Deconstructing Emotional Intelligence Competencies
In An International Graduate Teacher Cohort:
Reflections On People Skills In Effective Teaching Practice

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A reflective task was used to observe changes in teacher self-awareness and to monitor sensitivity to classroom interaction before and after a master’s course on socioemotional development. This intensive 3-week summer course was focused on how teachers established positive everyday plans for their classroom even when interactions were socially difficult and emotionally charged. As part of coursework, 76 fee-paying international students wrote pre- and post-course reflections of approximately 100 words on their “people skills.” Their responses to specific “emotional competencies” prompts were compiled into two text files and content analysed for high-frequency terms and patterns of word associations spatially represented in a two-dimensional field. Collated pre-reflections revealed conventional views of the people skills required in teaching (e.g., as handling situations in terms of the social rules of classroom and with feelings about the pressures and time constraints in dealing with difficult people). In contrast, postreflection views about feelings and situations linked specific teaching about positive environments with being prepared to deal with emotionally difficult problems. In relation to the construct of emotional intelligence, these analyses support the instructional view that this construct is a highly trainable output rather than an inbuilt personal attribute.

Introduction

The literature on emotional intelligence (EI) posits some combination of nature and nurture such that the trace elements of EI are laid down very early in childhood (Goleman, 1995). According to this view, EI should be largely fixed by adulthood, able to be measured and used predictively much like the intelligence quotient (IQ). It follows that some people are more socially effective than others and bring to bear established talents in social skills, communication, and empathy to social situations. Teacher goodwill towards students has been "a given", with individual differences in teacher practice tacitly accepted as the province of individual teachers and related to personal interest, motivation, and personality (Ackerman & Heggestad, 1997). What is a matter of individual differences in the general community is becoming a topic for professional training in teacher education. Teaching is an interventionist profession that, by its nature, is about making change happen. People attracted to teaching might be expected to have some socioemotional strengths. Yet classroom interactions remain one of the most problematic and stressful aspects of teaching and one in which teachers cling to unhelpful beliefs and practices. The study of emotional competence refreshes existing perspectives on teacher practice and, in particular, challenges unconscious, naïve, and nativist or nature-based beliefs about development and behaviour.

The combined influences of ability, personality, and motivation on teacher practice are complex and uncertain. Implications for classroom practice have been addressed in various ways in educational literature. Much discussion has been focused in terms of problems (e.g., teacher stress and burnout and behaviour management). Much reform has been espoused in terms of alternative views of effective learning environments such as student teams and cooperative learning (Slavin, 1996, 2004) and collaborative teaching teams and co-teaching (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990). However, debate is moving on to the emotional curriculum for students and, more recently, to the emotional curriculum for teachers (Davies & Bryer, 2003, 2004a, b, c; Jarzabkowski, 2002).

It is clear that socioemotional skills feature in teacher practice to an extent not manifested in teacher education. Experienced teacher practitioners have indicated that they regard themselves as competent in curriculum and pedagogy but that, well into their careers, they place great value on personal skills in which they see room for improvement. A large sample of 4,000 Australian teachers generated a comprehensive list of school and classroom competencies (Hughes, Abbott-Campbell, & Williamson, 2001). They
targeted specific personal and practitioner skills that relate to the teacher-learner relationship rather than administrative and organisational competencies, on which they expressed universal agreement about competence (e.g., daily administrative responsibilities, accessing curriculum resources, and, in the classroom domain, effective timetabling). Across primary and nonprimary teaching, important competencies on which they saw room for improvement included social interactions with colleagues, parents, and the community; self-awareness and reflection; and interactions around teaching, learning, and individual differences.

There is increasing concern that teachers need to engage in some kind of emotional self-help to improve professional effectiveness. Richardson and Shupe (2003) urged teachers to get in touch with their own feelings, thoughts, and behaviours in order to respond and relate more effectively to their students, particularly those students with frequent, intense episodes of disruptiveness. Self-awareness included understanding one’s own emotional triggers, ways of managing stress, and tendency to offer positive enhancement of other teachers’ efforts. Mosca and Yost (2001) argued that automatic and holistic teacher reactions to negative interactions with students could affect students cumulatively (see, also, Dodge & Pettit, 2003). Teacher reactions to troubling students also entrench routine ways of thinking, which draw on self-protective cognitive schemes developed over time and personal biases acquired through prior experience. Their reactions not only unconsciously escalate conflicts but also deflect teachers from making more adaptive change to their classroom conditions, selecting helpful decisions about how to improve student behaviour, and providing active support to student learning.

Davies and Bryer (2004b) found high levels of social awareness in graduating special education teachers at Griffith University on the Emotional Competence Inventory (Boyatzis & Goleman, 2002). Self-awareness was rated significantly higher than self-management and relationship management, which was significantly lower than the top two clusters. In particular, these students were cautious about skills in managing intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges even thought they’d completed intervention-oriented courses in interpersonal psychology, counselling, behaviour support, and communication that were not offered to regular classroom teachers. These data raise issues for program revision not only in special education but also for the curriculum-oriented program in regular education.

Many preservice teachers might be passively resistant to ideas of change in themselves, in the nature of professional knowledge about behavioural support, and in their approach to practice (Pajares, 1992). "They believe that problems faced by classroom teachers will not be faced by them, and the vast majority predicts that they will be better teachers than their peers" (Pajares, 1992, p. 323). Beginning teacher education students have been found to hold prior beliefs about the fixed nature of human behaviour, development, and learning. Nativist and innate beliefs about how children develop and static, reproductive views about how students learn have been recognised as barriers to nurture-oriented active, constructivist, and interventionist practice acquisition (Joram & Gabriele, 1998; Klein, 1996; Pajares, 1992).

Emotional intelligence in teacher education is about improving teacher effectiveness in relation to socioemotional skills by enabling them to perform professional roles in classroom and school and to handle difficult situations. It has become increasingly apparent that teacher education needs to offer conceptually and empirically strong alternatives to established training in behaviour management. Such a reframing of teacher education program will need to encourage teachers to engage in nonacademic skill teaching for their students and to provide a active, universal approach (i.e., for all students in a classroom). Preconceptions about either a teacher’s natural capacity to influence learning by creating interest or about a child’s natural capacity to grow independently, to develop responsibility, and to cope with adversity without active support can distort the way in which teacher education students frame issues in behaviour management. "The teaching of responsibility is no less demanding a task than the teaching of any other curriculum area; it requires careful thought and reflection, complex instruction starting at the earliest ages and continuing through the school years, and patience (Villa, Udis, & Thousand, 2003, p. 141).

Reflection as a tool is often recommended to improve teacher effectiveness (Bain, Ballantyne, Mills, & Lester, 2002; Brookfield, 1995) in relation to socioemotional skills. Mosca and Yost (2001) encouraged teachers to use reflection to make a thoughtful, rational, "professional" response to an emotionally tense social interaction between teacher and student in the classroom. They referred to the Dewey concept of a reflective practitioner as someone with personal attributes of open-mindedness, responsibility, and wholeheartedness. They outlined ideas for stronger and more skilful use of these attributes. However, Laboskey (1994) argued that some types of people might be more able to engage in reflection and might be more responsive to learning how to reflect. She found that nonreflective people could still be skilful, organised, and productive teachers even when their attitudes and emotions interfered with reflection.
A reflective task in a master's course on sociometric development provided a way to observe approach to teaching effectiveness at program entry and to monitor changed sensitivity to classroom interaction. A brief 3-week course provided an "intervention" in which participants learned they could use a model of antecedent-behaviour-consequence (ABC) strategies to understand and manage relationships in the classroom. Apart from the intervening coursework, this reflective process did not incorporate either guided, scaffolded, and structured reflection throughout an extended period of study or a formal process of critical analysis of actual practice in relation to relevant literature on ethics and evidence about strategies (Hole & McEntree, 1999). The prereflection task oriented students to the course focus on social aspects of teaching, emotional aspects of classroom behaviour of teacher and their students, and teacher capacity to change their behaviour and also that of students in the classroom. It was expected that reflection at course entry would reveal a characteristic view of teaching. The postreflection task was expected to indicate changes in understanding of effective teaching behaviour and role of a classroom teacher.

The current study examined the proposition that the pre-existing emotional competencies of student teachers are likely to affect teaching approach, irrespective of instruction, by asking a group of 76 postgraduate Canadian trainee teachers to complete pre- and post-reflections focused on their "people skills."

Method
An annual educational conference at Griffith University has invited addresses on educational strategies for inclusion (Anderson, 2003) and school-wide positive behavioural support (Jackson, 2004), and the education program has begun to include such courses in undergraduate and graduate education. The masters program has run this kind of strategy training course combining development and behaviour for several years.

The 3-week summer school outlined an approach to effective teaching that stressed positive, proactive planning to support students. The course shifted from "why" to "how" between the first and second weeks. Each week, there was a day of mass teaching and a day of workshops. In the first week, a day of lectures and videos outlined a developmental rationale of prevention for classroom behaviour (rather than a disciplinary model), which covered concepts of context and individual differences and processes of building resilience and providing an ABC support structure of teacher strategies for preventing problem behaviour. The introductory rationale explored empirical reasons why teachers should set students up for developmental success, why it was important to build developmental competencies in student relationships with teacher and peers as well as in academic planning, and why teachers' social support was important to student development of resilience to stress. In the second week, a day of lectures and videos addressed how teachers could implement a developmental model of prevention, involving an ABC model of positive teaching strategies, socioemotional learning by students, and nonreactive teacher practice. In the third week, coursework examined students at socioemotional risk for anxiety, oppositional behaviour, and impulsivity, using an ABC approach to causation and intervention. It was argued that the everyday strategies planned in the second week could be extended to accommodate the more challenging problems of these children and that regular teachers could acquire effective skills to cope emotionally with these interactional difficulties (Bloomquist & Schnell, 2002; Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004).

The participants enrolled in this summer-school brought a variety of undergraduate degrees. Most were recent graduates in their early twenties. Their fee-paying masters degree program was accredited for teacher registration with the Ontario Board of Studies. There was also a small subgroup of north and south Asian students from Taiwan, China, Korea, Japan, Indonesia, and India. Most claimed some teaching-related experiences in classroom teaching, coaching sport, and paraprofessional roles. For most students, this summer school course was their first exposure to the 18-month teacher education program, although a small number had completed a 12-week semester of study on campus.

Instructions for the task focused attention on the nature and role of emotional competencies in effective teaching practice and, specifically, on knowing one's own strengths and weaknesses and being able to use this knowledge in making changes. The simple nongraded task made it an opportunity to conduct a personal audit of existing and emerging strengths and preparedness for the classroom. The task presented early in the course explored the "people" skills that brought them to this course and engaged students with the goals of this course. After the course, the task revisited their views and their consolidation during prevention and intervention modules of the course.

An A4 page headed "People Skills" contained simple instructions and three sets of prompt questions that allowed each individual to think about their own skills. The first set of questions concerned ideas
about the advanced competencies that distinguish an outstanding teacher and awareness of personal strengths of personality, interest, and motivation required to become an effective teacher. The second set of questions concerned the capacity to assess the people skills of self and others, to identify important social skills in terms of value and self-confidence, and be self-accurate about "looking good" to others and detecting "putting on a show." The third set of questions concerned thoughts about changing the self and others in situations involving pressure (i.e., being prepared to "work with" socially difficult and emotionally charged interactions in the classroom).

Exchange of e-mails involved prereflections \((n = 80)\) and postreflection \((n = 76)\) from students and e-mail responses from the convenor to the postreflections of many students \((n = 76)\). Convenor responses to prereflections were restricted to confirmation of the e-mail and social responses to personal details (e.g., family notes on military life or generations of teachers in family, sports interests such as figure skating, subject such as chemistry and languages).

Students e-mailed their preparatory reflection to the convenor at the end of week 1. Students then e-mailed their postreflection after the end of the 3-week course, together with a copy of their prereflection, to facilitate reflection on changes in understanding of the nature of personal skills of the teacher throughout the course (viz., to highlight any major pre- to post-course changes).

The postcourse task was presented in three specific streamlined versions of the previous sets of questions. Participants wrote a paragraph of approximately 100-words covering the three core questions: (a) "How do your personality, interests, and motivations contribute strengths to the process of becoming an effective teacher;" (b) "At this time, how prepared are you to identify and manage heightened emotions in yourself and in students in a classroom;" and (c) "At this time, how prepared are you to work with socially difficult and emotionally charged interactions in the classroom?"

The convenor read the second reflection after finalisation of graded work, responded to individual students about issues raised in that reflection (e.g., reinforcing course themes in e-mails and encouraging intentions), and added the second reflection to a group text file).

Results

Participant pre- and post-reflections in response to specific "people skill" prompts were collated into two text files. These files were analysed using Leximancer (Smith, 2002). This software package was used to identify salient dimensions of discourse within a constructivist approach to data analysis. Leximancer computes the frequency with which a term is used, after discarding text items of no research relevance (such as "a" or "the"), but does not include every available word in the final plotted list. Constraints include the number of words selected per block of text as well as the relative frequency with which terms are used.

After computing the ranked list of terms, Leximancer computes the distance between each of the terms via computations equivalent to nonparametric factor analytic or cluster analytic procedures in quantitative data analysis. This analysis provided evidence of the range of issues identified through the focus groups. As with other factor analytic procedures, there is no single solution, and the quality of particular solutions is best judged in terms of interpretability. The result of this computation is displayed in a two-dimensional spatial representation (Figure 1). More frequent terms are more visible. Quadrants are numbered manually.

The software was run on default settings excluding all prompts and instructor feedback. Instructor statements were excluded because it seemed reasonable to assume that the instructor and students might be addressing different concerns.
Analysis 1: Prerelections

The two terms that appeared most frequently were “people” and “teacher.” The display was rotated so as to align the term teacher with the (x) horizontal-axis in between Quadrants 3 and 4. With teacher thus aligned, the terms “effective” and “think” and “situations” also aligned with this axis. In contrast, the term “skills” aligned with the (y) vertical-axis between Quadrants 2 and 3.

With these terms thus aligned, the high frequency term “feel” was situated towards the centre of Quadrant 1, the high frequency term “people” was situated towards the centre of Quadrant 2, the high frequency term “students” was situated within Quadrant 3, and the high-frequency term “important” was situated towards the centre of Quadrant 4. The tenor of these associations was gauged by examining the text from which they were drawn.

Student when pairing the terms think and feel (Quadrant 1) were largely talking about emotional challenges. For instance: I don’t put on a show or act like something that I’m not and I think I can tell when someone else is. I don’t think I get upset that easily. Under pressure, I don’t feel mean or upset or in disarray. It is of interest that other words in the same quadrant included deal, difficult, pressure, and situation.

Students when pairing the terms think and people (Quadrant 2) were largely talking about their ability to deal with people more generally. For instance: I think it is important to listen to what people are talking about and try to relate to the way they feel. Other words in the same quadrant included person, time, show, and skills (aligned with y-axis).

Students when pairing the term teachers with the term students in Quadrant 3 were largely talking about an idealised representation of the teacher-student relationship. For instance: Becoming an outstanding teacher would involve being able to relate to the students, including developing a strong rapport, in a friendly, yet professional manner. Other terms in the same quadrant included teachers, learning, ability, classroom, and skills (aligned with y-axis).
Students when pairing the term teachers with the term important in Quadrant 4 were largely talking about important skills and attributes required by teachers. For instance: Teachers require many skills similar to those individuals whose jobs involve people skills. First, educators need a large knowledge base on the subject that they are teaching. More specifically, attributes such as being calm, cool, and collected when faced with frustration and aggression from students are very important. Other terms in the same quadrant included teaching, student, feelings, should, and individual.

One way to summarise this prereflection analysis is that, when students initially were asked to write about their people skills, they did so in terms of internalised attributes exhibited by them under difficulties (Quadrant 1), when dealing with people more generally (Quadrant 2), in terms of the communication skills required or acquired to deal successfully with students (Quadrant 3), and in terms of the internal attributes and skills required by teachers (Quadrant 4).

**Analysis 2: Postreflections**

The three terms that appear most frequently were "students", "classroom", and "teacher." To maintain consistency with the previous analysis, the Figure 2 display was rotated so as to align the term teacher with the (x) horizontal-axis in between Quadrants 3 and 4. With teacher thus aligned, the term "teaching" and "deal" also aligned with this axis.

The arrangement of terms within quadrants was otherwise similar to that in the prereflections. Terms related to difficult relationships clustered in Quadrant 1. Terms related to being able to deal with people more generally clustered in Quadrant 2. Terms related to quality of teacher-student relationships clustered in Quadrant 3. Terms related to the professional role of the teacher clustered in Quadrant 1.

It is also clear that exposure to new ideas in the classroom setting has influenced the group’s choice of terms. Terms related to dealing with difficult situations in Quadrant 1 now included "prepared." Terms related to dealing with people more generally in Quadrant 2 now included "identify." Terms related to the teacher-student relationship in Quadrant 3 now included "help." Terms related to the professional role of the teacher in Quadrant 4 now included the terms "positive", "learning", and "environment."
In short, the discourse of these students on the topic of people skills has been influenced by exposure to new ideas. More specifically, the language of these students has shifted to include terms derived from the active lexicon of positive behavioural support and reinforcement (Anderson, 2003; Jackson, 2004).

Discussion and conclusions

The interest in analysing the reflections of these Canadian students prior to and subsequent to exposure to relevant course material is the extent to which a more precise vocabulary with a capacity to analyse (identify) and manage learning environments permeated prior musings about self and relationships with others in terms of innate attributes and generalised people skills. The shift of the term “deal” from its location within Quadrant 1 to its pivotal alignment between Quadrants 1 and 2 embodies this shift from the passive attribution of qualities to the notion of being able to deal with difficult events and a range of people in terms of a well-defined theoretical framework.

The two sets of reflections captured linguistic elements of the student change to a more active view of teaching during this brief period before the first practicum. The initial enthusiasms and affirmations of interest changed to an increased confidence in their ability to cope rationally and “unemotionally” and to temper their self-identified apprehensions with a strategic awareness of relevant environmental factors. Perhaps the graduate status of these international students and their major commitment to a teaching career made them more receptive to “interventionist” course arguments. Such changes might take longer for undergraduate students (e.g., Brownlee et al., 2001) and might need to be extended over progressive semesters to support a shift from a passively reactive approach to a more proactive and actively preventive approach to teacher practice.

Future work might take the direction of (a) comparative reflections about before-after statements and critical, literature-based reframing of approach to practice; (b) addition of further reflections after first practicum to explore the effect of experience on approach to practice; and (c) rewording of reflective task to sharpen the focus on strong emotional responses (feeling, thinking, response tendencies), views about disruptive student behaviour brought to and taken from this course (positive-negative; past-present-future, etc.), and specific situations or people that have shaped these strong feelings.

Educational researchers need to examine in more detail how teachers and teacher education students feel about their practice, why they feel that way, and what impact it has on their classroom actions towards their students in classrooms. Researchers need to ask teachers how their emotions affect their thinking and actions in both personal and professional areas of their lives, how they identify and generate their positive and regulated emotions, and how to use those emotions to energise their approach to student learning and behaviour.

Affirmations of goodwill remain an important value-base for all teacher professionals. However, teacher education preparation needs to equip the beginning teacher for a shared journey into this helping profession. When beginning teachers enter the classroom without emotional and social support and skills, they often begin a journey from early distress about the ineffectiveness of their efforts to achieve learning goals to increasing self-awareness and self-discovery of personal and professional limitations, perhaps culminating in disillusionment with teaching. Changes made during brief exposure to this course have indicated that training in emotional competencies should be a part of the curriculum of teacher education if only because nurture-based experiences can increase teacher sensitivity to these issues (Zeidner, Matthews, Roberts, & McCann, 2003).

More generally, this study suggests that EI, far from being an inbuilt feature that potential teachers bring with them and that determines their success or failure in terms of their ability to manage socioemotional aspects of the classroom environment, is a relatively plastic aspect of makeup, able to be modified by exposure to relevant instruction. This conclusion, in turn, suggests that programmatic attempt to develop measures of EI (e.g., Gardner, 1983; Goleman, 1995) equivalent to those for IQ or personality need to take into account the relative fluidity of this construct. Moreover, these attempts tend to misconstrue EI as a causal factor when, in fact, it appears to be at least in part yet another outcome of good or bad instructional (and other) environments.
References


