

## **Emotional Literacy in Academic Institutions**

Statistics show that about 95-100 people commit suicide in India every day, and of these, a whopping 40 per cent are in the adolescent age group. One of the motives why many of the students kill themselves is academic pressure; this accounts for 99 per cent suicides in the age group 12-18 years. The reason is three-fold: deprivation of sunshine primarily resulting from lack of mentoring, exam results, and copycat syndrome.

Many problems in modern society and educational institutions are due, at least in part, to people being unable to recognise, appropriately articulate and respond to emotions. Famous philosopher Aristotle (384 BC) believed that the aim of education was to help people to become fully human, otherwise it was pointless. Whilst this takes into consideration a range of factors, it can well be debated that being fully human involves a comprehension of oneself and one's emotions, i.e. understanding emotional intelligence. Here comes the importance of emotional literacy. Emotional literacy in this context can be defined as our ability to make sense of and apply knowledge about our own and others' emotional states with skill and competence. It involves self-awareness, building a sense of connectedness and trust, communication, conflict resolution skills, building healthy relationships, empathy and celebrating success at all levels.

A safe learning environment is crucial to students to achieve their full potential. Practitioners (teachers/ faculty and educational leaders) often face student reluctance to answer questions, make class presentations, and hesitate to ask for explanations when they have queries. This perhaps could be a conditioning where the student has learned, that the classroom is a dangerous and unsafe place. That if they were to risk asking a silly question or answering wrong, they might open themselves to sniggers, putdowns, laughter and perhaps jibes, from their peers or even sarcasm from the teacher. Taking risks in their learning, asking questions, freedom to choose or change optional subjects, are all essential to a student's success. In professional courses and institutes of higher learning too, the need of emotional literacy cannot be undermined. Doctors require emotional sensitivity and literacy while dealing with their patients, teachers with their students and business leaders towards all their stakeholders. Ironically, few dispensers of knowledge practice these skills and even fewer students are taught these skills at any level in our education system.

The concept that schools and educational institutions as organic wholes that grow and develop within which all the actors, their actions and their knowledge are interrelated and

interact with the surrounding environment, is important to understand. Building an emotionally literate academic environment involves taking care of communication and relationships between staff, students, parents and other stakeholders so as to ensure that all the information available about how to improve teaching and learning can flow to the relevant stakeholders where it can influence teaching learning processes and overall management.

Academic institutions can propagate emotional literacy through a three pronged approach, viz alliances, curriculum and ethos. Alliances forged through partnerships with parents, students, practitioners, educational leaders and the community. All the stakeholders should be sensitised and trained by, with and for emotional literacy. Curriculum for emotional literacy addressed through pedagogy, application of theory and the use of various teaching strategies. This may include cooperative and collaborative learning, group work, jigsaws, the six thinking hats, etc. Along with the explicit curriculum taught there is also a 'hidden curriculum', and together these determine the ethos, climate, aims, and values of a school. An academic institution that is emotionally literate will be characterised by an ethos of openness, good communication, well-developed consultation mechanisms that value people, and a spirit of collegiality. To build an ethos promoting emotional literacy, policies and procedures framed should be such that they are congruent to what is taught in the class, observed in the playground and in every school interaction and discussed in a staffroom. Developing an interest in students and staff as 'people' can build connectedness.

Concluding, we are a nation developing to be a super power. We aspire our gen-next to have the qualities of self-confidence, empathy, optimism, high self-esteem, and a commitment to personal excellence as a basis for their potential life role as family, community and workplace members. It would be prudent to concentrate on the affective domains of our students, so we do not make the same mistakes the western world has committed. We should specifically resist the temptation of valuing what is easily measured, and with determination make all efforts to measure what we value. It's time to put back compassion into the educative process that has been lost, by focusing exclusively on tangible achievements.

*(Authored by Dr Farida Virani, Faculty, Education and HR Consultant and life member of Higher Education Forum, HEF)*