

Developing emotional literacy in an infant school

Corinne Harris

Dudley Infant School, East Sussex, UK

Abstract

Corinne Harris is a teacher at an infants school in Hastings, a coastal town in the south east of England. She was a member of a group supported by Judy Durrant of Canterbury Christ Church University in which teachers were pursuing a masters in School Development. In this article Corrine describes her leadership of the process of developing strategies to improve emotional literacy and emotional intelligence. These activities helped both the pupils and the staff to deal with the emotional dimensions of their learning.

I have been teaching infants for seven years at my school in Hastings. The school is a popular one, although it is situated in an area of high social and economic deprivation, with a greater than average number of pupils being eligible for free school meals. Many children start school with standards below those expected for their age, especially in language, communication, personal and social skills. I had noticed that many of the more vulnerable children in my Year 2 class had very low self-esteem, lacked confidence and were prone to violent outbursts after unhappy playtimes. Other children were exhibiting signs of stress by continually sucking their clothing. I recognised the link between emotional health and academic achievement. Writers such as Goleman (1998) and McCarthy and Park (1998) show how emotional and mental wellbeing can raise motivation, increase concentration and improve problem solving and learning skills.

As a small staff, we have good knowledge of children and their families and the school ethos is a caring one. The school provides a secure and supportive environment for pupils, parents and staff, but I felt that we could do more to address our young children's emotional needs, help them to cope and develop their resilience. All of this would help them to be successful throughout their schooling and beyond.

It might be assumed that emotional wellbeing is entirely attributable to factors in the home and family, but my reading told me that there is a scope for intervention at school by focusing on the concepts of emotional intelligence and emotional literacy and how we can help children to develop these. Goleman describes emotional intelligence as follows.

(It is) ... the capacity for recognising our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships.

(Goleman, 1998: 317)

Goleman stresses that emotional intelligence is not innate but can be taught. This view is also promoted by MacGilchrist and colleagues (2004) who argue that a school needs to value and cultivate its emotional intelligence in order to be effective.

I resolved to initiate a development project that would affect other classes as well as my own; one that would influence my colleagues and perhaps contribute to changing the whole school. In this article I explain how I introduced new classroom techniques, enlisted the support of a play therapist, raised the level of professional discourse and initiated staff development. In leading this work, I also undertook an emotional journey of my own.

Raising awareness of social and emotional aspects of learning

A school training day was already planned to review the SEAL¹ materials provided as part of the Primary National Strategy and to support the 'Every Child Matters' policy (DfES, 2007a; 2007b). At school we were rather bemused by the government's intervention as we felt this had always been at the heart of our infant school agenda. We have always maintained that, in order for children to be successful learners, they need first of all to feel emotionally secure.

The aim of the SEAL programme is to reassert the importance of the emotions particularly with regard to learning and with regard to the goal of working towards a more inclusive society. The Literacy and Numeracy Strategies were highly valued, but some felt that emotional literacy is just as important and that we need to embrace the concept of educating the 'whole child'. Sharp (2001) had argued

¹ SEAL – Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning

that we have been in urgent need of a national agenda to promote and nurture our emotional literacy and raise self-esteem. By promoting emotional learning we will make a difference by enabling children to achieve their best and make a greater contribution to society.

During the training day we were asked to complete Sharp's questionnaire (2001) to see how emotionally literate we felt we were as an organisation. The outcome was contentious and led me to question my own emotional literacy. After a discussion with the school SENCO² I decided to attend a 'nurture group forum' with her. This is a weekly group in which we aim to generate a feeling of well being by encouraging positive self-esteem, exploring feelings, following rules, learning self-responsibility and how to relax. The impact of that startled me because, after carrying out several simple exercises, I saw colleagues become very emotional with some even breaking down in tears. This led to an in-depth discussion about how our professional working lives, when combined with home issues, prove so hectic and stressful that we need to unburden ourselves. However we are often unable to do this to the detriment of our own emotional needs. The same applies to our children. I wondered how I might address this through the introduction of play therapy. I wanted to come to understand more about teachers' views on these issues. I decided to explore day-to-day experience through the analysis of 'critical incidents'.

Using critical incidents: collaborative reflection for school development

Incidents are not in themselves critical, but are rendered critical by questioning and analysis in order to interpret the significance of an event (Tripp, 1993). By instigating the discussion of critical incidents in staff meetings, I was able to discover, for example, that all colleagues felt unhappy about unsupervised football at playtimes, as it led to some children becoming highly stressed and they returned to the classroom in no mood to learn and were sometimes disruptive. By raising awareness and highlighting this problem, I and my colleagues were able to review the situation. With the headteacher's support, we agreed on a simple strategy to solve the problem; an extra member of staff was given a specific role to supervise the football area at playtime and teach the children co-operation and taking turns. This had immediate impact on the children's behaviour

² SENCO – Special Educational Needs Coordinator

and also supported their emotional development. The change in pupils was immediately apparent. One child amazed me by saying what a good playtime he had had, where previously he had always returned in a bad mood.

We also learned that another catalyst for disruptive behaviour was the length of the lunch break which was almost seventy minutes. We realised that this is simply too long for children with emotional difficulties. After many discussions, we agreed that a play worker should be employed to work with our more vulnerable children at lunch times. This was carried out in our newly constructed 'Rainbow Room' which is a colourful, safe haven indoors where they are taught games to play, discuss friendship issues and solve resolutions to conflict, all of which develops their emotional literacy and allows them to cope better with school life.

The process of raising issues, discussion and problem solving amongst our small group of staff was initially undertaken informally after school with no obligation to participate. I was eager to tell people what I was finding out, I discovered that they recognised the same patterns of behaviour and the concerns became shared. Through this reflective process we increased our knowledge of how to give greater emotional support to our children.

I was conscious in introducing critical incident analysis that I needed to avoid colleagues feeling threatened but instead offer them a way to learn more about supporting the development of children's emotional wellbeing. Soon, colleagues began to bring their own incidents for discussion. Eventually we formalised this process by committing our incidents to paper and bringing them along to staff meetings, supporting each other in reflecting upon our experiences and thus gaining more from them. This proved so valuable and successful that the headteacher incorporated the idea into the next year's school development plan. I initiated a critical incident log, which allowed the school staff to learn collaboratively and improve teaching and learning. It became increasingly clear to us that reflection is essential for a professional approach to practice. Supported by the school structure, these discussions were more powerful; they shaped the organisational culture by overcoming tensions, opening up dialogue around difficult issues and initiating whole school change through the strategies we devised and implemented.

As well as this work across the school I wanted to address the particular needs of the most vulnerable children in my class. The introduction of play therapy proved valuable not only for these children but also for staff.

Play therapy to address children's emotional needs

I initiated the use of play therapy to promote the emotional and social learning of four children in my Year 2 class, who I felt were not emotionally stable enough to make the most of educational opportunities being offered to them. With the Headteacher's agreement I asked a play therapist to carry out some child-centred play activities with this small group. She agreed that I could work alongside her and then report to the rest of the staff, so that we might be able to offer therapeutic play activities in school. Working with an external expert was an invaluable part of my development work; it extended my own understanding of emotional intelligence.

The aim of play therapy is to help children who have a poor self-image and difficulties in making relationships (Jennings, 1999). If these children are able to develop essential 'give and take' skills, through play activities, they can channel aggression constructively and become more able to manage relationships with other children. Therapists agree that children who are cared for, respected and listened to are in a good state to learn. Emotionally unstable children either act out or withdraw, leading to social and friendship difficulties and further blockages to learning.

Before we could start our programme we informed parents and obtained written permission to proceed and, in an initial session, we recorded details of the children's emotional state prior to the sessions.

We carried out four play therapy sessions over a period of four weeks, which involved using puppets, art activities, story and role play. In the final session we planned to evaluate the work and review the children's emotional state following the course of sessions. We chose the staffroom for the sessions because it would be safe, secure and undisturbed. At the start it was imperative to help the children to distinguish the sessions from normal school activities. We also explained the boundaries of time and stated our only two rules: we do not hurt ourselves or each other and we do not deliberately break things.

Child centred play gives the children control, it is *their* play and should help them to express, play out and explore situations. It may or may not lead to problem solving, but their ideas drive it and their 'voice' must be heard. Our task was to provide the opportunity for the children to become aware of their feelings. We needed to encourage and support, but the play would always be led by the child. We told the children we were there to play but they would need to tell us what they wanted us to do.

After every session I discussed with the play therapist how the children had reacted and wrote up our notes, feeding into future sessions. This proved to be very valuable as I learnt so much from my highly trained colleague about the children's reactions and how best to deal with them in the classroom. The children were asked to give their views and explain how they had enjoyed the sessions. They felt they were free to explore their own thoughts, which I think led them to feel empowered, improved their self-esteem and helped them to form friendships more easily. The evidence from my observations suggests that, by addressing the emotional needs of our pupils, we enable them to learn strategies to deal with their own feelings so they can cope with school life stresses independently.

Unlocking the emotional dimensions of our own work

It became clear as the development work progressed that I also needed to take into account the emotional situation and needs of staff. Goleman (1998) maintains that staff who feel what they do is worthwhile and are valued will be more motivated and will have a greater impact on professional performance and on the organisation. He also argues that people differ in their capacity to understand and express emotions, but there are underlying skills that help us to do this; these can be learnt and can continue to develop as we learn from our experiences.

I began to realise that emotional literacy is important for all of us, as we need to recognise our emotions and understand them to become effective learners. We need to manage our emotions in order to develop positive relationships and be able to express our feelings appropriately so as to develop as well rounded people, capable of helping ourselves and therefore better able to help others. I therefore talked with my colleagues about how we could talk about our own emotional needs.

After discussions with the headteacher and colleagues I asked the play therapist to provide 'in house' support for those who would like it, similar to the activities with the children. She thought it was an excellent idea and hosted her next workshop at our school. I managed to coax three other members of staff into attending with me. This workshop and subsequent ones were very emotionally charged. We discussed how little professional support we have to unburden ourselves, while implementing government initiatives that require us to provide significant emotional support to children. We considered that we had already developed quite an effective mutual support system between our small, close staff but that here we were also exploring deeper issues.

It is not appropriate to explore here all the issues that arose out of those workshops. It is sufficient to say that the support we received and provided for each other raised our morale, helped to improve our emotional literacy and increase our emotional intelligence.

Towards an emotionally literate school

Considering the changes that have taken place, it is clear that there have been benefits for children, staff and our school as a whole and I have also recognised changes in myself.

Progress for children

Children have taken some steps in learning to reduce their stress at playtimes and lunchtimes. This type of development does not have a neat conclusion, and I realise I have only just begun to understand the complexities of the emotional dimension of learning, but this progress did convince us of the need to ensure that emotional literacy has to be considered in our curriculum planning. As a result, I have ensured that therapeutic play activities led by teachers have continued for the four children already involved and I am putting the techniques into practice more generally. Through this, and the introduction of 'feeling fans' based on the SEAL materials, children have learnt to identify and name their feelings and suggest ways to overcome problems independently or with peer support.

Since the outcomes of this initial development work are not easily measurable, there is a danger that they will be seen as insignificant in the light of the value placed on numerical performance data. However, the prominence of the Every Child Matters agenda gives the development of emotional intelligence and emotional literacy greater political credibility. Moreover, it has been suggested that

emotional literacy is becoming increasingly important as schools search for new behaviour strategies for children and try to reduce staff stress (Hammersley-Fletcher, 2004). We must continue to make these emotional dimensions more explicit in response to the growing consensus that all children can benefit from a structured whole curriculum framework for teaching social, emotional and behavioural skills (Webster, 2006).

Progress for staff

When teachers become self-conscious, collaborative and critical about their teaching, they develop more power over their professional lives and extend their teaching repertoire (Hopkins, 2002). Through critical incidents we had the chance to reflect on our practice and reinvigorate our passion for teaching. The play therapy workshops helped a number of us to become more aware of our emotional needs and to realise the need to provide more mutual support in this respect.

Day (2004) reminds us that teaching is emotional work and suggests that, where teachers feel tired, have low morale and are exhausted by paperwork, this needs to be addressed. If not, their passion may well begin to fade. Nurturing of emotional literacy in school can therefore benefit staff as well as pupils, particularly in terms of the need to feel valued and empowered (Hammersley-Fletcher, 2004). Emotional intelligence is not simply a ‘buzz word’; it is an essential capacity. It is important that we address our own emotional needs and develop the emotional literacy that enables us to become more effective in nurturing children’s emotional intelligence.

Progress as a school

In order to lead effective school change, an atmosphere of value and trust must be in place. Bryk and Schneider (2002) found that trust has an impressive effect on school improvement. Our new headteacher stated her firm belief in us as a team and was supportive of my leadership and the developing agenda around emotional intelligence. In an increasingly emotionally literate climate such as ours, I believe that all staff can work together to promote and maintain the school vision and ethos. We have developed practical strategies for developing children’s emotional intelligence and providing emotional support throughout the school. This has provided a vehicle for the creation of a more collaborative, open and supportive professional environment. By enabling everyone to have

a voice in this way, we are taking steps towards becoming a more emotionally intelligent school (MacGilchrist *et al.*, 2004).

My own journey

Leading this development work proved to be a very emotional process. I believe that I have become a more emotionally balanced individual, able to cope better with the stresses at work and at home. This has enabled me in turn to become a better teacher, able to address the emotional needs of my pupils more effectively. I have also experienced personally the empowerment of having my views and ideas supported and recognised. For example, I contributed an article for a university journal (Pepper, 2006) which gave me greater self-esteem and confidence in my research and development work and in leading change in my school.

The workshops in particular had an enormous impact on me. I admitted that, in trying hard to support others, I do not spend enough time looking after myself. Always independent, I confessed to my colleagues that I found it very hard to ask others for help, seeing this as a sign of weakness, but have now realised that recognising my needs is part of my own emotional intelligence and development. This has had a huge impact on my personal life as well as professionally. Increased self-esteem has strengthened my commitment to professional learning, so that I am better able to help children to remove the barriers to their learning and capture the excitement and power of learning for themselves.

References

- Bryk, A. & Schneider, B. (2002) *Trust in Schools: A core resource for improvement*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Day, C. (2004) *A Passion for Teaching*. London: Routledge Falmer.
- DfES (2007a) Social and emotional aspects of learning: <http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/publications/banda/seal/> (accessed 2007)
- DfES (2007b) Every Child Matters: Change for Children: <http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/>
- Goleman, D. (1998) *Working with Emotional Intelligence*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Hammersley-Fletcher, L. (2004) 'The Emotionally Literate Primary School'. Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, University of Manchester, 16th-18th September, 2004.
- Hopkins, D. (2002) *A Teacher's Guide to Classroom Research* (3rd edition). Buckingham: Open University Press.

- Jennings, S. (1999) *Introduction to Developmental Play Therapy*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- MacGilchrist, B., Reed, J. & Myers, K. (2004) *The Intelligent School* (2nd edition). London: Sage.
- McCarthy, K. & Park, J. (1998) *Learning by Heart: The Role of Emotional Education in Raising School Achievement*. London: Calouste
- Pepper, C. (2006) 'Awe and wonder: the emotions of teaching and learning', *The Enquirer*, Summer 2006: 27-29, Canterbury Christ Church University.
- Sharp, P. (2001) *Nurturing Emotional Literacy: A Practical Guide for Teachers, Parents and those in the Caring Profession*. London: David Fulton Publishers.
- Tripp, D. (1993) *Critical Incidents in Teaching: Developing Professional Judgement*. London: Routledge.
- Webster, A. (2006) More than a feeling. *Times Educational Supplement*, 17th March.