



Book Review

Emotional Literacy

Patricia Sherwood (2008). *Emotional Literacy: The Heart of Classroom Management*. Camberwell, Victoria: Australian Council for Educational Research Limited (ACER).
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by **Steve Edwards**

Emotional Literacy: The Heart of Classroom Management is the latest book by Dr Patricia Sherwood, one of the founders of the *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology*, which is currently co-hosted by Edith Cowan University in Western Australia and the University of Johannesburg in South Africa. Dr Sherwood is a researcher at Edith Cowan University, Western Australia, where she teaches and supervises postgraduate students. Trish, as she is affectionately known, is also Director of Sophia College, managing busy clinical practices and supervising free community counselling services run by Sophia College graduates in various Australian states and regions, as well as forging collaborative international academic, professional and social justice linkages between Australia, South Africa and other countries. This book on emotional literacy is a successor to her recent, highly acclaimed books on *Holistic Counselling* and *The Healing Art of Clay Therapy*.

The succinct back cover summary review of the book reads as follows:

Emotional Literacy: The Heart of Classroom Management is a pioneering book for primary school teachers, counsellors and therapists who wish to develop emotional literacy skills in classroom situations. It provides resources for managing the feeling life of children and offers:

- A classroom management model that

creates opportunities for healing emotions, rather than emotions being denied, repressed, discounted or excluded from the process.

- An understanding of the non-verbal languages and skills needed for children to identify the basic human feelings of anger, grief, aloneness, fear, judgment, and the bully and victim behaviours arising from such feelings.
- Group classroom exercises that help to reduce the possibility of major behavioural problems or psychological disturbances.
- Simple, self-managed processes that give children basic skills to identify and manage their own emotions.

The book is a rare treasure. Its phenomenological approach succeeds in affording the reader the unique opportunity, and privilege, of journeying into the heart of the primary school child, and experiencing the multisensory primary school world in all its pathos, tragedy, vulnerability, freedom and joy. This phenomenology is supported with an archaeology of ancient wisdom and contemporary educational research into the human heart, feelings and classroom experiences in Sherwood's inimitable and endearing language, which will be immediately recognizable and accessible to primary school teachers, parents and children as well as the general public. For all its deceptive simplicity, the language is extraordinarily

rich and accurate in reflecting verbal, non-verbal, concrete and metaphorical communication patterns characterizing the primary school world. These patterns are exemplified in beautiful illustrations by Tara Sherwood, as well as vignettes detailing experiences and interventions with a cast of memorable characters given pseudonyms such as Creamcake Charlie, Tiger Tim and Miserable Matilda.

This special language also has a radical, social reform function as vehicle for Sherwood's penetrating critical analysis of various destructive trends in contemporary society. These include the escalation of violence, crime, adult emotional stressors, family mobility, marriage breakdown, divorce and other factors that increase children's inherent vulnerability. In economically developed countries in particular, capitalistic and rational economic policies foster technocratic quick fixes. For example, public health becomes a competitive arena for the big business of modern medicine, where the propensity to provide short term, drug based, band-aid solutions inevitably compounds problems related to contemporary humanity's desperate search for meaning through addictions, consumerism, materialism, narcissism and cynicism. As an enduring antidote, *Emotional Literacy* impresses with its therapeutic depth, practical counselling suggestions and specific intervention sequences to prevent, manage, resource, empower and heal. Guidance is also given regarding ways to recycle destructiveness into creativity, so as to reclaim an original birthright of meaning, social justice, personal integrity, flourishing health, moral strength, compassion, respect, love and enduring spiritual living.

The central argument of the book revolves around the metaphor of the heart, not as distinguished from Harvey's 'pump', but as seat of life's rhythm, as pivot that balances upper and lower poles of the body, as energetic reality that harmonizes cognitive and willing components of being, and as focal point of feeling and the emotional intelligence of the child, teacher and classroom as a whole. Sherwood cites electrophysiological evidence to support such functions, referring to research by McCraty, Adkinson and Bradley (2004), who found a projected electro-magnetic field of about two metres around the heart, indicating its fundamentally intuitive, sensing and feeling role, which precedes brain activity. This central, multifaceted and intelligent heart function is immediately recognized and long known by all open-hearted people, indigenous cultures such as Australian aboriginals and Kalahari San, and established spiritual wisdom traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity.

The book is divided into nine chapters, dealing with various facets of emotional literacy. Chapter 1 sets the scene through the provision of an evidence base of teachers', parents' and children's contemporary educational experience of "a heads on legs" cognitive overemphasis, which cries out for the harmonizing corrective of emotional literacy. Chapter 2 provides further evidence for the central harmonizing role of the open heart in both internal and external worlds, relationships, the classroom, and the energetic, non-verbal languages of sensing, breathing, gesturing and sounding. Chapters 3 through 8 respectively explicate experiences and interventions for anger (taming the tiger), grief (climbing the weeping willow), fear (braving the storm), aloneness (filling holes in the heart), and bullying (freeing the victim and walking the bully through the doorway to empathy). Chapter 9 is intended to support teachers, "the heart of the heart of the classroom", with brief daily and longer term "self care kits" to sustain their instructional vision and mission.

An original contribution of the work is its detailed individual and group intervention exercises, using the abovementioned energetic non-verbal languages of sensing, breathing, gesture, movement, sounding and visualizing. These exercises, which have their theoretical and praxeological foundations in Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophical medical model (see e.g. Evans & Rodger, 1992) and Tagar's (1996) phonetic work respectively, have been developed further by Sherwood into a coherent system that spans the great chain or nest of consciousness from matter to body to mind to soul to spirit. She views sensing as the most basic language in relation to the flow of energy around and within us, connecting inner and outer environments; breathing in relation to blocks and flows of consciousness; gesture as frozen breath, expressing and transforming experience; sounding patterns that echo every aspect of human experience; and visualisation, "the firstborn of the imagination, the faculty of the feeling life, whose companions are intuition and inspiration" (p. 36).

Another meaningful contribution is the suggestion that each corner of the classroom be dedicated to a core aspect of the feeling life, a recognized space where children, able to identify key feeling states such as anger, grief, and aloneness, can go to work on their feelings. Suggested corner resources are clay for diffusing anger, sand play for unheard stories, water colour for grief and loss, and colour and sound resourcing for emptiness and aloneness. Various exercises are given for each feeling state. For example, one group exercise for anger management requires children to monitor the flow of breath, which, with anger, becomes contracted, huffy and

puffy, resulting in experiences of constriction and tension. Children are required to breathe repeatedly until they can imagine the breath (and anger) coming out of the tips of their toes. Alternatively, they could think of something that makes them angry, watch where the feeling lives in terms of breath restriction and bodily constriction, place their hands on the affected body part with most tension, imaginatively collect the tension into a ball shape and, while making clear 'g' sounds, repeatedly throw the imagined anger ball against a wall before stepping back and shaking both hands repeatedly to rid themselves of the anger feelings. An equivalent clay therapy sequence could require children to model the anger shape, a tool to break down the shape, act out the breaking of the anger shape with sounds and gestures, then model the new shape, describe it, draw it and live it.

Sherwood laments the current trend to "psychiatrize" children as well as adolescents and adults. Children suffering from grief, loss and related experiences and behaviour are often typically misdiagnosed, labelled with childhood depression and deadened further with drugs. Whereas empathic teachers are able to recognize and make allowances for such children, most teachers are not trained to manage grief to the extent that they are trained to manage anger. Various body-based classroom interventions are suggested, some involving the whole class (as is needed, for instance, when a favourite teacher dies). For example, there are water colour sequences for painting and healing grief. Here children imaginatively enter into that place in the body which is experienced as the site of grief, paint the pain in representative colours, paint again alternative healing qualities, imaginatively pull out the shock and pain (which may be experienced as a knife or wooden block), then breathe back imagined and painted healing colour qualities into the site of pain. In the case of loss, a healing ritual is created to honour the lost person through activities such as writing, drawing and sculpting.

In the case of unheard stories, no fewer than six group exercises are detailed as useful interventions. One example involves the construction of a mandala with four quadrants, representing mineral, plant, animal and human kingdoms with their respective elements of earth, water, fire and air. Children collect, paint, draw or model images for each kingdom to form a

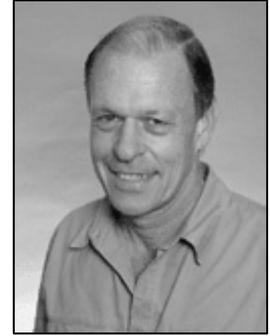
collage, act as a sand play resource and provide general connectedness. Other examples include creating mother or father sand play stories, in which children list good qualities of their parents, then complete a number of steps such as standing up in the gesture of the quality, sounding the quality while walking, breathing in the quality, imagining filling the self with the quality, drawing the quality, clay sculpting the quality and placing it in the sand tray.

The penultimate chapter on bullying notes four non-mutually exclusive types of bullies: the *arrested empathic* bully, whose development of empathy beyond the critical age of four to six years has waned, owing to particular family and other social circumstances; the *narcissistic* bully, who did not transcend either critical empathic or egocentric phases; the *abused* bully, who lives in survival mode due to growing up in households characterized by violent physical, sexual, emotional or verbal abuse; and the *media modelled* bully who has emerged more recently through social learning and vicarious modelling of media cultivated violence, particularly electronic games, play station and computer games, whose aim is to injure or kill another human being. In order to develop insight and empathy, Sherwood advocates, in addition to clay and other therapeutic sequences, the use of a compassion triangle, which encourages bullies to draw or sculpt their heartfelt feelings from the three perspectives of guilt, judgment and kindness respectively.

Patricia Sherwood's *Emotional Literacy* is a resource book for the future. A review such as this can only sketch some aspects of the work. In itself, the book requests and thoroughly deserves repeated reading and recommendation. It is suggested that further editions of the book should include a cross-referencing index to facilitate student usage. One foresees that this book will be in great demand, and the author Trish Sherwood, her daughter-tutor Tara, who created all the beautiful illustrations, and her publishers, the Australian Council for Educational Research, are to be congratulated on producing a text that makes a valuable contribution to re-establishing the heart of classroom management and nurturing emotional literacy in education in particular and society in general.

About the Author

Steve Edwards is currently Emeritus Professor and Research Fellow in the Psychology Department of the University of Zululand, where he served as Head of Department for 24 years. He has doctoral degrees in Psychology (UCT, 1974) and Education (UNISA, 1992), and is registered as a Clinical and Educational Psychologist with the Health Professions Council of South Africa and as a Chartered Clinical, Sport and Exercise Psychologist with the British Psychological Society.



A rated researcher with the South African National Research Council, Prof Edwards has supervised the research of over one hundred masters and doctoral students, mainly in clinical and community psychology, authored numerous scientific publications, served on various boards of national and international organizations and presented papers at numerous international conferences. His research, teaching and professional activities are mainly concerned with health promotion

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