The emotionally intelligent school leader: Enhancing adolescents' social-emotional competence

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Adolescence, a period of physical, cognitive, and socio-emotional transition, is a crucial age for development. The child once entering in this phase requires intensive readjustment to school, social, and family life. Several studies suggest that adolescents in schools face mental and emotional problems such as depression, loneliness, stress, anxiety, substance abuse, anti-social behaviour, and suicidality. Social and emotional learning, which involves enhancing social and emotional competencies of students in schools, has been found to be an appropriate way of dealing with such mental health issues. Social and emotional competence refers to the capacity to recognise and manage emotions, solve problems effectively, and maintain positive relationships with others. Evidence suggests that school leaders play an effective role in students' learning and well-being. Keeping this in view, the purpose of this paper is to review how an emotionally intelligent school leader can enhance social and emotional competence among students. The emotionally intelligent school leader can demonstrate repeatedly the ability to solve problems, to adapt to change and to overcome obstacles. They are more likely to create an enriching and conducive environment. They balance the increasing demands and complexities of the role with a positive, optimistic outlook, reflecting aspects of social and emotional competence. Thus, these qualities are apt in the effective development of social and emotional competence in students. An emotionally intelligent school leader, through the instilling of social and emotional competence, therefore, provides a medium in the restoration of many of the mental health problems among adolescents in schools.

Keywords: adolescence; emotional intelligence; mental health; school leadership; social-emotional competence

Eric Erikson (1968) defines adolescent as the period of physical, cognitive, and psychological transition, which makes it a crucial phase of life in the development of an individual. Adolescence involves a shift from the familiarity of primary school surroundings to a secondary school involving unacquainted teachers, buildings, and older students. Any problems in adjusting to these changes can result in the emergence of school refusal, anxiety, maladjustment and other mental health issues (Dabkowska et al., 2011; Greenberg et al., 2000). Adolescent mental health has, thus, been one of the growing concerns for psychologists and educators worldwide.

Research suggests that children with mental health problems perform less well in school and attain lower levels of education compared to other children (Acharya & Relojo, 2017; DeSocio & Hootman, 2004; Fergusson & Woodward, 2002). Studies also show that this relationship holds throughout the early life development – in elementary school (Alexander et al., 1993; Farmer & Bierman, 2002), in middle school (Fletcher, 2010; McLeod & Karen, 2004) and into the post-secondary years (Hunt et al., 2010). These problems are reflected in many ways such as distress and depression (Needham, 2009), emotional and developmental disorders (Staff et al., 2008), and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Galera et al., 2009).

Educators have found that social-emotional learning, which involves learning social and emotional competence, helps in the restoration of many of the mental health problems. Social and emotional competence has been found to improve students' academic performance, adaptive social and emotional behaviour, peer relationships, and reduces other forms of antisocial and maladaptive behaviour (Consortium on the School-Based Promotion of Social Competence, 1994; Weissberg & Greenberg, 1998). Enhancing social and emotional competence among students, the school leader plays a significant role. Hence, this paper proposes specific characteristics of a school leader, which can be effective in enhancing social and emotional competence in adolescents. The paper begins with a description of social and emotional competence, shedding light on its various benefits with respect to mental health. The paper, then, discusses the proposed characteristics of a school leader, and how these characteristics play a role in instilling social and emotional competence.

Social and emotional competence

Social and emotional competence is the capacity to use social and emotional aspects of one's life in an effective manner. It helps in the managing learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, and adapting to the complex demands of growth and development (Parker & Gottman, 1989). Social competence refers to skills that facilitate interpersonal interactions in the social environment, including the expression and control of verbal and nonverbal communication (Friedman et al., 2003). Emotional competence refers to skills in the identification, regulation, and expression of emotion (Saarni, 1999). Thus, social-emotional competence is defined as cooperative and pro-social behaviour, maintenance of peer and adult relationships, managing aggression and conflict, developing a sense of mastery and self-worth and emotional regulation (Parker et al., 2005). These skills have come out from the research on emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). A growing body of research suggests that social and emotional abilities linked with emotional intelligence are strongly related to an individual's ability to cope with the demands and stressors of life (Mayer et al., 1999). Emotional intelligence is considered as an essential factor in the quality of social and emotional well-being (Taylor et al., 1999).

Many researchers have found that social and emotional competence has a positive impact on mental health and academic performance (Payton et al., 2008; Zins et al., 2003; Zins et al., 2004). Social and emotional variables, in the context of schools, include positive interaction with teachers, positive representations of self, derived from attachment relationships, emotion knowledge, emotion regulatory abilities, social skills, and non-rejected peer status (Carlton, 2000; Howes & Smith, 1995; Izard et al., 2001; Jacobsen & Hofmann, 1997; O'Neil et al., 1997; Pianta et al., 1995; Shields et al., 2001). Students who exhibit higher social emotional competence attend school more regularly, are less likely to experience emotional distress (anxiety or depression), are less likely to reveal conduct problems such as

substance abuse or violence toward others, and are generally perceived by others as more intelligent and attractive compared to those who are less competent socially and emotionally. It is for these reasons that it is required to understand how social-emotional development plays itself out in the school setting. Students who have limitations in their social-emotional development often demonstrate poor social, emotional and academic success. Students are not only at risk for academic problems due to their mental health issues but often demonstrate difficulties with social skills such as getting along with peers and following school rules, placing them at additional risk for the development of academic difficulties (Wallach, 1994). In order to meet the social and emotional competence of adolescents, different approaches within the school may be needed to help children develop these competencies. It is, therefore, the responsibility of the school leader to provide an enriching environment and to have a positive influence on adolescents' mental health and academic achievement as well.

Leadership and social-emotional competence

Research suggests that leadership is vital to school effectiveness (Marzano et al., 2004). School leadership is second only to classroom instruction, has direct effects on school organisation, school ethos, and staff morale and satisfaction (Relojo et al., 2015), all of which have a direct effect on student outcomes (Geijsel et al., 2003; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005; Leithwood et al., 2004). Leadership is a social phenomenon, where an individual or set of individuals collectively move forward along a goal path. Researchers define leadership as an interaction between two or more members of a group that often involves a structuring or restructuring of the situation and of the perceptions and expectations of the members (M. Bass & R. Bass, 2008). Leadership is also defined as the ability to inspire confidence in and support among the people who are needed to achieve goals. Thus, leadership is the process that involves interpersonal relationships between the leader and members of the group.

Research indicates a strong association between social and emotional abilities and emotional intelligence, which enables one to cope with the demands of life (Mayer et al., 1999). Emotional intelligence has come to be viewed as an essential factor in the quality of an individual's general emotional and social well-being (Taylor et al., 1999), as well as an important predictor of an individual's ability to succeed in the classroom (Parker et al., 2004 ; Zeidner et al., 2005). Salovey and Mayer (1990) define emotional intelligence (EI) as the ability to analyse and understand relationships, take others perspective, resolve conflicts, and manage one's own emotions. Goleman (2011) drawing from this description posits that a leader's emotional intelligence has a greater influence on its members and organisation than the leader's intellectual capability. Empirical evidence suggests that EI abilities are linked with positive leadership behaviours at various levels within any kind of group (George, 2000). Recent trends suggest that EI appears to contribute to positive leadership behaviour in several basic ways. Individuals with above average levels of EI tend to have advanced communication skills (often in both verbal and non-verbal forms). This is an essential skill for leaders who need to communicate goals and objectives to subordinates on an ongoing basis. Individuals who have above average levels of emotional and social competency often have above average coping abilities (Parker et al., 1998). The ability to cope with stress is very important for successful leadership; this is the skill that helps a leader generate and maintain enthusiasm, confidence, and cooperation.

An emotionally intelligent leader allows people to build a set of skills and attitude to manage effectively the relationships. It enables an individual to recognize and regulate emotions of her/his own and others as well and to use this skill to manage thinking and behaviours. An emotionally intelligent leader, thus, develops the emotional and relational capacity, which builds a common ground and trust among the group members. Individuals with high EI are perceived as better leaders compared to those with lower EI (Thiel et al., 2012). Goleman and colleagues (2002) have found that there are clear positive relations between emotional intelligence and highly effective leadership and organisational performance. Additionally, leaders who are emotionally intelligent, tend to positively influence others, motivate others by controlling and understanding their own emotions and also create strong relationships with others (Chastukhina, 2002; Feldman, 1999; Noyes, 2001).

Goleman (1998) describes five components of emotional intelligence: self-awareness, self- regulation (or management), motivation, empathy (social awareness), and social skills (relationship management). Self-awareness deals with knowing about one's own feelings and emotions. Leaders high in self-awareness are attuned to their inner signals, recognising how their feelings affect them and their performance. They are attuned to their guiding values, intuit the best course of action, see the big picture in a complex situation, can be candid and authentic, and are able to speak openly about their emotions. Self-regulation entails self-control. Leaders with high self-control find ways to manage their disturbing emotions and impulses and channel them in positive ways. A leader with good self-control can stay calm and clear headed in high stress or difficult situations. Motivation implicates consistent work towards achieving the goals. Motivated leaders are usually optimistic, no matter what they face, even in challenging situations. Empathy involves taking the other person's perspective. Goleman argues that leaders high on empathy are able to attune to a wide range of emotional signals, letting them sense the felt, but unspoken emotions in a person or group. Empathy makes a person able to get along well with people of diverse backgrounds or from other cultures. Social skills, the last component of emotional intelligence, involve relationship management. Leaders who are high in this aspect are able to understand the differing perspectives and find a common ideal that everyone can endorse. They are able to identify the conflict, acknowledge the feelings and views of all sides, and then redirect the energy towards a shared ideal. The components of emotional intelligence, thus, can be viewed as important aspects of leadership. Further, these components, in a leader, play a significant role in developing and enhancing aspects of social and emotional competence.

It has been found that the aforementioned components of emotional intelligence play a role in the prevention and management of behaviour problems in school. Moreover, these aspects can help students become more effective in their communication and solve many of their problems that are leading to problem behaviours (Killick, 2006). In schools, the teacher plays an important role in terms of being a leader. The teacher having authority without being authoritarian is able to tackle the many different aspects of managing behaviour, such as to create the safe and respectful environment that encourages cooperation, to be able to calm flashpoints and to intervene and give assistance to those whose behaviour presents particular and on-going challenges. The objective is to create a calmer, safer environment for learning. Effective communication skills in teachers reduce the need to rely on sanctions and punishments. These skills and strategies are about helping students express emotions and solve problems appropriately within acceptable limits. In students, it has been found that it is often strong emotions that underlie many behavioural problems. Feelings such as revenge, anger, fear, guilt, shame or jealousy may underlie acting- out behaviour, which in turn may have negative consequences on their mental health as well as the environment. In such a scenario, teachers can find ways of helping the student deal with these complex emotions. It is through behaviour that these emotions are often communicated so it is important to see challenging behaviours as having a function and a communicative aspect. This is helped by a climate where feelings and emotions are frequently discussed. Communication skills of reflective listening and effective feedback are as critical, if not more so than giving praise or sanctions. Further, school leaders who are emotionally and socially competent have a strong sense of self and the ability to understand and manage emotions both in themselves and others. They engage the heart (emotions) and then the mind of key stakeholders as the gateway to gaining support for school improvement initiatives. Such leaders have the ability to develop collaborative learning environments that focus on student learning and empower new leaders within their educational community to assist in the pursuit of provincial and system goals and standards. They also demonstrate repeatedly the ability to solve problems, to adapt to change and to overcome obstacles. These leaders, thus, balance the increasing demands and complexities of the role with a positive, optimistic outlook – all reflecting aspects of social and emotional competence.

Conclusion

Mental health problems among adolescents are widespread and constantly on the rise. Many of these psychosocial problems are of temporary and often ignored. The many transitional phases that take

place such as the transition from childhood to adolescence and moving from early elementary to middle school or moving from high school to college can present new challenges for such children. Several policies, programmes and studies have emphasised serious concerns for positive adolescents' mental health, therefore, need of the hour. Increasing numbers of adolescents are suffering from mental and emotional stress, depression, loneliness, anxiety, suicidal attempts and adopting behaviour such as bullying and substance abuse. They adopt risky behaviours primarily because they lack certain skills to manage the risky challenges. Social and emotional competence is, therefore, an undeniable way to prevent adolescents from mental illnesses and to enhance their social, emotional and physical well-being. Social and emotional competence is the capability to help an individual to manage social and emotional aspects of one's life such as cooperative and pro-social behaviour, maintenance of peer and adult relationships, managing aggression and conflict, developing a sense of mastery and self-worth and emotional regulation. These social and emotional skills can be provided through a variety of diverse efforts and the role of school leaders is one of them. School leaders that are high on emotional intelligence can be said to be effective in instilling social and emotional competence in students, and thus, groom them for many of the mental health issues that they face.

Such leaders involve maximising human and organisational capabilities; facilitation of multiple levels of transformation (self and others); group development; democratic, developmental, and transformational activity based on equality and growth; curriculum development; involvement; and innovation. They are socially and emotionally competent and are able to enhance the mental health of students by instilling those social and emotional skills among them. They are more likely to create an enriching and conducive environment. Therefore, a school leader high on emotional intelligence, through the instilling of social and emotional competence, provides a more promising approach to overcome many of the unforeseen challenges and mental health problems.

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