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School Counselors Use Data to Tune into the Emotional Drivers of Learning

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ABSTRACT

Social emotional learning is recognized as a critical process for enhancing students' academics, behavior, health, relationship quality and future success. Not only students but also adults benefit from deepening their awareness, making intentional choices, and finding empathy and connection with others. School counselors are charged through the ASCA National Model, with being leaders, collaborators, advocates and systemic change agents. Social emotional learning can provide a unifying vision, structure, processes, and assessment tools to assist school counselors in becoming effective change agents. In this case study, teachers were helped to review their own social emotional competencies and to compare these to those of their students. When school counselors use data to demonstrate the value of social emotional learning, tremendous opportunities exist for them to be influential leaders in their schools and communities and propel students towards lifelong learning and success.

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Imagine Gita, a typical 9-year-old girl. She wants to do well, but she is facing serious adversity in her life -- she feels scared, isolated, and angry; *has she learned how to handle these difficult feelings so she can thrive - and do well in school?*

Imagine Gita has a typical teacher, focused on preparing her students for the upcoming exam; *does she have the tools and skills to help Gita?*

Imagine this is in a typical school: *have the children learned to talk to one another, to share, to support one another to be and do their best learning?*

All too often, the answers to all these questions are "No." Researchers have demonstrated that it's invaluable, and, indeed, possible, to change this trend by integrating Emotional Intelligence (EQ) and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) into our schools.

How would all educators fare with greater self-awareness and the ability to make more intentional choices? How would this increased awareness facilitate powerful learning for students like Gita? ? What effect on all students' engagement and

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learning if counselors and educators deepened their own emotional intelligence (EQ) competencies and were able to model these for their students?

SEL is the educational offspring of EQ (Six Seconds, 2007). It is the process by which children and adults develop the awareness and skills to make positive decisions, deepen their relationships, and reach their goals



I am a certified school counselor in Arizona and Director of Education for a global emotional intelligence network. Recently my colleague from Italy and I spent a day coaching teachers at an independent elementary and middle school in California. Synapse School, as it is called, offers an advanced academic curriculum fully integrated with EQ and SEL. The program is carefully designed to capture the power of blending SEL with brain-based, project driven, constructivist learning focused on school-wide themes. Synapse School, like many schools in CA, unfortunately, does not have a school counselor, but since its inception, the board, faculty, and administration have been deeply committed to social emotional learning for themselves and their students. They have also been committed to using assessments to measure the SEL competencies and

outcomes for their students and for themselves.

For those not familiar with SEL, I offer a brief introduction. SEL is the educational offspring of EQ (Six Seconds, 2007).

It is the process by which children and adults develop the awareness and skills to make positive decisions, deepen their relationships, and reach their goals (CASEL, 2014; Six Seconds, 2007). Researchers have demonstrated

that well-implemented SEL programs result in an 11% point gain in academics, measured by standardized test scores (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011). Equally important, researchers have overwhelmingly shown the linkages between SEL skills and school engagement and motivation, student health and wellness, and a decrease in at-risk behaviors (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor & Schellinger, 2011; Freedman, 2010). In a school with comprehensive SEL integration, a set of discrete EQ skills is taught to every student in every grade level. Teachers focus on creating a safe and nurturing classroom climate where students feel they belong, where they trust their teachers and each other, and where they feel motivated to learn. Educators at schools with school-wide SEL integration are also committed to creating a whole school climate where involvement,

safety, learning, and thriving occur (Six Seconds, 2014). In SEL schools, individual and group SEL competencies are taught, practiced, and measured to determine growth in competencies and overall personal, social, and academic outcomes. Scientific evidence now exists that:

SEL can accelerate student learning by increasing students' intrinsic motivation to achieve, their ability to be attentive and engaged in their work, their satisfaction with learning, their sense of belonging, and their desire to work cooperatively with other students. SEL also helps teachers become more effective, by fostering their own social and emotional development and supporting a caring and challenging classroom climate. (Brigland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013, Finding #3)

These SEL concepts and structures are not unfamiliar to school counselors who follow the structure and guidelines of the ASCA National Model (ASCA, 2012). Specifically, following the ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success: K-12 College- and Career- Readiness for Every Student, school counselors are responsible for insuring that their students have the skills needed for academic, social/emotional and career success (ASCA 2012). Skills such as emotional literacy, applying consequential

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thinking, navigating emotions, and empathy are critical for all students, K-12, as they pursue their education and future planning. Since the inception of the National Model, school counselors have been taught to be leaders, collaborators, advocates for youth and programs to help all students succeed, and drivers of systemic change (ASCA, 2012).

School counselors have been called the "glue that binds" (Suerto-Duran, 2010), and often the individuals most trusted by all constituents in schools. As such, school counselors have both a responsibility and tremendous opportunity to become leaders in integrating a social emotional learning framework into their comprehensive school counseling programs (DeVoss & Stillman, 2012). The structures and strategies of SEL align perfectly with the ASCA National Model, and with its student and professional competencies, making school counselors the natural choice to become leaders and advocates for SEL whole-school integration.

School counselors throughout the world have indicated to me that social emotional learning is becoming an essential component of their comprehensive school counseling programs. Rather than compete with school counseling vision and mission, they see it as a natural extension of their work.

Many school counselors are beginning to use SEL data and assessments to measure social and emotional growth in individuals, and in groups, classrooms, grade levels, and whole schools. Equally important, school counselors who use SEL in their informal roles as consultants and coaches to teachers and administrators find that using EQ assessments for adults can be equally valuable and necessary to help adults deal with the stresses and challenges that occur in schools each day. As school counselors and other adults develop self awareness through the EQ assessments, they may find themselves more empathic and purposeful, remembering why they became educators. They can become more intentional in their choices, less reactive to adverse situations, and more connected to each other, to their students, and to the peers. A school counselor developing EQ competencies in emotional literacy and optimism shared her reflections in an online discussion post:

The most important EQ skill for me as I move back into my role as a school counselor is empathy. The start of school can be a trying time for students and staff alike and exercising empathy with the people I'm working with can make the transition easier for all of us. The most important skill that I'm currently working on is exercising optimism. With the flood

of new state educational changes, increased case loads and ever increasing social/emotional stressors for my students, looking on the bright side can some times be too hard to muster.

A variety of SEL assessments exist that school counselors may use to analyze the social emotional competencies of their students. My experience with Synapse teachers and assessments developed by Six Seconds, provides but one example of how SEL assessments can be utilized by counselors, teachers, and administrators to deepen awareness and develop action plans for themselves and their students and classes.

Researchers have found that in designing SEL interventions, attention needs to be paid to student-teacher relationships and to the development of SEL skills in teachers themselves (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). At the start of the school year, teachers and administrators at Synapse took a research-based, validated EQ assessment, the SEI (Six Seconds, 2007). Students took the youth version of the assessment, the SEI-YV (Six Seconds, 2012). The EQ competencies measured by the SEI and the SEI-YV are the same: emotional literacy, recognizing patterns, applying consequential thinking, navigating emotions, engaging intrinsic motivation, exercising optimism, increasing empathy, and

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pursuing a noble goal.

Recognizing the importance of student-teacher relationships for learning, my colleague and I helped teachers at Synapse to review their own individual SEI reports, noting EQ strengths and challenges. We helped them set goals to apply these competencies in their work with students. Some teachers, for example, focused on increasing empathy for students and parents, while others explored recognizing patterns and applying consequential thinking in the emotional, social, and behavioral issues that they confront daily in the classroom.

Teachers (as well as counselors, parents, and administrators) can improve their own performance, and that of their class, by using their top Brain App strengths more fully and effectively and working to improve their lower ones.

My colleague and I also helped the teachers to review two adult reports, derived from their own adult SEI assessments, and their classroom's **Dashboard** or group report derived from the student assessments. The first report, the Brain Brief Profile provides a snapshot of one's brain's current style for processing emotional and cognitive data. It is useful for helping people think about what their brain likes to focus on, how it makes decisions, and what its primary drivers are. In a classroom or group, the teacher and students' brain styles may contribute strengths to performance and teamwork.

The second report we discussed with teachers, the **Brain Talent Profile**, reveals one's top six **Brain Apps**,

representing the brain's ability to apply an important skill in action. Using the metaphor of a smart phone app, a Brain App is like a tool for the brain. The **Brain Talent** profile describes unique, powerful capabilities that are essential to flourish in complex times – at work, in school, in life – and suggests opportunities to use these talents more fully. Like a smart phone app, one can have a Brain App, but not necessarily be using it. Teachers (as well as counselors, parents, and administrators) can improve their own performance, and that of their class, by using their top **Brain App** strengths more fully and effectively and working to improve their lower ones.

review their individual Brain Brief and Brain Talent Profiles with teachers, my colleague and I shared with them their classroom Dashboards. The Dashboard, presents a fascinating opportunity to review a classroom or small group's combined EQ score, divergence of brain styles, brain apps in order of strength, and students' performance. In the case of this Classroom Dashboard, we reviewed the students' SEI-YV outcome scores of Good Health, Life Satisfaction, Personal Achievement, Relationship Quality, and Self-Efficacy. The lowest outcome score for this group was Relationship Quality, indicating a direction for further intervention.

What Brain Apps are you running today?



One teacher who shared with us her own significant personal challenges this past year, realized the value of her highest apps, Resilience, Reflection, and Prioritizing, in allowing her to make healthy choices for herself and in her work.

THE DASHBOARD

After helping teachers to

In our work with the Synapse teachers, the synergy of educators reviewing their own Brain Styles and Brain Apps and aligning these with their classes' profiles was exciting and profound. Teachers later reported that ongoing discussions were directly impacting how they were addressing classroom and student needs.

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Recommendations made to the teachers included ways to best appreciate and utilize the diverse brain styles in the room. School counselors could make further recommendations, based on a sample such as the one above, to improve the low relationship quality or the lack of ability in this group to make connections. In the SEI-YV, the three EQ competencies that contribute the most to Relationship Quality are Optimism, Navigate Emotions, and Empathy (Jensen, Feidelday-Van-Dyke, & Freedman, 2012). Activities, derived from the school counseling curriculum, could be designed to improve students' competencies in these areas, thus enhancing the App of Connection. The teachers could be supported in developing the App of Reflection, another lower outcome, with great consequences for academics and social interactions. School counselors could help teachers consider how strengths such as resilience and adaptability could be used to increase academic performance areas, especially in content areas, such as math or language arts. Data derived from the Class Dashboard could be used for school counseling and all content area curriculum planning purposes, for modifying classroom groupings, and for differentiating instruction. The competencies explored through the Dashboard can also be used to assure that students are meeting common



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core standards. Class meetings and circles are also excellent arenas for exploring this data with students, and school counselors can play a pivotal role in helping teachers with these processes.

School counselors could use these SEI assessments in similar ways to that described above to help teachers become more in touch with their strengths and challenges and those of their students as a group. School counselors can also administer the SEI youth version assessment to individual students, ages 7-18, and parents can be given a Parents version to take for their children and give their perspective on the youth's competencies. School counselors could use youth assessments and reports as part of their classroom lessons or small group activities for personal/social, career, and academic growth. As a former school counselor, I believe this type of data would have made a tremendous difference in my work with individual students, small groups, parents, and in

team or student assistance meetings for students at risk. Research is currently being conducted by a school counselor in AZ are using these youth assessments in small group and after school programs for youth receiving D's and F's. The counselor will look at both growth in competencies over the course of the semester intervention and also academic growth as measured by an increase in grades out of the failure range.

School counselors looking for ways to strengthen their data-driven comprehensive programs and continue their critical role as leader, advocate, collaborators and system change agents, could look to assessments such as the ones described above to catalyze and unify the school around a common framework of SEL

Imagine the impact on emotional, social, career, and academic skills, if school counselors, teachers, parents,

administrators, and students were developing their social emotional learning; if they were using assessment data and reports such as the above, to become more self-aware, to make more intentional choices, and to consider empathy and purpose in their actions toward each other and as change makers in the world.

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