

Resource 9: Developing the emotional intelligence of pupils (1)

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'Jean Bond of Atlow Mill in Derbyshire, UK, describes how she and her colleagues try to develop the emotional intelligence of young people who are having trouble at school.

Carole's Story

Twelve-year-old Carole was one of ten students from her school who attended a five-day emotional literacy programme at the Mill, because of behaviour which put them at risk of exclusion. Carole was persistently causing trouble: fighting, shouting out and disrupting the work of other pupils. She seemed locked into herself and very isolated. She was unable to make eye-contact with others and could not concentrate at all.

We tried to help Carole and her fellow students to unmask the defensive layer they had constructed to protect their vulnerability, and to start exercising some choice over how they behaved with other people. The residential experience, followed up by 16 two-hour sessions in school, led to a profound transformation in Carole's appearance, behaviour and attitude.

"I don't shout any more", says Carole. "I ignore people a lot more if they call me names and pick on me. I don't retaliate as much. I work harder in lessons and I listen to teachers. I sit and get on with my work. I don't pick on people and I have got more friends."

Carole had been involved in nineteen serious incidents in the period between September 1999 to March 2000. Over the subsequent four months, there was only one. The number of serious incidents involving other pupils on the programme went down from 110 in the same period to eighteen.

The result of the programme was that pupils, even those whose behaviour changed a little, were willing to own up to misbehaviour, to stop applying the "it wasn't me, it was 'im" tactic. Teachers were taken aback by their new honesty and willingness to accept the consequences of their actions.

The project was about more than simply addressing the emotional problems of one group of young people. It also involved twelve pupils being selected to work as mentors to the younger ones. Training consisted of one two-day residential, and six two-hour sessions after school.

One reason for the success of the programme was the willingness of parents to take part in support groups. The children of those parents

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who regularly attended the meetings were those who benefited most from the programme. Another factor was the level of staff involvement. Three staff members and a deputy head attended the mentor training sessions and the five-day residential. This gave the project high status in the school. The school went on to request training for staff so that they could carry out much of the follow-through and train mentors themselves.

Experience of failure

The same programme was taken up with much less success by another school. This time, instead of selecting pupils who were at the beginning of a road towards permanent exclusion, those chosen were well on their way. The pupils were involved in many more serious incidents. The pupils selected to be mentors were relatively immature pupils from Year Ten. There was little staff involvement in the programme, with only one member of the Special Needs Support Staff being involved throughout the project. Many parents were hostile to the programme.

One young person who had allowed himself to show his more vulnerable side during the residential reverted on the final day to his more usual behaviour. When we pointed this out, he simply said, "Well, I'm going home aren't I?" He was arming himself for the expected onslaught.

The Coventry challenge

In cooperation with a Family Centre, we have been working with a group of young people from Coventry, aged thirteen to sixteen, who are in imminent danger of being excluded from their three schools. We offered training to the project workers, who then came on a three-day residential programme.

This aspect of our work is proving challenging and exhausting. The young people are extremely resistant to the emotional element of the programme. They keep telling us it is "boring" and threaten to absent themselves from the sessions we deliver. So far not many of them have done so. They seem to find it fascinating in spite of themselves. Some of them are beginning to respond, even though they "can't see the point".

In one-to-one sessions, they felt free to discuss with us the changes they had become aware of in themselves as a result of this work. They were unwilling, though, to share this information with the wider group. One said it was "embarrassing". Everyone there agreed with him, but nobody could say why it felt that way.

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“Do you think” I asked, “you have a reputation to protect?”

“Yes”, they replied as one.

“And,” I went on, “at school that reputation is not helpful. You get labelled. Give a dog a bad name and it sticks. So it means that you sometimes get blamed unfairly for things.”

There were lots of nods. I continued. “But do you also have a reputation somewhere else where that reputation is useful?”

Derek came on. “On the street, ‘cause you need people to think you’re hard.”

“And,” I suggested, “if you start to change the way you are, what do you think might happen?”

“Get problems,” Derek said. “Get hassle from people.”

“So,” I said, “in a way there is part of you that thinks it is not in your interest to change. Better stay as you are.”

Derek nodded in agreement. “You might,” I went on, “have to give up your friends. Nobody else would want to be your friend.”

It is currently too risky for this group of young people to express their emotions. We are attempting to develop trusting relationships with them, so that they will feel safe enough to express themselves. Currently, their fear is that someone will find the chinks in their armour and finish them off.

Our work is designed to help them find a different kind of power within themselves, one that will give them the confidence to be authentic and true to themselves. We encourage them to utilise their masks in a consciously self-protective way. This enables them to develop a more positive self-image by recognising that their mask is only a part of them.

A recent session with the group left us feeling hopeful. They are beginning to share their hopes, fears, disappointments, failures and achievements. They are starting to enjoy and appreciate our openness and ability to listen to their criticisms and meet their challenges. They are recognising that we are people too and that we are vulnerable and are willing to let them see that.’