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# Introduction

*Not ignorance, but ignorance of ignorance is the death of knowledge.*

—Alfred North Whitehead (n.d., para. 5)

**T**homas wasn't having a good year in second grade. Handsome, athletic, and very socially sensitive, Thomas had a mild learning disability that was interfering with learning to read. He was also struggling with writing and basic arithmetic. He regularly failed to complete his work, and his teacher would have him stay in the classroom during recess to complete it. By mid-October, his classmates had picked up on the teacher's frustration with Thomas and were teasing him—calling him the “retard.”

By November, Thomas was feigning illness to avoid going to school, and his mother was near despair. She had met with the teacher and the principal, and while they had developed a plan to get Thomas some extra tutoring in reading, this had done nothing to elevate Thomas's deep unhappiness and anxiety.

It was at this point that Thomas's mother brought her son for a consultation with Ochan, who was the coordinator of Special Services in the school. Initially, Thomas presented as a withdrawn and fearful child. He tended to avoid eye contact and would respond to Ochan's questions but would not initiate conversation. However, as the interview proceeded, Thomas became more comfortable and confident. He explained that he hated school because his teacher didn't like him. Ochan asked what made him believe this. Although socially astute and articulate, Thomas struggled with the question. He couldn't identify any specific comments or incidents, but he felt very strongly that the teacher's attitude toward him was one of disapproval and scorn.

We cannot know whether Thomas's perception of his teacher's attitude was accurate or not. We have no way of knowing what her true feelings about Thomas were. However, we can be certain that Thomas believed his

perception to be accurate, and it was having a profoundly negative impact on his learning. His emotions were interfering with his learning.

We can also probably make the conjecture that the teacher was unaware of Thomas's perception or her own behavior that may have caused it. Very few teachers deliberately display their dislike for students. However, a teacher with limited EQ may do so without either intending to do so or even being aware of it.

Following the consultation, Ochan reviewed at length Thomas's previous school reports, his IEP (individual education plan) and his psycho-educational evaluation. While he did have a mild learning disability, it was not such that it should be causing the catastrophic emotional meltdown that Thomas was experiencing. It was, Ochan concluded, Thomas's perception that the teacher didn't like him that was the most significant obstacle to his learning.

Ochan discussed the matter with the principal and requested that Thomas be transferred to another class. After some discussion, the principal agreed. The new teacher had a far more positive attitude toward Thomas's learning challenges, and slowly he began again to learn to read. Today, Thomas is in his late twenties, reads voraciously but slowly, and teaches fourth grade.

Much has been written about how teachers can support the development of emotional intelligence in their students. Less has been written about the relationship between a teacher's own emotional intelligence and student learning.

Historically, educators have tended to dismiss or ignore the role of emotions in learning. From Descartes through the Age of Enlightenment, learning was seen as the province of the rational intellect, and our emotions were perceived to cloud or befuddle cognition.

There were, of course, a few who challenged this duality. In his eighteenth-century treatise on education, *Emile*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762/1993) proposed that learning was a naturally occurring phenomenon that involves both our head and our heart. The Romantic poets celebrated the life of the emotions, and by the mid-nineteenth century, Charles Dickens (1854/2007) was writing scathingly in *Hard Times* about how education had been reduced to a "Gradgrindian" accumulation of facts.

Despite this handful of critics, there has been a widely held misconception that a duality exists between the intellect and the emotions; that cognition and the emotions are somehow separate and, in some cases, even diametrically opposed. This false dichotomy led to the belief that the brain was the seat of reason, logic, and analysis; whereas the emotions were irrational, counter to clear thinking, unpredictable, and generally suspect (especially in complex decision making). The

traditional classroom has welcomed the intellect but has tacitly instructed children to leave their emotions with their hats and coats in their lockers. The assumption was that school learning was intellectual and that our emotions either played no role in such learning or might even serve as a hindrance to learning.

This was a serious misunderstanding of how emotions and cognition are inseparably connected. Research conducted over the last two decades demonstrates clearly that our emotional and intellectual lives do not run on separate tracks but are connected at a most basic level (Damasio, 1994; LeDoux, 1996; Pert, 1997).

We know now that all emotionally charged events receive preferential processing in the brain. They literally come to the front of the queue for processing, in some cases actually bypassing the neocortex. There are very good evolutionary reasons for this. For our cave-dwelling ancestors, emotionally charged events, for example, the charge of a woolly mammoth, evoked responses that were likely to be connected to survival and, more often than not, had significant future use.

Emotionally charged events also get preferential treatment in terms of our memory systems. Psychologists refer to this phenomenon as “flashbulb memory” (Brown & Kulik, 1977). Think back to when you first learned of an event connected to a powerful emotion: the assassination of John F. Kennedy or Martin Luther King Jr.; the *Challenger* tragedy; or more recently, the attacks of September 11, 2001. The chances are that you will be able to remember exactly where you were, what you were doing, and who you were with. Our emotions play a powerful role in determining what we pay attention to and what we select to remember. “An emotionally charged event is the best-processed kind of external stimulus ever measured. Emotionally charged events persist much longer in our memories and are recalled with greater accuracy than neutral memories” (Medina, 2008, p. 211).

There is compelling evidence that emotions also have a great deal to do with how we organize and create our sense of reality. Emotions drive how we prioritize our attention—what we select to focus upon and what we choose to ignore. They regulate our behavior and support us as we create meaning from the world around us.

Both in the classroom and outside it, emotions are sources of information about the physical and social world around us. Emotions associate our learning with pleasure or pain, as was the case with Thomas, and can result in retreat or perseverance. Emotions—the visceral thrill of a new insight or the excitement of a fresh mental connection—have the power to foster an enthusiasm for learning. This so-called hot cognition (Caine & Caine, 1994) is addictive and can lead to a passion for lifelong learning.

While teachers do not have absolute control over the emotional weather of the classroom, they have a powerful influence over the affective climate. More often than not, their verbal and nonverbal behaviors and their displays of emotion, dispositions, and moods can have powerful effects upon their students. The emotions that teachers display—both consciously and unconsciously—can significantly enhance or inhibit student learning.

## **A PROBLEM SO SIMPLE THAT EVEN BILL COULD SOLVE IT**

As a child, Bill grew up in Britain. When he was eight, his teacher instructed him to go to the blackboard and solve a long-division problem involving the British currency then in circulation (pounds, shillings, and pence). This was a fairly complex procedure since Britain had not yet moved to the decimal system. There were four farthings in a penny, twelve pennies in a shilling, and twenty shillings in a pound. In front of the class, Bill struggled unsuccessfully with the problem. After a few minutes, the frustrated teacher came to the front of the classroom and announced that she would put on the board an arithmetic problem that was so simple that even Bill could solve it. She wrote up a three-digit addition problem. However, by this point Bill was feeling such intense stress that concentration was impossible. To the amusement of the rest of the class, Bill was unable to perform even the most basic calculations.

Clearly, the teacher exhibited a lack of one of the fundamental characteristics of EQ: empathy. And as a result, Bill's feelings of anxiety and humiliation interfered with his learning.

Recent brain research tells us a great deal about the effect of stress on learning. If high stress or powerful negative emotions have evoked the fight, flight, or freeze response, the amygdala (our emotional mission control) will block the passage of data into memory and will reduce the blood flow to the neocortex (the center of executive function and critical thinking) causing it to shut down (Sylwester, 2007).

## **WE TEND TO WORK HARDER FOR THOSE WHO CARE ABOUT US**

Contrast the following scenario: During her elementary school years, Ochan's family moved a great deal (her father was employed by the United Nations). Her experience in school in Bangkok and New York had not been particularly successful, and Ochan had attributed her

less-than-stellar performance to her own intellectual ability. That was until her dad was transferred to Addis Abba and Mrs. Joseph came into the picture.

Mrs. Joseph was a fourth-grade teacher at the Nazareth School in Addis. At the very start of the school year, she set out to come to know her students and to make personal connections to them. She expressed interest in her students and tried to design learning activities that would appeal to their learning styles. She was patient and cheerful. She cared deeply about her students and was unabashedly hopeful and optimistic about their achievement and progress. By the middle of the first term, Ochan reported to her parents that not only did she like Mrs. Joseph, but also she thought Mrs. Joseph liked her. For the first time, Ochan was enjoying school, and this was reflected in her increased effort. By the end of the year, Ochan's confidence, commitment, and competence had improved to such a degree that she was double promoted to the sixth grade.

In the United States, a nationwide survey of several hundred middle and high school students asked whether they worked harder for some teachers than for others. Three out of four of the teenagers answered in the affirmative, and the reason they gave was that these teachers cared about them. The authors of the survey concluded that effective schooling relies almost entirely on creative and passionate teachers (Crabtree, 2004).

## TWO PREMISES

This book is based on two premises. The first is that teachers who have strong emotional intelligence (EQ), or social competence as it is sometimes called, create classroom environments that support more effective and efficient student learning than those teachers with only limited EQ. We will offer considerable evidence to support this contention. The second premise is that teachers can develop their emotional intelligence. Although some people seem to be born with excellent interpersonal skills and others not, emotional intelligence is malleable and can be learned. We believe that this is an area of teacher professional development that has been overlooked in the past and has rich potential for improving student learning.

The phrase *emotional intelligence* comes to us from the groundbreaking work of Reuven Bar-On (Bar-On & Parker, 2000) in the 1980s and the subsequent conceptualization of EQ by John Mayer and Peter Salovey (1997). It was popularized by a book with the same title by Daniel Goleman (1995). Goleman's contention is that emotional intelligence is actually more important in terms of success in life than what we have traditionally thought of as IQ. Subsequent to the publication of *Emotional*

*Intelligence*, Goleman has gone on to conduct significant research on emotional intelligence and its influence on leadership.

The study of emotional intelligence is a fairly radical departure from earlier behaviorist models of human interaction. Emotional intelligence looks beyond behavior. It assumes that behavior is purposeful, goal directed, and the product of cognition. Even negative and destructive behaviors are the product of thought and purposefulness.

Goleman (1995) identifies five components or domains of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, social awareness, and relationship management. While each of these domains is an essential part of the everyday life in classrooms around the world, most teacher training colleges treat them only on the periphery of the curriculum. One of the purposes of this book is to bring them center stage.

Emotions permeate classrooms while instruction is taking place. These are both the emotions of the students and the teacher. Whether these emotions are enthusiasm, excitement, boredom, frustration, anxiety, or anger—they are most certainly present. Recent research of the brain shows us that “neuronal pathways are activated through relational, emotional, personally relevant . . . and experiential stimuli. The repeated activation of these new circuits . . . will strengthen the new pathways . . . and increase the efficiency of memory retrieval” (Willis, 2007, pp. 19–20). In other words, emotions play a key role in learning—so key that we simply cannot afford to ignore them.

From experience, we know that teachers are called upon daily to manage and, at times, mask their emotions. When handled skillfully, such management can be seen as emotional competence. We would suggest that a high degree of teacher emotional competence is a prerequisite in any high-quality classroom.

Emotional competence allows us greater accuracy when we attempt to make sense of student behavior. Teaching is an interpretative activity. Hundreds of times each day, teachers are called upon to interpret student behavior. What did Julie’s crinkled brow mean? Was Brian’s tone of voice defiant? Did Rehema’s nodding suggest understanding? Hundreds of times daily, we attempt to make sense of the emotions and feelings of our students. As such, teaching can be full of erroneous interpretations. Peer group pressure and intimidation can be invisible to teachers (Cushman, 2003). At times, we can mistake our own feelings for those of our students. At other times, we can mistake boredom for studious commitment or enthusiasm for hyperactivity. Confusion can become mistakenly construed as laziness as easily as attentiveness can be equated or misequated with comprehension. Accuracy of emotional interpretation is one of the most fundamental attributes of the

effective teacher. When emotional understanding is absent, emotional misunderstanding will take its place.

Almost forty years ago, Haim Ginott (1995) addressed the question of whether teacher emotions influence their work performance and have an impact on student learning:

I've come to a frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my personal approach that creates the climate. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess a tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, and a child humanized or dehumanized. (pp. 15–16)

For these reasons we would contend that the emotional intelligence of teachers is as important to student learning as their subject-area mastery or the breadth of their repertoire of instructional strategies. The good news is that we can all develop enhanced skills in emotional intelligence.

