

LINDA LANTIERI

EXPERT IN SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

She has been a school principal in Harlem and has helped children and adults solve their conflicts in over 400 learning institutions, including those who experienced 9-11 much too closely. Her recipe for making better citizens (with higher academic achievement) is simple: introduce emotional learning in schools through small steps.

[photo]

“Our schools resemble factories: they train instead of educate”

There are as many pedagogical theories as there are children in the world. Why should we believe the one on social and emotional learning proposed by Linda Lantieri? Her biography and references will help us answer that question. She was a school teacher and principal (in Harlem, no less), worked for the city of New York helping to resolve conflicts (including a shooting) at 400 schools, inspired Daniel Goleman in writing his book, *Emotional Intelligence* (five million copies sold throughout the world), helped students and teachers from schools near the World Trade Center to overcome the trauma of 9-11... She now leads *The Inner Resilience Program*, which has helped over 10,000 students around the world manage their emotions and has been implemented in six schools in Spain. For some, including Eduard Punset, introducing emotional learning in schools is “the greatest of the revolutions we will live during the coming years.” Some weeks ago, she taught a course on the subject at Universitat de les Illes Balears.

--Introduce emotional learning in schools, how?

--Children bring their emotions to school, whether we recognize them or not. What we are trying to do is help them express them in appropriate ways, helping learn how they can feel surer of themselves and better deal with their emotions. We do this in two different ways. First, by creating a classroom environment that is truly welcoming, where they feel emotionally safe, they can talk to each other, they can feel that the class really cares about them. The second thing we do is teach them skills to be aware and be able to talk about their feelings. In addition, the research shows that we can work to improve children's emotional intelligence. For example, a component of self-awareness is self-esteem. This simply means that if I look at myself, I am sure about how I feel at each moment and I am capable of expressing it, and I know that my feelings change throughout the day. Very often adults are not capable of doing this.

-- Does this system contribute to improving academic achievement?

Yes. The organization CASEL reports that there are over 214 different studies about teaching children social and emotional intelligence, including the program I work with. They have found incredible results. First, young people improved their pro-social skills, were more positive, and exhibited fewer risk behaviors. Secondly, their

test scores showed an 11% improvement in academic achievement. And that improvement was much better than the one we obtain when we try to improve achievement by focusing on reading, for example. Why? That's the exciting part. Helping young people in this way works on the part of the brain that involves attention, and when we help them improve their attention, they are more capable of learning, because the most important skill needed for learning is paying attention, being able to focus and connect the new things we are learning with what we already know. And, when you develop this, it improves their way of learning everything, including math and reading.

--You mention introducing relaxation methods in schools; how can this be done with teachers who are under stress or burnt out?

--That's a very good question. When we began with this new program based on calming the mind and the body ten years ago —with social and emotional learning we've been working over 20 years--, we began working with children and teachers who escaped the terrorist attacks of 9-11. There were over 8,000 children and 200 teachers from schools located near Ground Zero, the former World Trade Center. All of them had to run for their lives that day and were obviously very stressed afterwards. I had never seen teachers under so much stress. They asked me to help the children recover and I said to them, "If you want to pay me for that, I will only do it if you let me work with adults first."

--How did you do it?

--We are talking about adults who were also struggling with their own emotions. They explained that it was extremely hard because that day they wanted to go and save their own children, who were at another school, and they stayed to save their students, other people's children. Can you imagine that? All the teachers stayed with their students and took care of them, and of the 8,000 children who ran for their lives that day, not one was lost. Working with teachers was essential if we wanted to work with the children. We taught them meditation techniques, held yoga classes, had nature outings... things to help them calm down and know that they could begin to focus their attention, and they began to overcome their stress. Then they said, "Now we're prepared to pass this on to the kids." If we want to pass anything on to the children, we must first work with the adults, otherwise kids will know. It's not like teaching any other subject, it's not curricular. If you want to teach children self-awareness, you need to have it first, otherwise kids will notice.

--You were a teacher and principal at a Harlem school. Is it true that your work there in "teaching peace" inspired Daniel Goleman to write about your work in his book *Emotional Intelligence*?

--Before being a principal there, I worked at the central offices of the New York City department of education. My work was to resolve conflicts in schools. One day we had the first incident in which a child took a firearm to school; he shot and killed another student and injured a teacher. They asked me to go there. It was very hard for me... I had been a student there, Thomas Jefferson High School and had not entered through those doors since I was 17. I had to go. Daniel Goleman was then writing a mental health science column for *The New York Times*. Naturally, this was front-page news the next day. But he wanted to know if there was a solution for this. He found out that the woman that had gone there—me—was implementing a program which taught students precisely that, that there was a solution. He called me and asked if I could show him the work of some of the children in the program. I said yes, that in fact each Monday the students set a pledge for their behavior during the week and later talked about how

far they had accomplished it. Goleman asked me to send him one. The next day it was on the front page of *The New York Times*: "Children learn to manage their emotions after one child killed another." We became close friends. He lent his voice to the CD that accompanies my book *Building Emotional Intelligence*.

--You once said schools resemble factories. Why is that?

– Yes, think about it. We have bells sounding off for different classes, the rhythm of a production line... We don't prepare children for real life; we only train them to obtain cognitive skills, at times not even that. And we don't prepare them for the world they need to approach, a world that must teach them tolerance, compassion, all those things. And there's nothing like that in the schools. Teachers come, give classes, and that's it. It's more training than education.

-- What is the "peace corner"?

--In the U.S., when kids misbehave, they are sometimes told, "Go to the corner, you're punished." And what does that teach them? Nothing. Punishment. And punishment does not really teach much. If you want to intervene with a child who is not behaving as you would like him to, going to the corner will not teach him anything different, it will not improve the child's behavior in the future, unless it's out of fear of you, not because you have a good relationship. That's why we invented the Peace Corner, a place in the classroom or home where kids choose to go to calm down, to have a quiet moment to themselves. The peace corners are designed by the class itself. They decide where the corner will be, what pictures they will take there... there is always a five-minute hourglass, to give children time to take control of their emotions. If they are angry, they tell themselves: "I can't concentrate, I need some time in the peace corner." They go there when they need to, flip the hourglass over and simply close their eyes for a while to be alone. If the five minutes are not enough, they can flip over the hourglass again.

--What is resilience and why is it so important now?

--It's our innate ability to center ourselves and recover from adversity, and perhaps come out of it an even better person than you were before the event. This does not always happen, however. Some people break when bad things happen to them, and others become stronger, as Hemingway used to say. Certain conditions contribute to strengthening our resilience. One is to reinforce the part of the brain that is responsible for being able to stay calm and focus our attention. When people meditate, their physiology changes in ways that strengthen the neural pathways, which results in a greater ability to stay calm, focused, and emotionally centered in the face of adversity.

“Emotional learning will help lower drop-out rates”

M.F.R. PALMA
THE NEWS IN SPAIN

Lantieri believes that teaching about emotions would help schools in Spain and alerts us to the difficulties young people today are having with concentration.

Linda Lantieri of the U.S. has some knowledge about the Spanish education system thanks to her experience in piloting a program at SEK schools. And even without that experience, she would know a bit, since, as she says, “unfortunately, education is pretty much the same everywhere. Students are not taught to manage emotions, just math and English.”

--The immigration issue is an old one in schools in the U.S., but for us it is relatively new. What can we do to promote integration and prevent conflict? --I think emotional and social learning would help a lot because children learn how to look at the world not only from their own point of view, but from several other perspectives. Kids say, “Oh, he sees it that way, and I see it this other way, and that’s OK.” This is something that’s never taught and what happens is that, when faced with different points of view, the child usually thinks: “He’s wrong and I’m right.” Social and emotional learning helps us understand what other people are feeling, and if we don’t teach this, children will only be able to catch what others are feeling if they are from their own culture.

--Do you know anything about the Spanish education system?

--Yes, because of my work at the SEK schools, where we are implementing a pilot project. It’s the same everywhere, unfortunately. It’s a global problem, we see education as something centered on training students to get certain grades in English and Math, but we don’t teach them other things they will need in order to be good friends, fellow students and workers... happy people living their life goals. These are important things, and I’m not saying the others aren’t, it’s just that you can teach both.

--In Spain we have a subject named Teaching for Citizenship, which designed to shape good citizens. Do you have something like that in your country? Do you think these kinds of subjects are useful?

--In the U.S. we have Civic Education, which teaches children that they should become effective citizens, contribute to their country, vote.... the idea is that they learn the rules. Emotional and social learning is not the same thing, it has a different goal, it works with skill development to be able to be the citizens we want them to be. Furthermore, when you develop emotional intelligence, you become a good citizen, not only of your country, but of the world.

--Is the Internet making us think in faster, more shallow ways?

--That’s a difficult question. We really don’t know. We need more research to see to what degree the technological era is affecting young people at different ages.

--In Balears we have a school drop-out problem (one of the highest rates in Europe) because many young people are leaving school to work in the tourist industry. Would emotional learning help lower those drop-out rates?

-- Definitely. Social and emotional learning would help those young people make better choices and be more capable of thinking about the long-term consequences of their actions. It would also help them become more prepared for the employment world, since they will be more self-aware, more able to improve their situation, more culturally competent and more understanding of those who are different from them.

-- How is children’s development affected by the amount of stimuli they are growing up with (Internet, TV, videogames...)?

--Children are developing new, positive skills as a result of the age of technology we are living in, but this is also bringing more difficulty in concentrating because there are many things demanding their attention--television, Internet, etc... That's why it is especially important to teach children social and emotional skills, so that they are more self-aware and can focus better. That's a great place from which to start learning.

--Social and emotional learning sounds good, but we are in a period of crisis and budget cuts in which education is getting less and less attention, so how do you apply this program in face of such limited resources?

-- It's very hard. There has to be a commitment and it can't be done without funds. That's why in Spain we began little by little in a few SEK schools. It is important to create a model in this country that can be followed in other places. We have to go from a small model to a bigger one.