Emotional Intelligence And Resiliency In Adolescents As It Relates To Student Success

Authored by: Kelly Giorgi, Ed.D., NCSP, LEP


The Editorial Board Comment: This paper is published under the category of Public Stories of Educators. Public Stories of Educators manuscripts (solicited or unsolicited) undergo double-blind and open peer-review process by the Editorial Board. Manuscripts are evaluated on the basis of their innovation, quality of scholarship, and contribution to our understanding of education in the professional learning communities. These essays intend to provide an intellectual space for K–16 educators (i.e., classroom teachers, teacher educators, and educational researchers and policymakers) to tell their stories as they reflect on and transform their pedagogical philosophies and practices and, in turn, the opportunities to learn for the students they serve.

Abstract

When students feel safe expressing their emotions without the fear of being ridiculed by peers (or adults) they can open their minds to learning. It is imperative that educators take an active role in implementing programs that identify students struggling with mental health issues and provide interventions to teach healthy coping strategies so that students are able to be more active participants in their education. There are many ways in which educators can work with adolescents; providing tools to effectively manage emotions can assist students in moving forward, problem solving, decision making, and connecting with others. It is suggested that individuals with more highly developed emotional intelligence are more successful personally and professionally. This paper explores the relationship of emotional intelligence and resiliency in adolescents and how it relates to academic and personal success. Explanations of emotional intelligence and resiliency are given. Several techniques and methods of building these skills are explored as well. A review of peer reviewed articles and studies are included.

Keywords: Emotional intelligence, resiliency, student success, adolescent mental health, Goleman, Reivich, Shatté
Introduction

When one refers to intelligence, generally speaking, they would be referring to an individual’s logical reasoning, spatial and verbal skills, as well as ability to be academically successful. However, there is more to intelligence than “book smarts” and applying those skills. While these skills contribute to an individual’s personal and professional success, history and research suggest that individual’s with more highly developed skills in the area of understanding emotions (one’s own and other’s) and using this understanding to guide thinking and behaviors, are more successful than those individual’s that have a deficit in this skill area, even those with average intellectual ability (Queendom, n.d.).

The leaders in the concept, Mayer and Salovey, have described this ability as: emotional intelligence (EI or EQ). Briefly defined, emotional intelligence is the ability to perceive emotions, access and generate emotions to assist thought, understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions as to promote emotional and intellectual growth (Mayer & Salovey, 1993). Others have defined EI as the ability to identify, use, understand, and manage emotions in positive ways to relieve stress, communicate effectively, empathize with others, overcome challenges, and defuse conflict. This ability has implications on many aspects of one’s day-to-day life, such as forming healthy relationships, achieving greater success, as well as enjoying a more fulfilling life (Segal & Smith, 2015).

Co-founder of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), Daniel Goleman (1995) describes emotional intelligence as the competence of recognizing one’s feelings and those of others, the ability to motivate ourselves, and for managing and applying to our relationships. Goleman (1995), along with Mayer and Salovey, identify five attributes that contribute to emotional intelligence: (1) self-awareness, (2) self-regulation, (3) internal motivation, (4) empathy, and (5) social skills. Goleman describes each of the attributes in detail. As defined by Goleman (1995), self-awareness is the ability to recognize and understand one’s moods, emotions, drives, and their effects on others; self-regulations is the ability to control or redirect disruptive impulses and moods, to think before acting; motivation is the passion to work for reasons that go beyond monetary or status gain and to pursue goals with persistence; empathy is the ability to understand other people’s emotions; and social skills is managing relationships, the ability to build rapport.

Additionally, Reuven Bar-On (2006), also a pioneer in the concept of emotional intelligence, suggests that being emotionally and socially intelligent involves the abilities to be aware of others’ emotions, feelings and needs, and enabling an individual to establish and maintain satisfying relationships. Ultimately, being emotionally and socially intelligent allows for an individual to effectively cope with environmental demands and pressures.

Furthermore, Reivich and Shatté (2002) suggest that resiliency has a powerful effect on an individual’s success, both inschool and satisfaction in life. Resilience is the rudimentary foundation supporting all the “positive characteristics in a person’s emotional and psychological makeup” (p. 59). Resilient people are more likely to control their beliefs and behaviors in adverse situations and as a result are less affected by stressful events. Reivich and Shatté propose that resilience is comprised of seven abilities. These abilities include: emotion regulation, impulse control, empathy, optimism, casual analysis, self-efficacy, and reaching out.

Brooks and Goldstein (2004) propose that individuals with a resilient mindset are more likely to achieve success and dreams than those that do not possess this mindset. They describe the components of a resilient mindset as follows: feeling in control of one’s life, knowing how to fortify one’s “stress hardiness,” being empathetic, displaying effective communication and other interpersonal capabilities, possessing solid problem-solving and
decision-making skills, establishing realistic goals and expectations, learning from both success and failure, being a compassionate and contributing member of society, living a responsible life based on a set of thoughtful values, and feeling special (not self-centered) while helping others to feel the same.

According to Reivich and Gillham (2010), there are many sets of circumstances that require resilience: recovering from adversity or trauma, overcoming risk factors, and steering through the everyday stressors that many individuals confront. The term resilience has many different definitions; however, a general consensus is that resilience is a set of processes that enable good outcome in spite of serious threats. It is important to understand that resilience does not eliminate these adverse situations from an individual’s life; resilience provides the individual with the tools necessary to manage daily challenges and stressors effectively (Brooks & Goldstein, 2004).

**Building Emotional Intelligence and Resiliency in Adolescents**

While schools have long focused on teaching students reading, writing, and arithmetic, social emotional learning (SEL) is now becoming a large focus in schools. So much so, that schools are implementing evidence based curriculum lessons into the everyday education of students. Giving students the tools to effectively manage emotions can assist them in moving forward, problem solving, decision making, and connecting with others.

Through building children’s protective skills one can reduce the rate of negative psychological factors. School-based resiliency and SEL programs are an increasingly effective way in which to assist children in developing these skills. Many of the skills taught to adolescents are developing emotional awareness, emotional regulation, cognitive flexibility, self-efficacy, and perspective taking. Intervention programs are often based on cognitive-behavior therapy (CBT) techniques (Molony, Henwood, & Gilroy, 2010).

There are many approaches to teaching emotional intelligence and resiliency within the educational setting. *Six Seconds* is an organization dedicated to supporting positive change. Their intention is to teach the skills relevant to emotional intelligence in an effort to have people “become more aware, intentional, and purposeful so individuals, teams, organizations, families, schools, and communities flourish” (Six Second, 2013).

Feeling awareness refers to being able to link physical sensations to feelings and being able to express those feelings in words; therefore, developing a *feeling vocabulary* is an essential piece to intervention. Teaching children relaxation techniques is crucial if we want children to be able to regulate their emotions. In order for children to be cognitively flexible, therapists must assist children in understanding that many thoughts are possible in relation to a specific event. (Molony, Henwood, & Gilroy, 2010).

Simply praising children is often not enough to raise self-confidence, as children are not always satisfied with their accomplishments; a *Journal of accomplishments* or *courage journal* are two ways in which to help children develop self-efficacy. Perspective taking requires empathy training; this allows children to consider other people’s feelings in different situations (Molony, Henwood, & Gilroy, 2010). All of these techniques are critical in building children’s resiliency.
The Penn Resiliency Program (PRP) focuses on these protective factors. PRP is comprised of two modules: cognitive and social problem solving. PRP builds emotional awareness and regulation and empathy through CBT methods of having children realize that people perceive events differently than each other because of personal beliefs of such events. PRP builds self-efficacy through teaching putting into perspective. This skill helps students view the future with greater realistic optimism and helps them deal with negative events (Reivich & Gillham, 2010).

PRP also teaches goal setting which is important for those adolescents that are pessimistic or hopeless about their futures. Assertiveness and negotiation training is another part of PRP. As many adolescents underestimate the likelihood that situations can improve, this skill set supports adolescents in feeling more hopeful about asking for help and approaching others with their concerns (Reivich & Gillham, 2010).

**The Resilient Individual**

Reivich and Shatté (2002) describe seven steps to being a more resilient individual. These seven steps are as follows: (1) Learning Your ABCs, (2) Avoiding Thinking Traps, (3) Detecting Icebergs, (4) Changing Beliefs, (5) Putting It in Perspective, (6) Calming and Focusing, and (7) Real-time Resilience.

The first three skills are the “know thyself” skills and are designed to help build one’s own self-awareness. Learning Your ABCs refers to learning to recognize one’s beliefs and how these beliefs affect the individual’s behaviors. This step teaches individuals to identify challenging situations and the “in-the-moment” beliefs/thoughts to the adversity (Reivich & Shatté, 2002).

The second step to building resiliency is Avoiding Thinking Traps. This step details the eight major thinking traps that inhibit our resilience. According to the authors, jumping to conclusions, tunnel vision, magnifying and minimizing, personalizing, externalizing, overgeneralizing, mind reading, and emotional reasoning, are considered thinking traps (Reivich & Shatté, 2002).

The third, and last “know thyself” skill, is Detecting Icebergs. Icebergs are considered the deep-rooted beliefs an individual has that effects one’s mood and behavior repeatedly in difficult situations. The detecting component of the skill is learning to identify those beliefs; once identified, one is able to begin to change the beliefs, which enables the individual to start the next skill: Challenging Beliefs (Reivich & Shatté, 2002).

Reivich and Shatté (2002) describe Challenging Beliefs in seven steps: (1) ABC an Adversity, (2) Pie Chart the Causes (the “Why” beliefs), (3) Identify Your Explanatory Style (Me vs. Not Me, Always vs. Not Always, Everything vs. Not Everything), (4) Being Flexible, (5) Being Accurate, (6) New Pie Chart, and (7) New Solutions. This is a particularly important part for those who struggle most with anger, sadness, guilt, and embarrassment.

Putting It In Perspective is the next skill laid out by Reivich and Shatté (2002). In this step, individuals are guided to use more accurate thinking. This skill works parallel with Changing Beliefs in that Putting It In Perspective is intended to adjust one’s belief about the future as well as teach the individual not to catastrophize the adversity and curb one from formulating the worst-case scenario. This skill requires the individual to follow several steps; (1) Write Down the Ticker-Tape Chain, (2) Estimate the Probabilities of Your Worst-Case Fears, (3) Generate Best-Case Alternatives, (4) Identify Most Likely Implications, and (5) Problem Solve the Most Likely.

The final two skills are the “Fast Skills,” these are Calming and Focusing and Real-time Resilience. Together
these skills allow the individual to soothe his/her emotions, focus on thoughts that are intrusive, and reduce the amount of stress being experienced, along with fighting back against counterproductive beliefs. These skills allow the individual to be more resistant to stress (Reivich & Shatté, 2002).

**Resilient Mindset**


The first step toward developing a resilient mindset is *Changing the Words of Life: Rewriting Your Negative Scripts*. In this step, one must recognize the pattern of counterproductive thoughts and actions that continually have negative results. Often, one is not aware of the role negative scripts have in his life; here one must not blame others for his own misfortune or mistakes. Another obstacle one may encounter is insisting that others must change first; here the individual must find an effective strategy to making his own changes (Brooks & Goldstein, 2004).

Choosing the Path to Become Stress Hardy Rather than Stressed Out requires the individual to engage in commitment, which provides a sense of purpose, look at stressful events as challenges, leave one’s comfort zone, pursue life dreams, and look for novel solutions. Personal control is considered the third component to becoming a more stress hardy individual, in that one should be working to change the stressful events that which he has control over (Brooks & Goldstein, 2004).

Moving into *Viewing Life Through the Eyes of Others*, the concept of empathy is explained and how it relates to the resilient individual. This is the ability to contemplate how others may view him and/or describe him. When one considers the view of others and reflects on feedback, that individual is able to grow and learn in a positive way. Empathy allows individuals to have deeper, more connected relationships with others. Empathy ties in with *Communicating Effectively*. Individuals with effective communication skills are able to clearly articulate thoughts and feelings in a nonjudgmental way, to problem solve, as well as resolve conflict in a nonthreatening manner (Brooks & Goldstein, 2004).

Accepting Oneself and Others, the importance of self-acceptance is stressed; without self-acceptance, one cannot accept others. In self-acceptance, one is honest about his own strengths and weaknesses and if whether he is living a satisfying life. *Making Connections and Displaying Compassion* results in connection with children and adults in personal and professional settings, as well as reaching out to do volunteer work. Brooks and Goldstein (2004) provide several guidelines in which to follow in an effort to make these relationships: (1) make connectedness a top priority in life, (2) remember that connections come in many forms, (3) be proactive in developing connections and learn to take risks, (4) be compassionate and assume the role of a charismatic adult, and (5) remember that connections are constantly changing. A key point Brooks and Goldstein (2004) make is that connected relationships “are the roots of emotional and physical health and of hope” (Brooks & Goldstein, 2004, p. 181).

In the step, *Dealing Effectively with Mistakes*, Brooks and Goldstein (2004) review the steps to managing mistakes and setbacks, as these are inevitable in life. The resilient individual can (1) examine assumptions about mistakes, (2) challenge self-defeating attributions, (3) learn something positive from every situation, and (4) decide on a plan of action to attempt new scripts based on new attributions.
Dealing Well with Success in Building Islands of Competences suggests resilient individuals are able to identify their own successes and strengths and that these successes and strengths provide a sense of pride; that success is intrinsic. While appreciation from others is indeed fulfilling, this is not where the resilient individual finds his strength or satisfaction in accomplishments.

The Lessons of Resilience

Lastly, Brooks and Goldstein (2004) describe Developing Self-Discipline and Self-Control and The Lessons of Resilience: Maintaining a Resilient Lifestyle. Self-control is a concept we teach our young children. The individual that lacks empathy, the ability to think before acting, plan ahead, or regulate emotions is an individual with little or no self-discipline or control. In an effort to achieve self-control, Brooks and Goldstein suggest the following steps: (1) accept ownership for own behavior, (2) think before acting and become a proactive problem solver, and (3) be consistent with thoughts and behaviors, but flexible.

Emotional Intelligence and Resiliency in Student Success

Students face a variety of difficulties in their day to day lives that require a certain set of skills to navigate. Individuals that are unable to appropriately handle difficult emotions and situations become distracted in the classroom, therefore missing out on key academic skills. Building children’s resilience and emotional intelligence is a way of reducing symptoms of depression, stress, anxiety as well as other psychological factors that can get in the way of an individual’s ability to concentrate in the classroom. School-based resiliency programs are an increasingly effective way in which to assist children in developing these necessary skills.

Young, Mufson, and Gallop (2010) have stated, even a short-term prevention of depressive symptoms may have a significant impact on school performance and social functioning of adolescents.

Examination of the research indicates a positive outcome on academic success when students engage in social and emotional learning. Social and emotional learning (SEL) promote and teach students to (1) identify, label, and understand emotions that motivate behavior, (2) develop empathy, (3) problem solve conflict, and (4) establish and maintain positive relationships. Improvements in self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making have been noted in students that have participated in SEL programs (CASEL and National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, 2008).

Several plausible explanations of how SEL programs promote student success are (1) problem solving skills: strategies taught to solve interpersonal problems can be applied to address academic problems, (2) classroom activities that improve teacher-student relationships, encouraging students to (a) access help when needed and (b) increase student engagement, and (3) classroom management techniques: teachers are able to instruct in classrooms where students are less disruptive thus delivering more effective instruction (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2014).

A study by Schonfeld et al. (2015) examined the impact evidenced based SEL instruction had on academic achievement. Schonfeld and colleagues found positive effects on math, reading, and writing scores in elementary students attending high-risk schools that were exposed to SEL instruction over their control group. Downey, Mountstephen, Lloyd, Hansen, and Stough (2008) examined emotional intelligence and scholastic achievement in Australian adolescents. Results of this study concluded that academic success was associated with higher total EI. Further, Downey et al (2008) revealed that emotional management and control predicted grades in math and science while understanding emotions predicted scores in geography and art.

Billings, Downey, Lomas, Lloyd, and Stough (2014) studied the association between EI and scholastic
achievement among four hundred seven boys and girls between ages 9 and 13 years old. Billings et al. found a significant relationship between understanding and analyzing emotions and measures of achievement in literacy and numeracy. Costa and Faria (2015) examined the predictive validity EI over academic achievement of students in a Portuguese secondary school. Their results suggest that EI is a valid predictor of students’ academic achievement; most influential on tenth grade student achievement. Likewise, Hogan et al. (2010) looked at the relationship between EI, peer social support, and family social support on grade 10 grade point average. Results indicated that verbal IQ predicted GPA and EI and EI significantly predicted GPA in male students. No relationships were found for female students.

Furthermore, Fayombo (2012) found a correlation between academic achievement and emotional intelligence among undergraduate psychology students. Fayombo’s (2012) study revealed that attending to emotions, positive expressivity, negative expressivity, and empathetic concern were great predictors of academic achievement. Libbrecht, Lievens, Carette, and Côté (2013) examined EI as it relates to interpersonal courses on “bedside manners” for medical school students. While Libbrecht et al. (2013) did not find a relationship between intellectual academic achievement, they did reveal uncover a relationship among those with higher EI having more success in interpersonal academic performance.

Conversely, Pope, Roper, and Qualter (2012) found no difference of EI competency in UK university psychology students that graduated from their program of study as compared to psychology students that did not graduate. Pope et al. (2012) explain that “failed to graduate” could include students that transferred to another area of study, transferred to a part-time model of study, or took a leave of absence from studies, not that the students failed the out of the university. Pope et al. (2012) did find a relationship between final average percentage mark and Social Awareness, indicating Social Awareness does play a role in academic success. Pope et al. (2012) also found that female students score significantly higher in the area of Social Awareness than male students.

Discussion

Through this literature review, it is clear that schools embrace the learning model of healthy minds equal alert and eager students. This is an endeavor worth engaging in within our schools to ensure the emotional well-being and safety of our children, as well as the academic success of our children. When students feel safe expressing their emotions without the fear of being ridiculed by peers (or adults) they can open their minds to learning. It is imperative that educators take an active role in implementing programs that identify students struggling with depression, as many studies and empirical research have concluded that depression is among one of the leading causes of disability in adolescents.

Even with presenting the aforementioned statistics, it is not easy for parents and educators to recognize mental health difficulties in adolescents. Parents and adults should be cognoscente of their teens’ moods and symptoms; identifying them early provides the opportunity for treatment and intervention. The development and implementation of mental health initiatives in public schools allows for the early identification of students that may be at-risk for emotional difficulties or lack of healthy coping strategies.

Conclusion

The reality is that the lives of students contain many difficulties and stressors. These difficulties emerge as distractions in the classroom when left unaddressed or managed ineffectively. It is suggested that interpersonal relationships and conflicts can not only impact a student’s social-emotional developmental but also their academic achievement (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Understanding and addressing one’s emotions allows all of their faculties to be focused on learning. When emotions are not
addressed they become distractions in the classroom and inhibit the ability to concentrate and learn effectively (Morga, 2011).

The ability to adequately deal with emotions is described as emotional intelligence. Daniel Goleman (1995) describes emotional intelligence as the competence of recognizing one’s feelings and those of others, the ability to motivate ourselves, and for managing and applying to our relationships. Goleman (1995) identifies five attributes that contribute to emotional intelligence: (1) self-awareness, (2) self-regulation, (3) internal motivation, (4) empathy, and (5) social skills. Emotional intelligence is emerging as a critical factor for sustaining high achievement, retention, and positive behavior as well as improving life success. Increasingly, schools and educational organizations are turning to EI seeking a systemic solution to improve outcomes – both academic and social (Six Seconds, n.d.). Greenbert et al. (2003) indicate, “There is a solid and growing empirical base concluding that well-designed, well-implemented school-based prevention and youth development programming can positively influence a diverse array of social, health, and academic outcomes.”

Social emotional learning (SEL) programs include character education, anti-bullying, drug prevention, violence prevention, school behavior programs which ultimately enhance school climate and increase academic performance.

Rimm-Kaufman et al. (2014) report that SEL enhances students’ connection to school, classroom behavior, and academic achievement. Shriver and Weissberg (2005) concluded that social and emotional learning students have better attendance and classroom behavior, in that they participation is more constructive and less often disruptive, they like school more and they have better grade point averages.

Six Seconds, The Emotional Intelligence Network (n.d.) reports that emotional intelligence has “extraordinary potential as a mediator of positive school outcomes,” (p. 9). When supporting students academically, it is essential to foster their EI as to increase their adaptability and stress management abilities (Hogan et al. 2010).

Understanding one’s emotions and how to process emotions is vital to an individual’s learning, in that emotion assist the learning process by filtering incoming information, focusing attention on that information, and making decisions (McPhail, 2014). High EI contributes to increased motivation, planning, and decision making which positively influence academic performance (Downey et al., 2008).

As evidenced by the above mentioned studies, individuals with higher EI demonstrate higher academic achievement. As school administrators and educators become more informed on the impact that SEL programs have on students’ performances in the areas of social and emotional skills, classroom behavior, school attachment, as well as academic achievement, SEL programs will become more readily implemented and supported (Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2014). With open discussion regarding mental health difficulties and fostering students’ EI, we allow students the opportunity to freely express their emotions, enabling them to be more active participants in their education, leading to increased academic success.

References


Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning and National Center for Mental Health Promotion


**About the Author**

**Kelly M. Giorgi, Ed.D.** is a Nationally Certified School Psychologist and Licensed Educational Psychologist in the state of Massachusetts. She is a practicing school psychologist and adjunct professor at American International College instructing teacher preparation courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Dr. Giorgi acts as a mentor to aspiring school psychologists for local college students in their second and third years of graduate study. She has extensive experience conducting Cognitive, Social/Emotional/Behavioral, and Achievement assessment and interpretation, conducting Functional Behavioral Analyses, developing Behavior Improvement Plans, prevention and crisis intervention, and consulting with school staff and families.


Dr. Giorgi holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology from Worcester State University, a Master degree in Education and a Certificate of Advance Graduate Study in School Psychology from Worcester State University, and a Doctoral degree of Education in Psychology from American International College. She has training in DBT, Mindfulness, CBT, and Solution Focused Therapy. She is a member of The National Association of School Psychologists, The Massachusetts School Psychologists Association, The Massachusetts Psychological Association, and The American Psychological Association – Division 16. Dr. Giorgi has a passion for the social and emotional development and growth of youth and adolescents. She is a member of her district’s Social Emotional Task Force, Suicide Prevention Task Force, and is the Transition Program Facilitator – Summer Program for students in kindergarten through fifth grade meeting the SE/BD diagnostic criteria. You can reach Dr. Giorgi at kelly.giorgi@aic.edu.