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Emotions Matter

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Cultivating the emotional intelligence of both students and teachers is our best hope for safe, caring, and effective schools.

Jason is one of those middle school students who come with a warning label—a long list of stories of defiance and disobedience. Most mornings, Jason eats a quick breakfast after little sleep. He rushes out the door while being lectured by his mother about being late for school. He has a 30-minute walk to school, and he usually travels alone because his neighborhood friends have already left.

Today, like many days, Jason arrives to school late. When he comes in, his first-period math teacher scolds him in front of the class. Jason and this teacher have bumped heads since the beginning of the school year because Jason consistently arrives late. As a result, he has fallen far behind. Jason has missed the beginning of the lesson and is not clear about its objectives, so he ends up doodling mindlessly for the remainder of class. As he leaves, his teacher sarcastically remarks, "Maybe tomorrow, you'll actually get here on time."

In English, Jason's favorite class, things go more smoothly. His teacher greets him at the door with a smile, does a quick check-in, and notices that Jason is "off." She recommends that he write in his journal to help him relax. Jason does so for a few minutes and then joins the class, remaining mostly on task.

In third period, Jason's social studies teacher returns an assigned paper. Jason expects a high grade because he put in a lot of effort. On learning that he received a *C*, Jason immediately shuts down and mutters, "I hate social studies." He fiercely crumples up the paper and shoves it into his backpack. His teacher notices and sends him to the principal's office. On the way, he passes Matt, another 6th grader, who makes an insulting remark. Jason retaliates with a nasty remark of his own just as the principal walks out of her office. She demands that Jason apologize, but he refuses. The principal gives both boys conduct referrals and calls their parents. Jason leaves the office in a foul mood.

The remainder of the day has its ups and downs. At recess, Jason appears to be in better spirits. He plays basketball and looks like he is having fun. Lunch also goes smoothly. He sits with a group of friends and talks about the upcoming basketball game on the weekend. But during fifth-period science class, Jason has a pop quiz for which he is unprepared. In Spanish, the last class of the day, the substitute teacher reprimands Jason for chatting while he should be reading. The teacher also criticizes Jason for not looking her in the eye when she speaks to him. After school, Jason walks home, where his mother lectures him yet again about his behavior. Jason eats dinner with his mother and two brothers, does about half of his homework, and falls asleep after midnight watching television.

It's easy to observe Jason's tardiness, misbehavior, and disengagement and make assumptions about the reasons for his actions. Perhaps, Jason is disengaged in math because he's tired and has a bad relationship with his teacher. Perhaps he enjoys English because he connects with his teacher and acts out in his social studies class because he is frustrated by his low grade. But how do we know what Jason is actually feeling throughout the day? And what difference does it make?

Why Emotions Matter

The science of emotions provides a lens that can help us understand Jason's experiences at school and thus serve him, and all students, more effectively. It also helps us recognize how our own emotions affect our teaching practices, our interactions with students, and our ability to model healthy emotional responses in challenging situations.

At the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, we study how emotions drive teaching and learning. We also develop evidence-based approaches to teach emotional intelligence to educators and families. Here are four reasons we believe that emotions matter a great deal in school (Brackett & Rivers, 2014).

For attention, learning, and performance

Emotions can either enhance or derail classroom performance. Interest and amusement, for example, harness attention and promote greater engagement. Boredom, anxiety, and fear disrupt concentration and interfere with the ability to learn. Extreme emotions like chronic stress, sometimes arising from trauma or the perception of danger, can result in the persistent activation of the sympathetic nervous system and the release of stress hormones like cortisol. Prolonged release of these hormones affects the brain structures associated with executive functioning and memory, hindering a student's ability to learn and thrive in school and in life.

For decision making

Emotions influence decision making in both harmful and beneficial ways. People in pleasant moods tend to perceive individuals, places, and events more favorably than people in unpleasant moods do. Pleasant moods also tend to enhance mental flexibility and creativity. In contrast, anger or sadness triggered by one situation may carry over into unrelated situations, causing people to lash out at someone who had nothing to do with the original anger or sadness.

One study we conducted with middle school teachers demonstrated that emotions could influence teacher behavior. To induce sadness, we assigned one group of teachers to write about a negative memory for five minutes; to induce a happier mood, we assigned another group to write about a positive memory. We then asked all the teachers to grade the same essay, written by a 7th grade student, on its creativity, structure, spelling and punctuation, vocabulary, and overall quality. The ratings were about one full grade higher in the happy group of teachers than in the sad group. Interestingly, only 14 percent of the teachers believed that the mood induction influenced their evaluation of the essay (Brackett, Floman, Ashton-James, Cherraskiy, & Salovey, 2013).

For fostering good relationships

Emotions revealed in the face, body, and voice send signals about approachability. For example, sadness, displayed with a downward gaze and frown, indicates that a person needs help. Joy or happiness, expressed by a genuine smile, indicates that it's safe to approach and that social support is available. Anger, displayed with furrowed eyebrows and pressed lips, sends a message to stay away and can also elicit fear responses in others. Put simply, the emotions that teachers and students display in class influence the teacher-student bond, which is crucial to effective teaching and learning.

For health and well-being

Emotions release a variety of neurotransmitters that influence our physical and mental health, including our immune-system functioning. Stress, for example, is associated with increased levels of

cortisol, which has been shown to lead to weight gain. High levels of serotonin, on the other hand, tend to boost mood and curb the appetite.

Pleasant emotions can provide many health benefits, including greater resilience to trauma. People who have learned healthy ways to manage emotions like stress and anger are likely to experience greater psychological well-being.

Understanding Emotional Intelligence

Emotions give us information that can be valuable—if we use that information wisely. That's why it's important for schools not only to support students' and educators' social and emotional health, but also to teach all stakeholders—school leaders, teachers, staff, students, and families—the skills of emotional intelligence.

But what exactly *is* emotional intelligence? Can it even be taught?
Mayer and Salovey (1997) defined emotional intelligence as the ability to reason with and about emotions to achieve goals and success in life. The key skills of emotional intelligence are recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing, and regulating emotion (Brackett & Rivers, 2014).

The first skill, *recognizing emotion*, ensures that we obtain accurate and useful information from the environment. We can recognize emotions through facial expressions, vocal tones, body language, and even physiology (for example, our own heart rate). These emotions signal whether things are going well or poorly for ourselves and other people, and they also help us attend to our own and others' needs. Joy occurs when we achieve a goal; anger when we perceive injustice; disappointment when we have unmet expectations. In the classroom, our ability to accurately recognize emotions is key to connecting and engaging with our students.

Referring back to Jason, how could his social studies teacher recognize exactly what he was feeling when he crumpled up his assignment? On the surface, he appeared angry. But it's reasonable to think that he also felt disappointed or embarrassed. We need to know because the strategies we might use to help Jason manage his feelings would likely be different for anger than for disappointment. If Jason is angry, we might give him a safe space and strategy to help him de-escalate and later invite him to discuss his feelings and what he perceived as being unfair, followed by a discussion of expected classroom behavior. These strategies would also apply if Jason's main feeling was disappointment; but because disappointment generally results from unmet expectations, we might also want to inquire into how he prepared for the assignment and help him plan strategies he could use to do better next time.

Put simply, instead of playing the guessing game based on Jason's behavior, we need to clarify our understanding of what he's feeling.

Getting in Touch with Your Emotions

As educators, developing a deeper understanding of our own emotions can enable us to get our own needs met, to support all students, and to create the best possible learning environment. To build greater emotional awareness, ask yourself these questions:

- How do you feel in the morning as you enter your school?
- What emotions do you experience throughout the day while teaching?
- What emotions do you experience when walking the hallways, when in the lunchroom, when grading, and when in the faculty room?
- Which students and colleagues evoke pleasant versus unpleasant emotions in you?
- How do you feel at the end of the school day?

We can accomplish this by telling Jason what we observe in his facial expressions and body language and what we hear in his voice—and engaging him in a conversation that encourages him to share his feelings and experiences.

The second skill, *understanding emotions*, refers to recognizing how different emotions influence our thinking, decisions, and behavior. It's likely that the primary emotion Jason was feeling was disappointment because he didn't get the grade he expected. He also might have felt embarrassed when he was told to go to the principal's office and even fearful about the possible consequences of the principal's call home. Jason's understanding of the causes and consequences of his emotions would provide him with crucial information about how best to shift or to maintain his emotions and behave in an appropriate manner.

When we, as teachers, understand the causes and consequences of our own and our students' emotions, we can provide greater insights to our students. We can also teach more mindfully and differentiate our instruction depending on where our students are emotionally and where we want them to be. For example, we might create the conditions for excitement when we want students to generate ideas about a topic for a paper; help them tap into feelings of anger when their task is to write a persuasive essay; induce a sad mood when they prepare to write a moving poem; and cultivate a calm, relaxed state for private journal writing.

Labeling emotions, the third skill of emotional intelligence, includes having a diverse vocabulary to describe the full range of emotions, from basic ones like fear to complex ones like shame. It also includes the ability to differentiate emotions according to intensity. For example, emotions like contentment, joy, delight, exhilaration, elation, and ecstasy exist in the happiness family, whereas impatience, annoyance, irritation, frustration, aggravation, and rage exist in the anger family.

Most people have difficulty finding the exact word to describe their feelings. One way to expand our own and our students' emotion vocabulary is to teach words that describe various intensities of emotions from different emotion families (for example, *happiness* and *anger*). It's also important to examine how these emotions are shown and what causes people to experience them. Referring back to Jason, if he had a more sophisticated emotion vocabulary, he might have been able to articulate that he was anxious and confused during math class and possibly ask for help.

The fourth skill of emotional intelligence is *expressing emotions*. This skill pertains to one's ability to communicate emotions effectively with different people and in multiple contexts. How we express our emotions depends on our personality (for example, whether we are an introvert or extrovert); our level of comfort with different emotions; our social norms; and larger cultural or religious rules around when, where, and with whom we express emotions. (For example, the acceptance of direct eye contact and public display of affection vary by culture.)

Because educators and students alike have different rules and comfort levels around expressing emotions, students may mask or hide their true feelings. Jason's substitute Spanish teacher thought he was being disrespectful by not looking her in the eye; however, without knowing Jason's cultural background and past experiences, it's hard to know whether he was being disrespectful or deferential to authority. The more we know our students—from their personality to their cultural background—the better we can work with them on effective ways to express their emotions in school.

Regulating emotions, the fifth skill of emotional intelligence, involves strategies to prevent or reduce unwanted emotions and to maintain, initiate, or enhance desired ones. Many of us use unproductive strategies automatically, including negative self-talk (I'm a loser; I'm stupid); blaming others; or yelling. More effective strategies include positive self-talk (I can do this; I'm going to take the high road); positive reappraisal (for example, taking the other person's perspective); social support; and exercise. As educators, it's important to notice our own unintentional, potentially unproductive strategies and to develop effective ones so that we can be good role models for our students.

Jason uses a range of strategies. Some of them (such as procrastination, negative self-talk, and aggression) don't help him achieve his goals; others (such as journaling) are helpful. Our hope is for schools to provide opportunities from preschool to high school for all students to learn effective strategies to regulate their feelings.

Creating Emotionally Intelligent Schools

Research shows that emotional intelligence is associated with a wide range of positive outcomes among children and adolescents, including improved cognitive and social functioning, psychological well-being, and higher academic performance. Emotional intelligence is also associated with less stress and burnout and greater job satisfaction among educators. Our own observational studies have shown that classrooms rated higher in emotional intelligence have students who are more engaged, behave in more prosocial ways, and learn better (for a review of this research, see Brackett, Rivers, Bertoli, & Salovey, in press). Additional research shows that emotional intelligence can be taught and developed in schools (Brackett & Rivers, 2014; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

Despite this evidence, however, U.S. schools have not devoted much attention to emotional intelligence, more broadly called social and emotional learning (SEL) (Durlak, Gullotta, Domitrovich, Goren, & Weissberg, 2015). In many ways, the strong emphasis on standardized testing and teacher accountability has pushed aside the emotions of students and educators.

Still, a large number of parents, researchers, educators, and policymakers are pushing for schools to take SEL seriously. More districts are adopting evidence-based approaches to SEL; schools of education are starting to integrate training in the area, and policies to mandate and fund SEL are being considered, including two pending federal bills: the Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act (HR 850) and the Jesse Lewis Empowering Educator Act (S 897).

Consider how Jason's life and millions of other children's lives might improve if they learned to recognize, understand, label, express, and regulate emotions. Consider how teacher and leader stress and burnout might be reduced if educators developed these same skills. It's time to

Are You an Emotionally Intelligent Educator?

Ask yourself the following questions:

Recognizing emotion. How often do you pay attention to your own and your students' emotions? What do you do to teach your students to accurately recognize emotions in the face, body, and voice?

Understanding emotion. Are you aware of your emotional triggers? What makes you feel angry, worried, or joyful at school? How do you help your students understand the causes and consequences of their emotions?

Labeling emotion. How sophisticated is your emotion vocabulary? How do you infuse emotion vocabulary into your teaching?

Expressing emotion. Are you comfortable expressing the full range of emotions—including happiness, sadness, anger, and calmness—with your students? What do you do to ensure that your students learn about cultural differences in the display of emotions?

Regulating emotion. Which ineffective and effective strategies do you use to regulate your feelings? How often do you teach your students helpful strategies to regulate emotions such as stress so that they can achieve their goals?

ensure that all educators and children develop the necessary emotional skills to reach their full potential in school, at home, and in their communities.

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