

EMOTIONAL LITERACY – THE WRITING ON THE WALL

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Writing on the T-shirt is often really the writing on the wall. “*I was born intelligent*” said one such faded, disheveled T-shirt, which suddenly hopped out of a metro station and walked before me -- “*but education ruined me!*” Can this be true? This impertinent, defiant message got me thinking.

Goethe said, “If children grew up according to early indications, we should have nothing but geniuses” then where have all the geniuses gone? Is there something we were born with that we have lost or ignored so deeply that it withered into a vestige?

Babies are born with Emotional Intelligence. Before a child can speak, count or coordinate muscles, it is capable of sensing the moods, preferences and fears of the care givers. Like a sponge, a baby picks up the adult’s dominant moods, values, fears and possibly some prejudices. The early years can also be called the Imprint Period and spans roughly from the time of birth to 7 years.

The newer intelligences are rapidly developing at this time and this is when they can be stimulated and encouraged to increase these faculties through exposure to a variety of external stimuli, games and exercises. Teachers and parents, who are aware, provide the best environment for growth of cognitive, musical, spatial and kinesthetic abilities. These are the faculties that are tested by standard tests for IQ.

So dramatic and overwhelming is this development of the cerebral intelligences that it overshadows the quiet knowledge and covertly growing wisdom of the emotional brain. Why make a song and dance about something which was always there – even at birth! There are no trophies for Empathy, no badges for Anger Management, no special assembly for distribution of certificates for Self Motivation, yet these competencies are growing side by side with reading writing and arithmetic.

It is said that our academic abilities get us the job, but how we deliver and why we get promoted depends upon Emotional Competency. Is our education system equipping us adequately, or are we wisely making up for inadequacies of the system and learning to equip ourselves? Many have failed to do so, and we see toppers languishing in mediocre lives, technical wizards failing as entrepreneurs, failed relationships, disease, depression, drugs and suicides.

Emotional Intelligence grows throughout life unlike the cerebral potential which all but stops growing at the age of six. The education system which shapes fresh minds till adulthood could do well to give children the advantage of a head-start. Setting aside the system, teachers undoubtedly play a star role in the impressionable lives of children. Some are particularly remembered for helping us to discover ourselves and build self-esteem.

To make a beginning, teachers could heighten their awareness about esteem. Sensitivity in handling children revolves around nurturing and protecting their self-esteem. Contemptuous behaviour on the part of adults towards children should be regarded as a cardinal sin. Even when contempt nestles in the subconscious, it is bound to surface in some form or the other, and children who have very well developed sensors can 'smell' contempt from afar. Similarly respect and high expectations are insidiously conveyed and result in very positive response and high levels of performance (Pygmalion Effect).

From eight to thirteen years, children increase emotional literacy by 'modeling' themselves on significant people in their world. Who could be more significant than a teacher here? This is the period when we expect the child to learn virtues like Discipline, Honesty, Leadership and Compassion. They do not hear the words – they only do as we do. Beware for this is the time they also learn to cheat, lie, hurt, crush and exclude.

In my medical practice I have come across parents asking for a false medical certificate for a child in order to attend a family wedding, or a changed date in a birth certificate in order to get admission in a school of their choice – all this in the presence of the child!

Hard working teachers make charts overnight to deck up their classrooms before an inspection and say that the children made them. The children get appreciation and the teacher gains some brownie points, but at the price of permanent loss of credibility.

'Compassion', is it just a word to use prettily during the final round of a beauty pageant or have we experienced it? Often the way to punish a child, since corporal punishment was banned, is to injure his/her self-esteem. Yet another way is to make him/her suffer guilt because of being a let-down. In my opinion guilt (which can be felt even if one is not guilty) is a taste of hell. Punishment must be aimed at improving a child, not at crushing esteem or breaking the spirit. Just as motivation needs to be customized for each individual, so punishment could be suited to the individual, who could also be invited to participate in the decision about which punishment would be effective in bringing about the desired behavioural change.

Through the teens adolescents hone their emotional competencies by socialization. These young and inexperienced people teach each other important lessons which will get them through life after academics. We do take care to see that children 'hang out' in approved company, but we often grudge them time to socialize. This age group is overburdened with classes, tutorials, competitive sports and TV. We must realize the importance of socialization and respect it (since so far we have not been able to provide a better alternative for emotional learning). When children are emotionally insecure because of not being able to 'fit in', being ignored by peers, excluded from groups for being 'different' we should realize the magnitude of impact these things have for a teenager and be supportive and understanding, instead of downplaying them and laughing at them or encouraging them to pretend that they are not affected. In real life, being able to manage one's emotions and ability to understand another's predicament is going to be of more value than integral calculus and isotopes.

A young lady who had just finished her first month in an accounting firm remarked "When I joined this firm I thought all my problems would be accounting problems. Accounting is easy. All my problems are people problems!" As educationists it is

important that we see the writing on the wall. It will be a long time before Emotional Competencies are recognized as essential life skills by the Ministry and Department of Education. Till then we can each make a difference by acknowledging Emotional Intelligence as a platform upon which other intelligences are stabilized and given a chance to perform. This awareness alone will shine through everyday interactions and percolate to the new generation.