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Strengthening social emotional learning with student, teacher, and schoolwide assessments☆

Susan B. Stillman[a,*], Paul Stillman[c], Lorea Martinez[c], Joshua Freedman[c], Anabel L. Jensen[b], Cherilyn Leet[c]

[a] Six Seconds and Fielding Graduate University, USA
[b] Six Seconds and Notre Dame de Namur University, USA
[c] Six Seconds, USA

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ABSTRACT

In this case study, we examined how a school, committed to emotional intelligence (EQ) as a central pillar, used assessment data to build positive school climate and strengthen the EQ of students and all community members. School leaders used multiple EQ and school climate assessments, over several years, to acquire data to enhance individual success, enrich classroom practice, and provide a strategy for schoolwide improvement. Teachers used data to help both youth and adults increase self-awareness, make better choices, and create a more supportive learning community. Assessment results guided curriculum development and classroom management. Administrators examined their own effectiveness individually and as a team and planned teacher professional development and parent workshops. A three-part benchmarks framework for schoolwide implementation of social emotional learning is used to analyze (a) student and adult competencies, (b) classroom practices, and (c) whole school approaches, including school climate and administrative team leadership.

1. Introduction

In the 21st century, educators serve students who come from diverse ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds and who have varied abilities, challenges, and support systems (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). A child's academic, social, and emotional development is influenced by micro-conditions within their family, classroom, and school community, and the macro contexts within the larger community and society (Eccles & Roeser, 2011; Evans & Wachs, 2010). A growing body of literature supports the proposition that schools play an important role in preparing all students for academic and life success when they focus on the competencies that help students be more self-aware, make better decisions, set goals, solve problems, and have sustaining positive relationships with others (Dymnicki, Sambolt, & Kidron, 2013; Jones, Bouffard, & Weissbourd, 2013; Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013). In a wide variety of environments, the ability of a child to understand, regulate, and utilize emotions to increase self-awareness, make optimal decisions, set goals, and connect well with others greatly impacts his or her life outcomes and ability to thrive (Durlak et al., 2011).

In this paper, these social-emotional competencies, for both youth and adults, will be referred to as emotional intelligence (EQ) or EQ competencies (Freedman, 2012a), the knowledge and skills needed to combine thinking and feeling to make optimal decisions (Freedman, 2010). Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is the process through which both children and adults acquire and effectively apply these same skills, learning to understand and use emotions wisely, set positive goals, establish and maintain positive relationships, and engage in responsible decision making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2016).

The theoretical framework for this paper is based on two separate but related models. The first is the Six Seconds Emotional Intelligence model (Freedman, 2012a), originally developed in 1997 to provide a useful action plan for learning and practicing emotional intelligence in daily life. This model begins with three important pursuits: Know Yourself, to become more aware; Choose Yourself, to be more intentional; and Give Yourself, to be more purposeful. Under these three pursuits are eight EQ competencies that make up the full model. The eight competencies that comprise the EQ model are Enhance Emotional Literacy, Recognize Patterns, Apply Consequential Thinking, Navigate Emotions, Exercise Optimism, Enhance Intrinsic Motivation, Increase Empathy, and Pursue Noble Goals.

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* Corresponding author at: Six Seconds and Fielding Graduate University, 12505 N. Fallen Shadows Dr. Marana, AZ 85658, USA.
E-mail address: susan.stillman@6seconds.org (S.B. Stillman).

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The common framework for social-emotional competencies defined by the Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) includes the broad skills of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management skills, and responsible decision-making (Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning, 2016). The Six Seconds' EQ competencies align closely with the skills of the CASEL model. The Six Seconds' EQ model serves as the basis for the development of social and emotional skills, referred to as EQ competencies, in both children and adults, and is a central focus of formal instruction as well as informal coaching and classroom management at the school described in this study.

The second part of our theoretical framework is a model that describes the integration of SEL into a school. Six Seconds has created benchmarks (Freedman, Jensen, Stillman & McCown, 2016) to guide schools through individual development of EQ competencies in adults and youth, classroom and schoolwide practices. Freedman, Jensen, Stillman, and McCown (2016) developed these benchmarks to provide a rubric for schools to describe, measure, and analyze their current levels of SEL implementation and devise plans for further development. Within this framework, SEL integration in a school is multi-leveled. To effectively implement social emotional learning, and teach the essential skills of emotional intelligence, best practices have been identified in three key strands (Freedman et al., 2016):

- Everyone in the school is developing their own EQ skills
- EQ is integrated into the classrooms to enhance academic learning
- The whole school uses EQ to build a thriving learning community

In this view, SEL integration is more than choosing a program. As Jones and Bouffard (2012) noted, SEL integration necessitates developing strategies to integrate it into all aspects of educational practice, including academic instruction and school climate. This paper illustrates how an independent school in California embraced EQ as one of its core pillars and initiated a process to integrate SEL into their educational program following the Six Seconds benchmarks for SEL integration (Freedman et al., 2016). We focus on how assessments were used to support SEL implementation in the three strands of the benchmarks. The tools and practices implemented, as well as the lessons learned, are presented in this case study.

1.1. Rationale for SEL integration

With rising pressure on schools to meet and raise academic standards, what is the rationale for taking time out of the school day for EQ development and SEL integration? Evidence exists that social and emotional skills in youth are predictive of higher academic achievement (Elliot, Frey, & Davies, 2015). These skills may be the foundation for high-performing students, classrooms, and schools (Durlak et al., 2011). A meta-analysis of 213 schools, with over 270,000 students, revealed an 11% gain in academic achievement in schools with well-implemented SEL programs (Durlak et al., 2011). These researchers also found that SEL programs could greatly reduce risk-taking, emotional distress, and conduct disorders in students.

As a follow-up, some of the same researchers and their colleagues conducted a meta-analysis of SEL and longitudinal outcomes and found a significant correlation between students' post SEL intervention scores and their long-term outcomes, measured six months or more after the intervention (Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, & Weissberg, 2017).

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” (Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013, p. 30). SEL also can reduce student depression and stress, improve student attitudes towards school and increase pro-social behaviors such as empathy and compassion (Durlak et al., 2011).

Researchers have found that educators who promote SEL enable greater student engagement and better prepare students for post-secondary education, the world of work, and to be effective citizens (Dymnicki et al., 2013). Researchers have also demonstrated a positive return on investments in SEL in schools (Belfield et al., 2015). More recently, Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, and Gullotta (2015) advised that both students and adults need the opportunity to learn and practice social emotional skills and apply them in various situations, in both formal instruction and informal coaching. Teachers in the United States fully acknowledged the importance of SEL for student success in school and in life (Bridgeland et al., 2013). Moreover, Jennings (2015) found that teachers' stress reduction and general wellbeing are improved with focus on their own social and emotional competencies, using the strategy of mindfulness, which impacts not only their own wellbeing but that of their classroom learning environment. With the guidance of the benchmarks framework, teachers are empowered to be change-makers, by measurably infusing emotional intelligence into their classrooms and schools.

1.2. Benchmarks for full SEL implementation

The independent school highlighted in this study is well along in the process of meeting these benchmarks for SEL integration. School leaders (a) continue to measure current levels of EQ development in youth and adults, (b) analyze strengths and opportunities in SEL scope and sequence development, (c) deploy teacher and staff professional development, (d) survey the constituents for school climate, and, with that, (e) make plans for deeper and further implementation. To effectively implement SEL, and teach the essential skills of emotional intelligence, Six Seconds has identified best practices in three key strands, comprising three benchmarks in each one:

- Everyone in the school is developing their own EQ skills.
- EQ is integrated into the classrooms to enhance academic learning.
- The whole school uses EQ to build a thriving learning community.

In the first strand, EQ Development, the benchmarks are:

- All community members in the school learn & practice EQ.
- SEL Training for Educators is provided for all staff.
- EQ is measured to support individual growth.

Researchers have long agreed that individual social and emotional competencies can and should be taught to students using direct instruction. More recently, educators have come to understand that adults, teachers, staff, and administrators alike, need SEL training and coaching as well, and that their own modeling of EQ skills is critical to student success (Jones et al., 2013; Patti, Holtzer, Brackett, & Stern, 2015). General knowledge of SEL content, applying pedagogy with fidelity to SEL ideals and behaviors, and knowledge of learners' EQ skills and what is developmentally appropriate, are valuable components of SEL training for educators (Jennings & Frank, 2015). Formative assessment data used to support the continuous improvement of EQ skills (Denham, 2015) in all constituencies is encouraged in this strand.

In the second strand of the benchmarks (Freedman et al., 2016), document, Extending into the Classroom, the goals are:

- EQ data is generated and used to support teachers for effective practice.
- EQ is extended to more than direct instruction; it also supports and is integrated into academic learning.
- EQ is used for positive classroom communities, through the process of infusing SEL into increasing engagement, deepening relationships, and infusing into each classroom a compassionate and caring, inclusive climate.

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