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Discipline Your Emotions

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By practicing good emotional intelligence skills, educators can lead their classrooms more effectively and equitably.

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Emotions are inevitable, but working well with student emotions and appropriately expressing and containing your own takes effort and skill—the skill of emotional intelligence. Chances are, you have students who need more social and emotional support, whether due to what they experienced during pandemic-related distance learning or the ongoing uncertainties that are part of their lives. Yet how frequently do the adults in schools fall short on modeling the emotional intelligence they're working to nurture in students?

After all, what educator hasn't been triggered by the behavior of a student? Imagine, for example, that one of your students shouts an insult that lands hard on another student. Or another student's behavior disrupts instruction. You probably will feel a kick of adrenaline, resulting from frustration, anxiety, fear, shame, worry, or even a bit of anger or disgust. These are natural human emotions that occur when we or those we care about are hurt or hurting others. Problems arise, though, when we make disciplinary decisions while still experiencing these emotions. Why? Because such decisions inevitably lack emotional intelligence—the mental fitness we all need to make good choices.

Emotional intelligence involves recognizing and using our own emotions well, and recognizing and working well with, or even influencing, the emotions of others. No one "achieves" emotional intelligence once and for all. Increasing emotional intelligence (EQ) is an ongoing process, and our capacity can shift because of many factors such as levels of stress, our experience with similar situations, or how well-rested we are. Given that teaching is cited over and over as one of the most stressful professions out there, understanding the relationship between stress and your ability to employ emotional intelligence as you strive for effective, equitable, and compassionate discipline is crucial.

Consider the comparison on page 58 between what we're asking students to master via social-emotional learning (SEL) (CASEL, n.d.) and the components of emotional intelligence as defined by Reuven Bar-On in 1997 (Multi-Health Systems, 2011). The Bar-On model is frequently used for executive coaching and leadership development.

Note that the major difference is the separate category for stress management in the EQ model. Given the known pressure-cooker environment teachers work in, viewing adult skills development through the EQ model so that we can incorporate the importance of managing emotions under stress is invaluable if we are to create caring environments where students can flourish academically, socially, and emotionally.

Have you ever, after a stressful day at work, lashed out at important people in your personal life? Or, after a high-level planning session about policy or discipline or lesson planning, found yourself eating more junk food than usual or skipping a planned workout because you need downtime? Realize that these tasks all draw on the same bucket of energy in your brain—we call it your brain bandwidth (Holm & Kise, 2020).

No matter how emotionally intelligent you are, if you use up your bandwidth in one way, you must recharge to have enough for the next challenge. If you're still caught in negative emotions as you make decisions about student discipline, you're probably low on bandwidth. Chances are, you'll struggle to effectively employ emotional intelligence. And it's not fair for us to expect students to grow in social-emotional learning if we educators aren't exhibiting emotional intelligence as adults.

So, what can educators do? Ensuring you have enough bandwidth to both participate in the draining tasks of teaching and to engage with students effectively is an ongoing journey, but here are four effective, doable steps to get you started.

Step 1: Name the Judge

The first step is building self-awareness of your emotions. This is the starting place of emotional intelligence maturity, yet easy to ignore in the moment. When you feel that surge of frustration, anger, fear, shame—that bundle of negative emotions—pause. You're being hijacked by them and need to step back before making any decision.

Components of SEL

Self-Awareness

Self-Management

Social Awareness

Relationship Skills

Responsible Decision Making

Consider what thoughts tend to first crowd your mind when you need to take disciplinary action. Try to explore your reactions with curiosity rather than judgment. Do you blame yourself first, with a voice in your head crying something like, *Why can't I create a classroom of caring where students respect each other? What's wrong with me?* Or, do you tend to blame others for the situation, thinking things like, *It seems as if I have more than my share of problem students* or *These students know the administrators won't do a thing if I send them to the office?* Or do you think first of the impact of other

factors and circumstances? *So much else is going on in the lives of my students, and that messes up all our neat discipline theories and practices.*

Usually, the root cause of a student's misstep is a blend of two or all three of these factors, but good disciplinary solutions come from appropriately allocating the portions that you are responsible for, the student's and others' part in what happened, and the impact of circumstances (Chamine, 2012). Knowing your default way of judging the reasons behind student behavior is one way of recognizing when your emotions are hijacking you.

Components of EQ

Self-Perception

Self-Expression

Interpersonal

Stress Management

Decision Making

Step 2: Get Composed

Once you recognize you're being hijacked by emotions, you'll want to compose yourself so you can employ the rational part of your brain. This isn't easy because emotions block us from using the more analytical parts of our brains. Emotions are necessary data; few disciplinary decisions succeed without understanding the emotions of everyone involved. However, emotions can't be in control. One needs to employ logic as well as empathy when engaged in discipline. For example, are you setting a precedent, such as for all students to receive this same consequence for a similar behavior in the future? Or how might "if/then" thinking clarify the options, as in, *If I involve this student in setting her own consequence, then I can expect less pushback from her because I'm allowing some autonomy even as I insist on compliance*. Or you can judge whether your choice is based on sound principles that can be applied in other situations.

Empathy, by contrast, involves understanding the experience of the student being disciplined, the other students in the class, and even yourself. However, you can't be both logical and empathetic at the same time. When you're in empathy mode, the logic centers of your brain are inactive. And when you're in logic mode, the empathy centers of your brain are inactive (Case Western Reserve University, 2012).

So, how do you calm down your emotions to become your wiser self, allowing empathy to inform your logic rather than rule it? One proven technique is in-the-moment employment of mindfulness. While mindfulness is often discussed as practices for a set-aside part of your day, drawing on a few simple strategies can bring composure when you most need it.

When you feel that burst of negative emotions, for example, try rubbing your thumb across the fingernails of the same hand. Feel the ridges, smooth areas, sharp edges, temperature, variations in size and shape. This is a subtle gesture that students won't notice, but it increases your body awareness, which increases awareness of emotions.

You can also use the popular strategy of paying attention to your breathing. Calmly note your next three breaths, feeling your lungs expand, hearing the air leave your nostrils, noting the temperature as you inhale and exhale.

Another technique is to post a picture or favorite quote in a place that easily catches your attention—and take notice of it when you're stressed. Perhaps it's a picture of your education hero or someone you admire for staying calm when emotions run high. Or, it could be a picture of a calming place—a favorite park, beach, or forest.

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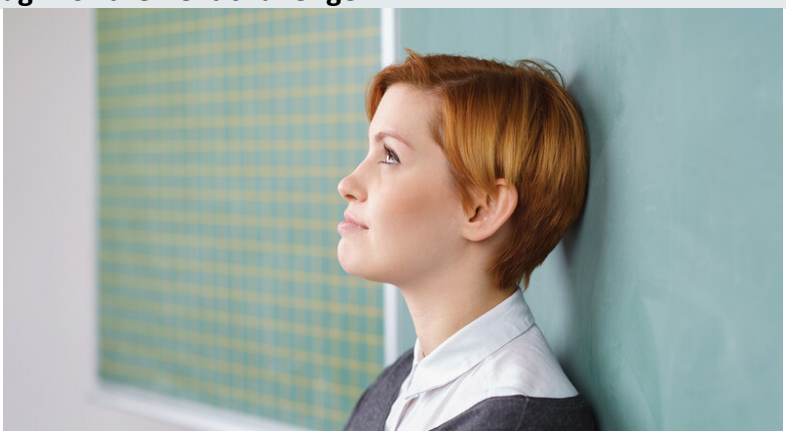

All of these strategies are meant to take just a few moments—long enough to make you aware of your emotions before making any disciplinary decisions. Before each class or as you change activities with students, take stock of your stress level and assess whether a quick dose of mindfulness might increase your capacity to deal with what might happen next. Think of the time, energy, and frustration you might save if you can realize you're running low on bandwidth and refuel before something happens where you wish you had more.

If you practice the same techniques daily, for even as little as five minutes, you'll be able to shift more quickly to positive emotions. Just as getting physically fit requires daily effort, so does getting mentally fit so that you are in charge of your reactions and decisions.

Step 3: Stay Curious

Now that you've shifted to your composed brain, it's time to rethink your first reaction to the root cause of a student's behavior. Whether you tend to blame yourself, others, or circumstances, think through other potential causes. To increase your capacity to do this in the moment, take time for reflection on the patterns you've seen, perhaps with another teacher to broaden your perspective. This will help you consider more possibilities.

For example, is the student simply too tired to make good choices? One assistant principal I worked with asked every student sent to his office to lean back in the rather large chair he had while he finished up some paperwork. Often, students fell asleep and, after a short nap, were able to recognize their mistakes and come up with a good return-to-classroom plan. Lack of sleep drains everyone's mental fitness.

Other options might be that a student is reacting to the difficulty of the classwork and too frustrated to ask for help. Or they may have just acted without thinking. Or maybe something else used up the student's capacity for self-control, such as being teased on the bus, completing a difficult task in a previous class (yes, concentration uses up emotional capacity), or worrying over food or money or a boyfriend. Remember that worries and stresses are often why *adults* eat the cookie or ignore the gym or snap at their colleagues after a tough day. While these underlying causes do not excuse behavior, they do offer an explanation.

What if, instead of assuming disrespect, you gave them a second chance by asking, with a bit of a smile, "Is that what you really meant to say?" Chances are, with even a split second to think, they'll say, "Um, no . . . sorry." And if they continue to misbehave, you can still move to the next step of discipline.

Look back through this list and add other ideas based on your experiences. Can you see how imposing discipline while you're hijacked by negative emotions might lead to discipline that doesn't fit the "crime"? Remembering these alternative explanations bolsters your ability to make a good disciplinary decision while under stress.

Step 4: Take Action

Events can unfold with lightning speed in the classroom, but the time you put into preparing to take the first three steps of emotional intelligence will increase your capacity to consistently demonstrate the emotional self-management you are trying to develop in your students. Remember that choosing not to act or choosing to ignore a behavior are in fact action steps. When you've calmed your own emotions, become aware of the student's emotions, and applied a bit of logic, you're less likely to overreact or take a step that won't sit well with you later. Even if school policy requires you to take a specific action, you'll be able to do it in a way that communicates to the student that she or he is a permanent part of your classroom family no matter what, even if this particular behavior isn't acceptable. You can discipline while still meeting their core need for belonging.

If you can, provide a simple choice. Choice also lies behind the strategy of, "I'd like you to come up with a plan so this doesn't happen again. Why don't you sit [in whatever spot lets them calm down] and we'll talk privately in a few minutes." You've met their core need for having some autonomy, yet retained classroom control.

Even if the offense requires a trip to the office or even detention, your composed, wiser self can calmly remind the student of policies while reassuring her or him that you'll be waiting to welcome them back.

Getting Mentally Fit

The more you prepare to take these steps before the need arises, the more mentally fit you'll be to employ them when students make mistakes. Investing in these steps calms your physiology, activates your wiser self, and allows access to a much broader range of options for discipline that will help your students grow in their own capacity to manage themselves.

Reflect & Discuss

Can you think of a time when your emotions got the better of you in the classroom? What could you have done differently?

What are some in-the-moment strategies you can employ to take stock of your emotions?

What components of EQ are you strongest in? Which could you work more to develop?

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