

Welcome to the Exploring the Core Podcast. I'm your host, Greg Mullen.

In this episode, I'll be exploring a layer of my framework that's actually a very popular topic for teachers, a layer that looks specifically at "competencies" for social and emotional character development, celebrated in schools with various Social and Emotional Learning programs - which I do talk about in Season One, Episode Four, but today I want to talk about a specific organization of concepts and skills that make up this layer of social emotional character development, because I believe helping people develop these competencies directly supports our efforts to promote the kinds of "values" I introduced in the last two episodes - like Responsibility, Respect, and Trust - and that underneath those values are specific concepts and skills, like emotional self-awareness and self-management, and social awareness and relationship management. There's been a lot of work done in this area by lots of different organizations, and having taken several courses myself and pouring over the literature from the past few decades, I'm excited to share with you the elements of this layer which I introduce in the second half of this episode.

The first half of this episode will be highlighting the work of Liz Keable, a Success Coach & Social Psychologist helping students to achieve higher academic marks by developing in them social and emotional competencies. And as I share segments of our conversation, those that have listened to previous episodes may start to connect the layers I talk about in past episodes and how they play into how Liz talks about helping students, how she connects those layers of beliefs, elements of their environment, and values like responsibility, respect, and trust, which all build on this layer of social and emotional character development.

So stay with me as I celebrate the work of Liz Keable and her social and emotional approach to academic success.

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GREG: Liz Keable is a Success Coach & Social Psychologist helping students achieve higher grades - "by believing that they can". She works out of the Greater Norwich Area, a few hours drive North East of London, and she agreed to speak with me about her experience as a student Success Coach. In particular, I was curious about her background and how exactly she defines her role as a Success Coach.

LIZ: "I was interested in being able to help individuals, learners, to learn, and it struck me that they were using the psychology and some of what had been labeled at the time I was teaching - "brain friendly" learning techniques - although I felt we had moved on a bit from that as well, I just felt working on a one-to-one with pupils will enable them to see things differently in a way that we can enable them to make progress. So I made a point of

creating a packet that has built up over the years with all kinds of activities that help children, young people, get to know themselves as a learner. They learn about how the brain actually works, physically as it does, and then also how it learns. Then they start learning how they got control over it, even something as simple as 'you can't leave it at home'. You know, you can't take it out and leave it with someone and say, 'can you look after this for me for the day, please', you have to take it with you wherever you go, and therefore you are responsible for it. So we kind of look at ways in which they are physically responsible for their own brain but also we look at the psychology and the impact of the subconscious and the way it can interfere emotionally with what the front end of the brain actually knows is the case. The emotional part can get in there and cause problems. But the main name of it is to help them believe in themselves which is invariably what happens over about twelve weeks that I work with them on building that belief in themselves as a learner.

GREG: These are secondary students you're working with, yes?

LIZ: Mostly, yes, I have worked with a few private schools where the age range goes a bit further in each direction but generally speaking it's secondary. So I kind of sell it on the strap line, if you like, that their grades improve because they believe they can. An example of that, it's slight extreme, but it's a good example, is that I'm currently tutoring a young lady online for science who was getting Level Two's in her in-house tests they were doing for preparation of exams, and the last one she got Level Eight - which is a massive improvement, and it had all come from her working with me for a few months, mostly on her confidence as well as her science. But I haven't taught her as much science as she would need to make that much difference, so a lot of it is the belief, 'I can do this, I do know what I'm doing, I can learn'. It's about teaching them methods as well so I teach them study skills and different ways of learning things that make them stick. We work on memory and how that works, how they can learn things in a way that is more appealing to the way their mind works so that it sticks. Because, although I'm not happy they are examined, and the only way they can prove themselves is by passing exams, I'm not happy with that, but if that's the way they are being tested, and that's the way they need to prove themselves, then that's what I help them with because I want them to be successful. So it's about getting them to that stage where they feel like a strong, independent learner who is taking responsibility for their own learning and can therefore impact on their own progress. They don't sit there like a victim waiting for stuff to happen to them, or for them, or for other people to make decisions for them about the way that they learn."

GREG: I was still very curious about this title, "Success Coach", and how Liz defines success as it relates to the students she's helping to learn how to learn. It seemed to me that, regardless of how a student defines success, by focusing on social and emotional competencies, Liz could coach a student to achieve success, whatever that happened to mean for that student.

LIZ: “Yes, so I don’t define the success. We do look at what possibilities are in the future as well. One of the activities I really enjoy doing with them is looking at what skills they have, what inherent strengths they have and therefore what kind of roles they’d be good at in the future. I was asked to help a young man in a secondary school who was in his final year and right at the very point of being completely excluded because they couldn’t cope with his behavior anymore. So they called me in as kind of a last resort and normally I ask if I may have them when they’re younger so I can have a greater impact at an earlier age but, obviously, this boy was sixteen and kind of refusing to cooperate at school - because of past experiences; and they were desperate to help him pass his exams and he was struggling with math, so I was asked to tutor him in math. But I said, ‘could I actually coach him in all these other things at the same time because I think that’s what he needs as much as the help with the math’. And it made such a difference, they were surprised he engaged with me, they presumed that he would run away and wouldn’t be there when I arrived. But what I find just after two or three sessions of working with him on this idea of belief and on the ‘strengths first’ side of things, working at what he was good at, and I said, ‘you’ve got a fantastic group of skills’, that in adult life are going to serve you really well. Just at this precise moment under these precise circumstances, you’ve got to get through this bit, but he could then see why he was struggling in school, why he was struggling with math, but it made him determined to give it a go. He turned out to not be as bad at math as he thought he was once we got started. But it all came from this self-belief that he was a worthwhile person, that he did have strengths, that he was going to turn out okay in the end after this little hiatus here just needed to be got through, and apparently I was the only person he would respond to to get him through that; but it’s in the way I approached it, I think.”

GREG: This was actually a very curious point, this idea of bringing someone in from the outside of a student’s environment to work with them in cases where nothing a school has tried has worked. So I asked Liz whether she felt it was helpful to bring someone from the outside in to work with students, or whether she felt teachers, parents, or administrators could take on this role of reaching students the way she does, in the environments that already exist for students.

LIZ: “I think that it’s both sides of the coin. Yes, bringing in someone from the outside is important because they have no preconceived ideas of who this person is. In fact, when I work with youngsters in school, I make a point of not asking questions, I don’t want to know too much of the history about the student because then I can come with no preconceived ideas and can build on what I find when I’m working with them rather than any kind of history. But in fact I think you’ve hit on something there - other educators can learn to do what I do. It’s successful because it’s years of experience and psychology, and the way you say things, and the way you respond to them, is all really important; so as long as somebody could learn how to do that, and create the right kind of trusting environment that you need, then, yes, other educators could do - and that’s actually what

I'm looking at in the future is training other educators to be able to do what I do because I'm not going to be around forever. I think that's, um, I'm looking at creating my pack that's been for my personal use until now, that's something other people can take and use with a bit of training, so they can have the same impact, really."

GREG: What Liz said had me thinking about my own experiences as an elementary and middle school classroom teacher, and how I had known very little about building trust. It seems like a kind of no-brainer, common sense thing to just know how to build trust with people, but it took me years to really understand what it meant to develop the kind of teacher-student relationship that not only bred trust but, eventually, was bred through a more self-directed classroom environment. I asked Liz about her own experience as a classroom teacher, and her thoughts on the kind of learning environment she created for her students. Liz actually became a school teacher after her experience homeschooling her two children, and I was curious about how she felt about the differences between homeschooling and school teaching.

LIZ: "There's one or two obvious differences. In a school, you've got the benefit of taking science, of all of the equipment you don't have at home. You can't do experiments; so you have a lot more in the way of resources but, as you said, there are restrictions and there's not so much freedom; and one of the things that hampered me was a very traditional head of department who was not happy with some of the methods that I was attempting to introduce - despite the fact that I had extra training, I had asked for the training in the brain-friendly learning techniques, and had even been sent to Birmingham to work with a neuroscientist to bring back ways of teaching that I was cascading to other staff. I was helping train other staff, but my head of department didn't like me using them in my classroom. He wanted everybody in their seats and in rows and being quiet and not moving around in some of the ways that they - I'll give you an example. When they needed to do energy transfer, we made popcorn so they could physically see the energy transfer. When we were doing fiber optics, they were expected to know how an endoscope works, and yet they couldn't fully understand how it worked, so I took in my fiber optic lamp and we stood in the dark stroking this lamp, watching the lights, and discussing how the lights, how that was working, and I was always being told off by my - I made friends with the deputy who is still a friend and mentor to this day, all these years later. I'd walk into school with bags of stuff and he'd say 'would you stop bringing everything you've got from home', but, again, because they were resources I felt I needed to make the point in a more effective way that I was bringing in from home, so there's some crossover there between benefits of homeschooling and benefits of being in school. I know some people who teach at home say they find the whole scheduling a bit difficult, you know, the whole having a routine and sticking to it, but we never had a problem with it. I have to say, we had the daily routine and stuck to it - that wasn't an issue for me. But you can see I feel comfortable in both settings. I love the idea of homeschooling, I was happy as a teacher - I loved teaching, so I was perfectly happy in the classroom, but it wouldn't stop me from going back to homeschooling if I had children again."

GREG: Another question I ask Liz is how she has motivated teachers to approach students the way she does as a Success Coach. I appreciated how positive she was in how teachers have reacted to her work, and was not surprised to hear Liz talk about a particular obstacle teachers face when they take what Liz teaches them back to their schools.

LIZ: “Yes, thinking back to a few years ago when I worked for an education partnership and, part of my role was encouraging teachers to use improved techniques for teaching and learning, I found a lot of enthusiasm among the teachers; but what I did find was that while I was with them or while we were talking or while they were receiving training, they were very excited, couldn’t wait to get back in the classroom and try it out. But somehow after a certain period of time, it kind of went quiet because the system kind of wouldn’t allow for that level of freedom. I found that as well training staff over the years is, that is what tends to happen, is that the desire is there, the enthusiasm is there, but it’s just too much with all of the other pressures they have on them. So I think there’s still room for improvement there.”

GREG: As a school teacher myself, I’m well aware of the other pressures teachers face and the many expectations to give exams and report grades, as part of the system for oversight and accountability of student learning which, to me, has always seemed to me to be separate from the actual process of learning; so I asked Liz about her thoughts on that part of the system specific to student exams and what she’s noticed about student learning with regards to this increasing demand for testing and reporting.

LIZ: “I think the first thing, and I’m not saying this applies to every student, but a lot of students go to school because they have to; they go to school in order to receive the education and therefore, within themselves without it being explicit, they feel that schooling is being done to them. They’re not really a part of it. Looking at that from the teacher’s perspective, it’s almost like a teacher’s throwing stuff out there and waiting for it to stick to students who are not actually engaging with it. So I think the first thing I try to point out is that I often start a piece of training or talk to teacher with the idea of forgetting what it is they’re actually looking at, that when we’re talking to students, we’re seeing their faces, bless them, lovely little faces ready to learn, or their physical demeanor or behavior in the classroom, and that’s what we engage with is their face and their demeanor and their behavior, et cetera, but that’s not actually what we’re engaging with - we’re engaging with what’s inside here - inside the brain. So the first exercise I get them doing is eliminating the whole body thing and picturing a load of floating brains. So when we’re in a classroom, that’s what we’re engaging with is all those brains - nothing else. You have to see past everything else and always get inside the head of the student. From then on, the important thing for me is that the students learn to get inside their own heads, so that they are not recipients of information, because learning doesn’t actually take place unless you have an experience - the brain is designed to learn from experience. So just throwing

information or talking at someone or showing them things is all well and good, but unless their brain actually engages with it, there's absolutely no learning taking place whatsoever. And that's one of the reasons why so many youngsters - it's not just a memory thing, it's not just about being able to recall it, it's just that, it never had an impact on their minds in the first place, so they're not registering it. The information has to be presented in a way that engages the mind and therefore becomes memorable and be grown into something more memorable. Because of things like practice, for instance, I always teach youngsters about the physical impact on their brain from practice. If you can make a single memory trace from doing something once, then it'll just fizzle out and disappear unless you strengthen it, and you repeat something again and again. And then, in fact, what happens is the brain registers that something's important and will coat it in a substance called myelin which makes it permanent, a bit like putting tarmac down on a road; and then you'll never forget it. But I think a lot of youngsters come to learning feeling they should already know it, and then when they struggle with it, they kind of back off because it's too challenging, because they don't know it. Then when they do get it, it's such a relief that they don't practice it, they don't see the need for repetition so it all gets lost. I think if learners understood their own better, they would make better use of it, they would take responsibility for their learning, and then they'll start making progress because it's not something that's being done to them, it's something they're doing for themselves."

GREG: I love this idea of teaching students about how their own brains work, how learning happens, how their own actions have consequences beyond the stickers and points they receive from teachers who themselves are receiving pressure from that larger system of oversight and accountability. I asked Liz what her thoughts were on the importance of parents and building a shared understanding of teaching and learning with teachers, whether programs that promote what she is teaching about how humans learn might benefit parents and allow them to have their own learning personalized in order to understand themselves, how they learn, in addition to understanding how their child learns, and whether she feels this might be a good approach for schools to explore.

LIZ: "I think that would be a very good approach. You've suddenly made me decide what it is I'll be working on next, thank you. I think, I don't know how involved parents are in schooling under normal circumstances in the U.S. but over here they have more influence in primary level but once the child goes into secondary school there's very little involvement from parents at all. And I think it would be a really good idea for parents to be more involved. I think, particularly at the moment, parents are thinking about more about schooling because they are having to do it themselves at home, and I'm posting on LinkedIn at the moment, suggestions to help them with the kind of psychology behind doing that, because it's not easy. And I think the first point I try to make is the fact that a lot of parents, once their children go off to school, lose sight of the fact that they taught them for the first five years of their life, and probably did a good job of it. So they have already taught their child a huge amount before they ever go off to school, and somehow hand that responsibility to the teachers, and forget their role in it. I don't think that's the

parents fault, I think that is, again, how the system is set up. Give us your children, we'll take it from here, and in fact there is some resistance if you like almost to any kind of interference from outside. I think there should be more of an exchange at all ages between schools and parents so that there's a joint role getting that youngster to a point where they are able to stand on their own two feet as it were, educationally, emotionally, and however else. It's a joint working between the parents and the home life and the school. They spend a large amount of time in both so I don't think they should be as separate as they are. I think they should be a lot more crossover, and that will require some changes in the way the system works. I don't personally know at the moment of any support for parents in that kind of becoming familiar in kind of having a teaching educational role for their child, which is something I'm prepared to take a look at, if enough people are interested, that sounds like something worth doing and would interest me because linking all of these different roles I've had over the years would all kind of come together. I used to train people who ran parenting programs who needed the facilitation skills. They knew the content, they knew the parenting, but they didn't really have the skills to run the group, so I was kind of training them with the facilitation skills. But there is still crossover there between parents and teachers because you've got parents whose main concern seems to be behavioral issues - 'what do I do when the child does this?' But teachers are the same, with teachers it's classroom management, which is very much about the behavior in the classroom. So they kind of both sets are dealing with similar issues, just one in school and one out of school. I think there's some room even for some training together for teachers and parents. I had a friend, until she retired, who was really interested in getting together schools and parents and the student, as a threesome, to cement stuff for the student, and she was interested in running courses that would put all of that together, but that really never got off the ground and I'd say I don't know, it doesn't mean it's not happening, but I don't know of anybody who is successfully doing that at the moment, and it may be where we're at that point in history now that that should be something that's happening."

GREG: I bring up with Liz the fact that many parents don't know what questions to ask their children's teachers to get this process started, many simply not having the time even if they did know what to ask, and how teachers themselves barely have time to connect with their own administrators, let alone so many parents, and that administrators often have to limit their time spent with parents and the community, which shows how every adult involved in this schooling process is already stretched so thin; I ask Liz about the possibility of a school being the center of a community beyond just handing off this responsibility for academic learning, and whether a school being a center, or hub, something to help give people the time to connect and learn about themselves and each other, even if that means incorporating social services into the schools which, a quick map search online will show, are already littered across every community.

LIZ: “Ya, it reminded me of something we had in the UK... I think it was when I was development manager for the parenting strategy in a local town here. At the time, both locally and nationally, there was a new project called Full Service Schools and it was along the lines of what you were just talking about where the school was supposed to become the hub or the center of the community, where a lot of stuff would happen in the school as a building to get the community in. I remember one head teacher, I talked to all of the head teachers at the time, because I held the budget for their after hours program so they were all really nice to me... one of the head teachers was very proud of the fact that his school was open 365 days a year, because they even had a Christmas service at the school on Christmas day, so he was really proud of that fact. I’m not quite sure why that - I don’t think there’s that same feel anymore, I think that was something the government put money into, and as with a lot of the projects I’ve been involved in, the funding comes to an end and then the good that has been done with that funding kind of dies with it until the next lot of funding takes it somewhere else. So it’s been done, and more successfully in some areas than others, but I do think there is the need for schools to be more open. I think they feel if they cater for every individual, parents will say I want this for my child, and I want that for my child, that they kind of go crazy trying to fulfill all of the desires so they just hold their hands up and go ‘no we’re not going to go there’. But I think if it was done gradually, and carefully, and with everybody’s cooperation, we could make slight inroads and hope that something would grow from that - it’s not going to happen overnight.”

GREG: My final question for Liz was with regards to this larger idea of self-directed schooling, placing the emphasis of learning, for learning, on the students and families themselves, by creating a more egalitarian school structure where the students involve their families in their own learning for which the school can serve as a resource, so that the authority and responsibility is shared with the family, rather than handed off from parent to teacher, so that each family can personalize their child’s learning and utilize the school as they feel is in the best interest of their child.

LIZ: “I think that’s why it would need to be gradual because of that shift - we’re talking about a paradigm shift, aren’t we, what with everything that’s come before. So it would need to be done gradually, and I think we’re getting there, and there are enough people like you and I that are passionate about that whole process, that gradually change will come. I think the biggest difficulty is that most educational setups are the result of government directives and therefore the head administrators are having to follow government directives and that they have to do this and that, and it has to be everything all the way down the line including the students... so we end up with this whole system that controls top-down, where what we’re looking at is more of a bottom-up, which if started gradually and grown momentum would meet in the middle somewhere and stop the shifts, cause change, that would have an impact.

GREG: “Do you think that would happen in the UK?”

KEABLE: “Over time, yes, as I say, I’ve been banging my head against the wall for the last twenty years trying to make change happen. But I think there’s more of a momentum now, and I think Covid has helped in that, I think, parents have been given more responsibility for ensuring their child’s education, there’s more of a dialogue open, and I think what would be sad is if everybody ends up going back to school, once we’ve all been vaccinated and everything’s okay again, if that’s lost, if we went back to this whole kind of separate thing. I think there are links being made that we need to nurture if you like and use to try and make stuff happen.”

GREG: I want to thank Liz for taking the time to speak with me, and for those interested in knowing more about Liz and her work, you can visit her website at [LizKeable dot com](http://LizKeable.com).

And When I return, I’ll briefly review my unique structure for organizing social and emotional competencies as part of my framework for exploring who we are and how we learn, and make the case for developing these competencies not just in children, but in ourselves as well.

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In this larger framework for who we are and how we learn, I include in this layer of social, emotional, character development, three components, or domains, which I’ve organized into smaller pieces. And as I briefly describe these three domains, consider which pieces sound familiar, which you might think are more or less valuable to you, and which seem to be new to you altogether.

The first of these three components has to do with self-awareness and management. It’s about recognizing and developing a capacity to manage our emotions, to set goals and monitor progress, and celebrating the self-improvements we make over time. The second component has to do with social-awareness and relationships, recognizing and developing the capacity to identify how people think and feel differently, knowing when and how to communicate in a variety of different contexts and settings, and to practice de-escalation techniques that can resolve various different kinds of conflicts. The third involves an awareness of how we as humans develop our sense of societal responsibility as global citizens and develop a moral or ethical obligation, beyond that of basic law and order, as individuals and groups who interact with communities big and small, locally and globally.

Now, Over the years, I’ve spoken with a number of parents and teachers about these ideas, and the general consensus is that we know that all of these concepts and skills are not being taught to children, and it’s not because parents or teachers, collectively, aren’t doing their job - it’s that we as adults, as teachers as well as parents, were simply not taught these concepts and skills at a young age, and did not have these ideas

explained to us during our formative years when we were forming integral beliefs about ourselves and each other. Adults who I've spoken to generally agree it's important to teach social and emotional competencies, and we generally want to help develop those competencies in our children, but there isn't yet a consensus among us as the adults who are part of our children's lives as to what these competencies are, and - as adults - are hesitant to have to relearn what we've spent a lifetime figuring out. And what I mean by that, is that a lot of these ideas were only just published a generation or two ago, so for many people, and this has been the case with many people I talk to about this, what adults learned by chance from whoever happened to be in their life growing up, is generally seen as good enough for helping them deal with conflicts and concerns today now that they're adults. We've actually developed our identity to include those lessons we learned from those we looked up to when we were younger, and from those experiences, we shaped our world view. So to challenge the lessons we learned in those formative years is to challenge how we might still be managing our emotions as adults, with strategies that might not actually match the emotions we are expressing, appropriate for the context and situations we're experiencing. and for many of us, we simply don't have the time or the energy to make the kinds of changes to these beliefs about how to cope with the kinds of challenges we face in our lives, and when we then see our children experiencing conflicts and concerns in their lives, we figure they will be fine because they'll likely figure out how to deal with their emotions the same way we did, with whoever happens to be around when they need to learn those valuable lessons. Unfortunately, history has shown that not all adults develop healthy emotional coping strategies and social skills, and with everything we know today about how the brain works, and how it isn't that a person never changes - the story actually the opposite, a person's brain can literally adapt to its environment, as can a person's behaviors, but only if we accept that these competencies in this layer are important enough to explore, to adopt, and to adapt to your own particular goals and situation.

This is where I believe schools can be a catalyst for change by inviting their families to create a shared vision and language that embraces this idea that it isn't just children who need to develop these competencies, that teachers must internalize these ideas as part of a shared language, a shared understanding, and be able to model and coach their students both in and out of the school environment, and that parents must also recognize and support the development of these competencies such that their children can see these competencies reflected in those they value in their own communities.

But there's a catch to all of this, which might not be a surprise, and as a school teacher myself, I want to acknowledge that it does take a lot of time and energy to just maintain the status quo, to keep the ship rowing the way it already is, and that change is often met with concerns over time, resources, and energy, and that implementing a social and emotional learning program as an additional thirty-minute lesson each week or scheduled extra-curricular activities is often placed on top of the already overburdened school schedule for teachers, students, and their parents; but we must not see social

and emotional competencies as something teachers add to their plate. Instead, we must see it as the plate itself.

Social and emotional competencies are not concepts we learn in addition to academics. These competencies are the behaviors that reflect the values we are already promoting in schools and in our communities, they're the behaviors that promote the kind of self-reliance, self-reflection, and the self-directed approach to problem solving and critical thinking that we want to see in our students, in our children, but it has to start with us wanting to see this in our own selves and our own relationships. That's why I believe this layer is key for understanding who we are and how we learn, it's the layer underneath the values we perceive, the elements of our environment, and the beliefs we hold, and as I continue in the next episode, we'll see how specific ranges of behaviors feed these capacity to develop social and emotional competencies in different ways. And the more we really start to connect this layer of competencies to those outer layers of this framework, the more willing we might be to consider that our own understanding of our own coping mechanisms may or may not be working for us, but perhaps more importantly, that they might not be working in ways that are helping you meet those larger goals in those outer layers of values, elements of your environment, and the beliefs you hold about what you think school and learning ought to be. It brings to mind the popular quote, "be the change you want to see in the world", and I believe this layer of social, emotional, character development is crucial to helping us become that change.

Now as I bring this episode to a close, I'd like to revisit the idea I introduced in this second season's introductory episode of capturing a rainbow. These competencies discussed in this episode are not in themselves an explanation for who we are and how we learn. The topics and all of the people throughout this second season are all part of the environment responsible for this metaphorical rainbow. The question to ask is not how this episode answers our all questions about who we are and how we learn, but how the ideas presented connect with the ideas in the other episodes to help us understand individuals and groups in a way that's meaningful to you and your various communities both big and small. So I hope you're enjoying this second season, and I thank you for listening. Talk to you next time.