

## **Cultivating Emotional Intelligence: Theory and Practice Post September 11, 2001**

Patricia A. Bergeron

Lesley University  
29 Everett Street  
Cambridge, MA 02138

[pbergero@mail.lesley.edu](mailto:pbergero@mail.lesley.edu)  
[patrbergp@aol.com](mailto:patrbergp@aol.com)

### **ABSTRACT**

L.S. Vygotsky proposed that cultures differ in activities and the tools that they use. He said that language, which is the primary cultural tool used, is critical to restructuring the mind and in forming higher-order, self-regulated thought processes. The social construction of knowledge, which is basic to Vygotsky's view, has relevance for the educational community and curriculum especially in the light of September 11, 2001.

Higher order cognitive processes and challenges to learning are at the core of L. S. Vygotsky's learning theories. He wrote about using the "tools of the society. " He stated that thought is as important as the behavior. The interaction provides activities that pose cognitive query and encourage inner dialogue. He asserted that the main function of the interaction was to model and guide thinking about subjects, activities, and the world.

Vygotsky proposed there was a difference between a child's capacity to solve problems on his own, and his capacity to solve them with assistance. The "zone of proximal development" included all the functions and activities that a child or a learner could

perform only with the assistance of someone else. The person in this scaffolding process, who provided the intervention, could be an adult or a peer who has already mastered the particular function.

Vygotsky posed intriguing theories in the development of children but these theories also have implications for all humankind. What tools are the children of the 21<sup>st</sup> century carrying forth? What relevance do the Vygotsky's theories pose for educators and students post September 11, 2001 and in conjunction with the theory of Emotional Intelligence as proposed by Daniel Goleman? Daniel Goleman defines Emotional Intelligence as:

“A different way of being smart. It includes knowing what your feelings are and using your feelings to make good decisions in life. It is being able to manage distressing moods well and control impulses. Its being motivated and remaining hopeful and optimistic when you have setbacks in working toward goals. Its empathy, knowing what the people around you are feeling. And it's social skill-- getting along well with other people, managing emotions in relationships, being able to persuade or lead others.”

Robert Frost once said, "I'm not a teacher, but an awakener." I propose that awakening, educating for emotional intelligence as defined by Daniel Goleman is needed more than ever for our K-12 students and for those who lead them. Goleman states, “We are being judged by a new yardstick: not just how smart we are, or by our training and expertise, but also by how well we handle ourselves and each other.” It is critical that school leaders exhibit dedication, concern, persistence and a commitment to the highest standards.

These skills exhibited by our educational leaders will provide valuable models for our students.

Goleman further proposes that emotional intelligence can be developed. Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development" has implications in nurturing the development of emotional intelligence. Students can attain a higher level of awareness when an adult or peer provides scaffolding. Strategies can be learned that foster growth in emotional intelligence.

For example, when I was a second grade teacher I started the day with my students in a "Feeling Circle." The boys and girls told how they felt that day, and why. One child shared in one of the sessions that she was sad because daddy was not feeling well again and the doctor told them it was because of Agent Orange. She said, it was some bad thing in the Vietnam War where he was. The Feeling Circle was invaluable when Jerry died suddenly from our class. Many in the class shared how much they missed Jerry and how sad they were that he died. They missed him but they knew he was happy with God. It helped the students to share their sorrow and their happy memories. The Feeling Circle provided them with scaffolding of encouragement and connection.

Children of the 21<sup>st</sup> century can benefit from the further examination of how the theories of L.S. Vygotsky support educating for emotional intelligence. There is a greater need than ever Post September 11, 2001, to raise awareness of strategies that help develop emotional intelligence in our children. L.S. Vygotsky stated in the *Mind in Society*, "In

receiving instruction in a system of knowledge, the child learns of things that are not before his eyes, things that far exceed the limits of his actual and or even potential immediate experience.” In closing the following quote by James Thurber offers hope, "Let us not look back in anger or forward in fear but around in awareness."

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