

Self Esteem and Emotional Intelligence

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Two stories from teachers recently left me traumatized. The first concerns a primary schoolboy who was gang-raped by a group of boys in his community. Few people can appreciate how traumatic such an experience can be. Fewer still would understand why a child to whom this has happened would behave in an extremely erratic, irrational, or aggressive manner. Unfortunately, because the boy's principal was not one of the "believers," the boy was suspended from school for his behaviour and today continues to roam the streets because school has failed him.

Scenario two is so typical that we tend to overlook it in the course of the school day in many of our schools. Thirty-five years after the introduction of the junior secondary school system and thirty-one years after the emergence of our senior comprehensive schools, we still find teachers who do not seem to have a clue about the continuum of emotional intelligence that exists among students in our schools. Within recent times some of our SEA graduates—the under-30s—have fallen towards the lower end of this continuum

This scenario refers to those students who, because of their emotional state and IQ, have become targets of misunderstanding, neglect, and even abuse. This has happened because teachers and students in the schools have not yet learned to understand and accept them. The teacher who described this scenario noted that it is not that the teachers are wicked, but simply that they are not trained or empowered to deal with such students and, as a result, are unable to create the type of environment suitable for them.

The fact that such things can happen in an education system which subscribes to the notion of not leaving any child behind and not allowing any child to be anonymous says quite a lot about our understanding and appreciation for the dynamics of effective schooling. We still continue to ignore the fact that subscribing to three domains, and not only one, is important for successful schooling: the cognitive domain, which is concerned with intellectual and mental development; the affective domain, which focuses on emotional and psychological growth; and the psychomotor domain—the domain reserved for the development of muscular coordination and the acquisition of skills. Too many of our schools still assess school effectiveness in terms of the progress made in the cognitive domain.

I wish to appeal to teachers and school administrators to strive to establish and sustain climates in our schools which recognise and embrace the philosophy that every child in our schools is important and can be a valuable human resource to the nation. I further submit that children learn best when they are located in an environment characterised by trust, respect, warmth, certainty, and safety. They also love schools that help them to bask in their self-esteem, and which help them to feel good about themselves.

There is no doubt that our political directorate, Ministry of Education officials, school principals, teachers, parents, and students themselves would like such a vision to materialise. The problem is that it is easier said than done.

Research and experience have shown that disorder and lack of control in schools are often the result of the existence of large, impersonal groups of students. Schools, therefore, should make every attempt to create smaller meaningful groups with which students and teachers can identify. For example, the house system appropriately used can go a long way to help the school restructure itself into meaningful small groups.

Schools must also take steps to acknowledge the achievement of teachers and students. This can be done by way of public ceremonies, bulletin board exhibits, standing ovations at assemblies, prizes, badges, and even friendly taps on the shoulder. Yes, even sincere praise works!

It has also been discovered that community volunteer programmes with high parental and adult involvement tend to help reduce the incidence of violence and gang activity in schools. This type of approach emphasises the well-known fact that schools by themselves cannot educate as they should. They must forge meaningful strategic alliances with other stakeholders.

Finally, I believe that the strategies described above can be successful only if teachers have the determination to serve and care, and are well trained in curriculum planning, team building, and ways to assess students' progress. Also, the education sector will have to engage in more research and projects that will give insights into how best we can serve our students whose emotional intelligence needs attention.

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