

# PROMOTING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN THE CLASSROOM

**A**manda and Shirani are close friends. Both girls are in the 8th grade and get good grades. However, they are quite different. Amanda is above average in intellectual capacity but relatively weak in emotional intelligence, while Shirani's average IQ is coupled with highly developed emotional intelligence (EI).

Although Amanda is more intellectually capable, Shirani is more popular. She enjoys the respect of both peers and adults in the school community. Shirani's success stems largely from qualities relating to emotional intelligence. She can motivate herself and persevere whenever a project or assignment needs to be completed. She has good impulse control and has learned to be patient even when rewards are delayed. Shirani also maintains emotional stability—she can regulate her moods and banish discouragement, irritability, and jealousy. This, together with her empathy, her ability to trust, and her capacity to transmit tranquility to others, makes her a favorite at school. Although she may not achieve straight *A*s, she will likely succeed scholastically and in the career she chooses. Amanda, on the other hand, may take the top academic honors, but she is much less likely to be a leader and may even be passed over for a job in favor of someone like Shirani.

## What Is Emotional Intelligence?

Emotional Intelligence (EI) was widely studied in the 1990s, and the term appears in scientific and popular

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literature.<sup>1</sup> Formerly, cognitive psychometric aspects of learning were emphasized, based on research by Binet, Thorndike, Wechsler, and others. Early studies of mental ability defined intelligence as the “capacity to carry out abstract thought and to learn and adapt to the environment.”<sup>2</sup>

But EI has much more to offer. Mayer and associates define EI as the “capacity to reason about emotions, and of emotions to enhance thinking. It includes the abilities to accurately perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions

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tional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth.”<sup>3</sup> Goleman describes five EI traits that transcend IQ: (1) awareness of one’s emotions, (2) ability to exert self-control, (3) ability to motivate oneself to attain achievement, (4) ability to recognize others’ emotions, and (5) competence in interpersonal relationships.<sup>4</sup> Since these tools are necessary to face life successfully, teachers need to help students in develop their skills in this area.

### **The Dividends of Emotional Intelligence**

The professional literature shows multiple benefits of EI. Many are closely linked to the work of education at all levels. Let’s look at a few of them:

**Academic achievement.** Van der Zee et al. report that EI is a predictor of academic success.<sup>5</sup> Study participants were college students with various majors, including the arts, psychology, and business. EI was found to be a relatively strong predictor of academic success as evidenced by GPA and study pace. This connection continued to be significant even after controlling for traditional IQ and personality traits.<sup>6</sup>

**Avoidance of Anxiety and Depression.** Anxiety and depression are unquestionably the leading symptoms of mental illness. They affect people of all ages, both genders, members of the working class as well as the middle and upper classes, and inhabitants of poor as well as rich regions of the world. According to the World Health Organization, depression will become the second highest cause of illness and disability by the year 2020, just behind cardiovascular diseases.<sup>7</sup> It appears that EI may help protect against these common disorders. Fernandez-Berrocal et al.<sup>8</sup> carried out a study with 250 high school students to examine the relationship between emotional intelligence, anxiety, and depression. Results support the value of EI as a predictor of psychological adjustment, lower levels of anxiety and depression, and the ability to discriminate among feelings and to regulate emotional states.

**Social interaction.** One of the greatest benefits of well-developed emotional intelligence is the ability to initiate and maintain positive interpersonal relationships. Van der Zee and associates found EI to be an excellent predictor of success in social situations.<sup>9</sup> Children, adolescents, and college students with high EI are likely to be well adjusted and successful in their relationships.

**Conduct.** Liau et al. studied the effects of EI on problem behavior in secondary students in Malaysia.<sup>10</sup> They found a significant relationship between emotional intelligence, internalizing/externalizing problem behaviors, and parental monitoring. Specifically, lower levels of EI predicted a greater likelihood of internalizing problem behaviors such

as stress, depression, and somatic complaints. Likewise, lower EI was linked to aggression and delinquency, which are effective predictors of psychological maladjustment in adolescence and adulthood.

It is no wonder that teachers consider the traits contained within EI as highly desirable. More than 400 elementary teachers participated in Poulou’s study,<sup>11</sup> which polled teachers about the most important cognitive, emotional, and social skills to prevent emotional and behavioral difficulties. Respondents chose as the top characteristics: (a) recognition and identification of emotions, (b) expression of emotions, and (c) assessment of emotional intensity.

### **Promoting Emotional Intelligence in the Classroom**

Since it is less genetically determined than traditional intelligence, emotional intelligence can be taught by teachers and parents. Through a variety of instructional modes as well as by example, emotional intelligence may be enhanced in the classroom. There are a number of strategies to strengthen various EI components. They all can be adjusted for use with age levels from elementary through college.

**Communication skills.** Teachers can create a learning environment that nurtures not only academic success, but also affective development by improving students’ communication skills. They can do this by organizing discussion sessions, making themselves available, and providing counsel.

Open discussions are an excellent way to expose students to a variety of communicative styles and give them the opportunity to vent their feelings within a secure and teacher-controlled environment. The teacher’s comments and directions on verbal and non-verbal content can be very valuable in shaping communication—“Do I hear a little frustration in your statement?” “That is a true statement, but what does it do to the feelings of those listening?” “Have you all noticed that Beth’s answer shows that she listened very carefully?” Activities such as role playing and simulations give students the opportunity to watch and emulate modeled behavior, leading to a deeper level of understanding and application.

Students can also be taught to communicate feelings and emotions through one-on-one encounters. The teacher and student (sometimes a small group of students is appropriate) can come together for a friendly discussion about personal or scholastic matters. In this context, students can learn effective communication, and the teacher’s guidance can prove invaluable.

Informal counseling can occur naturally in the school setting and is an excellent way to enhance emotional intelligence. When a student is willing to share emotional discomforts (or joys!) with the teacher, this provides a unique



opportunity to help the student develop emotional communication skills.

Elksnin and Elksnin offer specific insight into non-verbal communication in the context of emotional intelligence. Teachers may increase their students' emotional understanding by helping them recognize and interpret the non-verbal messages of others and effectively express themselves non-verbally. These skills can be enhanced by using the following assignments:<sup>12</sup>

1. *Paralanguage.*<sup>13</sup> Identify the emotions when the teacher reads sentences using different voice tones. Read a script with different situations that call for varying emotions. Match the rate of speech with emotions such as happy, angry, or sad. Record your voice, and count the number of words spoken per minute; then compare this with others.

2. *Facial Expressions.* Demonstrate a "resting face." Make facial expressions that convey different emotions. Identify emotions conveyed by people in public, on TV, and in magazines.

3. *Postures and Gestures.* Assemble a dictionary of gestures/postures conveying specific emotions. Demonstrate postures used in formal/informal situations.

4. *Interpersonal Distance and Touch.* Identify types of conversations that should/should not occur in each spatial zone. Discuss your feelings when your personal space is invaded. Demonstrate a touch for an emotion when role play-

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ing. (Be sure to discuss appropriate and inappropriate touch with students.)

5. *Rhythm and Time.* Estimate the length of time necessary to complete various activities. Keep track of the number of times you are late and on time. Describe examples of public and private time.

6. *Dress and Appearance.*<sup>14</sup> Develop dress codes for specific situations, and use magazine pictures to illustrate them. Describe the image conveyed by clothing as you observe people in public. Develop a dictionary of "in" styles.

The above activities can be conducted informally, but these and other assignments can also be formally incorporated in the curriculum, thereby giving students "opportunities to analyze and discuss events on an emotional level."<sup>15</sup>

**Goal setting and attainment.** Like any other area of human behavior and emotion, the development of EI helps students set realistic academic goals and find various ways of reaching them.

In addition, students may be taught to develop personal reward systems for additional motivation. This can be done

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using actual school tasks. For example, Tucker et al.<sup>16</sup> offer this suggestion to help students to face a major class assignment: Ask them to break the assignment into smaller, more manageable tasks, and use a flowchart or a timeline illustrating the target completion dates of each task. They are then to write a positive statement about their ability to do the task and contrast their initial feelings about the assignment with their final feelings after accomplishing it. Smaller tasks are more likely to provide motivation, positive feelings, and a sense of confidence.



**Management of emotions.** Middle school and high school students are at risk for displaying avoidant, aggressive, or self-destructive behaviors. EI helps protect young people from losing control of their emotions. Teachers can assist in this area by ensuring that they understand their own and others' emotions such as anger and sadness. They can use the following tips to help students better understand their emotions and thus prevent depression and at-risk behavior caused by adverse feelings and emotions:

1. *Verbalize and discuss difficult feelings.* Invite students to talk about their feelings when they receive poor or failing grades, when they have friendship disappointments or conflicts at home. Ask them to suggest specific thoughts and behaviors as positive alternatives to acting out or explosive anger.

2. *Write about personal emotions.* Tucker and associates<sup>17</sup> suggest that teachers challenge students to write about their negative emotions. Writing can be used as a preventive and therapeutic tool to channel emotions positively. Composi-

tions can be shared with the teacher (and with peers if appropriate) and rewritten after brainstorming.

3. *Practice self-motivation.* Lack of motivation blocks the learning process at all levels. Encourage students to attain previously set objectives and to postpone rewards. This will help them to more fully enjoy such reinforcements once a step has been completed.

**Developing social skills.** Successful social interactions are basic to personal and group development. And this is a central aspect in emotional intelligence. School is a social setting, so good social skills will help students both inside and outside the classroom to build healthy interpersonal relationships and to function productively in social settings. Elksnin and Elksnin list some of these abilities: “interpersonal behaviors needed to make and keep friends, such as joining in and giving compliments; peer-related social skills valued by classmates, such as sharing and working cooperatively; teacher-pleasing social skills related to academic success, such as listening and following directions; self-related behaviors, such as following through and dealing with stress; communication skills such as attending to the speaker and conversational turn taking; and assertiveness skills.”<sup>18</sup>

Positive social values can be enhanced by cooperative group work and respectful and open group discussions. Allow students the opportunity to practice respectful communication and listening skills. An example could be letting them identify boundaries, expectations, perceptions, and specific encounters of a troubled working relationship. As they review, have them evaluate their verbal and nonverbal communication as well as listening skills, and determine alternative behavior options.<sup>19</sup>

Lastly, empathic behavior is a key element of emotional intelligence. This goes beyond simply presenting oneself as polite and kind, to a clear understanding of others' feelings and identification with them. Teachers are significant role models since they have an ongoing “stage” from which to model active listening strategies. “These include maintaining eye contact, not interrupting a student's response, reiterating a student's thoughts for clarification and demonstration of understanding, and acknowledging participation.”<sup>20</sup>

### Conclusion

The EI movement has brought additional dimensions to the educational process as well as extra challenges to teachers. However, taking a step further into the social and emotional dimensions brings us closer to what the Seventh-day Adventist philosophy of education is all about—a wholistic view of human abilities (mental, physical, spiritual), with

character development at the center. Emotional intelligence theorists speak of motivation, perseverance, self-control, postponement of rewards, ability to trust, healthy mood, and empathy, all of which can and should be emphasized by Adventist education.

As Adventist teachers, we must not only impart knowledge to students, but also inspire them to embrace positive behaviors. Ellen White says that truth, obedience, honor, integrity, and purity, are principles that “make them [students] a positive force for the stability and uplifting of society.”<sup>21</sup> The regulation of one’s own emotions and the use of interpersonal competence are truly essential in order to develop men and women of character who can positively influence society.

Emotional learning, moral education, faith development, and critical thinking are not always easy to incorporate in the curriculum. Since they are usually not taught in a specific class, they must be spread throughout the school’s educational endeavors. Textbooks and other curricular materials tend to focus on the cognitive domain. However, rapid changes in world society and the work environment suggest that EI will be of increasing importance to students’ success in the future. Every Christian educator must reflect on how to promote wholeness and think creatively about appropriate activities to nurture EI in the classroom. Raising awareness of emotional needs is the first step toward understanding the issues involved; and understanding can lead to personal commitment and action that enhance our students’ EI. ✍



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