

## EXTRACT FROM

### FEEL THE DIFFERENCE: LEARNING IN AN EMOTIONALLY LITERATE SCHOOL

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#### THE IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIP

**The under-recognised and under-used resource in schools is the relationship between teacher and learner.**

The importance of 'relationship' within the school community should not be underestimated. It is the locus, material and vehicle (the where, what and how) of emotional and social development. Structured opportunities (formal and informal, teacher-led, young person centred and young person led) to be **in relationship, to learn in, through and about relationship, and to reflect upon that experience**: these are key components of a curriculum to develop emotional and social competences.

**The first and most important way we learn emotional literacy is by experience.** To understand more of this process we need to examine the findings of neuroscience as research helps us to understand more about how our brains develop- and in turn how this affects our emotional, social and cognitive functioning.

#### 1. EMOTIONS AND BRAIN DEVELOPMENT: THE FINDINGS OF NEUROSCIENCE

We first learn who we are and how to be - and by implication, how the world is, through our experience of relationship. The first relationship with our primary carer is the key. The quality of the interactions within this relationship, in the last trimester of pregnancy and then up to three years old largely shapes the development of our brain. This includes the development of our stress management system, the way we lay down memories and the foundation of our cognitive and social functioning. After that, our experience of relationship continues to be the primary influence on how our emotional brain develops- and this in turn directly affects the extent to which we access, use and further develop our thinking brain. The significance of this process for learning cannot be underestimated.

Emotional states are accompanied by sensations. We recognise this in the way we commonly term emotions as 'feelings'. How we respond to those feelings depends very much on our brain development which in turn directly affects our behaviour and social functioning.

It is helpful to think of our brains as having three interlocking levels: the earliest and most primitive being the so-called 'reptilian' brain that houses our instinctive reactions and survival systems. This downstairs brain triggers very strong, undeniable feelings of fear, rage and anxiety at separation- feelings that are designed to keep us safe by prompting certain actions: flight, fight or freeze.

The second system, the mid-brain, the so-called 'mammalian brain, is the home of our social bonding and functioning. Also sometimes termed the emotional brain, this is where the limbic system operates to keep us socially connected and functioning in relation to each other. It is where memories are laid down and the data bank resides that informs our recognition and manipulation of the external world.

The third and most highly evolved part of our brain is the frontal cortex, the cognitive or thinking brain. The extent to which this 'upstairs' brain is wired up to help us to think about and make choices about our actions when the downstairs brain signals that actions are required is dependent on the way we are treated by our primary carers in infancy. The quality of our interactions with them directly affects how and to what extent we can access thinking, evaluating and choosing when we are experiencing strong feelings, especially when they are accompanied by strong motoric impulses.

The good news is, however, that there is a high degree of plasticity in our brains. Subject to growth spurts- first as babies and infants, then as adolescents- and phases of 'synaptic pruning' when we lose the connections we do not use, the growth of our brains is experience-dependent. So we have many opportunities through-out our lives to enhance and extend our functioning.

### **The brain, emotions and cognitive development**

Current studies into the brain and intelligence, and in particular into the connections between emotions, cognitive development, attention-span, memory and learning, have much to say to inform educators. This area is new and the implications of the findings as yet inconclusive so we would do well to heed the warning from Wolfe and Brandt (1998:10) that educators should be cautious about neuro-scientific findings. That having been said, the following points are pertinent to our discussion.

We know that our feelings affect our motivation, our curiosity, and our concentration, our memory- both in laying learning down and in recall, and our staying power as well as our willingness to defer gratification.

- Siegel (1999: 1); (and Gerhardt (2004)<sup>1</sup> and Sunderland (2006) among others) emphasise the key role of primary relationships in developing the brain: **"Patterns of relationships and emotional communication directly affect the development of the brain"**. The research shows that "emotion serves as a central organizing process within the brain." (Op cit 1999: 4) The way the mind establishes meaning -the way it places value or significance on experience- is closely linked to social interactions, and this connection between meaning and

- interpersonal experience occurs because these two processes “appear to be mediated via the same neural circuits responsible for initiating emotional processes.” (Op cit1999: 6)
- The brain’s development is increasingly recognised to be an “**experience-dependent**” process. Relational experience activates certain pathways in the brain, strengthening existing connections and creating new ones. Experiences can shape not only what information enters the mind, but the way in which the mind develops the ability to process that information. The unfolding of genetic potential is also experience dependent. (Siegel, 1999: 16-19)
  - Schore’s work addresses the way child-caregiver interactions are so influential: “**the primary caregiver** is providing experiences which shape genetic potential by acting as a **psychobiological regulator (or dysregulator)** of hormones that directly influence gene transcription.” (Schore, 1997: 616)
  - Genetic studies of behaviour commonly attribute fifty percent of each of the personality features to heredity. “**The majority of the other half of the variability is thought to be due to ‘non-shared’ aspects of the environment, such as.. (primary relationships).. school experiences and peer relationships.**” (Pike and Plomin 1996: 560-570)
  - **Attachment**, an inborn system in the brain first identified by Bowlby (1969), prioritises the creation of an interpersonal relationship for the baby as an essential survival mechanism. In that primary relationship, the parent provides a ‘secure base’ that helps the immature brain use the mature functions of the parent/ caregiver’s brain to organise its own processes.
  - **Repeated experiences of emotional interactions become encoded in implicit memory as expectations and then as mental models** which serve to help the child feel an internal sense of what Bowlby (1988)called a ‘secure base’ in the world. This internal working model becomes a mental template through which interactions and events are anticipated and filtered.
  - **Loving interactions shape the brain for resilience in the face of stress.** Soothing, moments of shared affect and stimulating experiences release hormones and chemicals that contribute to the growing child’s sense of emotional well being: e.g. **Serotonin, vital to feeling good, Noradrenalin which controls arousal, attention and excitement allowing you to regulate, Adrenalin in the right amounts to help thinking, Dopamine for concentration.** (Sunderland, 2002; Gerhardt, 2004; Sunderland , 2006)
  - **Soothing has first to be experienced before the infant can learn to self soothe.** Affect attunement – matching the child’s emotional state cross-modally with visual expressions, verbal sounds, gestures, movements, body position that take into account tone, intensity, pitch, pace and rhythm regulate the aroused state downwards. This, together with tender non-intrusive touch, provide the quickest and most effective way of calming a hyper-aroused state. **Physical calming and containing** has to occur before the child / person is available to engage intellectually.
  - The adult carer becomes the **psychobiological regulator** of the child’s emotional state.

- Of course, if the carer may also be the child's **disregulator** if s/he is unable to contain and regulate their own emotional state.
- Unpredictable, frightening, emotionally distant or abusive interactions serve to result in expectations of relationship that are filled with uncertainty, fear, distance and distress. Detached, hostile, threatening, aggressive and humiliating interactions fire the sensory data processing systems in the survival sensitive circuits of the brain (e.g. triggering the amygdala). The **instinctive and learned responses to fear, rage and / or separation anxiety** will release chemicals to alert the body, increasing arousal and decreasing access to the frontal cortex, thereby **reducing IQ levels**. (Sunderland, 2002 op cit)
- Gerhardt (2004) and Sunderland (2006) show clearly how repeated experiences of high levels of **cortisol**- the stress chemical triggered by fear, and the states of **hyperarousal** that accompany rage , for example, shape the brain's stress management system so that the child is ready to fight, run or freeze the whole time, anticipating threat or danger. Low levels of serotonin and high levels of cortisol can result in aggressive and / or violent behaviour in children and adults.
- Children who have experienced multiple or continuous stressful, frightening, threatening experiences and / or uncomforted distress are likely to have developed **stress-management systems that keep them 'on red alert'**, make them prone to over-reaction and unable to calm or manage their strong feelings. e. g. very aggressive children have low serotonin levels, as do adults suffering suicidal despair; and the mix of low serotonin and high testosterone results in out of control behaviour (Sunderland, 2002; Gerhardt, 2004; Sunderland 2006).
- Siegel (1999:33) points out "The patterns of particular states of mind in an infant can be seen as encoded as an implicit memory... **Repeated experiences of terror and fear can be engrained as states of mind**.....with chronic occurrence, these states can become readily activated in the future, such that they become characteristic traits of the individual."
- These can only be changed through the provision of **corrective emotional experiences**. In cases where children have experienced neglect, abuse and chaotic, unpredictable care building the bonds of secure attachment (Hughes 1998) is a long-term process requiring the loving commitment of at least one securely present caregiver. Referral for long-term therapy is advisable in these cases.
- **With less traumatised children** and young people, however, the experience of reparative developmental interactions within a safe relationship with a trusted, significant adult contribute positively to the establishment, enhancement and consolidation of neural pathways that connect the downstairs brain to the upstairs cognitive brain.
- Opportunities for this occur frequently within ordinary day to day relational contact. With children spending 15% of their waking hours in school, **the teacher<sup>ii</sup>learner relationship** can be the key.

By contributing to a safe, structured, open-hearted and stimulating sequence of interactions the adult can literally engage the child or young person's brain capacity for

emotionally connecting, thinking, memory functions of retention and retrieval, problem solving and meaning-making.

**Emotionally literate teachers who interact with children in ways that soothe, calm, contain, stimulate and accompany them as they learn, support their students to become emotionally literate too. In so doing, they provide the positive interactions that contribute to the development of effective stress management systems in their learners' brains. At best, such teachers / adults contribute to the establishment of 'good-enough' regulating, focussing, meaning making and memory circuitry in the brain.**

### **Bodies Are Important Too**

Pert's work (1997:26) on memory claims that biochemical change is the molecular basis for memory and that memories are stored not only in the brain but in a psychosomatic network extending into the body. Memory processes are emotion-driven; emotions relating to past events can be held and expressed (sometimes through illness) in the body.

This also has implications for teachers. We need to create **a safe, supportive learning environment and use group processes** that are safe and supportive. We can also organise our teaching so that we offer a mix of:

- physical activity
- supportive emotional discussion
- opportunities for reflection

This combination will stimulate the brain to maximise learning and retention.

A Swedish and Canadian project<sup>iii</sup> promoting 'safe touch' has developed a structured programme of storytelling with massage which children give and receive from each other in schools. Research shows that pupils who are involved in this programme have improved social relations, higher self esteem and self confidence, fewer fights and disagreements, less inter-group tension and increased capacity to manage their feelings.

### **Trauma, abuse and neglect**

The experience of safe touch may be an essential reparative learning experience for some of our most vulnerable children. Some of our learners are vulnerable. They may well have experienced neglect, abuse, unsupported, unrecognised losses and / or events that have been traumatic. The fact that they have had such experiences may not come to light until their behaviour causes concern. **It is always important to consider what the behaviour might be communicating. We need to look beneath the behaviour to identify the emotional development need.**

Children who grow up in violent households or with absent or chaotic parents may well be unable to manage everyday events and relationships without hurting themselves or others. As well as having a profound impact on their stress management systems and their sense of themselves, they may well find themselves unable to settle, to sustain concentration, to think clearly and to remember. Their attention span may be very

limited. The behaviours that make others around them feel unsafe may well be the learned responses to situations in which they themselves felt unsafe.

The reasons why children become vulnerable are many and various- from world events like wars and living as refugees to everyday violence, poverty or bullying.

Such children need the safety of predictable routines; they need the security of a known reliable and trusted person to talk to and opportunities to be listened to; they need their basic survival needs to be taken care of by the adults in charge of them; they need to feel wanted and special.

## 2. EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Children need to be taught how to insert thinking between feelings and action. This happens naturally in good-enough, loving relationship with their primary carers. In such relationships, children experience the sharing of emotional states; they are taught to recognise and name emotions and their emotional vocabulary is extended; they learn to think about emotions and to think while experiencing emotions. **If they are not supported with these important developmental tasks, they have some important learning to catch up on once they come into the school situation.**

**Developmental tasks are lifetime tasks.** (Stern, 1985) Human beings can continue to have useful developmental experiences throughout life; indeed we can make up for lost or missing experiences as we mature as adults. This finding is endorsed by the findings from neuroscience

This **essentially optimistic model** provides for the possibility of learning through needed or reparative experience within interpersonal relationships throughout life. **If development needs are met within relationship and developmental issues can be addressed at any time throughout life, the potential for the relationship between teacher and learner, learner and learner to have a positive impact on future development and learning is high.** When a previously unmet need or similar situation presents itself it is always at least theoretically possible to have a different experience, to relearn or learn anew a different way to be and to be responded to.

***So teachers can do it, learning assistants can do it, site supervisors and dinner supervisory staff can do it and in some cases peers can do it.***

**The ENABLE Approach** looks at the six Building Blocks as six fundamental aspects of learning for Emotional and Social Development:

- Learning to Be
- Learning to Do
- Learning to Think
- Learning to Be Powerful and have an Identity
- Learning to Be Skilful and Have Structure
- Learning to Be Separate and Be Secure in your Sexual Identity.

Each area of competence (termed Building Block) has related tasks and desirable experiences to maximise learning. Each Building Block is linked to three learning needs.

The notion that parents/ carers are **the** only crucial ‘others’ for children and young people to develop a healthy sense of self is challenged by these two models of human development. Early experiences of care, attention, support, structure do clearly have a very significant part to play.... **but the story does not end there**. The potential for subsequent relationships with significant adults to contribute positively to children’s emotional development is enormous.

**Every exchange in a learning situation potentially holds within it the possibility of a developmentally needed experience.**

### **3. AN EMOTIONALLY LITERATE SCHOOL**

Here we offer a thumbnail sketch of an emotionally literate school and invite you to ‘feel the difference’. What are the ways, if any, that this school differs from one you know well?

#### **Leadership**

The Headteacher and Senior Management Team demonstrate (by their behaviour as well as what they said) the importance that is placed on positive relationships and emotionally literate, responsible behaviour. They are role models for life-long learning. Staff members feel valued and respected. Regular opportunities are created to acknowledge the various contributions of staff at every level. There are systems to support staff when they get into difficulty that are easily accessible and not shaming. Secondment opportunities, professional development opportunities and recreational activities are in place to encourage good relationships.

#### **Ethos**

The whole school ethos **values learning** and demonstrates that it **values everyone** within its community. The uniqueness and diversity within its staff, student and parent body is valued and celebrated. Everyone is a learner and everyone is deemed to have an ‘elastic’ capacity to learn. The school makes **provision for developing the emotional learning** of all its students, but most particularly for its most vulnerable and challenging students. The learning culture emphasises **learning as process, learning from mistakes, the importance of feelings in learning and learning how to communicate responsibility for one’s own feelings**. The school climate aims to create a shame - free learning zone. Responsibility for one’s own learning is prized. Independent, resource-based and collaborative learning are encouraged. It is understood and accepted that all learners are likely to have emotional needs sometimes- and these can be addressed as a part of promoting learning.

#### **Emotional Health and Well-Being**

The school promotes the mental health of ALL its community members. Staff members in the school demonstrate that each and every person in the school community is important, whatever their role or status. Each person’s contribution is recognised as

contributing to the whole. People feel that their presence really matters. This is true even for those students who are a challenge! When staff members act in ways that do not communicate this, they apologise and make every attempt to reconnect with the student in a way that helps them to learn what is needed in order for them to behave in acceptable ways. Staff members recognise that they have the responsibility of acting as role models for behaviour and learning for their students.

### **School structures, processes and routines**

The school presents itself as a 'Listening School'. There are systems and structured opportunities for all members of the learning community to talk and be listened to, sometimes private in confidence and sometimes publicly. Structures invite and encourage participation from every group within the learning community. Opportunities exist for students of all ages to work with each other in a variety of ways. Policies reflect an emotionally aware perspective and routines secure that all members' basic emotional needs (for safety, recognition, order, and stimulation) are met. The emotional needs of vulnerable and challenging children are recognised and addressed. Staff members are supported to deal with challenging children. When relationships between staff members and children break down, staff members are supported so that they feel free to talk about their difficulties and ask for help without being judged. Their learning needs are identified and addressed.

### **Environment**

The learning environment is clean, ordered and attractive. Displays and resources stimulate, excite and extend learning, as do areas within the school site, like Sensory trails, gardens or wild areas, Adventure / Challenge areas and playgrounds that invite games playing. Creativity is prized and diverse examples of human accomplishments- from aesthetics to engineering, poetry to shot-putting- are on display. Students take responsibility for some areas, and diverse interests and experiences are represented. Students are encouraged to relate well to each other; they feel respected, valued and know that they 'belong'. This is true for all students.

Classrooms have designated areas where children can withdraw, with support, to work to improve their emotional literacy and behavioural choices. (In primary schools, these areas are created with small tents or curtained off quiet areas with books, play resources and cushions, used for calming, distracting and containing disregulated children who have lost control of their emotions. In Manchester, these areas are known as ThInc Rooms - Therapeutic Inclusion; in Rotherham they are termed 'magic rooms' with names like Butterfly or Dolphin; in Devon, these are known as Jungle Den or Woodland dens.)

### **Continuing Professional Development**

Staff training includes topics like self awareness, motivational listening skills, collaborative problem solving, emotional development, behaviour management, positive play, use of the arts, dealing with bullying, addressing racism and inequalities and learning to learn.

The staff members who are responsible for teaching PSHE have high quality emotional literacy skills, good self awareness and well developed behaviour management skills.

They are trained in the use of relationship to support optimal brain development, emotional and social development and effective group work. They have a supervisory / support structure to maintain their optimum mental health.

### **Teaching**

Teaching styles are varied and they take into account different learning styles. Teachers and support staff make sure that their teaching, and the learning tasks they set, match the students' developmental needs. This is accepted as particularly important when teaching those children whose emotional development is behind their chronological age. Staff members pay attention to engaging such children at their age and interest level whilst (at the same time and in ways that are not exposing or shaming) offering opportunities for reparative emotional learning to take place. This is recognised as essential to the harmonious running of the whole school. It is seen as everyone's responsibility.

### **Learning**

Learning activities are varied, differentiated and stimulating. They offer every child the chance of success. Progress in learning is closely monitored and all students' achievements are celebrated. It is recognised that this is especially important for the vulnerable and challenging students.

### **Pastoral care**

Pastoral arrangements recognise and address individual needs. Staff needs are also catered for. Behaviour management policies, procedures and strategies would be informed by applied knowledge of the neuroscience of emotional and social development. Senior Managers would be in and around the school maintaining regular contact with staff, pupils, parents and visitors alike. Some regular staff meetings and department meetings specifically focus on students' learning, behaviour and emotional well-being. People know about, take an interest in and feel some connection to each other in the collegial task of maximising learning.

### **Staff Welfare**

Staff members feel supported and stretched; they are willing to raise difficulties in the expectation of collaborative problem solving. There are structured opportunities for staff to do this. Staff dealing with particularly vulnerable and/ or challenging children get regular structured supervision sessions, in a group or individually. Staff members who are struggling or who indicate by their harsh, punitive or overly critical behaviour towards students that they are not managing to maintain positive relationships with students, are supported and receive specialist advice and help.

### **Curriculum**

The curriculum addresses the emotional development needs of all students by offering a core Emotional Literacy Course at the heart of its Personal, Social, Health and Citizenship Education provision. This aims to develop emotional literacy. It is an entitlement for all.

Opportunities to learn in, through and about relationship are created at every level, with inter class, intra and cross year activities, cross-phase and cross school; participative projects (teacher initiated, student centred and young person-led) in the school, in business and in the wider community and peer education, mentoring and mediation projects. The curriculum includes structured opportunities to give and receive touch safely, e.g. Massage in Schools Programmes<sup>iv</sup>. Activities that invite imagination, reflection and creativity are available regularly to all pupils / students, for example Meditation in Schools programmes, Philosophy for Children courses, use of guided visualisations and scripted fantasy. Creative expression is encouraged and celebrated.

Students' emotional literacy is addressed by all subjects across the curriculum. Teachers consider how to address related competencies in their subject planning, particularly in relation to teaching.

### **Learning Support**

Assessment procedures are in place to identify children's emotional needs at the earliest opportunity. Parents and carers are involved in assessment procedures and action plans involve parents and carers as well as school provision wherever possible. Facilities are available to meet the needs of those children and adults who require intensive 1:1 support or small group work. This includes ENABLE / Nurture Group and / or Theraplay approaches where necessary. Good use is made of multi-professional, multi-disciplinary approaches. There is a good referral network of in-school support and out-of-school provision that can be accessed

The purpose is to enhance all pupils and students - and indeed staff members' - capacity to learn as members of a community.

### **CONCLUSION**

The most important aspect of the learning climate is the quality of relationship on offer: colleague to colleague; manager to practitioner; adult to student; teacher / support teacher to parent, student to student. The extent to which every member of the school staff models and demonstrates emotional literacy will determine the degree of safety experienced by students and staff alike. If policy makers understand how to increase teachers' emotional capacity, and teachers understand and act in ways that increase their students' emotional capacity, learners will be supported to learn in ways that equip them well for life in the Twenty First Century.

**This extract is taken from 'Feel The Difference: Learning in an Emotionally Literate School' by Lynne Gerlach and Julia Bird,**

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**Full copies of the paper are available from your Headteacher.**

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<sup>ii</sup> Teacher here means any adult involved in supportive contact with a child in a learning context.

<sup>iii</sup> Massage in Schools programme: contact the Centre for Child Mental Health, 2-18 Britannia Row, Islington, London N1 8PA for details. Tel: 0207354 2913 [www.childmentalhealthcentre.org](http://www.childmentalhealthcentre.org)

ENABLE computer program - available as CD available from The Modbury Group Sentinel House Poundwell Modbury Devon PL21 0XX Tel: 01548 830950 OR as an online resource. Website: <http://www.enable-online.com>  
e-mail: [sales@enable-online.com](mailto:sales@enable-online.com)

ENABLE Consultancy and Training from Julia Bird and Lynne Gerlach available from:

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