NC**SL** National College for
School Leadership

Research Associate Summary Report

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More than a feeling

Developing the emotionally literate secondary school

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Context of the study

The significance of emotional literacy reflects a growing concern that schooling has focused almost exclusively on academic and behavioural aspects and neglected the emotional aspects that are intrinsically linked to learning and behaviour.
Faupel and Sharp, 2003 p1

The leaders in this study have placed the human side of their schools high on their agendas and have committed to this with a strong sense of purpose. This is because they believe fundamentally that understanding oneself and understanding others plays a critical role in creating a place where learners want to learn and teachers want to teach.

Their recognition also of the link between students' cognitive, behavioural and emotional development would appear to be at the heart of the Every Child Matters agenda. Further, it would seem to reflect the emphasis behind those reforms focused on reducing social disadvantage, ensuring that behaviour is well managed and that integrated services support the well-being of the whole child, as outlined in *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All* (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2005).

This report focuses on the current successful practice of a small number of secondary schools in developing an emotional climate for effective learning. It aims to provide secondary school leaders with:

- an understanding of the rationale for promoting emotional literacy

- an insight into the potential impact of developing emotional literacy

- perspectives on what an emotionally literate school looks like and how this is achieved

- models of interesting practice that demonstrate how school leaders promote and implement effective strategies to develop emotional literacy

Methods

This study is based upon the findings from interviews in three English secondary schools. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with headteachers and staff associated with leading the initiative to provide information that included:

- key characteristics of an emotionally literate school

- reasons why the school decided to undertake developments in emotional literacy

- leadership approaches adopted to promote emotional literacy

- ways of developing understanding of emotional literacy in staff and students

- the impact of emotional literacy developments in the school

- external agency involvement in developing the school's approach

What is emotional literacy?

Various models describe the concepts of emotional literacy, emotional intelligence and interpersonal intelligence, and they all share a common emphasis on two key dimensions: the intrapersonal and the interpersonal.

A generic view of emotional literacy derived from the models could be:

- self-knowledge
- self-management   intrapersonal skills
- motivation
- empathy
- interpersonal skills

Why a focus on emotional literacy?

The schools in this study became involved in emotional literacy developments in response to a range of perceived needs that included:

- **addressing behavioural issues** – proactively working with the underlying emotional problems rather than relying on reactive strategies

- **promoting improvements in the learning experience** – meaningful learning as a process involving emotion as well as intellect

- **improving attendance** – fostering a sense of belonging and creating an ethos where students want to attend school

- **promoting staff well-being** – increasing the capacity of individuals to cope with their roles, including dealing with challenging students

- **improving support for vulnerable students** – recognising that their emotions make it problematic for some students to access the curriculum

- **promoting a positive culture** – developing greater tolerance and understanding across the school community to secure one that *'values participation, shared leadership, respect and the student voice'* (Sunley, 2003 p12)

Barriers

In developing emotional literacy the schools in this case study encountered the following barriers:

- curriculum inflexibility
- lack of funding
- staff resistance
- time and facilitation for long-term sustainability

Key messages for developing the emotionally literate school

There were several key messages about the strategies used to promote the development of emotional literacy and overcome barriers.

- **Knowing thyself:** The headteachers and other leaders exhibited high levels of intrapersonal skills in reflecting on their leadership of developments.

- **Vision and high expectations:** Developing organisational understanding of what an emotionally literate school would look like and the expectations required of different parties to achieve this.

- **Relationships for learning:** High-quality relationships, which rely on well-developed interpersonal skills, were established as a prerequisite for learning as a social process.

- **Modelling – 'walking the talk':** Emotionally literate approaches must be evident at all levels in the school community, eg among student leaders and in peer mentoring.

- **Distributed leadership:** Without exception, the schools initially identified those staff with a belief in emotional literacy and with a capacity to lead others to take their emotional literacy developments forward.

- **Dialogue – creating the space and time for collaboration:** *'If we slow down the pace of change … deepen our reflection and understanding … create more opportunities for staff to talk to one another and empower those at different levels, then we will move faster. In there is the paradox, we move faster because we are spending more time reflecting before we act'* (headteacher)

- **Investment in staff:** In addition to providing professional learning, mentoring and coaching opportunities, schools have introduced strategies to ensure staff have their own emotional needs recognised and met. These include opportunities for confidential staff counselling and a staff well-being programme.

- **Student voice:** Students were encouraged to participate in ways that develop their sense of ownership and contribution to their learning community. These included active student councils and students acting as lead learners and as researchers and evaluators of lessons.

- **Monitoring:** A variety of mechanisms were employed, including online baseline assessments, use of external evaluators, and staff—student relationship audits.

Structures and organisation

Common to all case study schools was an appreciation that organisation and structures can help to promote positive relationships for effective learning. Schools found that consideration should be given to:

- **curriculum organisation**, eg small teaching teams in Years 7 and 8 with joint subject teachers to reduce the number of adults the students come into contact with

- **creating smaller learning communities** inside a large school to promote a sense of belonging and identity, and the creation of safe havens for vulnerable students

- **accessing the specialists** through multi-agency work within the school setting to provide just-in-time on-site access to specialists, such as student mentors, family support staff and educational psychologists

The impact of emotional literacy

The impacts reported from schools in this study included:

- **Improvements in learning** – eg developing aspects of emotional literacy has enabled *'the school to develop a deeper and richer understanding of learning … which includes an appreciation of emotional well-being as a prerequisite to deep and sustained learning'* (headteacher).

- **Improvements in standards** – one school, with 13 per cent free school meals (FSM), linked improvements inextricably to GCSE 5 A*–C results, which have risen by 15 per cent over a five-year period to 78 per cent in 2004. Another school, with 51 per cent FSM and 82 per cent of students with English as an additional language, reports that: *'For the last three years, results remained static at 36 per cent, but last year's Year 11, the first to benefit [from engagement in this work,] scored 47 per cent 5 A*-Cs'* (headteacher).

- **Improvements in attendance** – one school reported a five per cent improvement in attendance to 94 per cent over a five-year period: *'There is something really powerful about students wanting to be here … they feel part of it and feel it is their school and it is a good place to be'* (headteacher).

- **Improved behaviour and relationships:**

  – positive changes in students' attitude and tolerance of one another

  – improvements in the way staff understand difficult and challenging behaviour and respond to it

  – increased understanding among students about how emotion impacts on their learning and behaviour

  – improvements in student behaviour

  – improvements in relationships between adults and students

- **Improved staff well-being and retention** – *'Emotional literacy has helped with stability of staffing'* (headteacher).

Implications

The following key implications emerged from the schools:

- Leadership by the headteacher is critical to the development of the emotionally literate school as its whole-school focus requires personal commitment to its principles and their development in practice.

- Leaders need to possess high levels of emotional literacy both to use an emotionally literate style of leadership and to model its characteristics in their dealings with the school community.

- Every opportunity must be used to build high-quality relationships and create an atmosphere of trust and openness.

- A culture of high expectations for behaviour and of learning that focuses on the whole child should be promoted as the norm.

- Opportunities should be built in for staff collaboration, dialogue, reflection and teamwork.

- Staff must have their own emotional needs met, and opportunities should be created to develop emotional literacy capacity.

- Opportunities for participation by school community members in all aspects of the school should be provided, including distributing leadership activities and empowering decision-making with associated accountability.

- A culture of recognition and reward should be promoted.

- Emotional literacy should be promoted as 'the way we do things here'.

- Leaders need to support the development of explicit programmes to develop emotional literacy through the curriculum.

- Leaders should ensure that school organisation is conducive to developing and promoting emotional literacy.

It is not a quick fix …

You can't do it in a year… we are a shining example of turning a school round, but you can't do it overnight.
Assistant headteacher

This was a view shared by all the case study schools. Changes to culture take place over a sustained period and all schools in the case study emphasised the need for patience and resilience. The clear message from these schools is to start small with developments in one or two areas and, when those are working, to broaden out to other areas.

Acknowledgements

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