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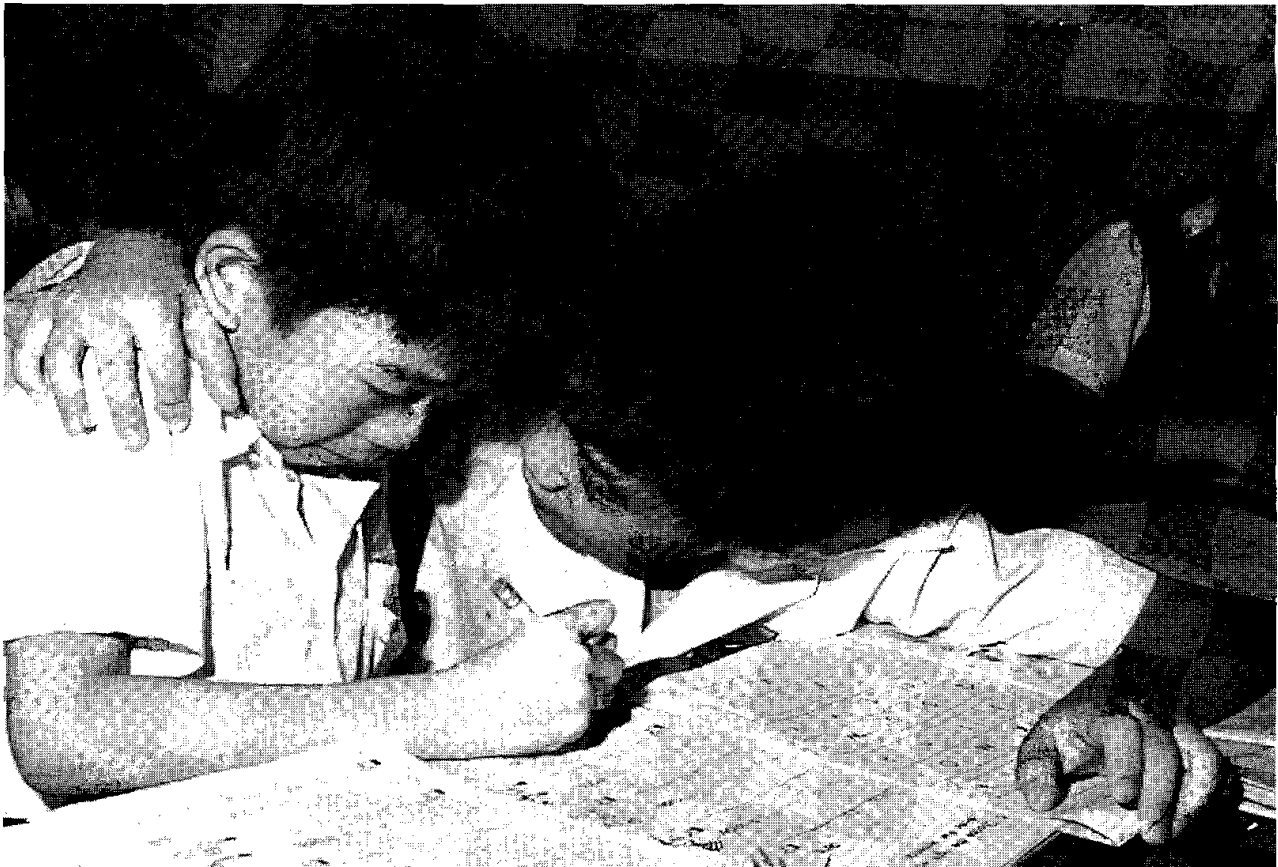
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# PROMOTING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE AMONG SINGAPOREAN SCHOOL CHILDREN

Review by Lachlan Crawford and Chua Tee Teo



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## INTRODUCTION

The concept of emotional intelligence (E.Q.) has attracted increasing attention among behavioural research scientists in recent years because of innovative methods of brain-imaging technologies. These technologies have enabled scientists to understand more clearly how the brain's centres for emotions function and how they are responsible for moving individuals from rage to tears. Behaviourists can now suggest strategies to control the emotions more successfully. The Yale psychologist Robert Sternberg (1996) reports that in schools and business organisations, senior personnel are taking seriously the idea that a little more time spent on emotional intelligence or social skills, which he calls

'practical people skills', may pay rich dividends in terms of better work relationships and better chances of handling individual personal problems. Sternberg suggests that if individuals are more alert to the importance of emotional intelligence and more adept at exercising it, they are more likely to be successful as individuals in spheres of employment and more adept at handling periods of emotional stress.

This article briefly examines the concept of emotional intelligence, reveals the paucity of school-based research in this area and considers why it is becoming increasingly important for Singaporean school children. The article also explores what is being done to promote emotional intelligence and suggests a number of strategies which

teachers could use to increase awareness of it.

## WHAT IS E.Q. ?

The concept of emotional intelligence is not new. Indeed, it may be traced as far back as the ancient Greek philosophers. Finley (1963) reports that Socrates, for example, borrowed the maxim of the Delphi oracle 'Know Thyself' to argue that man is capable of knowing his strengths and weaknesses by rigorous, rational thought. Socrates believed that all behaviour, including emotional behaviour, should be the subject of rational thought. This, in essence, is the keystone of emotional intelligence: awareness of one's feelings as they occur.

More recently, the Harvard psychologist, Howard Gardner (1993) also examined the concept in two forms - **intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence**. The former, according to Gardner (1993, p. 240), enables a person to have access to one's own 'feeling' life – including one's range of emotions, and to draw upon them as a means of understanding and guiding one's behaviour. The latter, however, enables the individual to turn outward to other individuals, to notice and make distinctions among other individuals in terms of different moods, temperaments and intentions. Both are deemed as important capacities for self-growth, the former to know oneself and the latter to know others.

The phrase **emotional intelligence** was actually proposed by Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer (1990) who attempted to map in great detail the ways in which we can bring intelligence to bear on our emotions. After prolonged deliberations, they established five domains as a basis for

studying emotional intelligence. These are:

- *knowing one's emotions* – the ability to monitor feelings from one moment to the next and to use feelings to make important decisions in life;
- *managing emotions* – the ability to manage distressing moods well and to control impulses;
- *motivating oneself* – the ability to marshal emotions in working towards goals and to remain hopeful and optimistic when you have setbacks;
- *recognising emotions in others* – the ability to empathise or knowing what the people around you are feeling;
- *handling relationships* – the ability to get along well with other people, managing emotions in relationships, and being able to persuade or lead others.

Salovey and Mayer (1990) recognise that people differ in their abilities in each of these domains, but they stress that these domains represent a body of habits and responses that can be improved upon if there are lapses or deficiencies in particular areas.

The phrase gained popularity with the publication of a book entitled *Emotional Intelligence* written by Daniel Goleman in 1995. In the text, the author reviews the current research into brain architecture; defines the nature of emotional intelligence; illustrates that childhood and adolescence are critical periods of opportunity for setting the essential emotional habits that govern our lives; and documents how pioneering

schools are teaching children the emotional and social skills they need to keep their lives on track.

Significantly, Goleman asserts that there is a relationship between emotional skills and academic success. In an interview with John O'Neil, (1996) senior editor of *Educational Leadership*, he pointed out that skills such as being able to resist impulsivity, or to delay gratification in pursuit of a long-term goal, are helpful in the academic arena. He also indicated that learning can be affected by the emotions. For example if a child is chronically anxious, or angry, or upset in some way, he will not be able to give his full attention to his academic tasks. Goleman (1995), therefore, suggests that emotional skills can be taught to children to give them a better chance of using whatever intellectual potential they may have been given.

## **REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH**

There is a paucity of school-based research in this area. Despite Goleman's assertion that there is a link between emotional skills and academic success, there is no body of local research to substantiate this claim. However, there are several studies which indicate that emotional intelligence is becoming increasingly important for Singaporean school students for a number of reasons.

### **Changing patterns of family and community life**

As a result of the changing patterns of family and community life, many children in dual-income families are becoming more isolated from their parents, as both father and mother enter the workforce and

subsequently spend less time at home. Moreover, the *Report of the Inter-Ministry Committee*, published in 1995, indicated a disturbing number of marriages which ended in divorce. Concerned officials now believe that there are increasing numbers of children from divorced homes who may have difficulty in coming to terms with the break up of their parents' marriage. In addition, many married couples are abrogating their responsibilities as parents and leaving the upbringing of their children to domestic helpers. Hence, parents are playing a smaller role in the up-bringing of their children. The result is that there is a dearth of adult figures to teach children how to manage conflicts constructively through examples or through indirect methods, such as moral codes and patterns of living.

### **Increase in youths arrested for crimes**

While not all youths arrested for crimes were school children, the *Report of the Inter-Ministry Committee* (1995) indicated that 66% were 14 to 15 year olds while 25% were school drop-outs or students with a poor academic record. Moreover, half of the offenders polled (*Report*, 1995 p. 33) said it was acceptable to break school rules, while one-third thought it was acceptable to break the law, if they were not caught.

### **Support for students who are less academically-inclined**

Another reason for promoting the development of emotional intelligence in schools is the need to help many less academically-inclined students who are perhaps feeling lost in a highly-competitive and results-oriented school environment. They may suffer from low self-esteem, anger, frustration and loneliness. Equipping these students with skills in emotional or

personal intelligence may enable them to adapt and adjust to school life and academic demands more readily.

### **Support for students who are academically advanced**

Similarly, the teaching of emotional intelligence would benefit those students from the academically advanced classes or so-called “top students” in each class. Tan (1996) has reported that secondary students in the Express stream apparently suffer higher academic and social stress than their counterparts in the Normal stream. Many of these students constantly carry with them performance anxiety that is constant and pervasive. They worry about their school performance and grades and are crippled by fears of making mistakes. Their anxieties are manifest in a variety of stress-related physical symptoms.

### **Problems in adolescence in general**

Results of a recent study of 233 students from four neighbourhood schools in Singapore indicate that adolescents in a typical secondary school generally have positive support at home and in school except that their confidence in coping with school work appears to decline as they grow older (Tan & Tan, 1999). The older students were also found to be more critical of adults, more assertive and more independent. The teaching of emotional intelligence will enable the older adolescents to gain self-knowledge and interpersonal skills and hence be able to cope with the increasing demands of school.

In another local study of 467 secondary students from three government schools, it was reported that many students indicated that they were worried about their “current

problems and about their future” (D’Rozario & Goh, 1998, p.16). The teaching of emotional intelligence to these students will help ease, if not eliminate, the concerns of adolescents about their personal problems.

## **WHAT IS BEING DONE IN SINGAPORE SCHOOLS?**

Emotional intelligence is not formerly taught as an independent subject in Singapore schools today. However, it would be fair to comment, that from 1979 schools have attempted to promote aspects of “affective” education through Religious Knowledge (1984 to 1989), Civics and Moral Education (CME) and Pastoral Care and Career Guidance (PCCG). Recent efforts also include the introduction of National Education which is designed to foster in pupils a sense of belonging and patriotism (Ministry of Education, 1996).

### **CME programme**

The purpose of the CME programme, implemented in all primary and secondary schools, is to develop character and integrity, to ensure that pupils become useful members of society, and to develop a Singaporean identity (Ministry of Education 1991b, p. 1). The development of moral values and good interpersonal relationships has been listed as one of the many goals which teachers can help pupils achieve in weekly CME lessons (Ministry of Education, 1991a; 1991b).

### **PCCG programme**

The PCCG programme, first introduced in 1988, focuses on the development of well-balanced individuals and members of the school who will promote a caring ethos,

equip pupils with the necessary skills to cope with life and be better prepared for the world of work (Ministry of Education, 1994). Other than training teacher-counsellors, the PCCG programme also teaches pupils life-skills such as personal and interpersonal effectiveness, effective learning methods and the making of career choices (Ministry of Education, 1999).

It is evident that the thrust of CME and PCCG programmes in schools has been the inculcation of citizenship and moral values while emotional education, though not totally left out in the programmes, has never been overly emphasised. Recently, several schools, community centres and private agencies have begun to conduct formal classes to promote emotional intelligence. The proliferation of these classes is also seen in private schools and even at pre-schools. This phenomenon can be attributed to the difference in nature of EQ programmes and CME or PCCG programmes.

## OTHER WAYS TO PROMOTE E.Q.

While the CME and PCCG programmes address issues like drug and alcohol abuse, teenage smoking, pregnancy and more recently, violence, the EQ programme goes beyond what is taught in Moral Education classes. It is essentially a set of knowledge and skills necessary to find creative solutions to personal and social predicaments. The goal is to raise the level of social and emotional competence in children as a part of their regular education. This can be achieved by practising the skills regularly over a sustained period of years. Emotional learning then becomes ingrained. As experiences are repeated over and over, the brain develops them as

strengthened pathways, or neural habits which can be activated in times of hurt, frustration or duress.

Goleman (1995, Appendix E, pp. 347-348) suggests that E.Q. skills include:

- 1) *self awareness*: recognising feelings and building a vocabulary for them; and knowing the relationship between thoughts, feelings and reactions;
- 2) *personal decision-making*: knowing if thoughts or feelings are ruling a decision; and applying these insights to issues such as sex or drugs;
- 3) *managing feelings*: finding ways to handle fears, anxieties, anger and sadness;
- 4) *self acceptance*: feeling pride and seeing oneself in a positive light; recognising strengths and weaknesses; being able to laugh at oneself.

## CONCLUSION

This is a century of rapid reforms and scientific advancement. Human lives are not exempt from new reforms and conditions, not to mention the school curriculum. Besides being innovative in thinking and perceptions, it is critical that schools re-examine methods in developing emotions and virtues.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

Teachers who wish to promote emotional intelligence among their pupils can consider the following.

### ***1. Teach emotional intelligence either directly or through infusion.***

Emotional intelligence in schools may be taught as a separate programme under the name of 'Life Skills', 'Self Science' or 'Social Competence', but the advent of yet another programme in the curriculum of Singapore schools may not be too popular with teachers at the moment. An alternative, as Goleman suggests (1995, p. 312), is to infuse lessons on feelings and relationships with subjects already taught, for example in reading and writing, maths, science, or social studies.

An example of an integrated emotional lesson in maths would be to teach pupils personal decision-making by putting aside distractions, such as day-dreaming or talking to one's neighbour; motivating oneself to study; and managing one's time efficiently to learn effectively. Stories in language classes may be used to manage feelings by discussing friendships, allowing the pupils to become aware of a friend's needs and their need to share feelings with friends.

### ***2. Spread the programme over a number of years so emotional intelligence skills can become ingrained.***

Teachers need to capitalise on "*teachable moments*" (Popov, Popov & Kavelin, 1995, p. 16) or "*ripe opportunities*" (Goleman, 1995, p. 313) to educate pupils in EQ. These are usually times of discipline or problem behaviours. Impulse control, conflict resolution skills and even the development of virtues can be taught during these times of moral dilemma. The teacher must be conscious of these teachable moments and use them to teach EQ when the time is right.

An example would be when a teacher hears a 10 year old make cruel remarks to a classmate; the teacher could take the pupil aside and speak to him about his remarks being unkind and hurtful to his classmate rather than ignoring the incident or just telling the rude pupil to stop. In another instance, the teacher may notice that an average ability child is consistently handing in work and helping her classmates voluntarily; the teacher should not ignore the behaviour or simply tell her that she has been a good girl. The teacher should tell the pupil how much the teacher appreciates her diligence and concern for others even though the behaviour was uncalled for. Furthermore, the teacher could point out to the pupil, and the class,

that the development of a hardworking attitude and helpfulness is indeed praiseworthy. This would develop feelings of self-worth and self-acceptance in the pupil concerned.

**3. *Help children from broken families, school drop-outs, and low and high ability students cope with the pressures of everyday and school life.***

The need to love and care for our environment, and domestic and wild animals may be highlighted in science lessons whenever the pupils are taught biology. Additional themes like empathy, caring and perspective-taking can also be discussed in social studies lessons (Goleman, 1995, p. 313). Mother tongue is possibly the best subject to infuse the teaching of EQ, for stories in mother tongue texts usually involve the culture of a particular race, and they are therefore most suited to teach pupils to express their sentiments towards their fellow human beings be they parents, teachers, peers, siblings or strangers. Mother tongue teachers could capitalise on role plays to teach empathy and hence educate the pupils on the feelings of others.

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