The Effect of Emotional Intelligence Training on Young People and its Impact on Crime

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Complexity Requires Integration – what is the cumulative adverse effect of risk factors in youths' lives?

Violence is a significant public health problem internationally that disproportionately affects poor and minority youth. Although youth violence is a multifaceted problem, a significant evidence-base for its prevention is emerging over time.

Hawkins et al (1992) first framed the importance of risk and protective factors in understanding substance abuse and other problem behaviours. This framework allows us to categorize the many diverse causes of crime into several discrete domains: individual, family, school, and community. Each risk factor within the domains significantly increases the likelihood of various problem behaviours; two or more risk factors exponentially increase the probability of crime and other problem behaviours. In contrast, protective factors are those variables (family stability, positive peer groups etc.) that can counter or decrease the risk of delinquency onset then or even later in life.

The practical applications of this framework abound, highlighting the need for comprehensive planning to sustainably address youth crime. Moreover, years of research has also demonstrated that the success of strategies in preventing or intervening in violence depends on whether or not two or more risk factors are adequately addressed in the intervention. The current public health tradition owes much to the years of research building upon the work of Hawkins et al (1992). The social crime prevention and the public health model recognizes that prevention strategy should be handled in a way similar to best practices for a communicable disease that passes from one person to the next when left untreated. In this sense, the local context of risk factors can be seen as "causes" that can successfully be targeted to prevent the spread of the "disease".

The specific combination of risk factors requires comprehensive strategy that integrates resources and protective factors across sectors. For example, police will likely always be necessary for place-based strategies that tackle offenders and criminogenic conditions in particular community hot spots, but coordination with the schools might also be necessary to prevent schools from becoming a fertile recruitment ground for gangs or incitement to delinquent activity. Law enforcement will always play an important role in addressing risk factors across many of the domains; however, although place-based policing strategies have a significant evidence-base for crime prevention and reduction; policing strategies focused on the individual (e.g. youth arrests, stop and search) have not.

Many children face multiple risk factors throughout their formative years. These risks can take the form of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) which encompass "not only harmful acts of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, but also familial and socio-environmental (risk factors) such as parental drug use, poverty, and neighbourhood or domestic violence" (Balistreri, 2016, pg. 72). While addressing immediate risk factors on either the community or other domains can significantly prevent violence, if this is done without also offering youths a more focused strategy for coping or resiliency, future problems may still surface in the long run. Similar to risk factors, research has shown that children exposed to four or more ACEs have odds of negative health outcomes in adulthood that are up to 12 times that of children without ACEs (Felitti et al, 1998).

In adolescents, cumulative ACEs are associated with increased risk of violence, behavioural problems, substance abuse, and depression (Flouri, 2011). In addition to their overall health being affected, ACEs affect the emotional well-being of youths in a way that can carry lasting effects on their success and quality of life well into adulthood. Violence is one important manifestation of such effects, but psychological security and life satisfaction are others of note (Afolabi and Balogun, 2017). The cumulative effect of many ACEs can be a sense of hopelessness and loss of optimism that is carried into life with deleterious effects on the youth's chance of success and ability to reach his or her potential as evidenced by physical health and emotional well-being.

Youths with a resulting external locus of control and low self-efficacy have a significantly greater chance of problem behaviours later in life, in addition to not meeting their potential for success at an economic cost to society.

What is the "value added" of emotional intelligence to a comprehensive crime prevention strategy based upon the public health model ?

Important lessons for prevention lie in the fact that risk factors are only predictive for about 20 to 49 percent of a given high risk population (Werner, 2001), whereas the protective factors predict positive outcomes in 50 to 80 percent of these same populations (Werner and Smith, 1992). This, and later research, demonstrates that understanding the resiliency factors that explain why most youths in the same highest risk situations do not themselves become delinquent.

Although not by itself a "silver bullet" in crime prevention, emotional intelligence is receiving increasing attention given its important role in providing the coping skills needed for resiliency identified in significant studies. Decades of research have identified the resiliency factors that help to develop prevention programs for urban youth exposed to social conditions that put them at risk for violence and other criminal behaviour: social competence, problem solving, autonomy, and sense of purpose (Benard, 2004).

Emotional intelligence (EI) embodies several of these competencies. Emotional intelligence refers to "a combination of skills: empathy, self control, self awareness, and self motivation among others" (Seena and Sundaram, 2018). Daniel Goleman's (1995) famous work on EI argues that social competence is a core element of EI. EI helps youths to "grasp and understand human nature" in a way that facilitates a sense of autonomy and higher self-efficacy fueled by their own self-awareness (Watson and Watson, 2016). Finally, they recognize that they have the ability to regulate their own actions which helps build a sense of autonomy, internal locus of control, and optimism. "Among the core EI abilities proposed by Mayer and Solovey (1997), the ability to manage emotions is expected to be most strongly associated with transgression-related interpersonal motivations" (Rey and Extremera, 2014, pg.199). Although the meaning in life inherent to a sense of purpose is not itself an identified key EI ingredient, it is likely a mediator of the sense of psychological security that has been empirically linked to EI (Afolabi and Balogun, 2017). Psychological security comes from the work of Maslow (1943) which suggested a ladder of needs: psychological security is a feeling that one gets after one's lower order security needs have been met, allowing the room for self-actualization that EI's self-awareness capabilities also unlock.

EI Works !

Although rigorous evaluation studies of emotional intelligence programs in secondary or tertiary prevention settings are scarce and often plagued by methodological problems such as small sample size and the absence of a suitable comparison group, there is good reason to support the application of emotional intelligence work in correctional and reintegrative settings as well.

Interventions with seriously traumatized youths have shown that EI can be successfully changed to help them cope with the traumas of life and to develop the requisite psychological resilience to increase optimism for life, spiritual insights, and create positive stress coping mechanisms despite very serious cumulative ACEs earlier in life (Seena and Sundaram, 2018). Similarly evaluations have demonstrated the power of EI as a mediating effect against cyber bullying and victimization in university students (Yadav and Yadav, 2018).

Emotional intelligence training sustainably improved the self-efficacy of women with multiple sclerosis months after the intervention (Mehrabi et al, 2017). Importantly, many years of evaluation studies with public school populations have continued to empirically link EI with leadership, academic success, and decreased disciplinary violations. This has led to a large-scale movement for the inclusion of social and emotional learning (SEL) throughout primary and secondary school education.

Sustainable Resiliency – Changing the Way People Think vs. the System

Contemporary corrections do not offer any real outcomes that facilitate successful reintegration in the long term.

The accumulation of risk – or the number of ACEs experienced by children leads to developmental and behavioural problems that require an EI approach to overcome. There is a vicious cycle that cannot be addressed by a public health or risk factor focus alone. Nearly half of all children in the United States are exposed to at least one ACE such as poverty, or violence in the home or neighbourhood – nearly a quarter experience at least two (Balisterri, 2016). Trauma from these incidents itself decreases the EI that is essential for resiliency and success later in life. The criminal justice system (particularly with incarceration) compounds this with further trauma without offering the needed coping skills for transformational change. EI interventions go beyond "changing how participants think" common to many cognitive behavioural therapies" (CBT).

In addition to coping strategies that help reframe perspective on trauma or conflict situations, the farther one increases in EI, the greater the self-efficacy and optimism essential for meaningful and lasting change. The core EI competencies can be changed through training. Once these competencies are enhanced, they can moderate the stress and trauma that keeps individuals locked in a cycle of no change. EI trainings help to unlock this by offering the ability to assess a situation, mobilize resources, and proactively see challenges as opportunities. Higher levels include a self-awareness that allows youths to identify their goals and interests and have a meaningful life in pursuit of them.

Putting it All Together – The Passion Project platform as the means to holistically integrate the essential elements of youth education and empowerment as part of a cross-sector public health strategic approach

The principal tenant of the Passion Project is to educate and empower young people. It is uniquely suited to complement the ongoing public health model in the United Kingdom, in that it encourages cross-collaboration across all the sectors whilst providing holistic support for young people. Leaders in the business, education, community, health and faith-based sectors provide important opportunities for individuals and communities that address multiple risk factors co-occurring in the life and places of young people, and residents more generally. This cross-sector participation can occur in ongoing programs such as the Crib in Hackney, football organizations, or in the primary schools and parent training. Once again, by working across sectors, community development can also occur that reaches risk factors across the domains (individual, family, school, and community).

However, while this represents a needed integrated working practice argued for throughout this paper, it still leaves out the essential role for education and empowerment to truly be holistic. The Passion Project's EI self-development and training framework offers this. Providing young people access to evidence-based materials, courses, mentors, and opportunities for self-discovery and learning each of the key components for resiliency (self-awareness, coping, emotion management) now and throughout their lives.

The aforementioned cross-sector supports this by ensuring that the lower level (physical security etc.) are met that create room for self-discovery and actualization; trauma is met as these EI skills develop. These cross-sector partners are also a ready pool of mentors that can help the young people meet employment and other important life goals that provide meaning.