INDEPENDENT THINKING ON ...

EMOTIONAL LITERACY

Richard Evans

A PASSPORT TO INCREASED CONFIDENCE, ENGAGEMENT AND LEARNING

First published by

Independent Thinking Press
Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales, SA33 5ND, UK
www.independentthinkingpress.com

and

Independent Thinking Press
PO Box 2223, Williston, VT 05495, USA
www.crownhousepublishing.com

Independent Thinking Press is an imprint of Crown House Publishing Ltd.

First published 2020.

Edited by Ian Gilbert.

The Independent Thinking On … series is typeset in Azote, Buckwheat TC Sans, Cormorant Garamond and Montserrat.

The Independent Thinking On … series cover style was designed by Tania Willis www.taniawillis.com.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

Print ISBN 978-178135373-8
Mobi ISBN 978-178135378-3
ePub ISBN 978-178135379-0
ePDF ISBN 978-178135380-6

LCCN 2020945095

Printed and bound in the UK by
Gomer Press, Llandysul, Ceredigion

FOREWORD

I was once gifted a book entitled *Could Do Better: School Reports of the Great and the Good*.[1] It was an entertaining compendium of teacher comments stretching back for over a century – from 'He cannot be trusted to behave himself anywhere'[2] (Winston Churchill) and 'He has glaring faults and they have certainly glared at us this term'[3] (Stephen Fry) to 'She must try to be less emotional in her dealing with others'[4] (Princess Diana) and 'All glib and cleverness'[5] (Carl Gustav Jung).

Although good for a chuckle, these comments show how subjective, inaccurate, meaningless and unhelpful this way of reporting on a young person's potential really is.

Of course, we have come a long way since a teacher could write, 'He shows great originality, which must be curbed at all times'[6] (Peter Ustinov) and get away with it – and reporting is usually done in a more humane, collaborative and productive manner these days.

Or is it?

To what extent do we enter into a genuine dialogue with young people, whether it's with the academic high-flyers or those making their way through school rather closer to the ground? Do we really engage with our students, not only in a conversation about what they are doing wrong and what they should be doing instead, but one that

1 C. Hurley (ed), *Could Do Better: School Reports of the Great and the Good* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1997).
2 Ibid, p. 98.
3 Ibid, p. 42.
4 Ibid, p. 136.
5 Ibid, p. 138.
6 Ibid, p. 25.

actually helps equip them with the tools and approaches that will be of real help as they chase the almost mythical 'do better' goal?

Even the schools that are dogmatically following Rosenshine's Principles of instruction – with its focus on review, small steps, scaffolding, questioning and the like – might be missing something more fundamental when it comes to helping young people improve.[7] And that something is at an emotional rather than purely technical or cognitive level – and it is that emotional understanding, and the way it can hinder or help classroom attainment, that is at the heart of this book.

Of course, the idea of emotional intelligence has been around for quite a while since it first appeared in academic papers in the 1960s, but it was well and truly brought to the fore by the science writer Daniel Goleman in his seminal book *Emotional Intelligence*.[8] For a brief, some may say glorious time, we knew that there was more to getting ahead than IQ and that our EQ had a big part to play in how we effectively thought about ourselves and those around us. And of course, that is still the case. The World Economic Forum's 2018 research into the most sought-after skills for 2022 has 'emotional intelligence' as number eight in its list of 'trending' skills, just below 'leadership and social influence' but above 'reasoning, problem-solving and ideation'.[9] (Worth noting here too is that its list of skills in global decline include 'memory,

7 B. Rosenshine, Principles of instruction: research-based strategies that all teachers should know, *American Educator*, 36(1) (2012): 12–19, 39.

8 D. Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996).

9 World Economic Forum, *The Future of Jobs Report 2018* (Insight Report) (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2018), p. 12. Available at: http://www3weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_2018.pdf.

verbal, auditory and spatial abilities' and 'reading, writing, math and active listening'. Hey, don't shoot the messenger.)

What happened in our schools, though, was the state-driven ideological hijack both of the curriculum and the pedagogy employed to teach it. The kings and queens retook their thrones from hoi polloi such as Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL) and Every Child Matters, while group work, teamwork and Personalised Learning and Thinking Skills (PLTS) were unceremoniously thrown in a school skip in favour of direct transmission and didactic teaching with a zero-tolerance approach to any child who took it upon themselves to kick off. What this meant was that those espousing that we seek to understand, even love, a child (and not simply manipulate them) were dismissed as tree-hugging sentimentalists whose 'soft expectations' would assign a generation of unqualified young people to a life working in low-paid jobs, as opposed to the generation we have now of highly qualified young people working in low-paid jobs and up to their necks in debt.[10] And that was before factoring in the devastating effects of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic on the graduate job market.[11]

Fortunately, there are still many teachers who, to borrow an old saw, prefer to be teaching children rather than simply teaching subjects – and so the focus on using understandings, strategies and practices from the world of emotional intelligence has prevailed, albeit under the radar of Ofsted and under the noses of school managers

10 K. Makortoff, UK Employers Will Offer Fewer Entry-Level Jobs in 2020, Figures Suggest, *The Guardian* (6 January 2020). Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/money/2020/jan/06/uk-employers-fewer-entry-level-jobs-2020-survey.

11 Institute of Student Employers (ISE), Graduate Jobs Decline in 21 Countries Due to Covid-19, *FE News* (15 July 2020). Available at: https://www.fenews.co.uk/press-releases/51463-graduate-jobs-decline-in-21-countries-due-to-covid-19.

who are more inclined to use students to improve their data rather than the other way round.

And Richard Evans is one such practitioner.

Drawn from his direct experience of working with troubled and troublesome young people, Richard has shown how asking the right questions in the right way and at the right time pays dividends in helping those young people get back on track and stay there.

By working to understand them – and help them to understand themselves – at a more emotional level, we can all help our students develop the necessary emotional intelligence to excel not only at school but beyond. In this way we genuinely help them create a passport to a better, more fulfilled life. Which is perhaps of greater use than simply expressing regret that the 'threat of failure in his exams has not helped him to grow out of a tediously lack-adaisical unsupportiveness' (Jeremy Paxman).[12]

IAN GILBERT
WEST WALES

12 Hurley, *Could Do Better*, p. 56.

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FIRST THOUGHTS

A friend of mine, let's call her Google, tells me people often ask her what emotional literacy means. This friend – intelligent, well-connected – says it describes a person's ability to understand and express feelings. She says not only does it involve being self-aware and managing your own feelings – for example, by staying calm when you're angry – but also being sensitive, and able to adapt, to the feelings of others.[1]

I tell her I like her definition. Not least because it points to the idea that these two words were meant for each other. Emotions are raw and savage, I offer, with a backstory to tell. Being literate in something is about having knowledge and understanding, in order that conundrums can be solved. Emotions and literacy feel like they belong together.

I might have misjudged the terms of our friendship because she's already onto something else. No time for chat or reflection. So I leave her be, to her world of Q&As, and toss these thoughts around in my head.

And my thoughts go to education. I wonder if the strength of our determination for our children to be conventionally schooled and skilled means that we overlook a more fundamental educational need: for our children to understand themselves. I even wonder if, in trying so earnestly to push a knowledge curriculum, we inadvertently crush opportunities for this more primal form of learning to take place.

Independent Thinking on Emotional Literacy is the result of these thoughts. It is an attempt to explore the emotional grey areas between the education system and the

1 See https://www.specialeducationalneeds.co.uk/emotional-literacy.html.

pupil. In it, you will be taken on a tour of the world of the pupil. Not because you don't know about it – you pretty much wrote the manual – but because it's good to be reminded. And also because you already have your hands full with the demands of your own world.

You will be reminded of your pupils' weaknesses and inhibitions; of their quirks and habits; of their upbringings and predispositions; of their needs and ambitions; of their innocence and strengths. And alongside this, you will be given a ready-made tool (well, a sheet of paper, but you know what I mean) with which to unpick, and hopefully help to enhance, the world of your pupil – in order that they can have better experiences of, at and, indeed, after school.

This tool, this sheet of A3, is called the passport.[2] Like the traditional travel document, it's designed to get you into new territories that will broaden your horizons, albeit with a few officious glares and refusals to enter along the way.

Through the language of feelings and needs (and a good dose of highlighter therapy), the passport enables staff to steer young people to greater emotional understanding of themselves, so they can better manage their route through the unwieldy school system. The passport is like an old-fashioned map: you faff with it until it's the right way around, plot your course together, make marks where you need and, in unequal measures of harmony and conflict, you find a way through.

It isn't aimed at any particular member of staff, student or educational setting. I've run with it at secondary level but it's just as welcome at primary and in further education. We feel and have needs at all ages. To unpick them, with compassion, is relevant to all.

2 Colour copies of the passport can be downloaded for free from: https://www.crownhouse.co.uk/featured/emotional-literacy

If it's aimed at anyone, adult or child, it's those not altogether happy with the system; those not convinced it provides as much breadth and meaning as it could; who question whether enough teaching is getting to enough children; who sense that education is as much about the acquisition of self-knowledge as it is about that of knowledge per se.

You will have questions. I shall try to answer them. But not right away. We need to hold our horses a little and take stock of our existing set-up: at the realities of everyday school life; at what works and is so impressive about education; at what malfunctions and is ripe for improvement. And then we can get going on this passport thing, this tool-like sheet of A3, to see if it can help.

You hold the map; I'll lead the way. I hope you've not forgotten the Werther's.

CHAPTER 1

WHIRLWIND

You've got your new uniform but the trousers don't fit. The jacket's too big and your tie's askew. And a foot too long. One of hundreds, you are, seeping in through the gates of your new learning centre. Self-conscious, anxious, directionless, but for the tide of uniform that carries you forward towards, well, wherever it is you're meant to start. Desperately looking for anyone who might constitute a new friend, someone assigned to the same place you've been assigned to, wherever that is. Someone of similar height, look, fear, confusion.

Were there space, last night would be replaying its familiar sequences in your head. How many times was it you awoke? Older brother next door, younger sister next bed, phone ping, worry dream, covers off, covers on, knees up, knees down, face plant. Do you need a PE kit? Did dad remember to pick up the tie? Whose house do you go to this weekend? And why have you started making odd vocal noises out loud for no reason, skipping slightly before each stride, tapping your leg repeatedly on the table?

But your head doesn't have space. This is too all-consuming. Teachers are barking out instructions, kids falling in and out of line, voices booming, silences, racket, then silence again. And then at some point, you end up in a room with a load of other lost souls, barely listening to a word that is being projected by the figure at the front. Instead, you fidget with your bag, your pencil, your desk, your hands, with anything in fact that you can lay those same hands on, to somehow stop the worry and the fear and the

confusion, the loneliness and the conundrum that is, right now, the thoroughly unwelcome institution of school.

Fast forward a month, a term, and some of this anxiety has eased: your timetable is either scribbled in your planner or etched on your memory – or you've just become good at following people. Your trousers still don't fit but you've semi-grown into your jacket; teachers scare you less; you have a friend or two; your tie now stops at your trousers.

Only to be replaced, however, by a wealth of supplementary worries, of unexpected stresses – such as homework and deadlines; seating and equipment; concentration and behaviour.

How to steer your way through it? Teachers, of course, are the ones charged with that task. And, by and large, they do their utmost to do so. With whichever tools are available. In whatever time. While juggling the known and unknown quantities of their own daily realities – you know, the meetings, the targets, the marking, the behaviour, the last-minute cover lessons, the marriage breakdowns, the photocopier. Regardless, you'll likely have at least one story about one teacher who did the steering, the caring and the inspiring so well that it still resounds years later; a teacher to whom you feel you owe so much. The one who realised something the others didn't, who picked you out of the crowd to make your business their business. The one who did something you had no idea at the time would echo for years to come. The one who helped make you you: your Mr Al-Hawi, my Mrs Whiting; your Mrs Yun, my Mr Keats.

We've all watched those teachers. The ones in control but not dominating, listening but not paying lip service; the ones praising but not patronising, reprimanding but not humiliating; the ones teaching but not lecturing, loving but not spoiling. And we've all watched their students –

those learning, not idling; growing, not stagnating; those feeling inspired, not bored.

Behind many good teachers are, of course, good schools. Not Ofsted-good necessarily – whatever that means at the time of writing – but good good. Those varying their curriculum; those coaching staff to provide it; those counselling and mentoring, advising and strategising; those opening early and closing late, informing and preparing, alerting and reminding, smiling and staying positive; those who know that to care about the parent and carer is to care about the child.

And behind every good school is a wealth of adults throwing their all behind the cause: the teachers and teaching assistants; the office staff and estates people; the IT gurus and technicians; the kitchen staff, cleaners and caretakers; the governors and parent volunteers. Every single contributing adult whose delirious dedication and slagheap of paid and unpaid hours (12.1 hours a week at last count – the highest of all UK workers[1]) means that at least some of the above can be achieved on behalf of the pupils. Whatever the success rate, effectiveness or overall value of a school, whatever anyone makes of any individual place of education, that incontrovertible reality of every educational institution is simply not to be sniffed at: schools exist, and sometimes even prosper, because the adults who work within them do so because they care. And some.

But for all this, schools still have an uncanny knack of not always working for their pupils. For one, great numbers of

1 TUC analysis of official statistics using unpublished Office for National Statistics data from the Labour Force Survey (July–September 2018) and the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (2018): Workers in the UK put in more than £32 billion worth of unpaid overtime last year [press release] (1 March 2019). Available at: https://wwwtuc.org.uk/news/workers-uk-put-more-£32-billion-worth-unpaid-overtime-last-year-tuc-analysis.

them are falling short of expected standards. According to the exams regulator Ofqual, in England in 2019, across all subjects taken, nearly one in three GCSE pupils failed to achieve the expected standard of pass, recording Grade 3s or below – a 'failure' rate which remains broadly the same year-on-year.[2] Of course, this also means that nigh on 70% of exams taken were passed, but try asking for congratulation cards from those who took the 30% that weren't.

In view of these numbers, we perhaps shouldn't be surprised when we also learn that, underpinning this underachievement (underachievement in the Department of Education's judgement, at least) is a plethora of unhappy – and, we can surely infer, demotivated – children. As part of a 2017 PISA report, around one in six 15-year-olds said they were 'not satisfied with life', ranking UK pupils 38th out of 48 countries from which the data was collected.[3] And if that's a little too 15-year-old-centric, there is plenty of broader evidence of student malcontent from other age sets: according to a 2017 report by the mental health charity Young Minds, every classroom has three children with 'a diagnosable mental health problem',[4] and the Children Society's annual *Good Childhood* report describes as 'really concerning' the figures that suggest about a

2 Ofqual, Guide to GCSE results for England, 2019 [press release] (22 August 2019). Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/guide-to-gcse-results-for-england-2019.

3 OECD, *PISA 2015 Results (Volume III): Students' Well-being* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2017), p. 11. Available at: https://www.oecd.org/pisa/PISA-2015-Results-Students-Well-being-Volume-III-Overview.pdf. See also H. Ward, New Pisa happiness table: see where UK pupils rank, *TES* (19 April 2017). Available at: https://www.tes.com/news/new-pisa-happiness-table-see-where-uk-pupils-rank; and H. French, What are we doing to our children?, *The Telegraph* (10 October 2017). Available at: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/2017/10/10/children1.

4 A. Cowburn and M. Blow, *Wise Up: Prioritising Wellbeing in Schools* (London: Young Minds, 2017), p. 2. Available at: https://youngminds.org.uk/media/1428/wise-up-prioritising-wellbeing-in-schools.pdf.

quarter of a million children, aged between 10 and 17, 'could now be unhappy with their lives' – the worst recorded result since 2009.[5]

Several steps beyond unhappy, I guess, is not being at school altogether. Government statistics for the 2017–2018 period tell us that one in every thousand pupils (across primary, secondary and special education) were excluded that year – make that two per thousand for secondary miscreants.[6] What's more, where exclusion presumably wouldn't suit the image of the school in question, there is also now (or perhaps it's been going on for years) the option of 'off-rolling' – recognised by Ofsted as 'the practice of removing a pupil from the school roll without a formal, permanent exclusion or by encouraging a parent to remove their child from the school roll, when the removal is primarily in the interests of the school rather than in the best interests of the pupil'.[7]

Despite the government's noble assertion in 2003 that 'every child matters',[8] we seem to have realised since that, well, actually, on reflection, they don't. Or maybe just can't. In 2017, researchers from the Education Policy Institute (EPI) found that around one in twelve pupils in the UK who were due to sit their GCSEs that year were mysteriously removed from the rolls – no explanation provided. According to the EPI, 'as many as 8.1 per cent of [Year 11s

5 Children's Society, *The Good Childhood Report 2019*, p. 5. Available at: https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/the_good_childhood_report_2019.pdf.

6 Department for Education, Permanent and fixed period exclusions in England: 2017 to 2018 (25 July 2019). Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/820773/Permanent_and_fixed_period_exclusions_2017_to_2018_-_main_text.pdf.

7 See https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/off-rolling-exploring-the-issue.

8 Chief Secretary to the Treasury, *Every Child Matters*, Cm. 5860 (London: TSO, 2003). Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/every-child-matters.

that year] were subject to moves that cannot be accounted for'.[9] With the majority of those pupils representing our most vulnerable groups, some commentators have been minded to wonder whether, for some pupils at least, the proximity of their exams and the meagreness of their predicted grades were in any way related to the mystery of their disappearances.

And while we're talking about students who seem to vanish into thin air – if you've worked in a school, you probably know one – the increasingly popular practice of home-schooling might be behind it. The BBC found that 48,000 children were being home educated in 2016–2017, which constituted an increase of around 40% from 2014–2015.[10] Regardless of its efficacy as a replacement education, which I imagine ranges on a scale of 'Thank goodness I got out of that place and can actually work and succeed in peace – thank you' to 'Home what?', we should at least acknowledge that the conventional system is not working for a small but increasingly significant proportion of our young people.

But why on earth, you might wonder, would a system with so much money earnestly poured into it – a cool £91 billion in 2018–2019, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies[11] – and so many willing workers and volunteers assigned to it, not expect to produce a more happy, inclusive, attractive

9 J. Hutchinson and W. Crenna-Jennings, *Unexplained Pupil Exits from Schools: A Growing Problem?* Working paper (April) (London: Education Policy Institute, 2019). Available at: https://epi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/EPI_Unexplained-pupil-exits_2019.pdf.

10 M. Issimdar, Homeschooling in the UK increases 40% over three years, *BBC News* (26 April 2018). Available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-42624220.

11 J. Britton, C. Farquharson and L. Sibieta, *2019 Annual Report on Education Spending in England* (London: Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2019), p. 6. Available at: https://www.ifs.org.uk/uploads/R162-Education-spending-in-England-2019.pdf.

and grade-attaining education for its young guests? How is it that a system can provide so much but, in far too many cases, yield so little?

Because, I would argue, it doesn't provide the foundation on which every progressive school education depends: the development of pupils' *emotional intelligence* to identify and solve the unspoken issues of school. Why don't I ever put my hand up? Why do I always call out? Why don't I do my homework? Why don't teachers like me? Without the emotional dexterity to solve the age-old problems they experience at school, at best pupils are not in a position to properly benefit from all it has to offer, and at worst they withdraw and are lost.

School life, and all that it entails, demands emotional literacy – it is this that should be pupils' first piece of equipment, their first item of uniform. Before any staff member has even picked up a whiteboard pen or created a class register, the first item on every school's agenda should be this: what can we put in place to develop our pupils' emotional intelligence? And if we can't help them all (or they don't all need helping), who should we start with?

Why? Because the reality is that many kids are so caught up in the whirlwind of school, home and all the baggage that resides in-between, that what schools sincerely provide sometimes barely even touches the sides.

How do you even start to master school when you can barely master yourself? When you've not yet worked out how to look after a worksheet. When you're still trying to remember to bring in your lunch. When you're always tired at school because you can't sleep at night. When you can't remember to take in your homework. When you don't know how to do it. When other children are clearly more popular. When you feel lonely and bullied and different in a way that the school powers that be, the dominant

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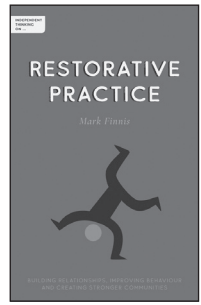

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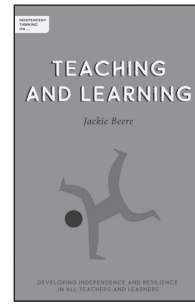

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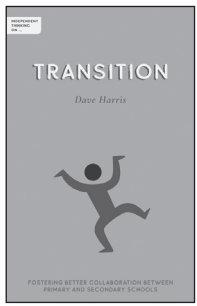

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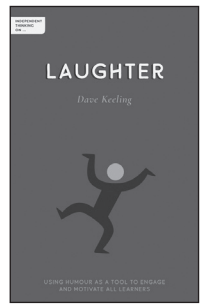

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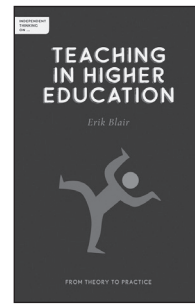

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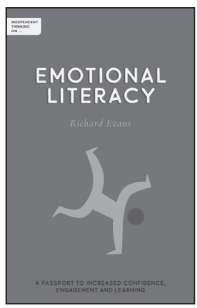

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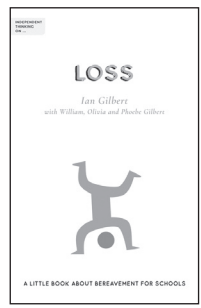

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LYNETTE HARTE, SCHOOL LIAISON, RESILIENT RUTLAND

Richard Evans is a secondary school teacher with a particular interest in, and passion for, helping pupils who struggle with literacy. A former journalist, he has spent the last decade learning from pupils in lower sets and in nurture and tuition groups – and the passport is just one of the many fruits of their joint labour.

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ISBN 978-1781353738

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