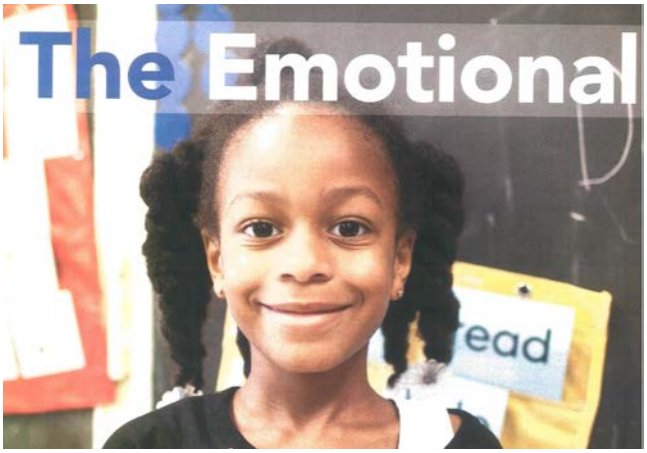

The Emotional Intelligence We Owe Students and Educators

When schools recognize that emotions drive much of how and what we learn, students and educators flourish.

Marc A. Brackett

Consider two pairs of schools. In a high-poverty neighborhood in New York, two K–8 charter schools were each established to raise their students' academic achievement. A majority of the graduates of one of these institutions enters college and thrives there. But the other school has large numbers of students who do well up to the middle grades but fall apart under the pressure of high school.

Likewise, two Connecticut high schools I'm familiar with are similar demographically by every measure. But one school suffers from low test scores, frequent bullying, poor attendance, and a low graduation rate. The other has continually improving test scores, high attendance, and graduation rates that surpass most other schools in the state.[1]

What's the difference between the two schools that do well and the two that fall short for many kids? It's not a new teaching technique, better test preparation, or a new reading or science curriculum. It's not a difference in students' intellect, parent involvement, or financial investments. The difference is that in the schools that lift up nearly all their students, educators have learned that what makes students thrive is what makes people human—emotions. When schools recognize that emotions drive much of how and what we learn, students and educators flourish.

The Bad (and Good) News on Emotions in Schools

Recognizing how crucial emotions are to the learning process raises the question: How are our students and educators feeling these days? The Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, of which I am the founding director, recently surveyed 22,000 high school students from across the United States, asking them to describe how they feel in school. Seventy-five percent of the words they used were negative; *tired*, *bored*, and *stressed* were the top three. When we gave 6,000 U.S. educators a similar survey, respondents said they spend nearly 70 percent of their days at school feeling *frustrated*, *overwhelmed*, and *stressed*. Our

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research indicated that much of this stress was related to the climate and culture in the educators' schools.

You get the picture: Students and educators spend a big part of their waking hours with feelings *not* conducive to learning and teaching. How clearly do you suppose kids think when they're feeling tired, bored, and stressed? How well do they absorb new information or engage in conversations leading to deeper understanding? And how effective would you guess educators are when they're frustrated or overwhelmed?

We know the answer intuitively, and 30 years of research backs it up. Ignoring how you feel and trying to just "push through" emotions can impair a person's ability to learn and process knowledge; make good life decisions; develop healthy relationships; feel confident, secure, and happy; and perform at their best (Brackett et al., 2016).

The good news is that strengthening social-emotional skills can reduce the harm that hard-to-handle feelings can have on learning. Although our students will never have lives free of hardship and troubling events, we can help them have lives full of healthy relationships, compassion, and a sense of purpose—by teaching them to work *with* their emotions. Integrating social-emotional learning (SEL) into a school provides a framework for developing mindsets, knowledge, and skills that enhance students' social

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and emotional competence. SEL can improve decision making and attitudes about school; decrease students' emotional distress and behavior problems (as well as teacher stress); and positively influence instructional quality, academic achievement, and classroom and school climate (Durlak et al., 2011).

At the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence (www.ei.yale.edu), we developed RULER, a schoolwide approach that teaches all stakeholders in a school about the value of emotions, the skills of emotional intelligence, and the importance of building a positive school climate. RULER is also an acronym for five skills of emotional intelligence: recognizing, understanding, labeling, expressing, and regulating emotion. The approach includes a set of practices for integrating social-emotional learning into all aspects of instruction and school life. Anchor tools help teachers introduce skills connected to emotional intelligence into everyday classroom routines and academic instruction, and RULER's Feeling Words Curriculum and its Optimizing Intelligence course (used at the high school level) integrate opportunities to further develop and practice "emotion skills" in K–8 and high school classrooms, respectively.

In creating RULER, we learned that we needed to integrate specific tools, strategies, and pedagogy *throughout* a school to make SEL an enduring part of the school's culture. Let me backtrack here. In the late 1990s, long before I collaborated with talented researchers and educators to develop RULER, my uncle and I set out to bring emotional-learning skills into schools. My uncle was a teacher who believed deeply in the power of emotions. But he and I were too narrow in our approach. We only delivered classroom instruction on learning about and managing emotions to students, and we quickly discovered that schools could never develop emotionally skilled children without enhancing similar skills in a school's adults. As with everything concerning children, it takes a village. That's why RULER starts with shifting *adults'* mindsets about emotions, followed by training on explicit skills—building educators' own emotion vocabulary and enhancing their emotion-regulation skills. That way, all adult stakeholders can benefit personally and have the knowledge and skills to both model and teach RULER to students.

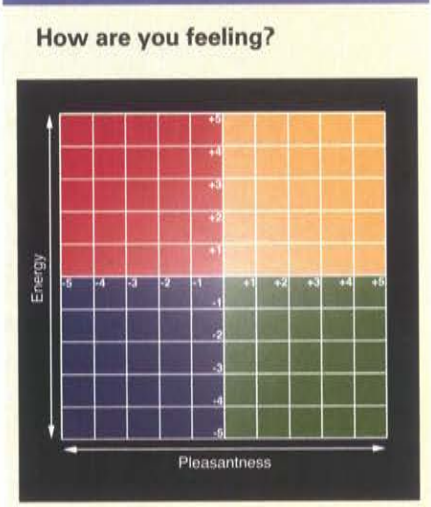
Appreciating All Emotions

As a society, we have been blind to the power of emotion because of an at least 3000-year-old bias. Much of early religion, western literature, philosophy, and psychology taught us that emotions are unreliable sources of information that get in the way of sound decision making and the ability to learn. Fortunately, we now know that not only are emotions relevant to intelligence, but that the more we repress them, the more they can affect our cognition and distort our perceptions.

A key premise of the field of emotional intelligence is that, used wisely, all emotions—both positive and negative—become resources we draw on to inform our decisions, support our well-being, and help us achieve goals. It's not that some emotions are all bad and others all good; rather, the purpose of all parts of our emotional system is to help us make predictions, become energized, and—ultimately—survive and thrive.

One RULER tool that helps students and teachers alike in becoming more aware of feelings and how they affect learning is the Mood Meter, a four-quadrant grid representing two dimensions of emotion: *valence*, or pleasantness (unpleasant to pleasant, represented by the X axis) and *arousal* (low to high energy, represented by the Y axis) (see fig. 1). The tool provides a concrete way to plot oneself in "emotion space." The two axes cross to form four colored quadrants: yellow (representing pleasant, high energy), red (unpleasant, high energy), blue (unpleasant,

FIGURE 1. The Mood Meter



The Mood Meter grid gives students a way to plot themselves in "emotion space" and build their emotional vocabulary.

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low energy), and green (pleasant, low energy). Older students learn to tune into and "plot" their emotional state—in terms of whether their mood is pleasant (or not) and how high their energy feels—on this grid using numbers and words ("I feel +2, -2; peaceful"). Younger students use the colors ("I'm in the red; frustrated"). This tool helps students build a broader vocabulary about emotions and learn strategies to maintain or shift their feelings to support learning.

Working with tools like this to talk about feelings helps students develop a nuanced "emotion vocabulary." It also helps educators and students understand how temperament and everyday life circumstances influence feelings and behavior. Educators realize that it's not realistic or even desirable for students to be "happy" all of the time. True, feelings like joy open the mind to new possibilities, leading to creativity and efficiency. But positive emotions can't fix everything, and negative emotions have constructive functions as well. It's concern, not excitement, that helps us narrow our attention and be more detail oriented. It's both anger and empathy that will lead one child to defend another who's being bullied.

Honing Skills, Not Traits

Once teachers and students become more generally aware of emotions, they can become adept at leveraging the emotions they experience. Consider how skills relate to handling emotions. Think about someone you know who is emotionally wise. What is it about this person that makes them emotionally intelligent? What specific skills do they have?

If you're like many people, you identified qualities like kindness, warmth, friendliness, optimism, or resilience. Now consider: Is this actually a list of *skills*? It's certainly good to be warm, kind, and friendly, but these qualities don't necessarily pertain to whether a person uses emotions wisely; they fall into the category of personality traits. This distinction matters. People tend to confuse personality traits like neuroticism—the inclination to be moody and experience intense emotions like worry—with emotion skills or the lack thereof. But emotion-management skills can be developed regardless of personality traits.

While traits can influence our experiences and provide information about our tendencies, emotion skills pertain to how we leverage our emotions to make sound decisions and strategically take actions that lead to the best outcome for ourselves and others. For example, I'm a natural born worrier. Emotion skills help me to identify the specific emotion I'm feeling (am I anxious, afraid, overwhelmed?) and use a strategy to manage the feeling. Strategies tend to vary by emotional and cultural background. A breathing exercise might help when I'm feeling anxious about an upcoming test, but if I'm overwhelmed, I might need to take things off my plate. Emotion-management skills pertain to how we reason with and about emotions—and how we use that information to guide decisions and strategically take actions that lead to the best outcome for ourselves and others. Five emotion *skills* are at the heart of RULER:

- Recognize our own emotions by attending to our thoughts and physiology, and recognize others' emotions through facial expressions, body language, and vocal tones.
- Understand the causes of emotions and their influence on decisions, learning, and behavior.
- Label emotions with a nuanced vocabulary.
- Express emotions in accordance with cultural norms and social context.

■ Regulate our emotions to achieve goals and well-being.

These skills are at the core of SEL competencies identified by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning—self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. RULER's activities teach strategies to accept and work with all emotions, including difficult ones. If a student feels highly anxious but needs to focus on a project, he will know what to do to calm down. If a teacher gets angry because misbehavior thwarts her plans, she can work with that feeling.

For example, the Meta-Moment technique helps kids learn to recognize when they're getting upset, pause before reacting, and consider how they'd want their "best self" to respond. Freshmen in Illinois's Hinsdale High School District 86 learn and practice the Meta-Moment in physical education class. Teachers there have noticed a difference in how students respond to provocations. Teaching such skills while building emotionally safe learning environments helps educators and students spend more time feeling the way our survey respondents told us they *want* to feel: *valued*, *supported*, *connected*, *inspired*, and *excited*.

If Not Now, When?

Sadly, many schools place kids on a hamster wheel of achievement that puts social and emotional skills at the bottom of the list of things to learn. When you ask students and parents

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about the importance of developing emotional-management skills, most agree they are essential—yet we put off their acquisition. Students say thing like, "I'll attend to how I feel once I get past this test" or ". . . once I get into college." Before we know it, these kids will be the working adults who report feeling "stressed" for much of their waking hours. This isn't how life is supposed to be.

We need to ask ourselves where children will learn these skills, since few parents have training in strengthening social-emotional skills. Unfortunately, most teachers haven't received formal training to pass along this knowledge, either. The good news is, any teacher can learn how to integrate SEL, and most teachers *want* to: In one survey, 95 percent of teachers said that SEL is an essential component of educating the whole child (Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013). It's crucial to train teachers so they can develop students' emotional awareness and competence.

In implementing RULER, we've learned that buy-in for SEL development must reach all the way to the top—including superintendents and school boards—or implementation will become uneven. New teachers won't get the training; not enough kids will acquire the skills. But when learning about emotions and how to manage them pervades a school—classrooms, lunchrooms, hallways, school offices—the entire school community can be transformed. Leaders, teachers, students, and families interact more positively. The school sees better classroom experiences; higher academic achievement; less problem behavior, bullying, and stress; and increased health and well-being. As with the schools contrasted at the start of this article, emotion skills are the key.

By unlocking the wisdom of the emotions, we can develop young people who are kind, caring, and resilient as well as academically successful. We can teach our students to collaborate, take risks, and get up when they're knocked down. Emotion skills are especially important for students facing adverse child experiences because the psychological and biological stress responses that accompany trauma impact motivation and executive functioning. If children facing trauma have tools for dealing with their hurt, frustration, and stress, they too will have opportunities to learn and thrive.

There's no age at which it's too early or too late to start teaching SEL. The parts of the brain needed to enhance emotion vocabulary and learn strategies for regulating emotions are active until our last days. By infusing into our education system solid teaching about emotion, we can ignite passion and purpose in our students and educators. It's up to us to launch an emotion revolution by systemically integrating SEL into schools. EL

[1]In each case, the school that had better results with its students and graduates worked with our team from the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence to infuse social and emotional awareness and skills in the school.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

› Brackett's research found that, when surveyed, K-12 teachers gave negative emotional terms to say how they felt in school. At the end of a typical school day, jot down three words that capture your primary emotions throughout that day. What words surface? Do any surprise you?

› Brackett notes that, "used wisely, all emotions—positive and negative—become resources we draw on to inform our decisions, support our well-being, and help us achieve goals." If a negative feeling surfaced for you, probe it. How might tuning in to that feeling alert you to a change you should enact or a decision to make that would help you "survive and thrive"?

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