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# Preface

*Whatever we decide is the nature of the fully functioning, self-actualizing individual must become at once the goal of education.*

—Arthur Combs (1962, p. 2)

## **A CHILD'S SENSE OF SELF IS OF PARAMOUNT CONCERN**

This book details the most important change needed today in our educational system: Developing a strong sense of self in each and every child.

Over the past few decades, an explosion of information illuminating the importance of educating *the whole child* has rallied educators, professionals, and parents to seek change in America's educational system. Standardized testing, extensive memorization, and rigorous schedules don't contribute to the development of lifelong happy, successful, and productive members of society. Educators need tools to effectively reach the whole child.

In addition, middle and high school students need help navigating the ever-changing and challenging climate of identity formation, clouded by personal stress and media overload. Today's students are, on average, overstructured, stressed out, numbing out, overeating, overmedicated, malnourished, and/or sleep deprived and, therefore, are failing to thrive in an educational system burdened by financial crises, high teacher turnover rates, and a lack of direction. Moreover, the shocking teen statistics in this country highlight their inability to effectively cope with their environment. Consider the high suicide rate, profuse alcohol consumption and drug use, high dropout rate, depression and anxiety diagnoses, as well as the obesity and bullying rate increases over the past few decades.

Teens' need for direction, resilience, and confidence has increased during that time, but our capacity to support this need has not kept pace. In fact, through failed education reform efforts, we've crippled students' potentials (Ravitch, 2010). America's overall standing in worldwide education has

seen a steady decline (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2008). Upon graduation, most students do not feel prepared for the workforce, and indeed, employers lament that today's graduates generally lack the innovative critical-thinking skills necessary to lead us into the future (Abeles, 2010).

These teen trends, and their consequences, demand a shift in education geared toward innovative, critical thinking founded on *a solid sense of self*. This book explores the research and provides the necessary tools to achieve this goal. Specifically, this book emphasizes that social emotional learning is an integral component to helping students reach their full potential. It is a pertinent part of developing the 21st century skills (critical thinking and problem solving, communication, collaboration, and creativity and innovation), character development, and other relevant proactive strategies whose common denominator includes a solid sense of self.

By "self" we mean each child's sense of both separate identity (who I am internally) and his or her relationship to others (who I am externally), as well as aptitudes, interests, concerns, beliefs, fears, and all the characteristics that make a person unique. The information and lessons you teach are less potent when students lack a framework and an image of the self. Indeed, this is why teens often make poor decisions even though information has been provided (posting questionable pictures on Facebook after the character education program, sniffing glue after an antidrug program, sitting in silence when a peer is being tormented after the anti-bullying talk). The information from these prevention programs is still "floating"—it is not readily accessible because without a self-concept, it has yet to find resonance in the self.

Developing and understanding the self—the emotional, social, physical, and *cognitive* elements of the self—are the critical components teachers need to address in order to reach and support the whole child. Extensive research, as well as interviews with teachers and with students, leaves no doubt that when the self is busy trying to manage social, emotional, and physical challenges, academics suffer (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007).

How are you nurturing the self (each child's individual identity) into lesson plans? How is that nurturing received? You may supply information in the form of brilliant lessons and powerful prevention programs, but without offering students a means to identify with and incorporate their own sense of self, those lectures won't be nearly as effective as you wish them to be. When you incorporate the self into your teaching, you convey the message: *You matter. I care about you and how I can help you become the best person you can be.* With this message, your teaching and students' grades will flourish because the social and emotional needs of the developing student

are supported. *After all, students' sense of self provides the strength and confidence to manage external and internal influences so they can focus on what you are teaching.* This book will cite many examples of this important fact.

Furthermore, the teen years provide an ideal opportunity to cement the formation of the self. Identity development is a natural process that begins at birth but is also the hallmark of the teen years. This enormously important process, replete with potential hazards, is rarely addressed in school, which is why most students are unable to concentrate on academics: They lack the self skills to manage their social, emotional, and physical challenges, changes, and selves. We rarely check in with students and address their identity development needs. We rarely provide tools to facilitate and help them shape the process. *That is why we have written this book: It is your toolbox to help your students more confidently tackle identity (self) development so they may feel worthy and fulfilled while finding success academically and personally.*

You may be thinking that this is a job for your mental health team, and indeed, much of it may be. Unfortunately, mental health expenditure has largely been reduced, resulting in fewer resources and personnel. With this present administrative reality, you face your reality: Your students need your help not just in academics, but also in navigating their mental health and identity development. The tools and strategies found in this book help manage the “self” sitting behind the desk, playing on the sports field, and vying for a place to sit in the cafeteria. Weaving self skills into your style of connecting with and relating to your students provides them with a stronger self-concept and a better ability to manage life's ups and downs. Through classroom scenarios and anecdotal evidence, *this book shows you how to develop those skills*, demonstrating that when you bring the self into the classroom, everyone benefits.

## **THE FOCUS AND PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK**

The purpose of this book is twofold. The first purpose is to introduce the idea that social emotional learning curriculums are necessary to help our future generations find their individual successes and passions in life, but *the key to those programs' success is in developing a sense of self.* When the self is supported and developed, students are more apt to reach their full potential because they have been provided a meaning in context: the bread for the butter—the *who-I-am* in the lecture, program, or class. Just by reaching and nurturing the self, you will ignite passion, purpose, and academic progress in your students (Blodget, 2009; Combs, 1962; Eisner, 2004).

The second purpose of this book is to inspire you to start incorporating the self into your curriculum and school climate using the steps and suggested interventions found throughout this book. To this end, each chapter provides teacher examples of interventions at work and concludes with a chart to help you map out how you will apply this information into your classroom.

### **A Peek at the Steps to Success**

*Step 1:* Understand and connect with the self behind the desk.

*Step 2:* Soften defenses to foster academic and personal growth.

*Step 3:* Provide tools for emotional management.

*Step 4:* Use cognitive understanding to awaken potentials.

*Step 5:* Consolidate the self in the social world.

*Step 6:* Support the physical self for optimal overall health.

*Step 7:* Create an environment that works for you.

Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the idea that a sense of self is a critical factor toward feeling success and happiness both in and out of school. These chapters review the fundamentals of social emotional learning (SEL), including what it is and why it's important; how teaching to the self goes beyond SEL limits; and how the self is influenced by early attachments and making connections.

Chapters 3 through 7 break down the four components of the self (emotional, social, cognitive, and physical) and provide anecdotal illustrations of what is happening within each aspect during the teen years. These chapters also provide examples, illustrations, and charts to help you incorporate the interventions and strategies provided.

Chapter 8 discusses the opportunities within your school climate to effect change. What do your students see as they walk down the hall? How are they affected by attitudes, artwork, and interactions? How is school morale? Simple and affordable ideas for your school climate are offered.

Chapter 9 summarizes previous chapters' purposes and explains how a sense of self aids in motivation, decision making, and a future ripe with potential for giving back to society at large.

In every chapter, we will discuss the topic at hand using research, quotes, explanations, analogies, and levity when needed. Classroom scenarios, input from teachers, and even some feedback from students themselves illustrate the core strategies and points. What is working? What is

not? We believe you will begin to see that what “works” is always founded on supporting and validating the self.

Many of the skill sets and interventions suggested may appear to impinge upon your already busy schedule and the necessary standards and mandates you strive to meet. However, please keep in mind that we are familiar with the Common Core State Standards, 21st Century Skills, National Health Standards, and the state mandates aimed at prevention. Teaching to the self, in and of itself, aligns with many of these standards and mandates while reducing the amount of time you ultimately spend on matters that impede your progress in the classroom. Indeed, it buys you time, expanding the potential of your teaching.

### **The Benefits and Features of This Book**

- Details seven straightforward, easy to implement steps to ignite passion and purpose in your classroom
- Demonstrates the ethical necessity to reach the whole child and foster his or her potentials socially, emotionally, physically, and cognitively
- Includes a plethora of real-life teacher illustrations showing the power and impact of the tools and strategies given
- Provides over 50 interventions to reach and connect with each student in your classroom, particularly those students who seem to defy your previous attempts at connection and instruction
- Offers techniques and strategies to form authentic connections with students and explains why these connections you create can mean the difference between thriving students and those who drop out
- Incorporates opportunities to check in with yourself to develop awareness as to how your habits and views impact your teaching style
- Details the functions and structure of the brain and offers ideas on how to share this information with your students
- Explains how social emotional skills and focusing on the self will foster 21st century skills

### **THIS BOOK APPLIES TO EDUCATORS OF TEENS**

This book is primarily geared toward people who work with middle and high school students, specifically

- Teachers
- Teachers in training

- All school mental health professionals (counselors, nurses, psychologist, social workers)
- Administration
- Principals

The philosophy and tone of the book is broad reaching: Though written for educators of teens, much of the content will also benefit teachers of younger children.

Like many educators (and family members and students), you may be feeling a sense of frustration with the direction our education focus has taken in recent history. But hopefully, that frustration is dwarfed by your determination to make change possible. Change *is* possible, and this book is the first step toward helping you create that much-needed change: Change in the way students are approached, taught, addressed, and treated in an effort to bring forth the self, reduce problematic behavior, and improve overall performance.

*When you develop a sense of self among your students, you provide the framework and foundation for what they ultimately need to find purpose, success, and happiness in their lives.*

Indeed, with tragedies such as the one that occurred at Sandy Hook Elementary School, our culture is beginning to recognize that the mental health of our students must be integrated into our curriculums just as reading, writing, and arithmetic are. Mental health is integral to learning. It profoundly affects learning potential and, indeed, can change the course of a life. Many teachers are already shifting toward a new consciousness in pedagogy—teaching with the self in mind. They have seen for themselves when the whole child is integrated, involved, and present in the classroom, not only do academics improve, but life just feels all that much more hopeful and promising. We share many teacher stories within this book so that, as you see the new ground before you, you will know it is a safe place to land.

## **THE BOTTOM LINE**

In 1962, in the book *Perceiving, Behaving, Becoming: A New Focus for Education*, Arthur Combs stated, “There is often a wide gap between our understanding of the nature of human behavior on the one hand and the utilization of such understanding in the classroom on the other” (p. 2).

Let’s not allow another 50 years to pass before we realize and utilize the impressive findings in the fields of neuroscience, psychology, the self, and SEL as they relate to education. Instead, let’s focus on the link between

these fundamental assets so that you—the educator, mental health professional, or principal—may find a strategic balance that cultivates success within your institution.

We recommend reading this book if you want to

- learn about the self and how it is the key component to successful lifelong learning
- learn proactive strategies to curb potential mental health issues
- learn easy, practical ways to bring the self into your classroom; and
- improve the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical outcomes for your students so they become purposeful, successful learners, and contributing members of society.