

Teachers' Perspectives on Change in Student Population and
the Need for Emotional Intelligence in Education

By

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Abstract

In the past several decades, there have been dramatic changes in technology, family orientations, and the global economy. These changes influence children's values, behaviors, and learning. This paper describes a qualitative ethnographic study conducted to capture the experiences of 19 veteran teachers and staff members in four elementary schools in the southern Bay Area near San Francisco, California. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews about the teachers' perceptions of changes in their student populations over time. All interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed for repeating themes. Sixteen out of 19 teachers reported increased numbers of students with emotional and behavioral difficulties. These teachers believed that their students were emotionally impacted because of the significant amount of time spent in front of television and video games, often unsupervised or overindulged. In addition, teachers observed how busy parents keep their children busy by over scheduling, enrolling children in variety of after school programs, resulting in minimal parent-child interaction. The participants in the study reported that they exert significant amount of efforts in their teaching practice to instill manners, build character, discipline, and motivate because increasing numbers of students come to school not ready to learn.

Introduction

Emotional intelligence has been defined as a brain function related to “experiential” learning and “constructive” thinking (LeDoux, 1996; Epstein, 1998). Mayer and Salovey first coined the term and defined emotional intelligence as the ability to be aware of emotions, integrate them into thought, and understand and manage them (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). The emotional center in the brain operates to trigger emotions, and then sends the messages to the reasoning and behavioral centers of the brain (LeDoux, 1996), thus, emotions impact reasoning and behavior.

Emotional intelligence has been linked to mental health. People with high emotional intelligence are less likely to be diagnosed with mental disorders (Taylor, 2001). Sung (2007) found that older adolescents with far below average emotional intelligence were more pessimistic, black and white in their judgment, and vengeance oriented. They also avoided problems and demonstrated poor self-regard. In contrast, older adolescents with high emotional intelligence were more optimistic, assertive, and adaptive. They solved problems, showed high degree of self-regard, and knew when to “let go”.

Emotional well-being of children is influenced by the quality of family interactions. The family cultures that are “integrated, coherent, and emotionally engaging for children are also likely to provide greater well-being” (Weisner, 1998, p. 71). However, with the increase in families with two parents working, single parent homes, nontraditional family orientations, and diverse cultures and backgrounds (Shaw & Woods, 2003), teachers are noticing increased challenges to teaching and learning due to emotional and behavioral issues. Achenbach, Dumenci, and Rescorla (2003) compared the children from the 1970s to the 1980s. According to their assessments, they found decrease in the Competence Scores and increase in Problem Scores. Overall, children were more impulsive, disobedient, angry, lonely, depressed, and anxious. By the 1990s, the Problem Scores among children stabilized but remained higher than

the children of 70s. Emotional difficulties in children seemed to persist while the educational system continued to focus on test scores and achievement. While “No Child Left Behind” may be a goal, it cannot be reached without paying attention to the emotional barriers in teaching and learning (Adelman & Taylor, 2008). Academic achievement alone may not prepare students for success in the job market and the global world.

A mental health study by Kessler and Associates (2005) reported that 75 million people a year were diagnosed with mental disorders and 60% of these were moderate to severe. In 2006, 250 million prescriptions were written in the USA for anti-depressant, anti-psychotic and anti-anxiety medication (Munsey, 2008). The medical model of diagnosis and treatment of an individual without looking at the environment has led to the pandemic level of mental health issues in America (Gutkin, 2008). The preventative model starts in the schools to address the social/emotional needs of all students. Teachers and parents need to be empowered to meet the emotional needs of children for early intervention (Gutkin, 2008; Doll & Cummings, 2008). Therefore, teachers’ and educational leaders’ knowledge and application of emotional intelligence infusion in the classroom may be one of the solutions to improve the future outlook.

Emotional Intelligence for All People

Emotional intelligence has evolved from Mayer and Salovey’s definition. Daniel Goleman (1995) popularized emotional intelligence by defining it as a concept people could relate to their own lives (Matthews, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2002). He supported the need to have emotional intelligence in the workplace and in leadership (Goleman, 1998 & 2002). Bar-On (2004) expanded on Goleman’s definition of emotional intelligence to include five areas. The first area is intrapersonal intelligence, consisting of self-regard, emotional awareness, assertiveness, independence, and self-actualization. The second area is interpersonal intelligence, consisting of empathy, social responsibility, and interpersonal relationships. The third area is

stress management, consisting of stress tolerance and impulse control. The fourth area is adaptability, consisting of reality testing, flexibility, and problem solving. Finally, the fifth area is general mood, consisting of optimism and happiness.

The expanded definition of emotional intelligence integrated the contributions made by different branches of psychology. The following are the building blocks of the current definition of emotional intelligence: (a) self-awareness found in psychodynamics, (b) positive self-regard and self-actualization emphasized in humanistic psychology, (c) behavior management used in behavioral psychology, (d) connections between thinking and emotions in rational emotive psychology, (e) social influence discussed in social psychology, (f) measurement and predictability stressed in cognitive psychology, and (g) multiple intelligence theory (Bar-On & Parker, 2002; Ciarrochi, Forgas, & Mayer, 2001; Matthews, Zeidner, & Roberts, 2002). With every quest to understand human nature, it laid a foundation for emotional intelligence.

While Western psychology describes emotional intelligence in terms of intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence, the Eastern philosopher, Confucius, taught similar concepts in terms of vertical and horizontal relationships in 500 BC. Vertical relationships focused on self-cultivation to become a wiser, benevolent, patient, ethical, and a moral human being. Self-cultivation can be achieved through meditation and education. Horizontal relationships emphasized social consciousness and the individual's impact on other people. Social responsibility started in the family, then the society, the country, the world, and the universe (Berthrong & Berthrong, 2000). The similarities between the Eastern and the Western approaches to optimizing human quality suggest that emotional intelligence is the fundamental human capacity to manage the self better and to have a positive influence on others.

Literature Review

Emotional well-being has been difficult to measure in the past due to its subjective nature. More recently, emotional intelligence is associated with psychological well-being and higher quality of life (Ciarrochi, Forgas, & Mayer, 2001; Taylor, 2001; Grewal & Salovey, 2005). Currently, the assessment of emotional intelligence is available in three different types: self-report, abilities assessment, and ratings by others (Schutte & Malouff, 1999; Ciarrochi, Chan, Caputi, & Roberts, 2001; Mayer, Caruso, & Salovey, 2002). These assessment tools are used to test predictability of emotional intelligence.

Emotional intelligence is a significant predictor of students' life satisfaction, after controlling for demographic variables and the Big Five personalities (Law, Wong, & Song, 2004). Emotional intelligence also had significant predictive power on task performance, interpersonal facilitation, and job dedication (Weinberger, 2002). Emotional regulation was significantly related to reciprocal peer nominations, self-rated interpersonal sensitivity, peer nomination of interpersonal sensitivity, and the proportion of negative versus positive nominations among 3rd and 4th year college students. Students who scored high on emotional regulation described themselves as interpersonally sensitive and pro-social (Lopes, Salovey, Cote, & Beers, 2005). In addition, distinction could be made between those with high emotional intelligence and low emotional intelligence in their ability to seek help. Ciarrochi, Deane, and Wilson (2002) found that adolescents with low emotional intelligence have difficulty with their ability to identify, describe and understand emotions. Greater hopelessness was associated with less intention to seek help. Hopelessness was significantly related to all the emotional competence. Those with higher emotional competence were more likely to seek help.

Emotional intelligence is linked with family experiences. Harrod and Scheer (2005) found that adolescents' higher emotional intelligence had significant correlation with both

parents' educational level; the higher the parental education, the higher the emotional intelligence in adolescents. In fact, cultural beliefs and values impact parenting practices, thus influencing the development of emotional intelligence (Sung, 2007). Furthermore, several studies on emotional intelligence indicated that it is the ingredient needed for high quality job performance. Emotional intelligence is found to have great impact on leadership in organizations (McDowelle & Bell, 1997; Maulding, 2002), management (Nuttall, 2004), educational leadership (Byrne, 2003; Cook, 2006; Spaeth, 2007), military (Latour & Hosmer, 2002), and law enforcement (Turner, 2006). The need for emotional intelligence in job performance, interpersonal relationships, resilience, and problem solving is evident.

Description of the Study

A qualitative ethnographic study was conducted to describe the experiences of 19 veteran teachers in four elementary schools in the southern part of San Francisco Bay Area in California. Those who had fewer years of teaching experience had started to teach later in life but had gained a wealth of experience through child care, program development, school board membership, participation in PTA, or volunteering at their children's schools. The teachers were identified by the number of years in education. The distinguishing experiences were added when more than one teacher had the same years of teaching experience.

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with teachers and staff members who have had from 10 to 40 years of experience in education. The interviews lasted 20 to 30 minutes. All interviews were audio taped, transcribed, and analyzed. The teachers' comments were categorized into common themes. Only the repeating themes were reported descriptively. The samples responses from more than one participant were used to support the themes.

The teachers made time to meet the researcher before or after school hours or during their lunchtime. Member's check was used to assure credibility as the teachers checked the accuracy of their words on the transcript. The study was guided by the following research questions: (a) What changes have the teachers and staff members noticed in their student population over time? (b) What are the teachers' and staff members' perspectives on the changes? (c) What are the teachers' and staff members' perceptions on diversity and globalization? (d) How are these changes impacting students' emotional well-being?

Findings

The teachers' report of changes in their student populations over time can be divided into four broad themes: 1) The change in the family structure and interaction style, 2) The change in teachers' perception about students' behaviors and the impact on school performance, 3) The change in ethnicity and student population, 4) The emotional well-being of students in their classroom.

Change in Parent Availability

The most common themes were related to change in family structure with single parent homes and both parents working. A teacher with 35 years of experience said that when she first started teaching, there were mothers who did not work. This phenomenon has not been so prevalent in recent years. A teacher who has been involved with the school system for 21 years remarked that the family's responsibilities and the school's responsibilities were clearer when she started teaching. A big difference she has noticed is that most mothers are not home anymore. These teachers noticed decline in parental availability, which impacted parent/child interaction.

A teacher with 14 years of experience said that she has more "latchkey children" (those who let themselves in when no one is home) because they have working parents. These students

appear to be raising themselves, in her opinion. A teacher with 15 years of experience said that many parents are busy in most families. If there is only one parent, that parent is working. If there are two parents, they both work, usually in jobs that require most of their energy and time. Either they are in high-end jobs with many demands or in low-end with several jobs which require them to take additional jobs in order to make a living. As a result, the parents buy things for their children to compensate for being less available.

Impact on Children's Behavior

The lack of parental availability leads to alternate means of childcare and weaker parental influence. Another participant in the study, a teacher with 18 years of experience, remarked that many children go to daycare, not having a parent at home in the afternoon. Some children are negatively impacted when a parent is not available. The parents are often too tired and feel guilty for not spending enough time with their children. She feels that the children are quite indulged and get whatever they want. Many of today's children are accustomed to instant gratification.

Another teacher with 17 years of experience noticed that because the children lack parental supervision at home, they do not learn to listen to their parents. If children do not listen to parents, she believes it is almost certain that they would not listen to teachers either. A teacher with 11 years of experience added that listening is twice as hard when children have difficulty with focusing. Children's ability to focus has changed over the years. There are many distractions for children at home, which make focusing at school difficult. Youngsters are used to being entertained, watching television, and playing games. They are not accustomed to focusing on directions.

A teacher, who has been in the educational system in various capacities from being a board member, classroom teacher to instructional assistant over the past 35 years, indicated that the change could also be due to the change in parental attitudes. She remarked that there was a

time about 10 or 15 years ago, when parents and teachers were not allowed to say anything negative to their children. These children are parents now, who do not know how to discipline their own children. According to this participant, their children, in turn, are overindulged and rushed through childhood. Another teacher who taught for 20 years reiterated this perspective. She watched a generation go by and found that some of the children are from the generation that was basically were given things quickly. She added that these parents have their own children and their parenting is manifested in two different ways. One way is to perceive that everything is okay, and nothing the children ever do is wrong. Another is to go to the other extreme, and realizing that growing up without structure is not the best way, they become much stricter with their children.

A teacher with 13 years of experience thinks the parents are getting younger and younger. She thinks the young parents might not have learned the necessary manners and their children are not learning the manners either. As a result, this teacher spends more time disciplining students, stopping her lesson now and then to discipline. She feels that it is disruptive and a considerable amount of time is wasted. Another teacher with 18 years of experience said that she teaches manners because parents do not have the time.

An instructional assistant, who has been in education for 34 years added that most parents nowadays feel like the school is the prime educator of their child. They do not see their children enough hours in a day to be able to teach them and pass their values along. A teacher in education for 11 years supported the same thought. The parents have gotten so busy that they have virtually abdicated their positions as teachers to their own children. In her view, it is easiest for parents to do the tasks themselves rather than to require their children to learn a task. Therefore, the children do not practice listening to parent direction.

A teacher with 35 years of experience said that their families give children less instruction and it impacts their maturity level. The same thought was repeated when a teacher with 15 years of experience added that the parents “baby their kids” more, holding their hands through life. Instead of telling their children to get their work done, parents argue with teachers over assigning too much homework. He notices that parents make excuses for their children when they do not do their homework, and the children are not taking enough responsibility anymore. In his perception, their parents are more “friends” than parents.

While parents play an important role, the current trend does not enable parents to influence their children in a positive way. One classroom assistant, who raised two children of her own, said that it is the parents who set the rules and guidelines, instill the moral and academic values, and “just motivate” children to do their best. If children do not have that, they are not ready to learn. Another retiring teacher commented that children are not interacting with parents as they use to. It seems to her that many families do not have dinner together at a table. She believes it is important to have dinner together as a family to discuss their day and to be involved.

Still, another teacher replied that even though there may be parental support, parents are competing with television, video games, different activities after school, and other distractions. One support staff member said that children complain that their parents are too busy. Children are left to their own devices, especially the electronic devices, and there is less human connection. A teacher with 35 years of experience remarked that many children are at day care and after school programs without their parents. She believes that if the parents come home by bedtime and leave the next morning, children’s self-esteem may be impacted. She thinks that children who have either of the parents with them feel better about themselves in general.

In addition, empathy is probably the number one quality that is missing in our population, according to a teacher with 20 years of experience. He said that without empathy, there is no way for a child to know what is wrong. Television is teaching our children its values and they are responding to it. Consequently, these children are not learning interpersonal skills or problem solving skills at home. Today's teachers have to address behaviors, discipline, and socialization in their classrooms.

Attitudinal and Behavioral Change

The teachers have been able to observe changes in students' performance at school in terms of thinking through problems, motivation to learn, and completion of a task. The teacher with 17 years experience said that the quest to learn and to get better is getting weaker and weaker compared to the way it used to be. A teacher with 11 years of experience said that children often do not understand what it takes to pay attention and care about what is going on.

A teacher with 19 years experience remarked that children want things to happen fast all the time. It seems to him that children's thinking and processing have changed. His students are good at taking in information because of their exposure to technology. Yet, sometimes, in his opinion, they "rush to do" and do not do the preliminary, deeper thinking. He stated that stamina is needed to concentrate and read through the problems and he is concerned that the students these days lack that stamina. He said that it takes practice to develop ideas and think about deeper meaning. However, today's children are not getting enough practice.

Change in Diversity

Several teachers noticed drastic change in the ethnicity of their student population. They experienced the impact of globalization in their classrooms. Older teachers pointed out that when they started to teach 30 to 40 years ago, the school district used to be 95% white. Now, 67% of

the population is from bicultural backgrounds. The number of first generation immigrants has increased.

Seventeen out of 19 teachers responded positively to diversity and globalization. One teacher commented that she loves the idea of having children from Japan, China, Korea, East India and Europe in her classroom. Having the cultures merging and learning from each other is “awesome” for her. Another teacher added that the integration of cultures in California is healthy because there are people from all over the world in one neighborhood. Another teacher reiterated the same idea, saying that the children are exposed to different ideologies.

Some teachers realized the imminent growth of diversity and globalization as they saw the change in student population. One staff member remarked that she thinks our society will continue to become more global. A teacher with 35 years of experience said that diversity is something that will help us in the future. For example, the field of technology is going to have a diverse population. In order to attract technology and industries, diversification is necessary.

Students' Emotional Well-Being

Some teachers noticed difference among ethnic groups in problem solving and behavioral management. Many teachers reported that Asian parents have high expectations for their children's academic success. A teacher with 40 years of experience commented that many Asian parents are extremely involved in their children's education and extremely demanding of their children. “The parents are driving their children,” remarked a teacher with 14 years of experience. An administrator with 10 years of teaching experience indicated that the Asian students are so pressured to excel that these students frequently live with negative emotions. She maintained that many of these students are afraid of failing and have fear of not performing. If a child does not get an “A” the parent will chastise that child, so she feels that a teacher would give an “A” to help the student avoid the punishment.

In some cases, teachers have noticed that academic pressure amongst Asian parents is so great that it appears to affect their students' emotions. There is a great emphasis, from the district as well as from parents, on the state mandated California's Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) test. A teacher with 20 years experience was surprised to see a good student cry when she did poorly on the practice STAR test. Even when the district converted to the rubric system of grading instead of letter grades in the elementary grades, the parents still ask what the highest mark would be and push their children to get the highest mark.

In lower socioeconomic populations, there are different cultural issues. Education is not necessarily valued in their homes because teachers have observed their students come to school haphazardly, unprepared or are absent often. A teacher in a school with lower socioeconomic population reported that their lowest scoring students, across the board, are Hispanic children. The number of Hispanic students that do well is very small, in his experience.

There were other teachers who believe that ethnicity has less to do with the ability to adapt and emotional well-being of children, but they maintained that it depends on the individual parents. The lack of parental beliefs about correcting wrong behavior, instilling motivation to achieve, and taking time to teach children can be seen across cultures. A teacher with 17 years of experience said that families that have strong values would push their children in the right direction. She experienced parents of different cultures emphasize education, sometimes to the extreme.

A teacher with 20 years of experience said that she has children from Germany, Russia and Israel whose parents are highly concerned about education. She also witnessed poor parenting in both Asian and non-Asian parents. A teacher with 14 years of experience has students from all cultures who are independent and self-motivated as well as students who are

not. So, it can be seen that emotional well-being depends on the parents, and some parents just do not have the parenting skills.

Conclusion

The result of the interviews from veteran teachers and staff members in the elementary schools in southern Bay Area near San Francisco, California revealed change in the family over several decades. An overwhelming majority described the change in the family structure is due to economic demands. There are more broken families with single parents and/or working mothers. As a result, the interaction time parents have with their children has decreased dramatically. The parents are too tired to deal with the day-to-day problems, and many cannot take the time to teach their children problem solving skills. They overindulge or make excuses for their children out of a sense of guilt. Many kids are left alone with television and computer games. Consequently, these children are less ready to learn at school. They do not know what it takes to be attentive or responsible, to listen and wait, or to problem solve. They have not learned the valuable lessons that parents can teach, such as moral values, social skills, and the motivation to do their best.

The impact of globalization can be observed in the classrooms as increased numbers of children from first generation immigrants enter the schools. Teaching strategies have changed over the years to accommodate children of diverse backgrounds. While there appeared to be ethnic differences in parental expectations, poor parenting cuts across all ethnicities because there are those who do well and who do poorly in every ethnic group. Today's teachers deal with discipline, manners, and socialization in addition to teaching. Based on the veteran teachers' interviews, there seems to be an increasing number of factors that keep parents and families from developing emotionally healthy children. The early indicators of mental health problems can be seen in the school setting.

As more people from across the globe live and work together, it becomes essential that all people have the ability to manage self and others effectively. Yet, the current educational system continues to focus on test scores and achievement. The inclusion of emotional intelligence in education promotes positive social change because it increases the students' ability to manage emotions, solve problems, take perspectives, demonstrate empathy, and adapt to change. Emotional intelligence is a concept that applies to everyone and is a necessary part of the educational system.

Social Implications

Now, more than ever, there is an urgency for integrating emotional intelligence into education. Due to change in the family structure and lifestyles, more children are affected emotionally. Teaching and learning becomes difficult when the teacher needs to deal with lack of motivation and discipline, poor concentration and communication skills, low self-esteem and self-awareness (Lewkowicz, 1999). We watch the media and wonder why children have become so violent and aggressive. Doty (2001) explained that when children lack positive role models, problem solving skills, and communication techniques, it can create in them a constant feeling of frustration and result in increased aggressions. More educators are realizing that students need to learn to cope, understand their own values, gain empathy for others, and manage and control their emotions.

The school setting is an ideal place to reach children and families before it is too late. Gutkin (2008) remarked that our educational system is facing a pandemic problem regarding mental health. He recommends an ecological model that investigates not only the student but also the whole environment in which the children function. Parents and teachers are the people who interact with children the most. Unless the environment in which the children function improves, the same problems will continue to exist. Now is the time to embrace emotional

intelligence in education for increased quality of life for all children. The current system of individual based intervention may not be enough to counter the massive barriers to social and emotional well-being in many students. A population-based intervention will address the social and emotional needs of all students (Doll & Cummings, 2008). Children with higher emotional intelligence have a greater chance of success than those with low emotional intelligence (Salovey & Sluyter, 1997; Lewkowicz, 1999; Doty, 2001; Pasi, 2001). Middle school students with higher emotional intelligence have demonstrated higher social and academic competence (Menzie, 2005).

The long-term benefits can be immense, as our children become adults with higher emotional intelligence. These children will grow up to be our next leaders in business, education, politics, science, and the arts. As the world becomes more global and interdependent, those with higher emotional intelligence will have a positive influence on others and make decisions for the benefit of all people.

Recommendations for Future Studies

This study is limited to veteran teachers' and staff members' perspectives in four elementary schools in Southern Bay Area near San Francisco in California. Future studies may include schools in larger cities as well as rural areas. It might be worth examining the perspectives of veteran teachers in a variety of schools across the country. A larger scale study might be conducted quantitatively by using surveys. Veteran teachers from different parts of the United States could be contacted through membership in professional organizations. Veteran teachers' observations of changes in student population are valuable because the outcome of societal change impacts children's behavior, attitudes, and learning in the schools. The knowledge gained from such a study enables the educational system to meet the needs of the changing society.

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