

Is there a relationship between character, values, and ethics and the development of emotional intelligence?

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Is there a relationship between character, values, and ethics and the development of emotional intelligence? Although concepts such as emotional intelligence and values might not seem to be closely related, in this article I will attempt to show that these concepts are directly linked. Indeed, a pilot project I am participating in has the potential to help students in the Jersey City Public Schools make better value judgements as a result of improving emotional intelligence and social decision making skills.

The project is a collaboration between The Social Decision Making/Problem Solving Program of the Behavioral Research and Training Institute of The University of Medicine and Dentistry, University Behavioral HealthCare (umdnj-ubhc); The Department of Psychology at Rutgers University; the Jersey City Public Schools; and my research team at New Jersey City University. The project is funded by the State of New Jersey and is part of the New Jersey Character Education Partnership Initiative and the New Jersey School Counselor Initiative.

The project that is being piloted is referred to as a social and emotional learning (sel) program. Social and emotional learning programs have many commonalities with the concept of emotional intelligence that was popularized in Golemans book, Emotional Intelligence. (1995). In its most basic form, emotional intelligence refers to perceiving, understanding, managing, and using emotions (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Social and emotional learning programs include these skills, but they also address a broader array of abilities that are related to social interactions. Some of the skills that sel programs are designed to develop are social decision making and problem solving skills, conflict resolution skills, the ability to accurately perceive the feelings and perspectives of others, the capacity to treat others fairly and honestly, accuracy in identifying and labeling ones feelings, the capacity to effectively communicate ones thoughts and feelings, impulse control, regulating emotions, and using emotional reactions in a positive rather than a destructive way. Implicit in social and emotional learning programs is the idea that there are multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983) or different ways of being smart (Goleman, 1995). How might emotional intelligence be linked to values and ethics? There are many potential connections. For example, one aspect of social and emotional intelligence is the ability to perceive and be sensitive to emotions in others. The sel program we are implementing in the Jersey City Public Schools uses a number of methods to increase emotional sensitivity and awareness. One method that is designed to accomplish this is to have students look at facial expressions and body language in pictures and indicate what emotion the person is feeling. Students also engage in activities such as specifying the facial features that reflect the emotional state of the person, recalling a time when they felt the emotion expressed in the picture, and thinking of a reason why the person in the picture might feel that way. Role-playing in which students practice mirroring the facial expressions and body language of another person is another method that is used to increase sensitivity to the feelings of others. All of these methods are also infused into academic lessons (e.g., a class might discuss how characters in literary works or in historical and current events were likely to have felt).

Students also engage in perspective taking exercises in which two students with conflicting opinions practice assuming the perspective of the other person. These methods are designed to increase sensitivity to the emotional states of others and to improve emotional literacy in general. They also seem to have potentially powerful implications for values, however. Increased

sensitivity to the emotions of others can lead to increased caring, greater generosity, an increased ability to take another's perspective, and a decreased likelihood of doing unethical acts that cause emotional pain to others. Thus, a result of increasing this aspect of emotional intelligence is the emergence of values and behaviors such as caring, generosity, compassion, empathy, tolerance, perspective taking, acceptance of others, and treating others in an ethical fashion.

Another important component of emotional intelligence is being able to recognize one's own emotional states and to learn to control and regulate extreme negative emotional reactions and impulses. The SEL program we are piloting uses a number of methods to improve these skills: identifying situations that trigger emotional reactions, being sensitive to physical changes that accompany different emotions, generating and role-playing alternative behaviors that can be used in situations that trigger emotion, and extensive practice in cognitive and physiological techniques (e.g., breathing exercises) to reduce the strength of emotions when they are triggered.

How might emotional recognition and control be linked to values? The ability to control emotional reactions and impulsivity has positive effects on behavior, including reducing the likelihood of violent behavior, increasing the effective expression of emotions, increasing constructive interpersonal interactions, maintaining positive social relations, producing more constructive conflict resolution skills, and creating a general reduction in anti-social behavior. The ability to control emotions also allows a person to think clearly in stressful situations, and this ability to engage reasoning processes rather than to react impulsively or over-emotionally creates a psychological environment in which value-consistent behaviors are likely to be exhibited.

The above discussion indicates that both the ability to recognize and empathize with emotions in others and the ability to recognize and regulate one's own emotions are likely to facilitate the development of positive values and lead to ethical, pro-social behaviors. This link between emotional intelligence and values will be discussed in more detail later in the paper.

The need to teach social and emotional competencies as part of the educational curriculum in grades K-12 is receiving increasing awareness and support. The importance of providing financial support for programs that develop character has been emphasized at both the national and state levels. The State of New Jersey is devoting significant resources to expand this aspect of education. Schools are experiencing problems that reflect a lack of emotional awareness and control, poor social decision-making skills, and poor judgments. This is reflected in problems such as school violence, inadequate learning, substance abuse, indifference to others, failure to learn to potential, school disaffection, and alcohol, tobacco and drug use.

There is increasing awareness of the importance of social and emotional competencies for life success (Goleman, 1995, 1998). Indeed there is evidence that social and emotional skills are predictive of a range of outcomes including career success and having positive and rewarding interpersonal relationships (e.g. Elias, 1997). In addition, many of the skills employers are looking for can be classified as social and emotional competencies. The list of workplace readiness skills that students in New Jersey should develop as outlined in the New Jersey Core Curriculum Standards overlaps considerably with the skills that SEL programs develop (Norris & Kress, 2000).

The Pilot Program:

Social Decision Making & Problem Solving

The pilot project in the Jersey City Public Schools was developed by researchers and clinicians at the Department of Psychology at Rutgers University and the Social Decision Making and Problem Solving Program at The Behavioral Research and Training Institute of umdnj-ubhc in collaboration with a wide range of New Jersey school districts. The program is referred to as The Social Decision Making/Problem Solving Program (sdm/ps). The general goal of the program is to promote healthy behavior and life decisions by improving social skills and emotional intelligence. The program is focused on providing students with skills to think clearly under stress, particularly in emotionally and socially complex situations (Elias & Bruene, 1999), such as a situation involving physical confrontation or a situation involving peer pressure.

The sdm/ps program consists of a curriculum of sequenced, coordinated exercises and activities designed to provide teachers with guidelines for systematically teaching and building students' skills. The methods include role-playing, modeling, group problem solving, group discussions and activities, and detailed lesson plans. The skills are practiced extensively and applied to different

situations and different contexts. The program targets skills related to emotional intelligence and social competencies including the following: recognition of physical cues and situations that trigger emotional reactions; strategies for gaining emotional control; learning to pay attention to cues such as body language, eye contact, and tone of voice in order to communicate effectively in emotionally charged situations; learning to recognize and label emotions; the ability to understand reasons underlying emotional reactions and emotional states; the ability to effectively express, verbalize and manage emotions such as anxiety, depression and anger; learning to understand others points of view; decision making, problem solving and conflict resolution skills; social skills in relationships; sensitivity to social cues; and skills for working in groups.

The sdm/ps Program has been shown to be effective in reducing the level of stress that students report feeling, decreasing aggression and violence, reducing alcohol tobacco and drug use, decreasing vandalism, increasing peer acceptance, increasing participation in school activities, and increasing social competence and pro-social behaviors (Elias, Gara, Schuyler, et al, 1981; Elias, Gara, Ubrico, et al, 1986; Bruene-Buter, Hampson, Elias, Clabby & Schuyler, 1997). The program has received numerous awards including validation as a Program of Excellence by the U.S. Department of Education. The program has also received designations as a Model Program, an Exemplary Program, and a Character Education Program of Merit by various national organizations and committees such as The National Mental Health Association, the Expert Panel on Safe and Drug Free Schools, the National Education Goals Panel (Goals 2000), and The Character Education Partnership. The program was also noted as a model program to promote emotional intelligence in Golemans (1995) book.

We are presently working with pilot teams of third and fourth grade teachers in six schools. The goal is to gradually build the program to include additional grade levels, first at these six demonstration sites and then at other schools within the district. The program is currently being used in many other school districts in New Jersey, with implementation district wide in grades K-8. Through efforts of The National Diffusion Network of the U.S. Department of Education, the program has also been disseminated throughout the United States, with adoptions also taking place in other countries. The program is designed sequentially so that the activities in each grade build on earlier procedures and are adapted to the developmental stages of the students.

An important feature of the sdm/ps approach is that the methods that are used to teach emotional intelligence and social competencies are designed to be infused into the academic curriculum and integrated into everyday school activities. Lesson strategies and activities are designed so that sel skills can be applied to content areas such as language arts, health, social studies, civics, science, art, gym, and music. In the context of a history lesson, for example, students might be asked to consider the emotions a prominent historical figure felt at a critical point in history. Likewise in a language arts lesson, students might be asked to identify what a character might be feeling at a critical point in the story and to think of a time when they felt a similar emotion. It is interesting to note that research from cognitive psychology indicates that elaborating information by relating it to knowledge we already have and especially by relating it to our own experiences is an excellent way to improve comprehension and recall. Indeed, there is evidence that social and emotional learning programs not only teach skills related to emotional intelligence, but can also improve academic performance (Bloodworth, Weissberg, Zins, & Walberg, 2001; Elias, Gara, Schuyler, Branden-Muller, & Sayette, 1981).

I have been collaborating with researchers and clinicians from umdnj-ubhc to help implement the program in the Jersey City Public Schools. We are presently monitoring the progress of the implementation and observe the impact of the program on student behavior and academic performance. njcu students I have been working with have been involved in the project in several ways, including going to classrooms in the pilot schools to support teachers, monitoring the progress of the implementation, and observing the impact of the program on student behavior. I am in the process of trying to create Social Problem Solving Laboratories at the pilot schools that will be staffed by njcu students and that will offer individual attention in the sdm/ps methods to children who need extra attention with behavior problems, peer problems, academic difficulties, problems with teachers, or other personal or interpersonal issues. The njcu students will use computer programs which apply the sdm/ps methods to specific problem areas (Poedubicky, Brown, Hoover, & Elias, 2001). I am also working with researchers from umdnj and Rutgers to develop a large-scale research project to study the impact of the program on student behavior

and academic achievement.

Connections Between Values, Ethics, and Emotional Intelligence

As discussed above, it seems that there is a close relationship between emotional intelligence and values. In this section we will discuss the link between emotional intelligence and values in the context of the sdm/ps Program.

Defining values and ethics can be complex. A good place to start to identify important values, however, would seem to be the work of The Character Education Partnership. The Character Education Partnership is a national organization that has attempted to identify characteristics that are universally valued in democracies. Based on the input of people from different ideological, political, and religious backgrounds, the Character Education Partnership identified characteristics such as fairness, responsibility, honesty, compassion, and respect for self and others to be shared values.

As discussed above, developing skills related to perceiving, being sensitive to, and understanding the emotional reactions of others should lead to the emergence of values and behaviors such as caring, empathy, compassion, perspective taking, tolerance, and acceptance of others. Likewise, developing skills in recognizing and controlling one's own emotions is likely to decrease violent behavior, produce more constructive social interactions, result in better interpersonal relations, produce less social conflict, and in general enable people to engage reasoning processes and behave in value-consistent ways rather than react impulsively or emotionally.

A good illustration of how values can emerge from training in sdm/ps skills is provided by some seemingly simple, but effective, procedures that can be referred to as Sharing Circles. A Sharing Circle is used to provide a structured environment in which many different methods, exercises, and lessons can be conducted. A general procedure for a sharing circle is that the teacher first presents or reviews a set of guidelines that the group agrees to: such as respecting Speaker Power, which means only one student can speak at a time and others agree not to interrupt. They also learn things such as Listening Position, which means using eye contact and body posture that show the speaker you are listening, and Active Listening, which means listening to understand and accurately remember what the speaker has said. The students are also asked to agree that they will respect each other and to provide specific examples of behaviors, noises, and things that people can say to both show respect and not show respect. Verbal and nonverbal criticism are not permissible. The teacher will then present a question (e.g. What was the best thing that happened on the playground today?), and the students, configured in a circle, take turns reacting to the question. Students are encouraged to express themselves and there are no right or wrong answers. Teachers often pass a Speaker Power object that designates which student has the power to speak. Concentration and attention to each student is tested and reinforced by having students recall how others in the circle responded to the question.

This procedure seems simple, but when it is viewed in action, it is clear that it has surprising complexity and power. It creates a climate, a sense of community, and a sense of connectedness to the class. It makes the classroom a comfortable place where children feel safe in expressing themselves; feel connected to each other, to the teacher, and to the topic; and, in general, establishes an interactive and participatory classroom. Once the Sharing Circle procedures are established, the questions that the teacher uses to start a sharing circle can take many forms and be infused throughout the day. The circle can be used to express reactions and feelings regarding international, national, local, school or political events; as a basis for discussing a classroom problem or decision; as an opportunity to express thoughts about the past weekend, the week ahead, or the week just passed; as an opportunity to reflect within the context of an academic exercise (e.g., the students can indicate what they think about a book read or a character in history).

Once students become familiar with the guidelines and procedures, a sharing circle can be used at any time to discuss any issue in a format in which students feel comfortable and free to express themselves. A sharing circle is often used at the beginning of the day or to start morning or afternoon classes. The prompts and cues, however, such as Speaker Power and Listening Position can be used to call for the related behaviors throughout the school day. Once students have learned the prompts, teachers at all grade levels can use the prompts providing everyone in

the school with a universal language that allows for multi-year exposure to skill practice. Children are most likely to internalize these skills if they have an opportunity to practice them more than one year (Elias et al., 1997).

A Sharing Circle is designed to develop several social and emotional competencies such as expression of feelings, improving communication and self expression skills, improving awareness and recognition of emotional reactions, listening skills, and impulse control. Although this sdm/ps procedure is designed to improve skills related to social and emotional competencies, again it would seem that the procedures result in the emergence of a wealth of values. The values developed by these methods include respect for other students, tolerance for different points of view, listening carefully to others, a sense of importance of community, and caring about others. A key aspect of the sdm/ps Program that is also relevant to emotional intelligence and values is the problem-solving component. The problem-solving component consists of a series of clearly defined cognitive steps that are used in a specific sequence. Some of the steps include determining and selecting goals, generating alternative solutions to problems, considering consequences of enacting solutions, selecting solutions that best meet goals, and using feedback from enacted solutions for future problem solving and decision making.

Students use the problem-solving framework for many different types of problems, and in each case they go through the steps in a sequential manner. Through extensive practice in a variety of different contexts, students begin to internalize a process that eventually will become automatically activated in any situation in which a problem is encountered. Students might use the problem solving process in the context of the classroom to consider issues such as how to deal with a bully, how to deal with peer pressure, or how to deal with situations that make them feel angry, frustrated or sad.

The problem solving component is designed to increase social and emotional competencies by developing skills for handling social relations and social problems, making responsible decisions, and noticing emotional states that signal the need to engage the problem solving process. Do skills associated with this problem solving process have implications for values? Again, it seems that there are important links to values. At one level, using these skills will produce positive, pro-social decisions and problems will be more likely to be solved in ways that maintain positive social relations. At a more general level, however, activities such as learning to generate alternative solutions and consequential thinking are likely to increase value-based behaviors. The ability to generate alternative solutions to social problems, for example, is likely to lead to the identification of ways to resist peer pressure that could otherwise lead to value-inconsistent behaviors. The internalization of consequential thinking and systematically thinking of the outcomes of activities such as drug use, excessive drinking, and aggressive and violent behaviors is also likely to decrease the frequency of these types of activities. Indeed, one of the nice features of the sdm/ps approach is that whereas other approaches to character education and prevention often address only one particular issue (e.g. drug and alcohol use), the sdm/ps model can be used as a template or framework to address any issue or problem once the student is given appropriate content specific information.

It is also interesting to note that there is a very close correspondence between many conceptualizations of the key elements of critical thinking (e.g., Halpern, 1998) and the decision making/problem solving steps that are part of the sdm/ps program. Indeed, the steps in the sdm/ps approach can easily be expanded to non-social contexts. In this regard, it is interesting to note that applying values and making ethical decisions in everyday life involves the use of thinking skills and can be viewed as the outcome of a decision making process rather than the straightforward application of a rigid set of beliefs. Thus even the content-free process for making decisions and solving problems that is part of the sdm/ps Program seems likely to be linked to the development and application of values and ethics in many different ways.

In summary, there seems to be a close link between emotional intelligence and values, with values and ethics emerging as a by-product of the development of emotional intelligence and social competencies. Thus, as a result of teaching skills related to emotional intelligence, the sdm/ps Program we are implementing in the Jersey City Public Schools has the potential to improve character, increase the prevalence of pro-social behaviors, increase the enjoyment of school and learning, enhance academic performance, and increase the frequency of value-consistent behaviors.

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