

## Social and Emotional Learning; A Way of Thinking and a Set of Practices. NOT A PROGRAM!

Programs come and go. Philosophies and “Ways of Being” endure - if they yield what we need. As a provider of “technical assistance” to Rhode Island schools, I’ve been inspired and reenergized by the work of Jonathan Cohen and his many colleagues in the emerging field of Social and Emotional Learning, or Literacy as some prefer to call it. Social and Emotional Learning/Literacy is a way of thinking and a set of practices, not a cookie-cutter, out-of-the-kit program. Three examples of recent work tell the story.

“What about us adults?!” cries a colleague. “We’re expected to plan, teach, collaborate, mediate, refer, intervene, reflect, problem-solve, and on and on, but where’s the preparation for dealing with the multiple layers of relationships we have to navigate?” Out of the dialogue represented by this single quote came a plan to offer instruction and support to teams of teachers at a middle school, specifically focusing on the social and emotional dimension of their collegial work.

At first, lots of skepticism and resistance. “No touch-feely! No fake group hugs!” So, from the beginning the plan was framed as “skills acquisition,” the social and emotional competencies of working effectively with other adults. “This sequence of meetings and activities is about “working well together, WHETHER we like each other or not,” we affirmed. Friendship would be a wonderful by-product of working together, but serendipitous, not predictable.

At the first event, a full day retreat, we spent time getting to know each other AS COLLEAGUES, focusing on information relevant to our shared work. We identified commonalities and differences, clarified our learning, teaching, and working styles, shared much information and went through a lengthy process of drafting an agreement, “Ways We Want Our Team(s) To Be,” not rules but guidelines for safe, respectful, productive interaction. Jonathan Cohen and the SEL people hovered in the air.

Subsequently, in after-school and, occasionally, half-day get-togethers, we learned about effective group facilitation, agenda planning, intra-group communication, balancing participation, and conflict management and resolution. As we went about the “tasks” of being a team – establishing homework and discipline policies, planning inter-disciplinary units, discussing service-learning projects, debating field trips, disagreeing about the handling of exceptionally difficult students – we used our agreement and our newly-acquired group skills. We reflected, briefly, on “How are we doing as a team? How am I doing as a team member? How could the team help me become a more effective member?” We rotated the facilitator’s role to those who accepted it (almost everyone). We began creating more realistic agendas and staying more frequently on task. We created simple systems for communication of information that saved meeting time for more in-depth discussions.

None of this was perfect. Some openly yearned for the days of ‘shut-the-door-do-your-own-thing.’ Some never really joined the group. They were there, but we know they

weren't there. Not all of our discussions were enlightened and not all of our conflicts were resolved. But, in sum, most of us rated the year as "way above average" in terms of our adult-to-adult relationships. In Cohen's terms, most of us learned to "be aware of ourselves and others, to solve problems mutually, to communicate directly and clearly, and to manage our feelings within the group." Some of us who were shy learned to step forward in an atmosphere that now felt safe. Some who perpetually dominated learned to step back, willingly and in respect for the need to create opportunities for all voices. Some, who had defensively hidden our shortcomings, learned to ask for, and receive help. Some, impatient with "group process" learned to slow down, to listen, and to value the advantages of building ownership among all partners. Some of us learned to accept the vastly different style of a colleague who had once irritated us, because now, in this environment of safety, we could talk about the difference directly. No more behind-the-back hidden agendas. Oh, yes, and some of us became friends.