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Social Emotional Learning:

Developing Emotional and Social Intelligence in Students with Incarcerated Parents

Abstract

Our study will focus on Implementing Social Emotional Learning and trying to develop emotional and social intelligences in students who have at least one incarcerated parent and are about to enter adolescence. Emotional and Social intelligence was introduce by Howard Gardner in the 1980's and has helped us understand that we cannot look at educational in the traditional "Three R's" system of Reading, Writing, and Arithmetic. We need to be able to instill positive feelings of self-worth in students. We used a pull-out program in a New York City Public School as the setting for our intervention. The main goals for the students we observed, of which there were fifteen, were to increase their self and other awareness, improve their mood management, get them to be self-motivated, teach them empathy, and show them how to manage their everyday relationships. Due to the nature of our intervention, many of the results were not expected to be immediate, and in some cases even quantifiable. However, we were able to see progress in more qualitative forms.

Social Emotional Learning:

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Howard Gardner (1993) suggested that we have been looking at the human intelligence in a very primitive way. The dominant culture of the time believed that the only way to test intelligence was to look at math and reading. Gardner suggested that there were actually eight intelligences: Linguistic, Musical, Logical-Mathematical, Spatial, Body-Kinesthetic, Interpersonal, Intrapersonal, and Naturalist. Gardner believed that with each of the intelligences there was a potential strength that accompanied it:

Intelligences:	Potential Strengths:
Linguistic	Child expresses him- or herself clearly through written or spoken language; can use language to achieve goals.
Musical	Child has strong musical talents or inclinations; can appreciate musical patterns, rhythms, etc.
Logical-Mathematical	Child is good at reasoning logically, solving mathematical problems, and/or exploring issues scientifically.
Spatial	Child is aware of the space, locations, and/or dimensions around him or her.
Bodily-Kinesthetic	Child performs well at sports, is aware of his or her body in motion, and can use mental ability to coordinate physical movements.
Interpersonal	Child has success at interacting with other people, having empathy for others' feelings, and interpreting other's motivations and desires.
Intrapersonal	Child is good at interpreting his or her own feelings.

Naturalist	Child knows a lot about nature; can retain facts about the environment, animals, etc.

(Schirduan, 2001)

With his new theory in hand, Gardner believed that it was time to change the way we conveyed knowledge to students. He believed that we needed to "address individual children's learning styles, intelligences, and interests," in order to really help them learn (Gardner 1993). Gardner believed that the only way to reach students' full potential was to form a new curriculum based on his multiple intelligences model. "Schools Using a Multiple Intelligences Theory (SUMIT) were designed to reflect the various cognitive profiles of the students" (Schirduan, 2001). In these schools research showed that students performed better than in schools that did not implement Gardner's theory; students attended class regularly and performed at or above grade level on standardized tests.

Daniel Goleman (1995) believed that from Gardner's work we could create a new type of intelligence. He suggested that if we combine Gardner's Interpersonal and Intrapersonal intelligences we could create a more holistic intelligence, Emotional Intelligence (EQ). Emotional intelligence was not something new or mysterious; on the contrary it was used by Socrates, who believed that knowing yourself was above all, the ultimate proof of intelligence. Although the concept is not new in the philosophical sense, it is new inside the walls of most schools. "Goleman's work teaches us that children's emotional and social skills can be cultivated, so that the child

will accrue both short-term and long-term advantages in regard to well-being, performance and success in life" (Stern, 2000). Goleman believed that emotional intelligence was actually more indicative of the success of a student. He reported "IQ is only a minor predictor of success in life, while emotional and social skills are far better predictors of success and well-being than academic intelligence" (Goleman, 1995). He found that within emotional intelligence there were five emotional competencies:

a. Self and other awareness: understanding and identifying feelings; knowing when one's feelings shift; understanding the difference between thinking, feeling and acting; and understanding that one's actions have consequences in terms of others' feelings.

b. Mood management: handling and managing difficult feelings; controlling impulses; and handling anger constructively

c. Self-motivation: being able to set goals and persevere towards them with optimism and hope, even in the face of setbacks

d. Empathy: being able to put yourself "in someone else's shoes" both cognitively and affectively; being able to take someone's perspective; being able to show that you care

e. Management of relationships: making friends, handling friendships; resolving conflicts; cooperating; collaborative learning and other social skills (Goleman, 1995)

Goleman believed that once these competencies were mastered that the student would achieve "enhanced emotional intelligence," and thus achieve a greater general intelligence. How could we reach this goal of "enhanced emotional intelligence"? The dominant curriculum was not cutting it.

Out of the research that Goleman's book, *Emotional Intelligence* inspired, a way to address the emotional intelligence of a student was born, Social/ Emotional Learning (SEL). Dr. Elias describes SEL as the process through which we learn to recognize and manage emotions, care about others, make good decisions, behave ethically and responsibly, develop positive relationships, and avoid negative behaviors (Zins, 2004). We are very eager to implement this research in the classroom, but how can we fit what seems like a luxury in the academic world, bettering the emotional state of our students, into our classrooms that are so test prep/ grade focused?

Mary Kate Land has been working with a SEL curriculum for over twenty years now and is a big proponent for this intervention. She believes that the only way that SEL will overtake the dominant culture of education will be if more teachers start using it. Land knows that this is not an easy task for those who have not used SEL in their classroom. In her article (Land, 2011) "Five Simple Techniques to Incorporate Social and Emotional Learning," Land lays out some common practices in the world of SEL and goes on to explain how she uses them. Land lists as Technique 1: Implement Regular Class Meetings, here the teacher and their students meet one on one to "discuss challenges, promote responsibility, and thoughtfulness in students," (2011). This is a

very strong strategy that could really instill a sense of importance of involvement from the students.

Technique 2: Use Conflict Resolution to Teach Problem-Solving Skills speaks to students being able to discuss interpersonal conflicts and handle their disagreements in a positive way. Land notes that, "teachers often worry that time spent handling interpersonal conflict will rob the students of time on task" (2011). This is a concern that is valid; however this worry should not take away from the fact that conflict resolution is important and should be stressed. Land concurs with her colleagues, and warns that before this is attempted, that the teacher be educated in problem solving skills in order to "stop the conflict as quickly as possible and get back to the real business at hand […] Learning a conflict resolution strategy brings interpersonal conflict into the realm of 'intentional curriculum' and legitimizes the time we spend learning these skills." (Land, 2011).

Technique 3: Use Emotional Sandwiching is something that most teachers already do, but don't realize it. Emotional Sandwiching speaks to the warmth that a teacher provides in the classroom. Land believes that "we can help promote this type of warmth by starting and ending every school day with a personal connection" (2011). This does not have to be a big show or take up a lot of time; it can be as simple as saying "good morning" or "how's your day going?" "If we think back to our school days and a teacher we enjoyed, we almost certainly bring to mind also a classroom environment where we enjoyed learning," (Zins, 2004). Land also suggests having a

small discussion before dismissal about anything that the class might be or is

interested in covering for the future. Students, like everyone, want to matter and be

noticed and it is quite important for them to get this at school so that they look

forward to going.

Technique 4: Build Emotional Capital in Ourselves and Technique 5: Build

Emotional Capital in Our Kids both discuss how to improve our intrapersonal emotions

and how we can instill strong intrapersonal emotions in our students. "When we are

emotionally balanced and feeling appreciated and valued, we are better able to be

present for our students and support their growth" (Land, 2011). Through our actions,

attitude, and demeanor we can communicate to our students that "feeling good will

lead to doing good."

> If we can think of our interactions as a banking system, we want to be
>
> sure we are making plenty of deposits (emotionally supportive
>
> communications) in relation to the number of withdrawals (requests for
>
> self-control and cooperation) we require. Students whose accounts have
>
> been overdrawn by life may need many deposits before a single
>
> withdrawal can be expected. (2011)

This is something that sometimes teachers forget. These students are on the way

towards adulthood, they are not there yet, and it is up to us as teachers to model what

the proper expectations are, from the environment around them.

While SEL can be seen as important for all students in any educational climate, it is particularly vital for at-risk students. Students who are arguably the most at-risk in terms of social and emotional development are those with incarcerated parents. "Children with incarcerated parents, and mothers in particular, are at increased risk for academic failure and school dropout." (Dallaire, 2010) The factors that impact these children's opportunities for academic success are invariably tied to the emotional strife presented by parental incarceration. While school is ideally a beacon of sanity for children with such a myriad of problems at home, these issues are so omnipresent in the lives of the students that they often manifest themselves in the classroom in the form of emotional and behavioral crises.

In the article, "Teachers' experiences with and expectations of children with incarcerated parents", Danielle Dallaire interviews teachers about a number of topics regarding the effects of parental incarceration on children and families. The findings provide insight into the vast array of issues these children must endure at home and how they can manifest in school. "Regarding behavior: Teachers noticed several distinct child behavioral and emotional reactions to parental incarceration, including emotional disturbances and internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Child behavior problems were mentioned in 22 of the 30 interview transcripts. Teachers noted that these emotional difficulties can often lead to academic difficulties, as one teacher noted:

"He had an emotional block because he knew his dad was going to get

out of prison, but I don't think he knew what to do with how he was

feeling...he would just go through this range of emotions and he never

had control of himself and he just, for a couple of weeks leading up to his

dad getting out of prison, he didn't know whether he was supposed to be

angry, happy...he didn't know what he was supposed to do. It was really

hard to watch him go through all of that in class and know that he

couldn't control it and he just needed to process it, but in the mean time

he wasn't really learning anything because it preceded everything else,

what he was thinking about." (2010)

The cyclical nature of the emotional and academic difficulties that children with

incarcerated parents endure leads to the further inhibition of the emotional

competencies that Daniel Goleman highlighted, in turn severely hindering these

children's growth as people. As evidenced by the teacher interviews conducted by

Dallaire, often times these students' minds are so scrambled that the emotional and

behavioral impulses make academic progress unfeasible. In that sense, integration of

an SEL curriculum can go a long way in transforming the cycle of emotional and

academic difficulties, into a cycle of emotional and academic prowess.

In addition to teachers emphasizing principles of social and emotional learning

in the classroom, mentoring programs have proven to be an effective avenue for the

enhancement of emotional capacities of children with incarcerated parents.

Occasionally, children dealing with parental incarceration can be stigmatized, not only by other students, but also by teachers. "... several [teachers] (n = 10) noted that they have witnessed colleagues being "unsupportive," "unprofessional" and expecting less from children with incarcerated parents. One teacher noted that for some of her colleagues, knowing that a parent was incarcerated would "play a role in how they treat that child." Another teacher noted that knowledge of a parent's incarceration often translated into lower teacher expectations, stating that some teachers would not "expect as much because the incarceration kind of explained it [the child's behavior]." Another noted that "I have seen some teachers who are not very supportive... they feel they that can't do anything for them so forget them." (Dallaire, 2010)

In the article "Mentoring Children With Incarcerated Parents: Implications for Research, Practice, and Policy", Rebecca Shlafer explores "the development of the mentoring relationship, challenges and benefits of mentoring children with incarcerated parents." (2009) A relationship with a mentor can provide a number of pillars for development and opportunities that aren't available in school for children with incarcerated parents. The social and emotional support that is provided on an individual level by a mentor is something that school simply cannot match. Furthermore, children with incarcerated parents can have privacy and trust issues with adult figures, and even with close friends. In "Children of incarcerated parents: Challenges and resiliency, in their own words", Ebony Ruhland identifies this issue through interviews with such children.

"Well, because you know how kids are? They like, oh where's your dad? We don't hardly see him as often. It's always mom picking you up. And then it starts...then I tell them well, he's in prison. And then they start being smarty pants, and then it turns into a whole conversation, and like, it takes me awhile to get the darn thing out of my head." (Ruhland, 2008).

"One young boy, when asked if there was anyone with whom he did not talk to about his dad, but wished he could, replied that he wished he could share with his friends, but was conflicted about it, 'I just want to, but I just don't want them to know, so I don't tell them about my dad.'" (2008)

A relationship with a mentor can not only provide a child with a role model and someone to trust and build a relationship with, but in the specific case of children with incarcerated parents, such a relationship can endow the child with the capital to build all five of Goleman's emotional competencies, in turn drastically improving their chances of success and well-being as they grow older.

<center>Intervention</center>

<u>Objectives</u>:

Increase the students' awareness of self and others

Students will show more positive attitudes and values towards others and towards

themselves.

Students will be more responsible in their decision making process.

Improved frequency of positive social interactions between the students and others in their environment.

Students will be drug and alcohol free.

Students will be able to cope with both positive and negative life events.

Students' school attendance and performance will improve.

Students will go on to pursue and acquire a high school diploma.

Students will become more goal oriented and strive to achieve those goals (ie: graduating from college/ vocational school).

Participants:

The population of students that we will be sampling is a group of thirteen 3rd-8th grade students in a large, public, urban elementary/ intermediate school; currently living on a family income below the poverty line. Additionally, each student has at least one parent currently incarcerated.

Procedure:

The intervention that we will be implementing is formally referred to as *social and emotional learning (SEL). SEL* tells us that students' emotional and social skills can be cultivated, so that the student will accrue both short-term and long-term advantages in regard to well-being, performance and success in life. Due to the nature of *SEL*, our

interventions will vary in order to meet the five emotional competencies of the emotional intelligence (EQ) of the student. Mentors and mentees will meet once a week for eight weeks, for 80 minutes, excluding days where a trip is scheduled, in which case they will be together for the duration of the trip.

Spending Time "Doing Nothing":

Students and mentors will have thoughtful conversations about "how life is going," discussing various aspects of the students' life. These conversations could range in discussion anywhere from a sports event or movie that the student has seen to what the student's favorite color is. The truth is it does not matter what the mentor and mentee discuss. Although this seems very elementary, it is the cornerstone of our intervention. Students need to know that they have a stable adult presence in their life that will listen to them. The mentor will serve as a positive role model to the student, not an authority figure.

Goal Setting:

Students of this nature usually do not have many goals set in their mind to work towards achieving. One of the more important five crucial emotional competencies of the emotional intelligence is goal setting for that same reason. Students need to create and express their long and short term goals in order to achieve them. Mentors will help students form their goals through activities and discussion. Mentors will provide students with information about how to achieve the goals that their student has created and help instill a belief that the student can and will realize their goals. As an

example, students can voluntarily participate in an electronic news letter which will display the development of the group as well as the individuals within it.

Skill Building:

Mentors will help mentees build self-efficacy through skills building activities such as cooking and nutritional education. While participating in these activities, students will be given the opportunity to not only build a skill but also reflect on the process and their involvement in it.

Creative Expression:

Mentors and students will work together to create short stories, art work, poetry, or other forms of self expression. Through this activity students will see that there are a multitude of positive outlets to express their experiences. Students will have to opportunity to present and discuss their work with others in the program.

Tutoring:

Students will be afforded the opportunity to receive academic assistance from mentors in the program for school work that they are experiencing difficulty with. Although this is a part of the intervention that a teacher would see as being a priority, we have to remember that the student sees the program as a break from the "monotony" of school, and would not want to use the time they are allotted out of the classroom for extra school work.

Trips:

Trips are a very important part of the program. They allow students the opportunity to experience things that are outside of their everyday environment. The students we are working with very rarely have the opportunity to leave their immediate neighborhood. This dramatically stifles the students' possibilities for growth and progress, and also enhances the chances of recidivism. Students need to be exposed to different stimuli and trips are a great way of achieving this goal. Trips can include museums, high schools, colleges, cities outside of New York (ie: Philadelphia), etc. Mentors can use the trips to not only strengthen the bond with their mentee, but also show students the various opportunities they may have.

Results

After eight weeks of implementing our intervention we were able to report an increase in attendance for 60 percent of the students who participated in the program. Nine out of the fifteen students who participated in the program attended school every day during the intervention. 30 percent of the students' attendance remained the same. We are able to report however, that the students whose attendance remained the same were present for all of the intervention days. Ten percent of the students' school attendance regressed.

After eight weeks of implementing our intervention we were able to report a marginal improvement in students' grades for 47 percent of the participants. Seven of the fifteen students improved their grades by an average of six points. 53 percent of the

participants did not show improvement in their grades. However, only thirteen percent of the students showed a decrease in their overall grades.

After conducting both formal and informal interviews with the students' classroom teachers and guidance counselors, we are able to report that there no cases of which students' classroom behavior regressed. After the eight weeks of implementing or intervention we are able to report that 33 percent of the participants' classroom behavior, showed a significant improvement according to anecdotal information supplied by the classroom teachers.

Discussion

Given the nature of our intervention, many of the results were not expected to be immediate, and in some cases even tangible. Our hope is that the fifteen students in the program will be provided with seeds of social and emotional intelligence that will continue to be cultivated going forward. That said, there were a number of signs that we were able to read as indicative of their progress. There were three exemplary cases in which the objectives set forth in our intervention were evident.

Keisha was a sixth grader, who when the program started had serious issues with anger, introversion, and other emotional difficulties which had serious effects on both her academic performance and social abilities. Both of Keisha's parents are incarcerated and she is living with her sister and his sister's boyfriend. Keisha had the proverbial short fuse and would lash out at teachers, as well as counselors, who attempted to help her in times of frustration. Additionally, Keisha did not socialize

with other students. After just about a year in our program, Keisha made tremendous strides socially, emotionally and academically. Keisha's behavior in class improved dramatically, as did her interaction with other students. Keisha received the "Student of the Month" award for February 2012, and she also volunteered to serve as the leader of the electronic newsletter that we are putting together for the program.

Roger was an eighth grader who had a strong interest in sports. Roger's mother is incarcerated and his father is absent from his life. Roger lives with his elderly grandmother in Coney Island. He plays basketball, and when we did a lesson centered on becoming goal oriented early in the program, we concentrated on how Roger and the other students could align their interests with their goals – both immediate (i.e. High School admittance and graduation) and further down the line (i.e. career). Roger developed a goal of being accepted into a High School at which he could synthesize his sports prowess into viable skills for a career in sports. Roger made the High School of Sports Management his first choice on his High School application list and a few months later, Roger received his acceptance to that very High School. He was eager to share this achievement with his mentor and the people involved with the program.

Zaire was a fifth grader who had issues with anger and self-worth that interfered with his ability to function in school socialy, and in turn academically. His mother is incarcerated, his father is out of the picture and he is living in foster care. Zaire was extremely quick to instigate in vulgar fashion with other students as well as teachers, and he would also get in fights frequently, many of which he initiated. After

working with a mentor for a semester, Zaire became noticeably calmer, more collected, and more confident. When asked about what he thought the program did for him, he specifically cited his mentor's advice about handling situations of conflict, an example of which being when she told Zaire to walk to the bathroom and splash water on his face to cool down when he felt that he was getting angry and hot.

The three students highlighted here were present for every session of the program we held at the school this year. Although it is unfortunate that all fifteen students could not attend every session, it is encouraging that we were able to identify progress from students such as Keisha, Roger, and Zaire, whose deep involvement is most representative of the objectives and effectiveness of the intervention. Their achievements and progress directly reflected vital elements of the S.E.L. curriculum that we implemented for this intervention.

Limitations

Some of the limitations we encountered in our intervention had primarily to do with restrictions linked to being a pullout program in a New York City Public School. We were limited to essentially 50 minutes per week with the student/mentees, and because of factors such as public school testing, class scheduling conflicts, holidays, college vacations (our mentors being from the nursing program at New York City College of Technology), etc., there were breaks in the continuity of our program. Although the mentors were there for four hours each Wednesday (excluding unavailable dates), the mentees could only be there for certain 50 minute blocks, which

made it difficult for us to meet with each student , and in turn, to achieve all of our objectives.

More than one time during the year, we encountered the issue of a student moving out of the area, essentially without a trace. Given the population that we were working with in Brownsville and the lack of stability in the vast majority of these children's homes, transience is something that comes with the territory. The term "at-risk" doesn't begin to encapsulate the climate in neighborhoods like this, where deprivation is everywhere and survival supersedes things like educational continuity.

Like the neighborhood and population of Brownsville, the school was deprived of many resources that other areas perhaps take for granted. There was only one social worker and one guidance counselor for a school with a population of approximately 570. Fortunately, we were able to have direct and consistent contact with the guidance counselor, who served as a liaison on many levels. She had deeper contact with and insights into the students involved in the intervention than many other adults who worked with these children, including their teachers and mentors.

Some ideas for the future would have to include; implementing a social and emotional curriculum for the entire school. This will allow all the students to benefit from a program like this one; having the program available more than one day a week. I believe that offering the program more than once a week, for 50 minutes will only serve to increase the frequency of the students attending school and succeeding in their studies; as they work towards their goal of graduating from junior high and going

to high school. Having classroom teachers involved in the program could be another amendment to the intervention. If the students see that their teachers are taking an active role in their lives, outside of the classroom, there is a greater chance that they will respect those teachers more and maybe even like them; this will increase the students' participation in class and in the school.

The ultimate goal is for us to break the incarceration cycle that exists in our society. These students need to have positive role models in their lives so that they do not end up in prison, like their parent(s). An SEL program, such as the one we implemented is what is necessary in these students' lives to provide them with these positive role models.

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