

Critical Success Factors for Developing Emotionally Enriched Learning



Annie Hamlaoui

Session focus

This session focused on understanding and combining the 'biology' and 'psychology' of emotion and how it had been very powerful in creating the kind of enriched learning environment where students begin to **thrive** - rather than barely **survive**.

Passionate presenter

Annie has a wealth of experience to support her work. She lives and works in England – which was quite unusual at the Brain Expo! Her official title is 'Careers Guidance Advisor and Emotional Literacy Practitioner', yet she went on to qualify this by explaining that she spends her days 'at the chalk face' working with pupils, staff and parents.

Relevance

The session was built around a young boy she had worked with in a school in Thanet – a town she described as having low employment, zero opportunities, and no aspirations. This boy was symptomatic of the culture the education system had to work against – inspiring the resistant. From the first few anecdotes I became convinced that she firmly believed in the children she taught and that it was possible for them to overcome barriers to achieve goals, thus improving their state of mind and self-esteem. I identified with her passion for seeing the good in children and ensuring they were aware of the unshakable hope you have for them.

Changing the children: changing the school

Her presentation went on to detail the changes she had made to schools she had worked with. She started 'from the ground up', first identifying the staff's feelings and perceptions about the changes being made. She developed a programme that involved working with groups of eight students for two one-hour sessions per week. The students all had difficulty at varying levels in:

- Making and sustaining friendships (over and above the normal fallouts)
- Working cooperatively to share ideas and resources
- Communicating their physical and emotional needs
- Empathising and tolerating differences in others.

It struck me, as I am sure it struck others during the anecdotes and examples she gave, that we all have experience of children that display all those traits. We may have one or two children like that in our class or a class where the majority of children have varying difficulties, either way none of these children should be overlooked. I felt that the programme she put into place could be applied in every school, no matter its situation.

The structure for the students was focused on building empathy skills. It started with a gentle assessment of how they could 'read' faces. This then developed into work on understanding body language and facial expressions.





Annie further qualified her work with specific examples of how her students would begin to associate positive feelings with learning. We were then given the theory of how the brain reinforces behaviours that make us feel good, creating a learning environment where fun, success and security were the norm.

How can we use this?

Specific examples followed on how we could employ small changes to create such an environment for learning.



1. **Positive acts of kindness club** – children can nominate a classmate whom they think deserves a 'pick-me-up'. The PAK club would do something to make them feel good. This could range from drawing them a positive portrait, to writing them a little poem. We all know that we cannot successfully spot every child who feels low, but the children can be taught to do this themselves. What a powerful tool for class and school harmony.

2. **Check-ins** – a system whereby a class list is displayed and children post how they are feeling at point of arrival in the class. This can be colour coded, happy/unhappy faces or a numbered system. What is important is that the children are aware that others **notice and care**. The teacher and pupils will make a conscious decision to positively affect children that feel low. A more sophisticated looking display could be achieved by taking photos of the children posing with a range of emotions on their faces. The appropriate photo could be 'pegged' onto their place on the board. I was particularly affected by this idea. It will create a real sense of belonging in the class. It could be a real force behind developing feelings of empathy in the learning environment.



3. **Downshifting** – a re-branding of 'anger-management'. Annie had experience of children excluded from mainstream schools for a variety of reasons. One project she worked with them on was the concept of downshifting. She would school them on how the brain reacts when threatened. This allowed her students to better understand the maelstrom that was their teenage brains at the time. They made and sold posters that explained their findings to younger children under an enterprise scheme.

4. We shared several **'treats'** that came to us as a result of the enterprise projects. Firstly, we had chocolates because we were 'Heroes' and should be 'celebrated'. A raffle took place, the prizes being symbolic gifts brought by the students. I received six small handmade dolls in a decorated cotton bag. The Guatemalan tradition is to tell the dolls your worries in the evening. You then put the dolls under your pillow and in the morning your worries will be gone! It was a thoughtful gift and reminded us of the two-way dialogue between staff and pupils.

The workshop certainly achieved its aim and all the delegates left feeling inspired and determined to improve the culture of caring in their classroom.

When the children feel safe, secure and understood, they will learn.

Philip Whiston

