

Incorporating **Emotional Intelligence** in the Core

Emotional Intelligence as a component of schools.

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Some schools extoll the virtues of character development, others tout in-house programs designed around citizenship, and still others develop partnerships with community organizations toward a unitary goal. The purpose seems universal – students need more sources to learn ethics, values, and the accompanying strategies for behaving in positive, productive ways. Ultimately, educators want students to be accountable for their reactions and subsequent behaviors. At Valley Academy, the foundation is being laid for equipping students with self-knowledge and alternative routes to own their reactions and outcomes.

In the last two decades Emotional Intelligence (EI) has received an increasing amount of attention in the fields of psychology, organizational development and education. Salovey & Mayer, the team that identified EI, define it as: “. . . the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought . . . and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth.” Thousands of scholarly articles and studies have been published in peer-reviewed journals and dozens of management books addressing EI have become best sellers in the popular press. In laymen’s terms EI means being smart with feelings, making good decisions and working well with others.

Even in this era of increasing reliance on standardized tests and the push for more math and science in the school’s core curriculum, many states have mandated social/ emotional learning (SEL) as a component part of the educational process for public school students. A meta-analysis of 213 school based SEL programs (Durlak, et al., 2011) indicates a growing base of empirical evidence that well implemented SEL programs positively influence social, health and academic outcomes in students from kindergarten through high school.

Conscious choice to implement EI

The issue for administrators is how to fit SEL in with all the other priorities vying for scarce time. Given the preponderance of evidence that good EI skills help students in a number of ways, the pressing question is not: “Should we implement EI into the curriculum?” It is: “How can we effectively and meaningfully implement EI into the curriculum?” These skills are increasingly important in order for students to effectively navigate in the world as functional adults.

There are programs available to schools from a variety of sources to infuse the “intangibles” to accompany academics. The implementation of most programs is primarily the responsibility of school counselors who go into classes weekly or monthly and deliver SEL to students. These programs have limited, lasting impact on students because they are stand alone in nature. In other programs, like Core Knowledge™, EI is part of a larger instructional program which incorporates SEL into daily lessons. These programs seem to have a more lasting impact on student behavior and decision making.

Our charter establishes SEL as a pillar of education along with technology and the performing arts. Our goal is to create a school culture where students understand and process their emotions and make responsible choices. That is a tall order! We decided the most effective and meaningful way we could

approach SEL was to provide training for all our teachers. We then set out to find a program most suited to meet our goals and budget.

After spending a considerable amount of time and energy looking at various options, we chose the Six Seconds Emotional Intelligence Network. They are a non-profit organization dedicated to EI training at all levels of development. Their program originated in a private school in California and is based in neuroscience. Their board of directors includes giants in the field like Peter Salovey. From our point-of-view, the most attractive aspects of the Six Seconds program are the Emotional Inventories that can be taken from grade 4 through adult. They are self-reports with highly reliable results.

Our teachers recently decided to receive additional training similar to what the administration completed, to become certified to debrief these emotional functioning measures. Like so many endeavors in the field of education, knowing “why” invariably leads to knowing “how.” The more our faculty has become immersed in understanding how our emotions effect decision-making, the more invested they are in facilitating that development in others.

Differences so far

Having a basis for, or developing a context for academic learning, seems to ground teachers and allay fears that the core may not get the “coverage” it requires. Similarly, when we use thematic units to teach concepts for long-term storage, using EI as a backdrop for contextualizing scholastic concepts helps teachers and students create lasting meaning with respect to new learning. For example, a discussion of why it would be useful to complete the math problems or which one needs more practice teaches self-selection and choice-making in terms of authentic goals. When students assess their relative strengths and weaknesses, then act upon those determinations with action and intent, they can readily see the effect of their own personal investment. Clearly, we need to create a culture wherein making mistakes and taking risks associated with learning becomes the desirable norm. This paradigm shift has been met with enthusiasm on behalf of our teachers. Our professional development focus is to establish norms of open communication among faculty and to create a culture of people happy to come to work because emotional dispositions are aligned with helping kids become aware of the things that ultimately make them happy. The dialogue and tools for this transformation are found in the EI literature, but are made usable and practical through the Six Seconds group. As is the case with any discipline, sharing a common vocabulary to process emotions and contemplate better choices is essential. When adults and students communicate with understanding and give voice to their feelings in calm and meaningful ways, a culture of acceptance, trust and belonging is the result. There are still misunderstandings and disagreements. People occasionally get angry. We are, after all, human. The difference for us is – we work through issues and come out the other end better people for it!

What our teachers say

“My ultimate goal as an educator is to inspire and provide a safe place for students to express themselves through the art of dance. SEI practices have given me the tools to achieve this goal, as well as encourage students to take responsibility for their own goals and achievements in life.”

“In the Special Education world we continually work with students and their families on what it means to be smart with feelings (emotional intelligence). I feel the academic survival of my/all students depends on being able to recognize and manage emotions appropriately. One of the best predictors of success in life is being able to recognize and effectively deal with others’ emotions...”

“SEI has helped the students emotionally, physically, and mentally.”

“SEI has impacted everything from everyday social interactions to classroom instruction. I have seen tremendous growth within the culture of our class that I attribute to their SEI learning. The students have

gone so far as to thank me for giving them the opportunity to work this way. They have a deeper understanding of themselves as well as the classmates that they interact with. SEI learning is a new opportunity for growth. Emotional navigation and skills are essential predictors of lifelong success and well-being.”

“The presence of SEI in the classroom automatically promotes accountability, choice, and natural consequences. I have been witness to children taking a stand for themselves because they were able to get in touch with and express in healthy ways what they were feeling. It is powerful! I love teaching at a school where SEI is one of the main pillars.”

“I love teaching and learning about Emotional Intelligence. I believe it is absolutely important in an educational setting. I have formed relationships with my students that contribute to a safe learning environment and enable them to take educational risks that they might not take otherwise.”

Final feelings and thoughts If the essence of education is relationship building, it is incumbent upon all educators to build their repertoire of techniques, strategies, and skills toward that end. In the same way as experience and use of good pedagogy enhances instruction and outcomes for students academically, increasing emotional literacy, social functionality, and knowledge of regulating these domains dramatically affects the disposition and behavior of educators. In turn, the mode by which educators transmit their expectations are felt and understood more readily by students when the “message” is coming from a feeling place. SEI provides a vehicle for all students, staff and faculty to communicate in genuine ways to elevate the workplace to the “calling” of education as opposed to the “job” it can become.

When this was published: Ed Woodd was the Director of Valley Academy Charter School in Hurricane, UT. He is currently the Director of a charter school in Santa Fe, NM. His doctoral research is in Emotional Intelligence. Dr. Killeen was the Vice Principal of Valley Academy Charter School. His doctorate is in educational psychology and gifted education.

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