Developing Socio-Emotional Intelligence in First Year Students

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Abstract

There is an under-studied relationship between 'socio-emotional' intelligence (Castejon et al. 2008), which is the ability to understand, manage and engage both our emotions and our social interactions in the appropriate manner, for the right purpose and with the right person, to have a successful interaction or experience (Bar-On 2005; Goleman 1996, 2007) and bespoke one-to-one Learning Development (LD) support offered to first year HE students. The availability of and access to LD support, assists students in their transition to Higher Education, reduce withdrawal rates and significantly enhances the student learning experience. Thus, by focusing on developing their socio-emotional intelligence, students strengthen those personal attributes aiding their learning and wider student experience (Qualter et al. 2009). We provide an overview of the concept within the context of HE and presents formative findings of ongoing exploration in a LD team in a UK HE institution from a pilot focus group and informal action research, corroborating the positive impact on aspects of socio-emotional intelligence for students accessing this type of support.

154 words (without references)

Paper

Socio-emotional intelligence has been traditionally studied as a dual premise (emotional and social intelligence separate). However, in all cases both are seen as intrinsically linked (Bar-On 2005, Castejon et al. 2008), an idea we subscribe to. For instance Goleman asserts that "all emotions are social" (2007, p. 83) as individuals are sharing what they are feeling for a common purpose and those emotions might be triggered by the social environment, or an external influence.

 Experience affects how people behave, especially as the way in which people act, reflect, react or re-enact change based on experiences (Bandura 1977; Lankshear and Knobel 2011; Vygotsky 1978). We argue the same is true for socio-emotional intelligence, and whilst personality characteristics which are innate ought to be taken into account, these are not fixed and can be developed or managed with appropriate knowledge and support, for instance whilst in education. In our team, we provide 1-1 bespoke LD to students within the media school in a UK HE institution.

Dryden and Vos (1994) assert that education must take into account personal and emotional development as these are critical to effective learning. They found whilst studying the best educational practices that emotional development was at the centre of their programmes. The importance of SEQ in the classroom has been widely accepted (Jennings and Greenberg 2009). In the UK, school age children have initiatives such as SEAL (social and emotional aspects of learning) (DCSF

2005), for example. To Jennings and Greenberg (2009) social and emotional competences (SEC) are central to classroom outcomes, consequently, supporting students to develop these competencies adds to their experience (Davis 2010).

To further explore how best to support students in developing their socio-emotional intelligence, gain confidence and fully engage with all the academic and related learning opportunities, a pilot focus group and informal action research in a UK HE institution was undertaken. The dialogic focus group (Liamputtong 2011, p. 24), concerned with "shared lived experiences" to get "live data from naturally occurring social situations" (Cohen et al. 2007 p. 386), where reality is socially constructed (Vygostsky 1978); allowed participants to express their overall opinions and attitudes towards the subject (Robson 2002; Bell 2010; Liamputtong 2011).

Findings applying a descriptive narrative (Stewart et al. 2007) suggest that learners appreciate having support, space and time to develop their socio-emotional intelligence, as they can see and experience how it enhances their learning and academic journey. Therefore, introducing support for students to develop their socio-emotional attributes, has a positive impact on how they settle and their overall experience. Concurring with this, Seal et al. (2011) and Qualter et al. (2009) reason that integrated teaching programmes can provide the level of support and opportunities for students to develop both their learning ability and their socio-emotional intelligence. Furthermore, Low et al. (2004, p. 2), who collated the findings from the main studies and research projects related to emotional intelligence were able to confirm "the importance and value of emotional intelligence and personal skills to college and career success". They developed a programme to support first year students to develop their emotional intelligence to aid their success. Their programme is delivered by providing classroom lessons. We suggest that this needs to be supported by bespoke one-to-one LD support, to reach out to as many students as possible through a variety of opportunities

Matters et al. (2013) suggest such support requires experienced staff and appropriate training for those working with students. Latsome (2013) argues that lecturers should, as part their teaching, promote and encourage development of attributes like acceptance, empathy and respect for successful social and intercultural interactions. The reality is that most lecturers have neither time nor experience to consistently provide this level of non-academic support – but we have found that where such support is taken out of the lecture theatre or classroom, and provided within the same academic context as the student's programme, relevant and tailored opportunities can be provided to develop their socio-emotional intelligence whilst enhancing their learning and academic ability.

Aranwela and Maringe (2012) discuss the importance of providing continuous support, including pastoral, from the outset. This helps "integrating students so that they feel they belong to the programme and are part of a student body within the

wider university" (2012, p. 16), enhancing their overall experience. Our support sits outside the programme but within the academic School, providing greater synergy between this sort of support and the students' own programmes of study. It is offered face-to-face, by academics who, whilst not subject specialists, are subject knowledgeable and expert pedagogues.

The informal action research (Hollingsworth et al. 2013; McNiff 2002) conducted to inform an end of year report assessing the impact that our support has had this academic year, where new knowledge was generated through dialogue with four colleagues "who are equally interested in the process of learning" (McNiff 2002, p. 8). Students were also involved through plenaries where their experiences were explored, and by recording all verbal and written feedback from those accessing our support.

These revealed that students' transition to university can be difficult, a view shared by Parker and Duffy (2005). Fayombo (2012) found that there is a relationship between emotional intelligence and academic achievement. Furthermore, a national study by the American college test organisation found that the main reason why first year students leave is not their "academic ability" but "personal factors" (Low et al. 2004, p.5). One of our student wrote "without your academic and psychological support, I would have left my course…there should be one of you in every university course". With our bespoke support he ultimately became a self-directed and more confident learner enjoying his university experience.

For first year students making transitions from school to university and coping with a range of issues as diverse as homesickness, adapting to the academic mores and styles or experiencing a culture clash (Davis 2010). Qualter et al. (2009) noted that for some students, this creates tensions which, in the absence of appropriate support, lead to negative experiences and eventual withdrawal from their course. They also found evidence that a programme targeted at undergraduate students to increase their socio-emotional intelligence, could "increase their likelihood of staying on at university" (2009, p. 14).

Our students expressed that the support they receive in their first year from our LD team helps them recognise and respond to feedback, plan for and meet deadlines, work in groups and understand the requirements and conventions of academic work more effectively. Students reported a more 'rounded' and positive learning experience, which they felt equipped them to achieve in and enjoy their academic studies, whilst also having the confidence to engage in wider university opportunities.

From all the above evidence as well as existing knowledge and extensive practice in this area, we argue that locally-based LD teams – who are experienced academics but not necessarily subject specialists - can have a positive effect on students' socio-emotional intelligence by providing bespoke support within a holistic context. Acknowledging that many academics are already integrating some of this work within their own programmes on a group-wide basis, we contend that this additional

academic but non-subject-specialist support, will reach out to those students who lack the confidence or self-awareness in their own academic ability and provide a personal and secure arena for them to successfully make the transition from school to university, and from there, to succeed in their studies.

1064 words (without references)

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