

# **Exploring Emotional Intelligence and Learning: An Educator's Personal Journey**

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## **Abstract:**

Healthy classroom environments depend on the creation of a classroom culture that allows children to develop emotional intelligence competencies. Emotional intelligence help us to become healthy individuals capable of encouraging and motivating students to become better individuals. It has been an interesting subject of study over the years and one which has often intrigued and interested me. As such I decided to take one particular classroom as my subject of study by giving them questionnaire in order to understand them better. These questionnaires were given out after much study and consideration and the results were amazing. It gave me an insight into the various students, their behaviour, moods and how best to engage with them and motivate them. It has been an interesting journey for me and it has helped me to understand how to connect the emotional and rational part of the behaviour of students. While at times there was not much of a connection but it was interesting to note how best to make the connection and to get it to work.

## **Introduction**

Emotional Intelligence (EQ) competencies are developed from the ability to be aware of one's own emotions and patterns of behavior (Self-Knowledge), to manage negative or destructive emotions effectively (Self-Management), and to share in positive relationships and experiences with others in a way that enhances learning and life satisfaction (Relationship Management). Research suggests that life satisfaction derives from the development of Prosocial Behavior, the precursor of Empathy (Caprera et al., 2000; Malecki & Elliott, 2002).

The first step in the EQ process is becoming aware of our emotions and naming them research shows that when we name our emotions it helps us to create a link between emotional and rational thoughts. The emotional brain must be allowed to practice the skills of empathy and understanding, receive feedback from the surrounding environment, and evaluate the correctness of judgments made as a result of emotional input. Making a connection between the rational and the emotional part is not easy, especially in the case of students. Understanding their needs and trying to get a fit between the emotional and the rational level requires much patience and dedication. A student who asks as to why he cannot write a good essay as equally as his friend needs to understand the connection between the emotional and the rational choices that he makes. Also a student who fears to make the connection between his peers and his teachers need to consider how he can overcome this emotion. Besides this, anger plays an important role in the classroom. For example a student in my class at one time threw a piece of paper that he was writing on and decided to walk out of the class banging the door shut with a loud noise. It baffled everyone except me since I was curious to find out the cause of his anger.

By the time I sat down to talk to him it became clear to me that anger is an issue that students face in the classroom. So how does anger and fear help you to make a rational choice? Can we help the students overcome this fear and anger in the classroom? Am I competent enough to deal with this situation? Anger and fear are powerful motivators — and powerful demotivators. In fact, anger and fear are the very things that trigger us into shame, faulty core

beliefs, self-loathing, negative self-talk, self-sabotage, addictions and ALL TYPES of destructive behaviours. Your anger and fears are not “bad.” They are a gift, to keep you safe from danger. However, they can become debilitating when the objects of your angers and fears are not based on reality. Despite compelling evidence to the contrary, many teachers still believe that fear—fear of failure, fear of an unwanted call home, fear of the teacher, fear of ridicule, or fear of an unpleasant consequence—is a prime motivator for students to do high-quality work. The intentional creation of fear in the classroom remains one of the most widely used strategies for managing student behaviour and encouraging academic achievement. But why is it that even teachers today do not have the patience when it comes to fear and anger? Why do we dismiss it as something not very important and that we should do as we are told. For example a student of mine was afraid to speak out for fear of being ridiculed. At every question asked she would shut up and refuse to speak. In fact her eyes would dart to and fro and looking at her friends made her fear even more. A few words of encouragement and motivation is all it took to get her to open up. In fact she became so fearless after that, she would even joke at some of the questions asked and the whole class would roar with laughter. "There are no gains without pains." —Benjamin Franklin "Feel the fear and do it anyway." — Susan Jeffers. Let's examine the impact of fear on learning. When we feel threatened and experience fear, we downshift to survival mode. Students are less able to learn effectively because their primary focus is on self-protection. As the students told me, a good day in a teacher's class is defined by one's ability to "remain invisible."

Fear activates the well-known fight-or-flight mechanism. This autonomic physiological process sends increased amounts of oxygenated blood to the large extremities so that we are prepared to fight or flee. Because we have a finite amount of blood, the increase in blood flow to our arms and legs leads to a corresponding *decrease* in blood flow in other areas—specifically, the brain. Physiologically speaking, students in an environment characterized by fear are not able to think as effectively and learn as much as those who are in an environment that feels safe and secure.

Erik Jensen states, "Start by removing threats from the learning environment. No matter how excited you are about adding positives to the environment, first work to eliminate the negatives. ... There is no evidence that threats are an effective way to meet long-term academic goals" (1998, p. 30).

Now to start with anger as another strong emotion in class, it may not be easy to deal with that. Students who use anger as a tool for intimidation, present as very much in control, calm, yet frightening. They make their threats or demands in a controlled manner. With these students the best thing to do is not to fight but not to give in. State the consequences of the behaviour if they follow out their threat and quote the school policy in this area. Sometimes instead of getting locked into a power battle giving a face saving way out can help diffuse the situation. There are a number of different scales for self- assessment, or self- monitoring of anger (Findler & Engel, 2011). In schools young people come to the attention of staff because of their inappropriate behaviour. Typically they have been acting out – involved in some row, aggressive incident, or other unacceptable behaviour. The initial contact with these young people should be about building a relationship of trust. An angry student might display his temper in a variety of ways. He might be unresponsive to the teacher, disengaged from the learning process, and withdrawn from his peers. Seemingly minor matters can trigger his anger, causing him to fly off the handle with little provocation and to lash out at the drop of a hat. For example a student of mine once said that he always feel angry at the world since he has to study and wake up early and have to cope with exams. He is usually withdrawn and sulks at every work given. At first my instinct was to ignore him but then the fact that every student is important in every way and can be turned around through patience and

perseverance prompted me to motivate him. At every instance I call out his name and smile at him and also coax him to write out an essay. Even if he doesn't complete it, by saying that whatever he has written was good enough encouraged him to write more. Today he has improved so much and is an inspiration to others as well.

Each of the eight basic emotions in an individual has a message that can aid individuals in making good decisions. Taking a pause to consider our feelings can help to make this message clear. So I took the eight emotions, but focused on two of them fear and anger and helped to make the connection between these emotions and rational behaviour.

**Fear:** The message is that something needs to change.

**Anger:** The message is to fight against problems.

**Joy:** The message is to remind us what is important.

**Sadness:** The message is to connect us with those we love.

**Acceptance:** The message is to open our hearts.

**Disgust:** The message is reject what is unhealthy.

**Anticipation:** The message is to look forward and plan.

**Surprise:** The message is to focus on new situations.

**Fear-**But in today's society, making the wrong decision or giving the wrong answer is associated with embarrassment, ridicule, and reduced self-worth. Even *not knowing* is better than being mistaken. In the classroom, there are two things immediately and dramatically affected by the fear of being wrong: freedom of expression and creativity.

For fear of being wrong, many students never participate in class or ask questions. This has several negative effects on learning: 1) Because classroom environments are designed to let students learn not only from the teacher but from each other, the potential benefits of a shared learning environment are lost; 2) Because students oftentimes *are* wrong but are too afraid to ask questions, they never learn the right answer; 3) Because students oftentimes are right, but doubt themselves too much to volunteer, they miss out on a potentially rewarding experience. Students normally fear of being wrong, or simply being judged by their peers, students limit their creativity. Playing it safe and erring on the side of conformity may reduce your students' chance of rejection, but it will also reduce their chance of learning, growing, and contributing something unique to society. As Ken Robinson said, "If you're not prepared to be wrong, you'll never come up with anything original." The best teachers explain why a student's answer isn't right, rather than simply telling them it isn't.

**Look for the "right" in the "wrong."** See if you can recognize traces of the right answer in a wrong answer, and encourage your student to see them too. Sometimes students do need a nudge in the right direction. Perhaps by giving them a subtle hint you are able to help them think and overcome the hesitation. This will give them a little head start and make them think about the question and also make them feel confident.

**Turn wrong answers into a learning experience for all.** This is a great way to avoid singling out a student for being wrong. Involve the rest of the class by asking them what they think of the answer given, and encourage them to analyse it. Sometimes the “wrong” answer can lead to an even more interesting discussion than the “right” one. While the whole class is analysing it could break into a class discussion thus prompting a spirit of eagerness and willingness to learn more. This is something that most of us fail to do in class, thinking that by doing so the whole class may label the student as weak. But then again an effective teacher will find a way to bring the class together and help them to work together.

When we include participation as an overall grade it becomes outdated. An outspoken student will always be outspoken and a shy student can be prompted to come out of it by fostering a culture of mutual respect and an environment of free judgement. When we indulge students in their creative impulses it shows that we value them and students should value them too. Creativity always helps them to understand their lessons in a way that they know by creating either a picture, a cartoon or video that they can relate to.

Anger- Almost every student becomes angry at some point in school. Moreover an angry outburst may also confuse the whole class. While some are amused by it, others can also be saddened by it. A student who displays angry outbursts can throw a classroom into turmoil. He can also trigger strong feelings in you. Your challenge in working with a student whose emotional temperature often reaches the boiling point is to control your own feelings as well as those of the student. One way of managing the situation is to foster a calm attitude. We should avoid arguing with him or threatening him. Without raising your voice you might be able to send a strong message. It is important to listen calmly to him and say ‘I understand your point of view but why don’t you look at it this way’, think about it? This would get him to reflect on what you have said too.

Do not take his words personally. In a fit of anger, the student may say things that make your blood boil. His anger may be due to home issues. Give him time to calm down before you respond to him.

It is important to connect with him and we should encourage him to open up and discuss as to why he is so angry. It would be better if he can express his anger without disrupting the class. And it is up to you to explain to him as to how he can react in such a situation and the vocabulary he can use to express his feelings.

.Consider your interactions with the student and ask him if you might be upsetting him in any way. If you are able to identify a cause for his anger, work with him to develop an action plan to deal with the issues that are provoking his anger. You may even want to role-play with him by presenting various situations that make him angry and have him try out new ways of responding. It is normally not uncommon for a student to vent his frustration with schoolwork. You can provide support through peer to peer coaching whereby he will regain his confidence and lessen his frustration. Keep also a close eye on the student and intervene early. Probably give him an errand to do, like fetch a book for you from the staffroom and this will help him to forget as to why he got angry. And every time he is angry, instead of letting him sulk or throw a tantrum, it is important to get him to do something, either through drawing or watching a video concerned with the lesson. This will help him to release his anger and acknowledge his effort.

An angry student often leaves me wondering as to why he gets angry all the time. There surely must be something that I can do. And so often I begin to talk to him and connect with him. That bonding will give him the trust and would slowly start unwinding to me. By listening attentively to what he says and to give him the attention every now and then will earn his trust. It may not be easy and would take up much of your time, but the fact that every student is important to you makes it worth it. By identifying a student's outburst it can help you to anticipate as to when it occurs and whether it is at the presence of certain people. For example a student who doesn't like his teacher will often display anger whenever she asks him a question. This student believes that the teacher is trying to put him down or intimidate him and uses his anger to calm himself. So that he doesn't feel the pain too much. For example, if a student with a reading disability often gets upset right before he is expected to read aloud, you will want to find a way to relieve his obvious discomfort about reading in public. Review his responses with him and use them as a jumping-off point for a lesson in self-control. It is also important to tell him that when he gets angry he can leave the room and go to his cooling off area. This is not a punishment but a way of helping him to calm down and get back in control. But he should not abuse this privilege as a way of leaving the classroom whenever he wants.

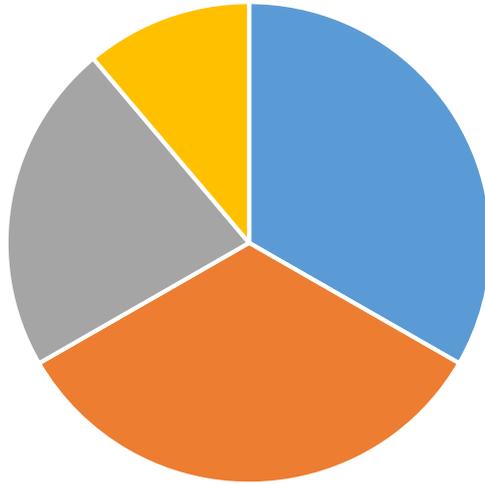
Anger and fear has helped to identify many issues in the classroom. This being one of the main elements in a classroom and finding a solution to these two biggest factor has not been easy. But through some questionnaires it has helped to identify the panacea for these situations in a class

Questionnaires was distributed to twenty students in my class. These students behaviour were observed for a month before distributing it in class. Some students hesitated to answer the questionnaire. They believed that I would judge them based on their answers. It took some coaxing to get them to do It was done in class. The study was conducted since this kind of behaviour was happening quite often in my classroom. Connecting their emotional behaviour to rational thinking often got me thinking and after observing their behaviour in depth for a month long I wanted to test it.

But once the results were in I was amazed at their answers. They were confident that their peers too were given the questionnaire and no was singled out to answer these questions. That would seem that the teachers are biased. But they were happy at the end to do it since they felt that they were able to learn something from it.

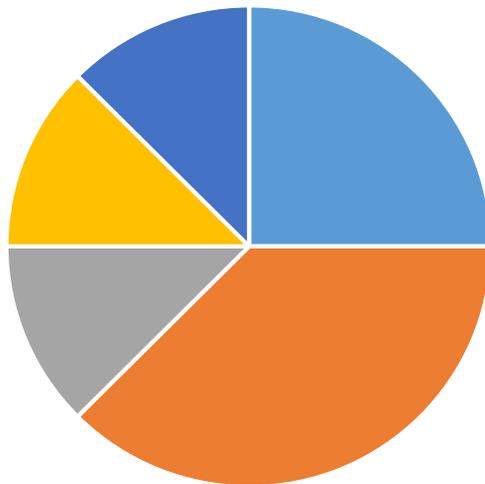
The problem that I encountered was that some students thought it was unnecessary. Studying student behaviour on fear and anger alone doesn't give a much comprehensive view on rational behaviour. In fact anger and fear makes up one of the strongest emotions in our rational behaviour. After looking into the study strategies used were a simple questionnaire on fear and anger. Fifteen questions on each of these two emotions were given. They were then compiled into a pie chart to analyse the number of students who have answered the questions. Twenty students were given the questionnaire and the highest number were shown to markedly avoid it and definitely avoid it.

Fear



■ 5 ■ 6 ■ 3 ■ 6

Anger



■ 3 ■ 3 ■ 5 ■ 4 ■ 5

## Reflections

My topic emotional intelligence has helped me to understand my students in the class. The data gives a clear picture of how I can help my students to a certain extent in class. Most of them seem to be the emotional kind often being subject to mood swings. This has not been an easy journey throughout the years and has taken a toll on my emotions as well. This roller coaster ride has been good and also made me understand that the teachers also should be emotionally well balanced. Unchecked emotions raise an individual's stress level and stressed brains find it very difficult to learn (Medina, 2008) academically and socially, children who learn these skills are better prepared to deal with the adversities of life, to learn from mistakes, to reframe difficult situations, and to adapt to life's constantly changing circumstances. (Durlak & Weissberg, 2011). Emotional intelligence is important in a classroom and as teachers we need to be prepared emotionally as well to handle the students.

In an instance for example teachers do often feel fear and anger too in handling a certain group of students. But being prepared and developing self-confidence helps the teacher to prepare oneself to handle most of the situation. It is often a learning process for both the student and the teacher and it helps to develop both the student and the teacher into a well-rounded individual. Emotional Intelligence is the ability of an individual to appropriately and usefully respond to a vast variety of emotional stimuli, being elicited from the inner self and immediate environment. Emotional intelligence motivates an individual to recognize truthfully, interpret honestly and handle tactfully dynamics of human behaviour. Developing skills and pleasure in the avenue of emotions and being emotionally sensitive, mature and competent is vital to the wellbeing of the individual and the communities. An individual should attempt to improve his own emotional intelligence as well as that of the persons in his immediate social network. An educator should create an emotionally safe classroom environment by providing targeted, positive feedback on successful elements of work in conjunction with suggestions for improvement.

A student said that 'she didn't want to express herself for fear that she would be ridiculed', and it took some explanation and coaxing to get her to answer the questions. The questions were made simple and easy to understand. Some questions were created based on observations and others were from colleagues and their findings. Questions were interwoven so that after compiling the findings the next round it could be modified based on the circumstances.

Emotional intelligence play a huge role in the classroom today. Understanding these emotions and using it in the classroom posed a huge challenge to me. But it helped to understand my students better and created a bond between us. Even though the students were disturbed at the beginning of the term, journeying with them and bringing their emotions through a simple understanding made teaching easier. Teaching was always a challenge to me. Every year the emotional needs of the students are different. For example a few years back the students were

more matured and understanding them was less complicated. They expressed their needs freely and give you an outline as to what they want from you. They were willing to cooperate and also partake in whatever tasks you set for them. Emotional challenge was easy to handle. But over the years this has changed. Teaching in a college which caters to the higher income group has been like an obstacle course.

Though I have only touched on two emotions out of the eight that I mentioned earlier, I would love to incorporate the others too in my next research. Since I did not encounter the other emotions too much I felt that that it would be difficult to collect and analyse those data. I had one question for the class, Do you think fear works? Almost 70% of them said 'yes'. Some said that they fear their teachers since they also decide on their forecast result. Mostly it is not the love for the subject but just to get good grades so that they can go to better universities abroad that mattered to them. They still struggle to complete their assignments and value the time with which it is completed and not the quality. They memorise and if the question is changed even a little they are lost. Then anger takes over since they feel that they have been cheated. They are told earlier on in the semester what is needed of them and what to expect. But it is as if some things are drilled into them, that they should get good grades no matter whether they like the subject or not and that that's the only thing that matters. A student once said that his parents told him 'that paying his tuition fees is an investment for them'. And that whatever it takes he has to do well so that their investment bears fruit in the future. It was impossible to convince him otherwise and that fear transformed into anger at times and in the end he barely made it.

Students will provide us with information but we carefully need to consider what we receive. It is important to understand each and every student and journey with them accordingly. It is not easy for us to get through every semester but as teachers it is important to study them carefully. They are our future citizens and as teachers nurturing them in the right way will not only help them but also give us a satisfaction that we indeed achieved what we set out to do. Indeed, schools that utilize social and emotional learning programs report an increase in academic success, improved quality relationships between teachers and students, and a decrease in problem behavior. By providing your students with ongoing opportunities to express their creativity, you'll also be helping them handle the inevitable curve balls that life throws at them. The EQ of children starts developing long before they ever enter a classroom. But EQ levels will vary widely, depending on each child's home environment. Thus teachers must be able to recognize those children whose emotional literacy needs a boost. Teachers should be ready to talk about feelings in the classroom. The message is that no emotion is "wrong," but certain ways of expressing those emotions or acting on them are indeed inappropriate. Many schools also advocate the teaching of positive strategies in order to promote optimism and positive thinking, and to create resilient and confident learners. Teachers can support this approach by creating classroom climates that promote optimism and by using language rich with optimism.

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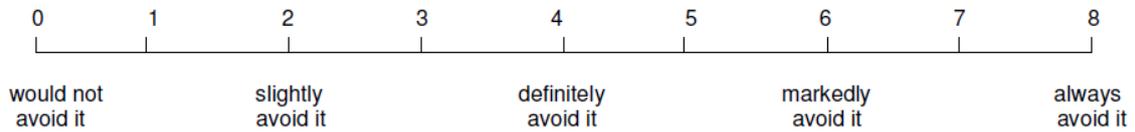
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## **Fear Questionnaire (FQ)**

Choose a number from the scale below to show how much you would avoid each of the situations listed below because of fear or other unpleasant feelings. Then write the number you choose in the space opposite each situation.



- 1. Being watched or stared at -----
  
- 2. Talking to people in authority, your teacher -----
  
- 3. Being criticised -----
  
- 4. Being ridiculed -----
  
- 5. Fear of forgetting the answer -----
  
- 6. My appearance -----  
--
  
- 7. Fear of my teacher getting angry -----  
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- 8. Fear of being ridiculed after the class -----  
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- 9. My friends would consider me stupid -----  
-----
  
- 10. Fear of not understanding the question -----  
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- 11. Peer pressure -----  
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12. The teacher calling me aside after class -----  
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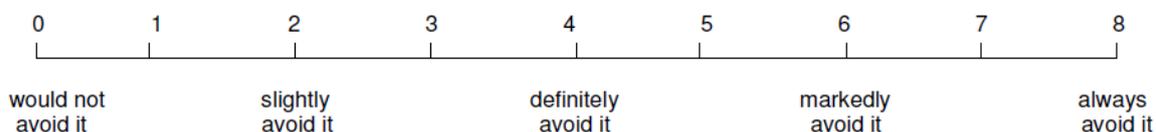
13. Letting my teacher down -----  
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14. Fear of facing my parents -----  
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15. Being pushed aside by my friends. -----  
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### Anger Questionnaire (FQ)

Choose a number from the scale below to show how much you would avoid each of the situations listed below because of fear or other unpleasant feelings. Then write the number you choose in the space opposite each situation.



1. I get angry when the teacher asks me questions -----

2. When things don't go my way I get depressed -----

3. I like to argue with my teacher if I feel she is unfair -----

4. I get angry when I don't like the question -----

5. I get angry when the teacher pushes me to answer -----

**6. When I cannot get the answer I get angry** -----

**7. When riled up I often blurt out things I regret later** -----

**8. I like to argue with my friends when I am angry** -----

**9. When things don't go well at home I get angry with friends** -----

**10. When my friends hurt me I want to get even** -----

**11. I need help to control my temper** -----

**12. Extra homework makes me angry** -----

**13. When friends stare at me in class during a question  
I get angry** -----

**14. I feel that things never go right with me at times** -----

**15. Waking up early to come to class makes me angry** -----