

Fostering Emotional Literacy

by Kristin Souers

As educators, you feel the pressure of rising standards, the demands of raising student achievement levels, and the stress of managing your classrooms. This, compiled with the fact that many of us in the education field were taught how to teach, not how to help kids learn. And some students – in fact, many students – come to school ill-prepared to learn and emotionally fragile. All of this can adversely affect *our* emotional states! Often we are asked to meet these demanding challenges with less. We know that several of our students would benefit from additional support and many will never qualify or have extra resources available to them. Thus the responsibility falls back to us.

Much attention has been given to the concept of **learning-ready states** and what it truly means for a child to be learning-ready. Many of our students come to school ready to learn and prepared to fill their minds with new knowledge. Many don't. We also know that all students – no matter what age or grade-level – have brains that are developing at rapid rates. It is our job to ensure that we are helping to develop those brains in healthy ways—that we are supporting their learning beyond just the ability to regurgitate information. More so, we want to challenge our students to learn in a way so that the concept is truly comprehended and becomes something that they can integrate into their learning for future access as needed. When students – and staff members, for that matter – are in regulated, learning-ready states, their capacity to grow, learn, comprehend, and teach increases exponentially.

Teaching students' skills to understand their bodies and make healthy choice is a lifelong asset that will benefit them in multiple ways. We know that increasing capacity to manage our emotions and to be socially aware of how we can impact others in both positive and not so positive ways is critical to our health. Knowing what it feels like to be in a regulated state, how to describe it, and how to attain it, is what's known as having emotional literacy.

Steiner and Perry (1997) add to the idea of emotional literacy as describing one's ability to:

- Understand your emotions
- Listen to others
- Empathize with others and their emotions
- Express your emotions in an effective and productive way

The whole concept of emotional literacy is an important one, especially in the education world. What we know about children and their capacity to learn centers around their ability to feel safe in their environment and their ability to regulate their bodies so they can access those learning capacities. If we can help children understand that emotions in their bodies can trigger a biological response, then we can begin to empower them with tools for how best to manage that response. Keep in mind that all feelings are ok and we need to ensure that our students know this. The crucial goal is equipping them with ways to manage the intensity often associated with the experience of feelings.

Safety, Relationships, and Emotional Literacy

The safety our students feel and their capacity to **regulate** (the ability to access the part of the brain that allows the students to process, relax, and remain emotionally calm) will allow them to enhance their own emotional literacy. Many schools have social emotional programs that support skill development in these areas, though they aren't always as effective as they could be. The challenge for many of us is consistency with how we reinforce those learning strategies. An additional barrier that can impact success in this area is the lack of whole staff consent to seeing this as a true value to education. If staff are not committed to this as a value, then the success of students becomes jeopardized.

I have the privilege of working with students in multiple states and I get to partner with staff in these school settings. My primary goal is to support staff in understanding how best to get students to **learning ready states**— the mental, physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological readiness to learn. By contrast, if students are not in a learning-ready state, they simply will not learn. The key to being able to do that is to provide a safe environment for students to connect and to also be able to teach them the skills to regulate their bodies so they can learn.

Thanks to the amazing research that has been released in the last decade about the brain and about what a brain needs in order to truly learn, we are more equipped to create those learning ready environments for our students. We also know that true success in learning and in life comes from our ability to regulate our bodies in a way that allows us to have healthy interactions, make positive choices, and to learn.



For over two decades, Kristin Souers has dedicated herself to the improvement of people's lives. As a licensed mental health counselor, she has provided counseling services to individuals, couples, and families. With a history of working in the fields of early learning, law enforcement, education, and mental health, she has been able to develop an extensive knowledge base. This, partnered with her expertise in complex trauma, the impact of violence, crisis management, counseling, and trauma-informed care, has allowed her to partner with professionals around the development of trauma-informed practices in a multitude of settings.

As an independent consultant, adjunct faculty member at the Gonzaga University School of Education in the Counselor Education Department, and the Assistant Director of the Washington State University Child and Family Research Unit, Kristin now provides critical professional development, consultation, education, and training services to schools, school districts, and organizations throughout the country. She has presented to hundreds of audiences, facilitated group learning, supervised internships, directed programs, and supported the learning and growth of countless educators, caregiving professionals, and other individuals.

Self-regulation is necessary for emotional well-being. When we can recognize how external states influence our internal states and how our internal states influence our external environment, then we can begin to successfully maneuver through the lifelong challenge of learning.

Trauma affects self-regulation

The reality is that the capacity of many students living with, or exposed to trauma to do just that is not always easy. To quote my dear friend Natalie Turner, “Stressed brains can’t teach and stressed brains can’t learn.” We know that chronic exposure to stress and adversity can significantly disrupt the development of healthy regulation skills in all of us. We have also learned from the research that the more adversity experienced by a child, the greater the likelihood that he or she will struggle with academic success.

Often, children experiencing adversity have never had the permission to truly develop an emotional vocabulary intended to help them make sense of their world and their experiences. They often just relate to the intensity associated with experience and determine, based on their body’s biological response to that intensity, whether or not it is safe to regulate or if they need to move to more of a survival way of being. If the option becomes survival mode, their capacity to learn and retain and to make healthy choices is greatly marginalized, thus affecting our jobs as educators to effectively be able to teach.

I truly believe that when we can empower students to understand their own biology and how stress can disrupt learning, then we can give them a sense of

awareness of identifying healthy ways to manage that stress. When we can empower students to understand how stress impacts learning then they can become partners in identifying what they need to manage that stress and return to learning ready states.

What can we do?

These are a few suggestions to help students achieve emotional literacy:

- Teach them about their brain and how their brain works. Help them connect their body regulation to learning. If they can communicate with you that they are moving away from being learning ready, you can support them in finding ways to return to regulated states.
- Provide predictability—help students have insight into what they can anticipate for the day. What can they expect from you? What do you expect from them?
- Incorporate feeling words into your lessons—feeling words can help them connect to the feeling and identify how it can have an impact on learning
- Provide story problems that encourage them to problem solve and understand healthy ways to handle the situation.
- Provide opportunities for relationship and connection—this will help increase the likelihood that a student feels safe

As educators, you spend massive time teaching content and academic targets. We must put the same energy towards teaching emotional awareness and effective expression. The ability to manage emotions and express them in healthy ways is not a genetic trait...it is a learned response that requires support from you. The same amount of time put towards concept comprehension must also be applied to teaching emotional literacy. Keep in mind you don’t have to make this separate. The more we can incorporate social emotional opportunities into teaching academics, the better. Students tend to learn better when they can connect their learning to real life situations.

Remember what got you into the field of education and why you stay. You care about your students and you want them to be as successful as possible. Teaching them how to be emotionally literate is a critical skill to life success. Continue to be awesome!

The recent publications of *Fostering Resilient Learners: Strategies for creating a trauma-sensitive classroom environment* (ASCD, 2016) and the article “Address trauma with calm, consistent care: Strategies to help educators avoid burnout while keeping students learning-ready” (*Principal* magazine, March/April, 2015) have strengthened Kristin’s impact in education.

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