

How the theory behind Holistic Education and Emotional Intelligence (E.I.) can illuminate our work as social work practitioners

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What is holistic education? Holism is the notion that a thing is composed of more than the sum of its parts e.g. when we try to understand a person, we need to study not just the interaction of the various body systems, but also something undefinable, what some would term the soul or atman. This is something that emerges from one's interaction with the world and affects the whole person. Holism is the opposite of the specialization that is more prevalent today and tries to create a unified whole out of the vast streams of information that we encounter on a daily basis.

Holistic thinkers survey the vast field of knowledge and try to create "higher orders of structure", in the words of one of the finest examples that come to mind, Dr. Harold Morowitz, author of "The Emergence of Everything", in which he discusses concepts like complexity and emergence in various fields. However, it is not always encouraged in academe, as it is considered the domain of charlatans and ideologues, lacking intellectual and logical rigour. However, we have been lucky to have outstanding holistic synthesizers, especially in the biological sciences, like the previously mentioned biophysicist Harold Morowitz, the physician, essayist and all-time guru Lewis Thomas and the celebrated and legendary palaeontologist Steven Jay Gould; not to mention Edward O. Wilson, who attempted to unify the whole field of human knowledge, starting from physics and ending with the arts, in his mammoth work "Consilience".

To give an analogy of holistic education from computers, which we can all relate to- If we imagine the world as a giant computer, the specific, individual disciplines are like individual apps and holistic education is the operating system that ties them together. As the apps go on evolving, the operating system also needs updating from time to time. However, this has always not been happening in a timely fashion, leading to quite a few system crashes.

Emotional intelligence, on the other hand, relates to the capacity to intuit the soul of a person and is a subset of holistic thinking. Our rishis and seers of old had this ability, but we seem to have partially lost it, judging by the quality of recent television debates. Naturally, this ability is much in demand in both the corporate and the NGO worlds, where understanding people is the key to success, given great advances in technology, which has simplified our work greatly.

Coming to the definition of Emotional Intelligence, Dr. Daniel Goleman, a great populariser of the concept, identified the following five pillars of Emotional Intelligence.

1. Self Awareness. This is the ability to pay attention to one's emotions. This is not as easy as it sounds, for example when faced with some difficult emotion, many of us, myself included, have a tendency to grab the closest comfort food, rather than identify what it is that is bothering us. But it is the necessary first step to emotional intelligence to identify and label our emotions.
2. Self Regulation. This consists of being able to manage unmanageable emotions in a way that society deems appropriate, e.g. while certain excesses were tolerated during the time we grew up, in the 70s and 80s, these are not so appropriate today. The situation is further complicated by the explosion of prosthetic devices, such as the mobile and internet that have unified the world into a global village and leading to greater aspirations overall.
3. Motivation. It can be the hardest thing to understand the hidden springs of human nature. There is more diversity in the human world than in the world of nature as Montaigne pointed out nearly 500 years ago. NGOs and other organizations that work primarily with people ought to have an "Enter at your own risk" sign inscribed on their door step to underline this fact. Also goal posts need to be altered with different stages of life. What motivates one at 25 does not move one at 50.
4. Empathy. This relates to being able to put oneself into the shoes of the other and understanding the context of her actions. This ability is

invaluable when working in teams, as is almost always the case in today's large NGOs, where one needs to psych out one's teammates, in order to be successful. Are our children in danger of losing this ability growing up in gated communities?

5. Social skills. If the last century was the century of Biology, the present one is the century of Sociology, judging by the popularity of social media and reality TV. People want to understand the dynamics of social situations as this can be at times problematic and unpredictable. This skill also relates to the ability to deftly handle social situations and not get entrapped in exploitative zero-sum games and humbugs. This is useful if society is to move in the right direction.

This is all very well but how does it affect our work besides pointing out the need for all round development and better understanding. A hint can be found in Dr. Ali Khwaja's concept of "Why Me" syndrome or what we in Sociology call "relative deprivation". This is the notion that some of us, as individuals, feel we have been singled out for some particular misfortune, compared to others. This feeling is more prevalent in aspirational and unequal societies like India today, where some individuals are doing extremely well compared to others. The antidote to this is shifting the frames of reference to those who are worse off than one is; and there are invariably some; a task that calls for a high degree of emotional intelligence.

The good news is that Emotional Intelligence can be learnt and this is precisely what we in Bala Janagraha have been doing. By exposing children to a wide variety of social situations in a guided and safe manner, we are teaching them that to treat each experience as a resource and every individual as a potential teacher. We are teaching them that no matter what their circumstances, they really have a lot to be grateful for; which is not always apparent to children growing up in today's gated communities. We are also indirectly making them more competitive, as studies have shown Indians tend to perform well in places like Silicon Valley, because of our ability to deal with diversity. This quality is often underestimated and by

exposing our children to diversity in social situations, we shall also be enhancing their competitiveness as President Obama pointed out.

In addition, we are doing our bit to quell the emotions of the young and restless, caught up in a whirl of aspiration, in a rapidly modernizing society, and keep them from turning into sociopaths and loose cannons. By so doing, we can stem some of the social unrest, which has been spilling over into the impassioned soap operas that characterize our televised debates. And by continuing to do what we have been doing, but with increased self-awareness and reflexivity, we shall be doing our bit to make India a happier place to live in.