The New International Emotional Intelligence Curriculum

What is Emotional Intelligence?
Emotional intelligence has been described as the ability to manage feelings and express them appropriately and effectively, thus enabling people to work together. There are two schools of emotional intelligence; the ability model and the mixed model. The ability model considers emotional intelligence as a mental ability, somewhat like logic and has criteria which can be assessed. The mixed model mixes ability with personality traits such as optimism, empathy, self-motivation, impulse control and helpfulness. Social Emotional Literacy school based programmes include both model’s components and have established a curriculum that teaches these as skills.

Is Emotional Intelligence learned or innate?
Scientific research indicates that the formative years from birth to late teens are the years when emotional intelligence is developed. Bullies are described as having a low awareness of emotions and a low empathic response to others while victims show lack of understanding of thoughts beliefs, emotions and intentions of others. Social emotional literacy programmes teach skills to enable children have better social interactions.

What are Social Emotional Literacy Programmes?
These programmes, recently introduced around the world have an underlying basis on the American Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies initiative - the PATHS curriculum model teaches self-control, emotional awareness and understanding, peer-related social skills, and social problem solving to increase social and emotional competence.

The most common strategy involved classroom-based interventions administered by classroom teachers. These usually took the form of a specific curriculum and set of lesson plans (e.g., behaviour rehearsal, class meetings, journal writing, storytelling, poetry, music, art, and drama) that sought to develop specific social and emotional skills. Multicomponent programs typically involved parents. Often parents worked with their child to complete skill-related homework assignments and/or attended parent discussion and training group.

Global Social Emotional Literacy
A 2008 report from the Marcelino Botín Foundation describes some of the Social Emotional Literacy work taking place world wide. There are now SEL policies in the UK, Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Slovakia, Lithuania, Malta, Finland, The Netherlands, Spain, Australia, the U.S., Canada and Germany. Chile and Colombia in South American, Greenland and Singapore have recently developed SEL programmes not to mention Singapore, Kurdistan in Iraq and Turkey which is closer to Europe. Australia has developed a multi-faceted SEL programme for schools under an umbrella term called Kidzmatter in 2005. This analysis finds that SEL programs in other countries, “significantly enhance social and emotional skills of children and youngsters, reduce or prevent mental and behavioural problems and/or promote academic achievement, in the short as well as in the long term.” For the purpose of this article I will focus on the SEL initiatives in Australia the US and the UK.

What are relevant examples of existing programmes?
Fast Track Prevention Programme USA.
The Social Emotional Literacy (SEL) programmes originated in the US, specifically from the Fast Track intervention which is superbly researched and assessed: The intervention programme was guided by a well developed model of the development of antisocial behaviour in children. The
participants of this group are all ‘at risk’ groups. Schools within four sites (Durham, NC; Nashville, TN; Seattle, WA; and rural central Pennsylvania) were selected as high-risk institutions based on neighbourhood crime and poverty levels. The 10-year intervention (begun in 1991 with three yearly cohorts) included parent behaviour-management training, child social-cognitive skills training, reading tutoring, home visiting, mentoring, and a classroom curriculum. The positive outcomes were reported not only by parents, teachers and children but by independent observations as well. Compared with the control group, Fast Track children improved their social-cognitive and academic skills, exhibited lower levels of aggressive behaviour at home and school, were less likely to be placed into special education, and a great proportion of the participants had become completely free of conduct problems. In adolescence, Fast Track participants were arrested at lower levels and exhibited continued lower levels of “serious conduct disorder” than their control group peers.

The Ruler Approach was developed at Yale University, US and focuses on 1) Recognising emotions in oneself and others, 2) Understanding the causes and consequences of emotions 3) Labelling the full range of emotions using a rich vocabulary 4) Expressing emotions appropriately in different contexts 5) Regulating emotions effectively to foster healthy relationships and achieve goal. Also included is parental involvement and smaller group work for children designated as exhibiting a need for greater intervention. After 30 weeks of this emotional literacy developmental course the children of these 15 classes had both ‘higher grades and teacher ratings of social and emotional competence.

Another approach is MindUP which teaches SEL skills along with Mindfulness (meditation). Goldie Hawn contributed to the creation of this programme and MindUP benefits from her continued support.

KidsMatter was developed in collaboration with the Australian Government, the Australian Psychological Society, Australian Principles. KidsMatter objectives are (a) improving mental health and well being of the students, (b) reducing mental health problems among students, and (c) achieving greater support for students experiencing mental health problems. KidsMatter works as a curriculum subject in its own right and as a set of broad learning objectives under which a school’s existing programs can comfortably fit.

Teachers primarily deliver it to the class, however, if an intervention is needed to help a particular child or group of children it includes parents, outside professionals and tries to involve the school as a community. This is achieved through a four-component framework focusing on (1) positive school community, (2) social and emotional learning for students, (3) parenting support and education, and (4) early intervention for students experiencing mental health difficulties.

KidsMatter participants had greater mental health outcomes in children especially children who had existing difficulties along with an increase in academic performance of similar to an extra 6 months of schooling.

UK SEAL (Social Emotional Aspects of Literacy) is similar to the Australian model in that it is class based, the existing SPHE and circle time are built into it and it has a multi-component model which includes parents. SEAL uses one weekly whole class 40-minute session over six to eight weeks and small group work to boost pupils' personal development. This social skills training aims to develop children’s relationships with others by improving their self-awareness and motivation. This programme now runs in runs in 80% of primary schools in the UK. Several primary schools reported a drop in serious incidents and exclusions since receiving the emotional intelligence
toolkit. The research, covering 250 primary schools, stated that ‘it also led to improved performance in national curriculum English and maths tests for 11-year-olds’. Research in Australia and UK showed that SEL programmes are most effective when amalgamated into an existing approach.

In Ireland we have a comprehensive S.P.H.E curriculum and we teach Religion which also includes a social emotional literacy element. Many schools teach The ‘Stay Safe programme’ and ‘The Walk Tall programme’ alongside SPHE. The ‘Stay Safe’ programme was developed by the Eastern Health Board as an abuse prevention programme. It evaluated the programme in 1999. Their findings were ‘Compared with waiting-list controls (388 children), trained children (339 children) showed significant improvements in safety knowledge and skills and these gains were maintained at follow-up along with significant improvements in self-esteem which were maintained at 3 months follow-up. However 7 year olds in the training group made significantly larger gains in self-esteem than their control group counterparts. Children with a higher socio-economic status benefited more from the program than less privileged children. Both parents and teachers showed significant improvements in knowledge and attitudes concerning protection over the course of the program and for teachers, these gains were maintained at follow-up.’

The Walk Tall programme can be classed as an ‘Irish intervention’ and was introduced in Ireland in the mid nineties as a reaction to the 1995 and 1999 ESPAD studies which discovered that substance use among young Irish people was high by international standards. Dr Mark Morgan in St Patrick’s College in Dublin evaluated this programme in August 2003. Completed questionnaires were obtained from 233 children of whom 45% were boys and 55% girls. Four-fifths of the students said that the classes gave them a chance to express their views while a roughly similar number thought the classes were more enjoyable than were other classes. The children also stated that they enjoyed the expression of feelings, they almost all agreed that it was important to express these and they also agreed that it was better to reflect before making a decision. Nine-tenths of the teachers took the view the Programme helped children make healthy choices, helped children develop a sense of self-esteem and provided a basis for prevention of substance misuse’.

While there is no doubt that Ireland teaches emotional intelligence I wonder if we teach all areas and how does our SEL education compare with other international curricula? I am about to start researching this area for a thesis and I will post my findings along with links to any interesting products I come across on a website; www.developingchildrenspotential.com.

Jackie Ahern, 2nd class teacher.
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