4.3 Educating Adults: Teachers and Parents

Daily practice shows that the teacher has a primordial way of managing and teaching children's emotions. It is therefore of primordial importance to follow from early childhood, then throughout the course of schooling, the child's development and help him or her to cope with difficulties, to guide him or her in the management of his or her emotions, to arrive at a balance between the rational mind and the emotional mind. (J.Castex, 2000)

It is important to reiterate how important the adults around the child are in the whole process of both emotional and cognitive development. It is imperative that every adult educator constantly remembers to be first and foremost a role model for the children around him or her, which is precisely why the educational model of 'Do what I say, but don't do what I do' is unlikely, to say the least! Children only and exclusively do what they see their caregivers do repeatedly; that is why they learn to express and understand emotions from the adults around them. Adults who play an important role in the lives of children, especially very young children, if they want to help them, will have to fully experience their own emotions, be aware of them and manage their expressiveness and actions according to the children's emotions (Denham, 2001). Here, in more detail, is what has been gained from research so far on the three fundamental aspects of interaction between adults and children, namely:

1. adult expressiveness

2. emotion training

3. adults' reactions to children's emotions

1. Adult expressiveness

Children who have relationships with more emotionally positive adults tend to be more positive themselves towards their peers; in contrast, the attitude displayed in kindergarten by children of more negative parents appears to be associated with lower social competence. Adults who report being emotionally positive in problematic circumstances raise children who are more apt at understanding emotions.

2. Emotion training by adults

Adults who are better able to provide children with emotion training help them to better understand emotions and prove themselves more socially competent in kindergarten. Children, even at such a young age, can 'sniff out' the difference between being bullied or rebuked through emotional language, so not all emotional speech is of equal value!

3. Adult reactions to children's emotions

Adults' reactions to children's emotional displays are important, as children generalise them to their own expressiveness and use them to construct their own knowledge of emotions. For example, discouraging children's emotions by telling them, "Stop crying!" is a powerful deterrent against self-reflection on emotions and is therefore an obstacle to emotion knowledge. Paying attention and providing positive reinforcement to children's emotions, accepting them, taking note of them and reacting in a way that meets their practical needs can pave the way for better learning about emotions, which is then reflected in social competence.

We can conclude that in order to ensure good emotional training, it is necessary for teachers to be emotionally competent themselves. Nobody is able to teach what they do not know! Research has confirmed that when adults work with their own emotions, they are able to accompany and speed up the E.I. development process of the children in their care. The optimal profile of emotional literacy programmes is to start early, to be age-appropriate, to be carried out in every school year and to coordinate efforts at school, at home and in the community (M.J.Elias, L.Hunter and J.S.Kress, 1997). "Whether or not there is a course explicitly devoted to emotional literacy may be far less important than how these lessons are taught. There is perhaps no subject like this in which the quality of teachers matters so much; the way a teacher handles the classroom is in itself a model, a lesson in fact, of emotional competence or lack thereof. Every attitude of a teacher towards a pupil is a lesson to twenty or thirty other students'. Not all teachers, due to their character, are inclined to teach emotions, as it is necessary to 'feel comfortable talking about one's feelings and not everyone is or wants to be...'. Little or nothing in the usual training of teachers prepares them for this kind of teaching" (Goleman, 1996, p. 322-323). For these reasons, emotional literacy programmes generally provide prospective teachers with special and demanding training in which they first of all put themselves at stake and, before anything else, come into contact with their own emotions.

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