

School Psychology's Next Generation: Hello, EQ -- Bye-Bye IQ

By Anthony Pantaleno, Ph.D.

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Like many of my "senior" School Psychology colleagues, my own professional training took place from the mid-1970's through the mid-1980's. With the passage of Public Law 94-142, the Education For All Handicapped Children's Act, public schools began the slow but steady process of transitioning thousands of students with disabilities from segregated, often out-of-district regional special education placements into local school district resource rooms and self-contained classes. The field of school psychology began the daunting task of defining learning disabilities, which remains as hotly contested today as it was in 1975, and beginning to refine our understanding of autism among many other disability classifications. The advent of cross-battery assessment and the evolution of the response-to-treatment models have given a new generation of practitioners some new tools and new formulations to make the political wheels of service delivery continue to turn, and through it all, school psychology training programs have continued to graduate students who have spent significant amounts of time learning how to diagnose disability but not how to step outside of the box and begin to examine the developments within the larger field of psychology as these changes apply to the mental health development of all children.

For over thirty years, school psychologists have been inextricably tied to the process of special education, and even been deemed the "gate-keepers" of that realm. At least in New York State, Committees on Special Education (CSEs) still require the participation of a school psychologist for making "initial" classifications of children with disabilities, or when changing service levels to more restrictive placements. Not that this is a bad thing – since the school psychologist is, without doubt, the most highly trained mental health professional within the school system, uniquely capable of integrating educational, psychological, and other family and classroom data to shed light on the learning abilities of the whole child. But, somewhere along the way, in our zeal and ambition to meet all of the roles and responsibilities inherent in

wearing our diagnostic assessment "hat", we have not taken on the broader leadership challenge of system-wide change that would affect the learning, mental health and well-being of the larger population of children whom we also serve.

As all public school districts face budget votes this week, all educators are aware of the mission: do more with less – keep the tax increase as low as possible, maintain programs, and for Pete's sake, don't even think of using the "S" word (as in adding staff!!). In the larger scope of budgets presented to local voters, one sees large proposed budget increases for technology upgrades, so that Johnny can have the fastest highest-speed internet connections possible. One sees the ever-present increases in capital projects for updating building facilities long overdue, and those ghastly increased costs associated with special education. Parents, classroom teachers, and administrators all live the daily reality of increased requests for mental health services, without the commensurate increases in school budgets to provide these services.

When national headlines are grabbed by stories such as the Virginia Tech shooting, college administrators weigh in on the issue as well. Psychologist, Dr. Sherry Benton, assistant director of counseling services at Kansas State University, has conducted research concluding that students' mental health problems are more complex and severe than twenty years ago. "We're well aware that problems are getting worse, but what hasn't happened is increased funding for mental health services," she said. "Most centers are now overwhelmed. Business has gone up and up, but budgets have remained the same or been cut, and that's a huge problem." One factor, Benton said, is that mental health services are usually not among the categories assessed during colleges' periodic accreditation reviews. If school needed good services to remain accredited, they might invest more, she said.

So how does the profession of school psychology respond to this need? In the face of an increased need for crisis intervention services, family counseling, and violence prevention programs, just to

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name a few, can we afford to continue seeking comfort in our Wechsler protocols, web-based IEP goals, and Annual Review schedules? In the face of our daily reality of stress overload and staffing shortfall, what contribution will our generation of practitioners leave to the next generation? Will school psychologists in 2037 be cranking out WISC-VII profiles and still debating which children are learning disabled? Will school psychology programs teach to disability identification or to the identification of the mental health needs of the larger educational system?

Just before he left office this past December, Governor George Pataki signed a piece of historical legislation which has the potential to not only change the face of education for all of New York's school-age children, but the manner in which ALL school-based professionals will be trained to face the increased need for creating a mentally healthy climate for our children. The Children's Mental Health Act of 2006 underscores the importance of putting children and families in the forefront of the children's mental health system, and recognizes that the social and emotional well-being of children are essential. Other NYSED initiatives, notably the P-16 plan (pre-school through college) calls for the development of **voluntary** guidelines that incorporate social and emotional development into elementary and secondary school programs.

So what exactly is social and emotional (SEL) learning all about? One can begin to answer this question by asking another question...namely, what constitutes a quality education? With what skills and competencies must today's high school graduate emerge to achieve success in a multinational global marketplace and maybe even find a little peace of mind as well? A research study by Casner-Lotto & Barrington, (2006) addressing the knowledge and skills employers identify as crucial to success in the workplace concluded that employees need the following, in rank order, (1) critical thinking/problem solving, (2) information technology application, (3) teamwork/collaboration, (4)creativity/innovation, (5)diversity, and (6)leadership. Knowledge domains – foreign language, mathematics, writing, reading comprehension, and science were ranked numbers 12 through 16.

Do we all remember our colleague Dan Goleman, and his basic theory that one's emotional quotient (EQ) is the more significant variable in predicting adult success outcomes – more significant even than one's IQ? Simply stated, EQ meets the road to the classroom door in the SEL movement. When one begins to attack the massive SEL literature (go "to www.casel.org) or read the seminal work of Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor in describing barriers to learning (go to <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>), one senses that the future of mental health for children will not lie in the expansion of the system of special education services, but in a new direction altogether, paved by the inclusion models of recent years and fired by the desire of those educators who know that the heart of true emotional education lies within our unique school environments, that is, with our classroom teachers. With a kind word or a smile of encouragement, the teacher can make a child's day one to remember and cherish. On the flip side, however, the words of criticism or the look of doubt can sow the seeds that will bring detachment and a stunted self-acceptance twenty-five years later.

Charles Shultz, the creator of "Peanuts" has a widely circulated inspirational article on the internet – it coaxes readers to try and recall the five wealthiest people in the world, or the last five Nobel or Pulitzer Prize winners, or the last decade's worth of World Series winners. If your memory is anything like mine, you'd fail this quiz. But ask some different questions...can you list a few teachers who aided your journey through school? Can you name five people who taught you something worthwhile or a few people who made you feel appreciated and special? This second quiz asks us to look at schools through the lens of SEL. Most of us would do much better on that second quiz!!

SEL is the process of developing social and emotional skills in the context of safe, caring, well-managed, and engaging learning environments. This **skill-based model** includes the direct teaching of the ability to (1) recognize and manage emotions (2) care about and respect others (3) make good decisions (4) behave responsibly and ethically and (5) develop positive relationships.

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For those who would question the need for widespread SEL instruction in schools, consider the Centers for Disease Control (2003) report which states that 28% of youth surveyed reported feeling so sad or hopeless every day for two weeks or more that they stopped doing their normal activities, and that 12% of youth surveyed had made a plan to commit suicide sometime during the last twelve months. The Search Institute's 2003 study reported that 29% of youth saw themselves thinking through the results of their choices and planning ahead, but 71% did not; 35% saw themselves as respecting the values and beliefs of people of different races and cultures, but 65% did not; and that 24% of youth reported the feeling that their teachers really cared, but that 76% did not.

Many school psychologists, social workers, and other support staff have offered a variety of programs throughout the grades which have attempted to assist in the development of coping skills for specific populations. The SEL movement does not seek to topple the hard work and certain successes of these programs. Instead, it seeks to recognize that a solid foundation in SEL is critical for EVERY child in this world we now live in, and that no single solution can be the panacea for every child and for every problem which life brings. SEL also comes in the form of K-12 curriculum, which may be presented much in the same manner as any curriculum in any academic sphere. Instead of the system of mental health service delivery most often seen in the schools today which is "fragmented" and "marginalized" to quote Howard Adelman, SEL seeks to unify the teaching of prosocial skills which will reduce or perhaps one day eliminate the barriers to learning faced by thousands of disabled and non-disabled children across the United States. If the theory and practice of SEL training bears fruit, as the research in past years has shown, what we will all witness is an increase in the bottom line of a quality education – ***children with social-emotional skills in their "cognitive backpacks" will come to school and be more emotionally available for academic learning to take place.***

In January, 2007, this psychologist called for a meeting of two powerful educational guilds, each with an active voice in advocating for children's mental health in the schools. Executive

Board members of the Suffolk and Nassau County Psychological Associations, and the New York Association of School Psychologists came together with the leadership of the Long Island Social Emotional Literacy Forum (LISELF), a group of educators that spanned both Eastern and Nassau County BOCES, local school districts in Nassau and Suffolk counties, and university trainers from St. John's and Hofstra Universities. The initial question posed to this group was the feasibility of developing a "mental health school report card", modeled after the one used across the state to measure academic achievement and performance of school aged students. The type of report card proposed would evaluate school district mental health resources in a manner that would permit comparisons across districts and across student populations. What became clear in this first meeting was that while such an assessment tool could be seen as divisive and adversarial when comparing across school districts, the idea of permitting individual school districts to do their own intra-district analysis of mental health resources was accepted as worthy of further study. What became apparent in this discussion was the need to focus on the dissemination of SEL skills across the grades and a process by which this could be accomplished.

As networking within this work group and beyond the work group expanded, we reached out to Linda Lantieri and Janet Patti, two world-renowned educators in the field of SEL. Within a matter of weeks, the entire work group was reading of the groundbreaking accomplishments of the Illinois State Board of Education – the first state in the nation to mandate SEL instruction across the grades (go to www.isbe.state.il.us and do an internal search for "social emotional learning" to view their K-12 standards). The school system in Anchorage, Alaska, had also been working to develop and refine their SEL curricular standards, a comprehensive model which represents the state-of-the-art in this area to date. Fortunately, they were very willing to share their work of many months with us so that we did not have to reinvent the wheel. We consulted with the NYC Pilot Project, a group of twenty city schools who had volunteered to pilot the introduction of an SEL process into their schools.

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All of this networking finally brought the Long Island SEL work group and the NYC SEL work group together with members of the Collaborative for Social Emotional Learning (CASEL) and other NYC-based SEL advocacy groups in March, 2007. We were able to reach out to the NYSED, and had the privilege of also bringing into this meeting the SED official whose task it was to develop an initial concept paper describing the importance of SEL to the NYS Board of Regents and presenting this document to the Regents in June for approval to further develop curricular SEL standards in New York.

As we watch the winds of change begin to take hold of the promise of SEL, we are humbled. For the first time in the history of New York's children's mental health system, the opportunity for sweeping innovations stands at our feet. Depending on the direction and velocity of the political climate, our state could be only the third in the nation to embrace the notion that SEL is important for ALL children, not just for some. What we do would certainly be watched very carefully by every other state who is contemplating the implementation of SEL standards. Together, we could forge a new mental health system in the schools, and give to children what they truly would need to come to school and feel connected, centered, and capable of harnessing the power of their own emotions.

Ask any school mental health services provider to describe not only the numbers in his or her case-load, but the broad and wide-ranging nature of the psychopathology within our schools. These same children are sitting in classrooms with teachers who are not equipped to manage them, through no fault of any teacher. How many teachers received training in teaching children in crisis? What would our educational system be like if such training was provided to every classroom

teacher? Would an SEL-savvy school building be able to create a climate where learning could thrive and every child be given a promise of self-acceptance, caring, and a commitment that education is far more than teaching the three R's?

Or will turf wars and other political realities cloud the dream? Who would deliver this system of SEL training and curriculum? Would school psychologists be displaced by other mental health professionals and therefore not support this movement in favor of the status quo? Once we begin to walk this walk, as in any new venture, there are often more questions than answers. As we look forward into the futures of our children, what will they bring with them out into the world? Will they be able to form lasting, healthy relationships in their lives? Will they know what makes them tick, and how to respond to emotions such as depression, anxiety, anger, guilt, and fear? Will they know where to reach out when life becomes overwhelming? Will they remember that lesson taught so long ago about all of us being born with a natural curiosity about other people and other cultures?

What evolves over the thirteen years of a public school education sets the stage for life. Shall we accept the challenge to introduce K-12 SEL standards in New York public schools, despite the many challenges, pitfalls, and dilemmas that would lie before us? Can we say goodbye to the IQ and welcome the EQ? In reality, we have no choice. The alternative is to continue to speculate in the aftermath of the next school shooting and ask the questions... ***What could have been done differently? Why was "the system" not able to reach out to this person and help him?***

In the end, it will only be our own collective consciences that we will have to live with. Let the educator in us remember what called us to this profession in the first place and let us stand up in New York and support a statewide SEL education initiative.