

Emotional literacy the key to being the best you can be

How can children be helped in their transition from primary to secondary school? Fiona Goodwin describes a programme that has helped to create an emotionally literate school, with benefits to students and staff alike

Organisational changes are not enough. A spirit of community has to be created for the whole to be greater than the sum of its parts. (Gandhi)

As a teacher in an inner city school, I know what it takes to hold the attention of a class of 11 and 12 year olds, so the thought of having 134 of them in a circle, not only holding hands but also completely silent would have seemed surreal just a few years ago.

In my role as learning support unit manager, my team and I are daily witnesses to the resilience of children and their capacity to adapt to stress. The more impersonal setting of the secondary school frequently overwhelms year seven students. It contrasts starkly with the comparatively intimate setting of the primary school. The task of helping these children to navigate the environmental as well as emotional challenge of this transition requires considerable levels of empathy and emotional literacy on the part of all staff. The 'Being the best you can be' programme was created in response to this challenge, as well as to help develop a collaborative culture throughout the school.

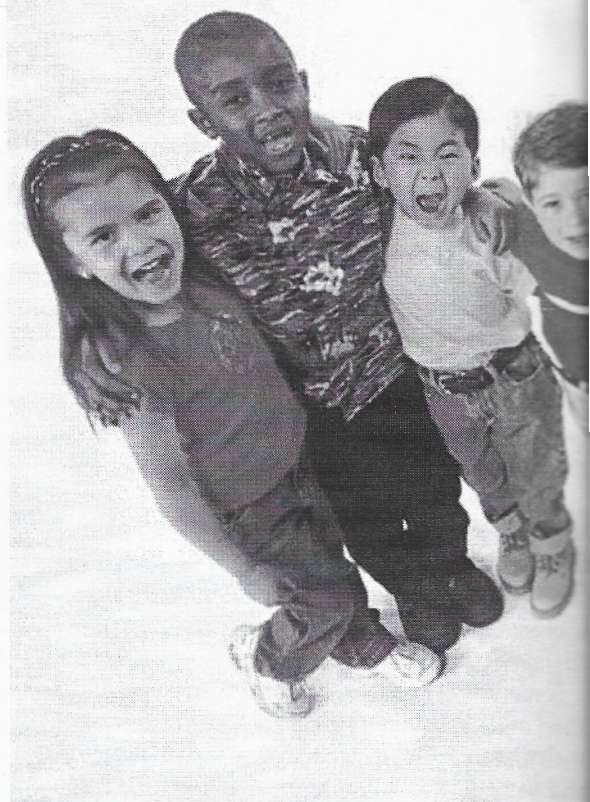
I first met US facilitator Robert Razz when I attended a workshop facilitated by him in Manchester, England, in 2001. A year after the Manchester seminar, I worked alongside him as an assistant on a four-week summer 'Wilderness experience' for adolescents in California. It was this experience that became the inspiration for the 'Being the best you can be' week, and for the vision of helping to create an emotionally literate school.

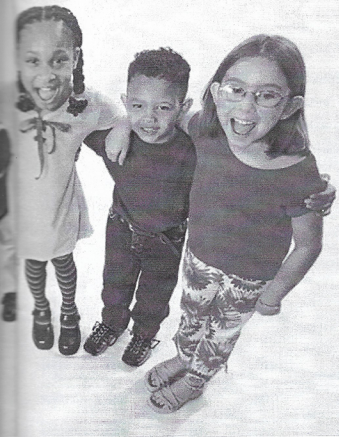
I decided to incorporate a more Socratic approach of facilitating the students' personal growth and competence through inquiry and investigation. I implemented the use of a 'circle time,' which has five simple rules: speak from your heart, listen from your heart, be concise, be spontaneous, and only the person with the talking piece speaks. The impact of this technique was immediately apparent – I couldn't understand how I had ever doubted how much young people value, and long for, the dignity

of having a voice. Given the opportunity, they create a collective wisdom that ought to be built into the governance of any school. I am not just talking about school councils perennial campaigning for soft toilet paper and lockers; the back bone, the resilience and the moral fibre of our schools and of our society relies on our young people having a voice, and learning how to use that voice respectfully and powerfully. Our education system, indeed any education system, would gain so much by committing itself to empowering children to speak and to listen from a place of authenticity and integrity.

The mature dialogue that took place in circle time, and the commitment of the headteacher and staff to building an emotionally intelligent community, bridged a significant gap in pupil and staff experience. To further develop the impact of circle time we decided to run our own wilderness experience in the school drama room. Our proposal to devote a week of year seven time to helping them to improve their relationships earned us the BT Guardian Award, giving us £2,000. This was used primarily to document the programme in the form of a DVD, entitled 'Being the best you can be'. Having the concept and design of the week in place, I asked Razz if he would be able to join us on our venture. As synchronicity would have it, he was in the process of moving with his family to London from California.

A few weeks later he was in school helping us to recreate the dynamic I had experienced the previous summer. This time it was with 134 year seven pupils, 69 gifted and talented pupils and 70 pupils who are regular visitors to the learning support unit. It was extraordinary to see the healing and paradigm shifts that took place for pupils and adults during this time.





IMAGES/ALAMY

The 'Being the best you can be' week

Each day we had a class of 30 pupils and the day was divided into three sessions of two hours each. We started with the students seated in a circle and introduced the topic of friendship, followed by each student choosing a classmate to thank for being their friend. Next, they received an individual piece of rope. The students then learned to tie a mountaineering figure-of-eight knot, connecting their rope to the person on either side of them, analogous to the bonds and value of friendship. Their next challenge was to stand, holding the rope circle they had just tied, checking the strength of their knots and following a series of instructions testing their individual and group levels of focus and teamwork. The point was soon realised that friendship made life better, and the experience started to remind everyone in the room of the importance and value of the people in their lives. What followed was a simple and enjoyable exercise that invited greater levels of focus, rapport, cooperation and collaboration within the group by juggling tennis balls. Each phase ended with acknowledgment, celebration and group discussion.

The children were asked to define their own core values and, searching within themselves, came up with the principles they deemed most important. All pupils were encouraged to contribute to a list of core values. Topping the list were teamwork, trust, communication, cooperation, fun, respect and listening. These values, coming from the students' own thinking, were focused on and referenced throughout the programme, so that by the end, all students felt that each value was more present in the culture of the school.

It was not 'boot camp' or 'brat camp'. The 'Being the best you can be' programme was designed to

encourage participation or 'challenge by choice' from the students, but nobody was forced. Part of the power of the exercises came from a level of ownership within the students. As any counsellor, parent or teacher knows, forcing children to do what they are told only elicits resistance. The children were participating of their own volition, making them not only more eager to be involved in the experience, but giving them ownership of the results. The pupils came away from the programme having created their own core values, and these were arrived at through their participation and collaboration. This powerful recognition of the value of the students' input meant that the outcomes of the programme have continued to take effect after it has finished. The students as a group value the change of thinking because it has been brought about by their own enthusiasm. Throughout the five days, a level of concentration, attentiveness and respect for speakers, including classmates and peers, became apparent in the student body. Also, students who were typically quiet and reserved came into their own, expressing their opinions. A feeling of safety was there for the first time for some of them. We were seeing children communicate in a way that I had not seen in a school setting and at times it was very moving.

Collaboration and cooperation

Whereas traditional teaching methods require that pupils study, learn and commit information to memory for future testing, the competence-based curriculum promotes collaboration, cooperation and emotional literacy. Students discover, through relating to one another, what the answers are to problems and what lessons can be learned. Challenges were set in place through the various exercises of the 'Being the best you can be' programme, and a creative process of discovery supported students in problem solving and interpreting their own results. The exercises had names such as bonding, electric fence, treasure, karaoke sharing, community, circle time, roll over, herbie, race car, turn the page, high five, and the woodie, creating a fun and dynamic context for learning. Some of the exercises, such as the electric fence, also known as the spider's web, are old favourites, but what was not familiar was the depth of the challenge and joy that was created when the solution was devised.

The electric fence – teambuilding

The electric fence is a large apparatus with lengths of string pulled tightly over the surface to create a freestanding web dividing the room in two. The students are separated into two teams, with one group placed on each side of the web. The task is for the teams to change sides by moving through the holes in the web without touching it, until all members of the team have switched sides. This

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