

# Teaching with empathy is a breath of fresh air

*Schools must meet pupils' emotional as well as education needs*

The words “just breathe” accompany the sound of a Tibetan bell being rung in Francis Street Christian Brothers’ School three times a day. During these moments, children and teachers put their hands to their stomachs and inhale deeply. This activity serves as a reminder to every student to live in the moment, to reflect on their bodies, to consider how they are feeling and how best to express this. The strategy is drawn from mindfulness practices and represents one of the many diverse initiatives run in the school as part of an empathy-based programme.

Francis Street CBS is an all-boys primary school located in the Liberties in Dublin. Established in 1818, it was a soup kitchen during the Famine and went on to educate 500 scholars a year, many from what was regarded as one of the worst tenements in 19th-century Europe. Today the boys in our school come from the Coombe, Pimlico, Meath Street and Thomas Street and they are offered an education rooted in self-respect, mutual understanding and building positive relationships.

When I took on the role of principal in 2006, I kept hearing the same concerns about children’s behaviour. Parents, teachers and children all frequently spoke of stress, anxiety, and mental health issues, and I sensed that no real learning could occur unless social and emotional needs were also met.

Art therapy was the first initiative we implemented, in order to help children with emotional difficulties. This has expanded into cognitive behaviour therapy and a wellness programme to give children the tools to manage their feelings. Every child in the school does yoga and “yogalates” — a mixture of yoga and pilates.

How to sustain motivation is a topic that comes up at every staff meeting. Our teachers believe learning must be based on what children already know and what they are interested in. Behaviour is managed in a restorative way.

When a situation of conflict arises, the children are encouraged to ask themselves questions: what happened? What were you thinking or feeling at the time? Who has been affected by this? What do you need to move on? What needs to happen now so that harm can be repaired? Designated student mediators belonging to a “peace club”

carry question cards in their pockets during play time, and must consult them when dealing with a situation in the yard, rather than involving an adult.

Circles are a common theme in our school: peace circles, conflict-resolution circles, “circle time”. Lessons are taught in circular formation and are incorporated into the school day. In circles, everyone is equal and feels equally important.

I believe that empathy-based methodologies create the conditions for engaged self-understanding and learning, and that this approach can build healthy communities.

I like to be involved in the goings-on at my school by speaking to students and teachers on a daily basis. A few weeks ago, while talking to a student, I discovered something amazing: every single child in Francis Street CBS can play chess, and many students choose to play it during play time and “golden time” of their own accord. I knew that a teacher had introduced chess seven years ago to improve concentration in mathematics class, but I had not been aware that the game had taken hold among the student body to this degree.

On a basic level, chess has allowed the boys to improve their problem-solving, critical thinking and communication skills. However, it has also taught them to think and make good choices, thereby encouraging them to be responsible for their actions and giving them the ability to plan ahead: all values that are integral to the empathy-based methodology programme delivered by the teachers.

The empathy-based curriculum has been established at our school for several years now, and we have recently received international recognition for this work. In 2014, Francis Street CBS was selected to become an Ashoka “changemaker” school — one of only five in Ireland. With more than 200 schools in Europe, Africa and the US, Ashoka schools form a global network of peer institutions that share a commitment to fostering empathy, creativity, teamwork and leadership among their students.

The ever-growing network aims to inspire schools both in the programme and beyond, to share the tools and ideas that put them at the forefront of innovative education.

I have just returned from an Ashoka European summit that brought together principals from the UK, France, Turkey, Spain, Sweden and Germany. Sharing insights and ideas with like-minded educators convinced me that the commitment to teaching empathy is a truly global one, and I feel hopeful and inspired for the future of our students

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