

Latino Networking Group Webinar:
Making Social and Emotional Learning Programs Culturally Responsive
December 18th, 2008

Presenters: Arlene DeLaLuz and Janet Koza, McAvinnue School in Lowell, MA, implementers of Open Circle

Facilitator: Jim Vetter (TAS)

- How can schools adapt a Social and Emotional Learning program to a richly diverse student population?

Open Circle – 20 years old, started in Framingham, now all over New England and NJ.
Fosters social skills + a caring community

How did you get involved with Open Circle?

Arlene:

- In the past, the school had used several discipline/safety curricula, but nothing that addressed Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) specifically.
- SEL was mainly addressed in counseling or social skills groups, so it was impossible to reach out to all students who needed it.
- In 2003, a new administration came in, and the principal had used Open Circle in a another school.
- A committee looked at different programs and chose Open Circle based on their needs.
- At first she was hesitant since it seemed like a big endeavor.
- They put together a team for training, and received financial support from the city of Lowell.

Janet:

- Joined the school when Open Circle was getting started.
- Wanted to be challenged and enriched by getting along with people who have different perspectives.
- Found Open Circle to be extremely authentic. Bottom line is that we are all different but we need to get along. Does not water down complexity.
- Respectful and doesn't "dumb down" to children

Tell us about the McAvinnue School.

- 13 languages spoken, no single population is more than 50%
- 40% Latino; many students from Cambodia, India, Vietnam, Laos, Burma
- Lowell was founded by immigrants and continues to attract more immigrants
- New population – families from Kenya and other African countries
- SES – lower than state average, this is a challenge as well.
- Hispanic population is growing tremendously

How did you start thinking about adapting this program for your population?

- From the first training, began thinking about how to make it useful for the community.
- Language was a big piece – deliver in English and Spanish, even if it meant double the # of workshops.
- Needed to make it understandable, friendly, not intimidating. Tell parents that it is useful – like a product she needed to sell.
- Would involve home visits, personal relationships with families, understanding of culture before introducing skills. Make sure that other needs were being addressed.
- At first, parents would talk about other basic needs (rent, food, etc.) so first she needed to address those issues first. Went through problem solving steps.
- By connecting with family they know you care – using same skills that children were learning.
- Workshops for parents during the first year – ask them to do the same activities that the students did. Small groups of 15-20 parents, problem solving together. Basically doing Open Circle with parents.
- Developed trust with parents, respect and honesty. Flow of conversation is real.

Was this part of an overall approach to engaging with families?

- The school would send a lot of paper home (notices, forms, etc.). Even though most of it was translated, they knew that some parents did not read.
- As a way to address this and to improve relationships with parents, they started doing home visits.
- They also began using the “connect ed” system, which enabled them to send automated messages to families in different languages. It sounds like a personal invitation because they hear voices of people they know.

Did you find yourself making shifts to the program as you were engaging with students?

- For some students, what they were being taught at home was different from what they were learning in school. School staff had to make a decision – they believed in what they were teaching, but should they go against the culture/microculture of family?
- EX: Little girl and her sister didn't speak English, and their way of relating to others was very aggressive (e.g. rude gestures). The staff called the mother in, and learned that in her environment, she survives by fighting. Asked her – how can we help you adapt so that your kids can be more successful? Got the mother to buy into making changes. Understanding and building bridge to family.
- They chose to teach children to behave appropriately for school without judging what they are hearing/learning at home. This allows a child to develop multiple identities or behaviors, since family and school have different expectations. Their reality is that street skills are different from school skills.
- EX: They taught a boy the difference between assertive and aggressive. He said that his (aggressive) style works for him outside of school.

Did you have to make adaptations around language?

- So many different words used within the Spanish language. Families from many different countries. Also, can't use words that are over their heads.
- Several native Spanish speakers in the building.
- Most children from SE Asia and Africa speak English when they come here.
- Translate some things as they go along.
- Role playing – problem solving scenarios. Kids love this!
- Kids are accustomed to trying to understand one another beyond language.
- For newcomers (less than one year, no English) – they are trying to get a class together only in Spanish, taught by a native speaker.
- Some children have never been in school before, they have a huge amount to process, if they hear their native language it would be a “blessed relief.”

Does the community building of SEL help students?

- The circle itself with the empty chair speaks for itself.
- Kids feel that they have a voice.
- Sometimes use a classmate for translation.
- Go through a format with parents, ask them specific questions around basic needs, and try to establish a relationship from day one.
- Shared common language of Open Circle helps them to adapt. Peers and teachers using the same vocabulary.
- Teachers model by embracing the philosophy.
- Using this program makes school feel safer. Gives us all a chance to feel authentic together.

What kinds of cultural adaptations to concepts and approaches have you had to make?

- Poster – “School Listening Look.”
- They were asking students to look at teachers – some wouldn't. In some cultures or families, they were not supposed to look up at adults – they felt that it was disrespectful
- New message: “Look at us at school/at home you look down.”
- Recognizing and honoring home culture and community.
- At the same time, they feel the responsibility to teach parents about laws and norms where they are living now (e.g. discouraging physical discipline) - -without judging but with the recognition that they may need to follow new rules in a new place.

How did you make family engagement programs successful? It is sometimes challenging to get families to come to school.

- We call, we call and we call.
- Connect with other parents to get a ride.
- Give out bus tokens, teach them how to take the bus so that they lose fear of public transportation.
- Offer food and child care
- Get enough staff to do different programs/activities for parents and children
- At the end – all get together, kids did a role play from Open Circle classroom, had a singalong.

- This year they had an open circle night just for kindergarten – 70 participants! Getting K parents on board is a great foundation.

What have folks found to be challenging in terms of engaging families, and what has worked for you?

- Engage them based on relationship, address them in their language.
- Somebody who is on PTO or is active in local community – engage them as a champion.
- It feels different if a small group goes to school together – they may feel safer.
- Engage them by asking them to provide food, help and support the school community
- Empowering
- FIESTA – hundreds of people! Food, music, donations.
- Some sites have linked SEL programs to International Night

Comments/questions/discussion:

Ben from TX: Winterfest for parents will draw 500-600 parents. GREAT program involves police officers/SROs, grades 4 and 6. Kids develop relationships w/ police officers, “Look mom, he’s my police officer!” Counselors and social workers pass out information. Kids are conditioned – they expect rewards. Officers have a graduation exercise after 6-week course – receive certificate and rewards for completing the course. Century 21 Grant has parent coordinator on each campus, and they get around 200 parents per month at training sessions. Their community is 98% Hispanic – most classes for parents are in Spanish.

Overall approach around SEL with a diverse population – have you had to deal with issues of discrimination?

- We can’t lump one ethnic group together and make assumptions.
- Discrimination exists but it is hidden.
- Often kids do not portray themselves in the best way, then they ask why they are being singled out for their behavior.
- Some of the students make assumptions about white people – e.g. they assume that the teacher must be rich. She tells them about being the daughter of immigrants, etc.
- Children sometimes discriminate among themselves. They use Open Circle to deal with name calling. Challenge is to see everyone as who they are, not as where they come from.
- Why did Rudolph’s parents hide his nose? They were afraid that he was going to be discriminated against.
- Very complex – opportunities for discussion come up all the time.

RESOURCES

CASEL: Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning – <http://www.casel.org/>

Open Circle -- <http://www.open-circle.org/>

Other resources re: CLC: <http://www.promoteprevent.org/Resources/clc/Resources.html>

Your TAS is a good resource!