

“Say it outloud”: Fostering Trust and Connectedness in the Middle School Classroom Through Open Conversations and Sharing Circles

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It's a well-known fact that middle school is brutal. Between the pressures to fit in and the sudden hormonal and physical changes, it is no wonder that many adolescents seem to slip in academic growth during this time. For students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) due to a learning difference, typical challenges encountered by a pre-teen tend to be magnified: many students in special education face particular ridicule for being “different” and misconceptions around ability and intelligence abound. Educators of general and diverse student learners alike are well aware that social emotional learning (SEL) difficulties can inhibit learning and academic growth, so why not do more to equip our students with the emotional intelligence aptitudes they so clearly need? By prioritizing SEL in a relevant, responsive manner, we may help our students develop the self awareness and empathy needed to navigate their complex social landscape, thus clearing space for academic learning as well.

Where I teach is not a school where you would expect to find much trauma, at least not on the surface. Pulaski International School of Chicago is an International Baccalaureate elementary school located on the near Northwest side of Chicago in the Bucktown neighborhood. The area is affluent; there is a darling cafe across the street and many kids walk from their nearby homes, which are often priced upwards of a million dollars. Yet 75% of our students are considered low income and receive free or reduced school lunch, and 17% have limited English. Many of the 900+ prek-8th grade kids travel from far across the city in the hopes of getting a better opportunity. Pulaski also features a regional gifted program in Spanish, which means that each grade level has one homeroom composed of students from throughout the city who have tested into this program and travel by bus from as far as two hours away each day. We also have a large number of diverse learners; approximately 90 students with labels such as Specific Learning Disabled to Emotionally Disturbed to Autism.

In 2009, the local parent community rallied around bringing the IB program to my school to increase the rigor and curb appeal. Previously, we had been offering a standard instructional program in conjunction with the Gifted bilingual program. Between 2009 and today, Pulaski has seen three major changes in leadership, but each Principal has continued to move the school towards IB authorization and we have maintained the highest possible school rating (1+) throughout.

In the past school year, there have been some major changes to the process of determining and justifying least restrictive environments for students with IEPs (individualized education program). This year, the ODLSS (Office of Diverse Learner Supports and Services) department has created a new progress monitoring process to be used by both general education teachers as well as special education teachers to track student progress and interventions used. The changes increase the amount of data required to provide supports,

effectively increasing the pressure on teachers as we try to continue to deliver what our students need.

The Chicago Public Schools have also recently pushed for an increase in what's called Tier One interventions, which are general best practice strategies used to support students behaviorally and academically. One facet of this is the Morning Meeting, which is supposed to be conducted each day during homeroom. The function of the morning meeting is build community amongst the student, develop empathy and understanding, and create better relationships amongst the members of the class. Many teachers struggle to find enough time to do this activity, as the day is already strained with academic coursework.

Some of my colleagues utilize Second Step, a program to explicitly teach social emotional learning skills. Many report finding it useful, while others less so. The general sentiment often seems to be that time is a precious commodity that there is never enough of to carve out time for SEL instruction, particularly if it is not relevant-seeming enough to the students of the class. SEL instruction was not a component of my general teacher certification process and is not an area where teachers are specifically certified in as they would with academic subject areas. Over the past eight years, there have occasionally been requirements about explicit SEL instruction but not consistently.

As a teacher of diverse learners, I've always found it a bit easier to make social emotional instruction a priority. Many of my students over the years have struggled with learning in particular because of social emotional needs that needed to be addressed, such as anger issues, anxiety, low self esteem, and struggles in grief coping. As a result, I've adopted SEL instruction into curriculum throughout various class periods and have always found it to be worthwhile.

This year through the Action Research Leadership Institute, I decided to explicitly address SEL during my Reading resource class once per week, utilizing something I called circle time. Each week, I would offer a prompt on the board; an open-ended question to spark discussion. Their chairs circled up to face one another, my students would record their thoughts in a journal privately, and then anyone could choose to share their thoughts with the group. One person spoke at a time; respectful listening was the expectation, and no one was required to speak.

My research questions were:

- How do weekly opportunities to share and discuss personal experiences impact emotional intelligence in middle school diverse learners?
- What happens to student vulnerability?
- What happens to connectedness between students?
- What happens to self- and peer-perceptions around emotional intelligence?

There were 10 students participating; 3 in 7th grade, and 7 in 8th grade. All of the students have IEPs and are diagnosed with various disabilities including Autism, Other Health Impairment (typically ADHD), Specific Learning Disability (e.g. Dyslexia), Speech/Language Pathology, Mild Intellectual Impairment and Emotional/Behavioral Disorder. I chose this group for a few reasons. Several member of this student group has had some particular recent traumas, and I was interested to see how they would respond to the circle time practice. The size seemed ideal as well, with not too few kids to limit discussion opportunity, and too so many that it would be difficult to have an intimate conversation. Additionally, this group includes many students who I have worked with in the past and feel are already willing to open up to the group.

I used various method of data collection to observe shifts in my classroom community and in individual students, including pre- and post- student surveys (Appendix C) as well as interviews (Appendix A). During weekly circle time, I observed the conversation and used a coding system (Appendix B) to track instances of students volunteering information about themselves, responding to one another, and other, more subtle reactions such as laughter. Throughout this process, I kept a journal to capture some of my reactions occurring immediately after a noteworthy conversation or classroom event.

I'd like to tell a story about a particularly noteworthy session that helps to illustrate the nature and potential impact of these gatherings:

Emilio was a 7th grader who desperate sought any attention he could get by making himself the butt of his immature jokes. He garnered the occasional chuckle from a classmate, but most of his antics were met with an exasperated eye roll that he'd counter with yet another ridiculous contorted facial expression. He had a difficult time honoring the class expectations around kindness and respect in circle time during those first few months. Giggling over nearly anything, even during a more somber conversation, he'd take deep breaths and gaze out the window away from the source of amusement to try and calm down. Nevertheless, he often needed prompting to "go get some water;" a system for suggesting that he temporarily leave the space without it feeling punitive. He'd exit for a few minutes and return slightly calmer, but might have to step out once or twice more and sometimes even remain in the hall, which he hated.

One day in January, the prompt on the board read "If you could go back in time anywhere, anyplace, where would you go and why?" The question had been suggested by a student named Ricky , and I figured it'd be interesting to find out which historical eras appealed most to my middle school diverse learners. Thus far, one student mentioned an interest in experiencing slavery in the 1850s, and another named the civil rights movement. Ricky wanted to witness his parents as children, which seemed a most amusing and intriguing concept to me. Emilio, meanwhile, had just returned from one of his water breaks. Instead of wearing the impish grin he so often did when he felt others were watching him, today his expression was uncharacteristically blank and emotionless. He sat down and immediately raised a hand to beckon the talking piece, something he'd only done a few times these past Fridays to offer a light-hearted or inappropriate remark. Holding the little stuffed bird, so quickly and quietly we

almost missed it, Emilio mumbled "I'd go back to when my cousin was still here." He immediately lost his composure, his shoulders heaving with huge waves of choked tears. The hoodie came up and was tightly cinched down over his face. He declined all offers of tissues, hugs, or opportunities to step away. Emilio sat slumped down in his chair, listening under the fabric of his milk-stained sweatshirt as other students began to offer their own experiences of losses.

You see, this group of students knows a lot about grief. Of the ten kids participating in circle time this year, six have lost a biological father to death, prison or simply abandonment. Two live without a biological mother. One girl lost her little sister several years back and wrote about it once in a narrative, describing how slowly the ambulance came down her street while her five year old sister's body convulsed in seizures. Another lost her grandmother last year; a second mother to her and her closest family member. As a class community, there have been shared losses as well. Last summer, a special education student named Phillippe who had only just graduated, died at the hand of another former student's gun; a careless accident on a hot summer day. This Winter, a special education aide, Mr. Chavez, died suddenly of a medical complication; every member of my classroom community knew him well and loved him dearly.

Yet many of these discussions around death, both individually experienced and shared, might never have come to light had it not been for Emilio's courageous moment of vulnerability. What's more, how the students responded to him set a tone for how we handle such things. He later reflected in a video interview I conducted last May "Nobody made a joke...everybody was just serious about it, and I got the support that I needed from them." Following this collective show of understanding and empathy towards Emilio; Carl, Maxwell, Dylan, Ricky and others exposed their own deep losses that day. A particularly innocent student, Larry, wished to go back in time to prevent Mr. Chavez's death by insuring he ate differently that day, which reflected an incredibly sweet-if-naive misconception around how the man died. At this moment in our conversation, I myself was crying along with the others. I wrote in my journal that day: *"I certainly did NOT see it coming. But wow, amazing..."*

Circle time was something new I did this year in the name of research, but I've always tried to allow space for kids to talk about what's on their minds. These organic moments where emotional breakthroughs might occur are undoubtedly the most memorable of my nine year teaching career thus far. As a special educator, I am no expert in any given content area. I have taught Algebra, Ancient Civilizations, Biology, Expository Writing, Phonemic Awareness and Basic Decoding, Statistics and Probability, the Age of Exploration, Physics and Chemistry, Theater, Robotics, and most recently, Cooking. It's been terribly engaging and never, not ever, boring. Or predictable. But if you asked me what aspect of education was my personal favorite, what I most loved to teach, emotional intelligence is absolutely it. I want to help my students learn to be happier, more balanced, more self-aware citizens of this world. We have explicit conversations around the idea of core values and how to identify them and tie this to personal (not merely academic) goals. I want them to have tools to critically examine themselves and their relationships, and to have the language to express the complicated emotions they may be

experiencing at any given moment. I want them to responsibly and compassionately manage the unpredictable nature of being a human and know how to self advocate and assert themselves. This has all sounded so nebulous always, even to me, but deep down I've always sensed that there's much weight to this idea. I suppose it's not unlike the philosophy of teaching the whole child.

But...but the expectations on teachers are not so aligned to such things. We are evaluated on our test scores, our growth percentile rankings, our coverage of a certain amount of curriculum. This, paired with the ever-mounting paperwork and red tape, has left many well-meaning educators overwhelmed by the mere notion that they may also need to teach Social Emotional lessons somewhere in their already-packed schedule. What's more, not every teacher is naturally inclined to teach SEL, particularly without proper, (here I must emphasize) HIGH QUALITY professional development. And so, the majority of my colleagues simply avoid the matter all together.

Yet it cannot be avoided. This we all know. The social emotional and functional needs of our students cry out for our attention each day, whether we like it or not. A student who utterly lacks motivation and has so much POTENTIAL - this child needs SEL intervention. The kid who seems to be constantly getting into it with a peer, or an authority figure - again, their needs are apparent. And we fear losing class time, yet what good work are we actually doing when so many of our students are not mentally, wholly present during a lesson? And for those who seemingly are learning, what if they have no real way to contextualize it to their actual lives? How much richer class discussions might we have if we allow room for our students to truly open up, talk to each other -really be allowed talk, and listen- perhaps about issues that have nothing to do with a content area of school? My research would suggest that students may perform just as well if not better in academics if time is allotted to work on some of the emotional barriers.

I actually doubt many teachers would say that they are most passionate about raising test scores or knowing they've "hit" every Common Core standard. Such metrics and tools provide some ballast and context, but they certainly don't keep us coming back each day. Quite the opposite, actually. Many educators have become disheartened by the demands being placed on them that are so often misaligned to their holistic values; a call to show results through a purely academic lens and a narrow one at that. In pushing for "results" each year, one might forget what a beautifully nuanced and holistic thing education ought to be. Add to that an increased pressure to perform with fewer resources but more paperwork and students in front of us, and it's easy to see why something like Social Emotional instruction might fall by the wayside.

Why must so many students come to school unprepared to learn? We're ready to teach them, ready to share our expertise and knowledge, but then all too often behavior issues seem to get in the way. Some students just can't focus, or are unwilling to take responsibility for their actions, and they treat others without a lick of empathy. We wonder what will happen to these

kids when they're all grown up. The constant putting out of fires and management can be extremely overwhelming for a teacher who simply wants to give academic instruction. Perhaps, though, we can think of these emotional cries for help as we would weaknesses in our students' academic foundation. Great teachers deviate from their curriculum when the need calls for it, scaffolding and supplementing to provide the critical skills students require to access something more. In this same way, perhaps the emotional barriers to learning we sometimes butt up against serve to remind us that there are other layers to learning that we must attend to. Maybe our students need to learn how to be a positively contributing member of our classroom society; self-aware, able to manage emotions and recognize them in others, prepared to navigate tricky relationships, and keeping oneself motivated and moving towards a goal.

Emotional intelligence is the basis for our human experience and for how we perceive knowledge. After all, our emotional brain developed before our thinking brain. It can also be a game changer when it comes to general life satisfaction, far more than our intellect. IQ, which isn't as stagnant as we once thought, has been found to have merely a 20% impact overall on life success. That means the remaining factors are some mingling of luck, good fortune, and emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995). Addressing emotional intelligence in the classroom has the potential to go far beyond mediating difficult behaviors; it can be as inspiring and joyful as helping a young person determine where their passions and talents overlap; guiding them to their element (Robinson, 2009). I've found that when students have begun to visualize a future for themselves that ties to their element, they find more purpose in their day to day activities at school and give more effort overall. Of course, that is just one aspect of what social emotional curriculum might encompass.

An interesting tidbit: the prefrontal cortex, the very part of the brain that houses our working memory, also plays the role of regulating strong emotions such as anger and anxiety (Goleman, 1995). If a child is struggling with acute emotional distress, their ability to engage in new ways of thinking is impeded. Whatever we hoped to teach them that day effectively goes in one ear and out the other. Having discovered this alarming aspect of our anatomy, the New Haven school district asked teachers to enroll in emotional literacy professional development. Initially, about a third of the staff admitted they were reluctant to tackle this new area of instruction. However, a year after they had implemented the strategies and lessons, over 90 percent were eager to do so again (Goleman, 1995). My personal theory is that they not only discovered how well it worked, but enjoyed the experience of developing deeper relationships with their students.

The classroom environment provides a wonderful setting to develop the emotional intelligence of our students because kids are inherently more engaged in this sort of learning alongside their peers than in isolation with an adult such as a parent, for instance. What's more, many of the skills that go into emotional intelligence are of a social nature and are best practiced and observed amongst others.

Invitational Education is pedagogy well suited to building emotional intelligence because it's built around a more holistic approach to teaching and like Robinson, believes there should be an emphasis on summoning student potential as well as building their own capacity to behave according to their goals and values (Purkey, Novak, and Schoenlein, 2016). Social emotional instruction in the classroom really should be shaped around individual student hopes and dreams along with their needs, so there is a sense of optimism throughout the process. Invitational Education acknowledges that all students come in with their own self concepts and perceptions that need to be unpacked and explored as well. When one considers an adolescent's typical self-consciousness and concern with peer acceptance, puberty is a crucial and nearly perfect time for teaching and applying emotional and social lessons (Goleman, 1995). The classroom can provide a rich and safe opportunity for students to explore their sense of self and others and start to manage some of the complicated emotional challenges they face each day.

Psychologists like Daniel Goleman have studied the impact of explicit SEL instruction in schools all around the country that have witnessed often dramatic improvements to aptitudes such as self-awareness, ability to communicate respectfully and assertively, conflict resolution skills, ability to empathize, etc (Goleman, 1995). Not only do these changes surely create a more positive classroom community, but one must wonder what sort of impact this could have on a person's life in the years to come. Our students likely won't remember the historical timelines or geometric theorems we've taught them, but because they must practice and hone their emotional skills on a daily basis, this intelligence continues building off the foundation we provide.

James R. Doty, a distinguished professor of neurosurgery at Stanford University, entirely attributes his success in life to a single mentor who for just one summer, taught him "the magic trick" of emotional intelligence; calming one's body, thoughts, opening one's heart and manifesting personal goals. He says that "I didn't know this at age 12, but during those six weeks she literally rewired my brain" (p. 26, Doty, 2016). Doty goes on to detail his experience with developing emotional intelligences such as self awareness, stress coping, and motivating himself to set and achieve goals he never thought possible.

I think about so many of my students who have already faced challenges and losses that I can hardly comprehend; Aria living without her sister, mother or father; Emilio who's never met his Mom; Dylan whose father committed suicide when he was just a baby. Many of my students become noticeably anxious right before breaks from school; more fights and arguments tend to break out around that time as well. Mondays after school vacations tend to be a day for resetting the foundation for learning, and unbridled student behaviors might beg the question how little structure a student experienced while they were home. As Doty would wisely point out, "Children perform best when there is consistency and dependability...Teenagers crave freedom, but only if they're standing on a base that is stable and secure" (p. 27, Doty, 2016). I hoped circle time would offer this stability in a small, but impactful way.

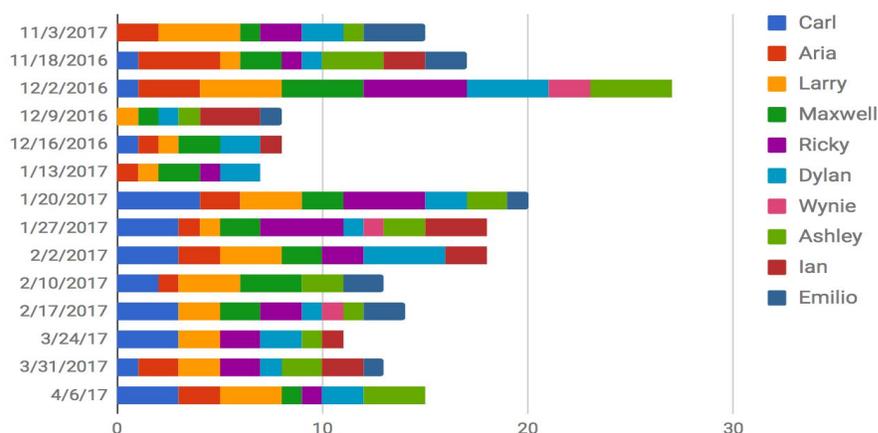
In May, I began swimming my way through the data - the coded tracking forms, the student post-interviews and surveys, and the teacher journals. Certain themes began to emerge. Some aligned naturally to my original question and subquestions; I noted shifts in student willingness to share personal stories (vulnerability), a subtle increase in responding directly to each other (apparent connectedness), and changing perceptions around the experience of opening up and discovering more about each other. There were other themes as well, which I had not anticipated from the outset. Beyond changes in vulnerability, connectedness and perspective around this experience, there were other distinct outcomes I'm eager to share, such as one student's marked evolution from taciturn and resentful to trusting and eager. There were tender moments where I witnessed students revealing a subtle yet intentional compassion towards their peers, or instances when students protected circle time as a sort of sacred practice. These are some of the developments and findings highlighted in the seven chapters below.

Chapter One: Vulnerability

"I've got to figure out how to promote better conversation... They all had something to write down in response to the prompt- it was about feeling cared for and appreciated- but very few would share out. Most seem to enjoy being circled up, though, so maybe that's a start?" - teacher journal, 10/29/16

I looked at vulnerability in a couple of ways: noting how frequently my students offered to share their prompt reflections based on my coding system, but also at the nature of what was being shared, which came through in my notes and journal entries. In both cases, I observed some significant changes in my students as they gradually both opened up more often as well as began to share some deeply personal matters with their peers.

Tracked instances of student volunteering during Circle Time.



In the chart above, you can see that initially, in November and early December, the ten students volunteered somewhat frequently. The prompts at this time were quite light-hearted, such as "What superpower would you choose and why?" But on December 9, I attempted a

more open-ended Rose and Thorn prompt, which invites students to share something positive and something negative happening in their life. I did something similar December 16 with a focus on what they were both looking forward to/not looking forward to about Winter Break. In both cases, students were reluctant to share, particularly anything negative.

January 20, which I have come to think of this as The Day That Everything Changed, shows a surge in volunteering that was more or less maintained thereafter, and it is this day that changed the trajectory for circle time insofar as the potential value of it, the sense of openness and vulnerability that I would later witness across numerous sessions, and a day that confirmed for my students that one can in fact share something deeply personal without consequences (as many noted in post interviews). That was the day Ricky posited *“If you could go back in time anywhere, anyplace, where would you go and why?”* As I described earlier, numerous students opened up that day with accounts of their own painful memories around losing a loved one, and no one laughed or wrote any one off; in fact, the opposite happened and there was a great deal of compassion shown that day. As a side note, while it appears that two of the ten students did not share on January 20, those students were actually absent.

January 20 not only marked an influx in sharing in general, but also a clear deepening in terms of the nature of what was being offered. Early on, responses were often one word answers to the prompt without elaboration, and some students would only make comments to get a laugh. You can imagine why this sort of dynamic was not conducive to a more sensitive contribution. However, after Emilio exposed a part of his background, it seemed a levy broke, and all of the deep, rich experiences that others had in their past came surging out. When no one laughed or teased (Emilio being the most likely candidate in most cases), it affirmed the safety of the space we were creating. After the January 20 session, hardly a week went by where some student didn't share a more personal account. Even Maxwell, who tended to keep his comments brief throughout the year, felt he could get things off his chest and put them out their to his peers using this venue:

“We only had time for a quick, 10-minute circle time - rose and thorn. I didn't record formal data on this one. The most interesting thing that happened was when Maxwell, without hesitation, shared that his rose was that over the weekend it was his father's birthday, and the thorn was that he wouldn't be able to wish him a happy birthday (because he had passed away).” - journal entry, 4/20/17

We already knew about his father because of the January 20 session - that day being the first any of had learned why his Dad wasn't in the picture. But now, three months later, it felt as if Maxwell needed to remind us that this was still affecting him, or that he simply was reaching out for that sense of comfort once more.

Another student who opened up on January 20, and who gets a chapter of his very own, also continued to open up from that day forward, building in his storytelling capacity and willingness to describe at length what was on his mind:

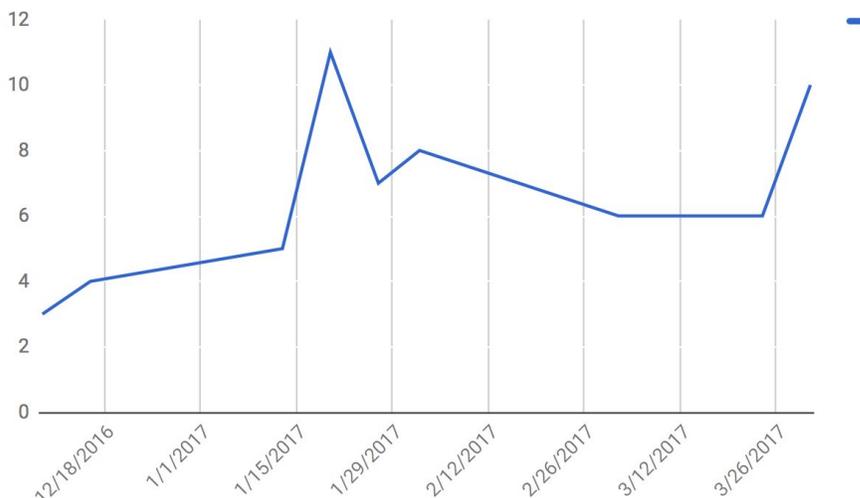
“Carl shared a really personal story, and told in great length and detail, about the moment in 2014 when his mom told him his Grandma passes away. Then he described going to Mexico and meeting his grandpa and attending the funeral.”- journal entry 3/23/17

I think I can best encapsulate how circle time impacted students with help from one of my students. In an interview conducted in June, I asked Aria how she felt about opening up during circle time. She surprised me by saying “Before circle time I didn’t express my feelings to no one but now I do it more often and I’m more open. I didn’t tell my Grandma if I’m sad or anything happened to me, I didn’t tell her, but now I can tell her.” I was so focused on the peer relationships that I had never considered how the lessons learned in circle time would impact family relationships as well.

Chapter Two: Connecting

One of my sub-questions involved noticing to what extent the students were actually relating to one another, or even showing interest in what the other students had to say during the live conversation. Given limitations around actually measuring this, video of the conversations might have been more informative. But I was able to code instances of responses to each other, which I initially labels as “responding with a question” or “responding with a comment” and later combined into one category. There was also a hand gesture, tapping two index fingers together, which I offered the students to use as a means of connecting without interrupting. This was particularly hard to gauge in conjunction with all the other notes and observations I was trying to track during the circle time.

Tracked Connections/Responses



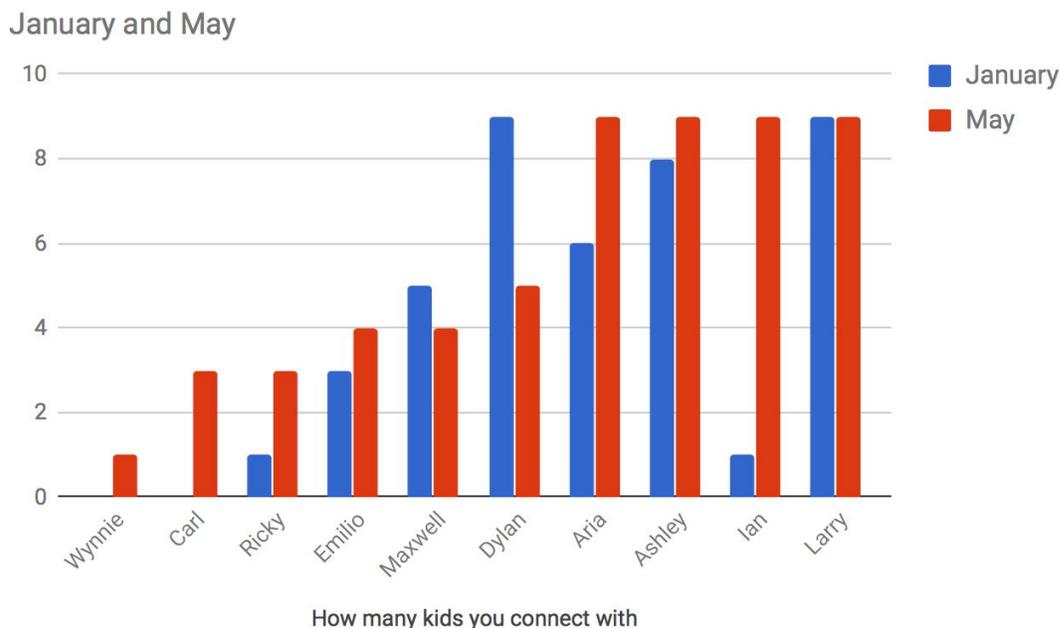
Above, you can see that there was a general upward shift of instances where students either responded to one another with a question or comment, or indicated a connection. I think

this is especially noteworthy in conjunction with the increase in volunteering personal information, since circle time does have a time limit. In having an opportunity to speak by holding the talking piece, it is powerful to me that students would opt to follow up with one another rather than introduce their own personal topic.

The chapter on shifting perspectives shares some more detailed insights from the post-interviews in how students related to one another. I also noted some changes in my journal entries:

“Overall, I noticed more students wanting to respond to one another. It was often done as an interruption, but I liked seeing how engaged they were with each other’s stories.” - 3/24/17
“I’ve also started the student post-interview process and was really excited to hear that Emilio and Ricky both felt that participating in circle time had changed their perspective on other students and had also increased the number of students they felt a connection to.” - 4/20/17

Another way that I measured connectedness was by asking students in the pre- and post-interviews directly “Of the nine other kids in our Reading class, how many do you feel some connection to?” I did not remind students of the number they gave me initially, as I didn’t want that to impact their answer.



Above, you can see that seven of the ten students showed an increase in the number that they reported. Both Wynnie and Carl had actually said 0 in the pre-interview. Two students; Dylan and Maxwell, showed a slight decrease, which I thought was interesting. I wonder if in

some instances, just as Wynnie noted a lack of being able to connect at times, if other students also experienced a more critical view of their connectedness as they learned more about their peers. It might be the idea that when you discover more about a person, you sometimes conclude that you aren't as close to them as you originally thought. Of course, this is all just conjecture on my part. Larry, who as I've said is quite innocent and sweet, did not vary in his response - he felt he connected to everyone both times.

Chapter Three: Moments of Grace

One of my students is diagnosed with Autism and often struggles with picking up on subtle social cues or responding appropriately to different social situations. One session, Ricky was expressing grief about the fear of losing his Grandma, who he was going to visit in Mexico over the Winter break. The rest of the group had thus far been engaging in a light-hearted conversation about what they'd be doing over break, and Larry had been waiting with obvious anticipation to share his plans. When it took a turn and Ricky started tearing up, several kids offered their sympathy and the room got sort of quiet. After he was done sharing, Ricky offered up the talking piece to Larry, and continued to hang his head low and softly cry. For a moment, Larry beamed with excitement to speak finally, but then something shifted. He looked down at his journal, then over to Ricky, then back to his journal. He visibly shook his head, lowered the journal down to the floor, and leaned over to pat Ricky on the shoulder and say "I'm really sorry about your Grandma". I later wrote in my journal:

"I sensed that it was a loss for Larry to realize that acknowledging the other students needed to take precedence over his own original planned comments, and I thought that was incredibly sensitive and self-aware of him." 12/16/16

On January 20, Carl had a particularly self-aware moment of that first day that he began to really open up with the group. Everyone had shared about their respective losses and the mood had become quite emotional; Larry was passing out tissues. Towards the end of the session, I suggested a change in subject towards something more positive, suggesting we give shout outs to one another to wrap up the session. I later noted in my journal that Carl caught himself from saying something more frivolous about Assassin's Creed again when it seemed to dawn on him that it was no longer the right time for it. This has always been a bit of an obsession for him, and a topic he can prattle on about if you let him, so I was pleased that he showed some self restraint in light of the recent conversation we'd shared.

Chapter Four: Perspectives Shift

In May, I conducted one on one post-interviews with each of the ten students. One of my questions was "What is something you've learned about someone in the class that has surprised you? I used this question to get at any shifts in perspective of one another and to better determine how in tune the students seemed to be with others. Some of the most compelling responses are below:

"I feel bad...because sometimes I'd like to feel what they're feeling but I can't. I related when Ian said his friend's sister passed away because that happened to my good friend." - Wynnie

Wynnie was an interesting case because she wrote a lot in her journal, but rarely shared in the group. She would make the connection sign with her hands, but rarely asked follow up questions or commented on what someone had to say. Wynnie wasn't present on January 20 when the group had the collective grieving session over Mr. Chavez, Phillipe, and various family members. I wonder how her capacity to relate and empathize might have been different if she hadn't missed school that day.

"I feel bad with Julian- he's with his aunt and I don't know why his parents abandoned him...I mean, what kind of people abandon them?"- Carl

For starters, I was astonished that Carl had paid that much attention to what was happening in Julian's life, considering that Julian was a new student who had only joined our circle towards the end and Carl had a tendency to be very focused on what he had to say during circle time. What's more, I have worked with Carl for four years, and this was literally the first time I heard him express anger and frustration around *someone else's* problem.

"Aria I knew about her family stuff but I didn't understand how or why." - Ian

Ian and Aria are actually good friends, and spend time together outside of school pretty regularly from what I've gathered. I was surprised and pleased to find that circle time had provided another avenue for them to deepen their friendship.

I also wanted to find out in general how perspective around circle time had shifted over the course of the year. I asked in May *"Has participating changed your perspective in any way, and if so, how?"* Below are some of the responses:

"Thinking about the future because I would never think about what I'm gonna be when I grow up and stuff; I used to just think about the now." - Aria

Aria seemed to really enjoy the prompts that had to do with our aspirations and dreams of the future, and ultimately was awarded a special journey award at graduation from another teacher for her passionate views on world issues and potential for future activism and advocacy. In one discussion, she corrected a student who remarked that our class was more "slow", reminding them that "Being in special ed don't mean your slow..it just means your brain works differently." I certainly observed a growing confidence in Aria, even in her willingness to speak her mind the circle time setting.

"It's very good for people to talk more and share their life stories to other people. People

sometimes hold it in and keep it a secret but if they say it outloud they feel more better.”
-Dylan

Dylan was someone who contributed frequently but rarely shared anything deeply personal. On January 20, he opened up about his father’s suicide and cried in front of his classmates for the first time.

“YES because I usually don’t like speaking or answering the question but now I know you won’t be laughing or anything.” - Ricky

Ricky was someone who would go multiple sessions without sharing, ultimately became a huge fan of circle time, and would often ask me on Friday morning whether we were going to meet that afternoon (to which the reply was always “yes”).

Chapter Five: Valuing and Protecting the Work

It was important to me that circle time became a practice that the students took ownership of. As with academics, a teacher wants to feel that eventually, their students value the activities that she has prepared, and are enthusiastic to participate. I was pleased to find that from early on, students showed great interest in gathering for circle time. In one journal entry, I noted:

“I couldn’t believe it- four of my students showed up with their journals today! I hadn’t even reminded them that we’d be having circle time today in Reading, and yet they must have been looking forward to it because they all remembered to come prepared. The others had opted to leave their journals with me, an invitation for me to read over what they’d written during Reflection time.” - 10/21/16

Emilio and I had many one on one conversations from the start of the circle time practice around his difficulties with staying calm and respectful throughout. We had strategies such as deep breathing, looking out the window, asking for breaks, and the use of handheld fidgets, but it was still a weekly struggle for him to be able to stick it out:

“Emilio, who was sent out several sessions ago for making a rude joke, and then the following week barely managed to hold it together, specifically asked if we’d be circling up and then stayed very calm and mature throughout. I’ve been sitting next to him and think that may be helping.”- 11/15/16

As the year progressed, Emilio required fewer and fewer breaks from Circle time, and would tell me how much he didn’t want to miss it. I could see him visibly straining to keep it together, but in those moments he’s usually elect to take a water break on his own, evidently preferring to miss a few moments than risk missing the whole thing.

The members of the classroom became more protective of the practice as well. Initially, I had to remind everyone of the norms and expectations, and I was the only one policing any silly or disrespectful moments. This began to shift in the Spring:

“Emilio was being very silly (maybe had an emotional response in mind, though he didn’t share it). The interesting part is that both Ashley and Maxwell subtly discouraged him from acting that way on multiple occasions, something I’ve never seen either of them do before. Usually, Ashley doesn’t assume that role with other kids who are generally “cooler” than her, and Maxwell is Emilio’s friend. I was really happy to see that they were taking ownership of the circle time etiquette.” - Journal entry, 3/24/17

Chapter Six: A Case Study of Carl

One student seemed to change more than anyone else in the class; Carl. Carl started off HATING circle time. For the first six sessions, he shared only three remarks, all of them brief and limited. He wouldn’t write either, and would drop his journal to the floor almost immediately after they were passed out, hanging his head down and refusing to make eye contact during the discussion. After the rich discussion on January 20, when he shared about his Grandma, there was no turning back. Carl volunteered so much, in such great detail, that we had to give him a hard time about hogging the birdie (the talking piece).

Carl's volunteer rate over time



Above is a graph of Carl's volunteer rate throughout the course of the year. Not only was he volunteering more, but Carl's views on other students and his own self-perception around sharing were noteworthy as well:

Interview responses in January and in May

1:1 Interview Question	Response on 1/19/17	Response on 5/1/17
<i>How do you generally feel about circle time?</i>	[Shakes head]	(nodding) "It's kinda fun like when you like the prompt."
<i>From 1-10, how comfortable are you about expressing emotions in front of others?</i>	1	"10 because cuz sometimes I like to share about everything we talk about."
<i>Out of the 9 others kids in this Reading class, how many do you feel you relate to in general?</i>	None	"Maxwell, Aria and Wynnie"
You've shared some personal stuff a few times; how do you feel about that?	NA (only asked in post-interview)	"I'm glad I did because so at least people could understand what it means to lose your grandma."

I wasn't the only one witnessing this transformation. Carl's peers did as well, and many highlighted him specifically in the follow up interviews around the question of "*What is something you've learned about someone in the class that has surprised you?*"

"I thought he used to be shy and everything and didn't want to speak but you're encouraging him and he started telling his feelings and deep down inside he's a normal kid." -Ricky

I found this remark to be especially powerful, considering Carl's history of having a more severe cognitive disability and often being excluded from lessons with his special education peers in order to work one on one with a paraprofessional. Though I had discontinued that practice once I became his Reading teacher, there was a strong sense of his being isolated socially and academically for all too long.

"Like Carl lost his grandma and I could relate to that because I had two family members pass away."-Aria

"Carl was telling us about his grandma and at first I felt like he hide his emotions but then when he was explaining it I learned that sometimes he can actually show it."

-Ashley

"That Carl didn't learn to ride a bike until he was 11"- Emilio

Whether the observation about Carl was more trivial (bike riding) or more serious (losing his Grandma), I think it's quite telling that four of the nine students I posed that question to went straight to Carl.

Chapter Seven: Shedding Light

Circle time had another benefit: helping me learn things about my students that I wouldn't otherwise have known and reminding me to see the whole person as much as possible.

"I noticed something interesting about Larry today; he tends to go from speaking somewhat loudly and clearly to more and more mumbly. With each additional sentence, he gets quieter, physically begins to draw inward, look down, speak more softly and unintelligibly. I've noticed this occasionally in reading class but it's easier to see in this setting since there's so much discussion and he's speaking for longer periods of time." - journal entry 3/3/2017

This provided some insight into the speech and communication needs of Larry, which I was able to share with his speech therapist and parents. With all of us being more aware of this, we developed some verbal and visual cues to offer Larry when he begins to slip away in his speech, and I was thrilled to find that for an end of the year social studies presentation last five minutes, Larry maintained his volume and clarity for the duration!

Dylan frequently mentioned his love of creativity and building things, such as in response to prompts "What is something you value and why?" and "Describe something you're good at." Through those discussions, I learned that Dylan loves fixing up skateboards and building Lego models of historical events. With that knowledge, I was then able to suggest a Lego presentation option for a Social Studies project we were working on in another class. He was stunned to have the option to bring his favorite toy to school, but for me it was an easy choice because based on his remarks in circle time, I knew he would make good use of that outlet - and he did!

In other ways, circle time ensured that I remembered that my students are complicated humans. For example, Maxwell's occasional comments about his father's passing years ago or Aria's memories about her Mom would be a bit of reality check for me just when I had allowed myself to forget. It can be so easy to be caught up in what you want to teach, and to get frustrated with students for not engaging in the material the way you wanted them to, or for being off task or silly or rude. But then I'd get that reminder of what they've been through, and at such a young age, and it would put things in perspective. It doesn't mean I let them off the hook or expect less, but it is important to have some context and compassion for who our students are beyond the classroom walls.

Conclusions, Limitations and Next Steps

Without a doubt, I thoroughly enjoyed circle time with my students and have every intention of continuing this work next year and beyond. I found that it did wonders for my ability to relate to my students and have a more nuanced understanding of who they are. Even with students like Wynnie, who didn't speak much, shared things in her journal about what was happening in her personal life that she invited me to read and that I would never have realized. The combination of writing and talking was critical to allow space for everyone to open up in their own way. That said, I would love to see how students might open up even more if given a more intimate group to share in, since ten is still a decent sized group to be vulnerable in front of. I also found that for many students, journaling was a rush job - they would jot down a few words to have down it, but were mostly eager to get to the talking part. I'd be interested to see if I could elevate the practice of journaling on its own.

My students love the opportunity to share, and they all stated in their post interviews that they enjoyed hearing what each other had to say. Not a week went by since we started the ritual of circle time where someone didn't confirm that we were indeed having it (often reporting this information excitedly to a friend). The kids got the space set up and the journals distributed with a sense of urgency that I only wish I saw in other activities. I would love to try post-journaling next year so students can have a chance to reflect on the conversation while it's still fresh.

While the interviews were extremely informative, the surveys did little to support my research. Looking forward, I would like to pose more explicit agree/disagree statements around perceptions of self and others that students can rate themselves on, e.g. "I think my classmates might laugh at me if I say something personal" or "I am willing to share very personal information about my life in front of my classmates" or "Letting painful things out will help me feel better in the long run", etc. I might also add fill in the blank statements such as "I would want to share about _____, but probably wouldn't in circle time because _____."

Another conclusion I've drawn from my research relates to the impact (or lack of impact) on academic progress. Many teachers would be reluctant to allocate weekly time for this SEL practice, especially given the pressures for students to make expected growth on the annual standardized test. These results are heavily tied to teacher ratings within the Reach system used by Chicago Public Schools. Growth in emotional intelligence certainly is not measured on any district or school-wide level.

Data comparing Reading Resource Special Education growth and attainment on the NWEA standardized test. More students met or exceeded their goal in the 2016-17 school year in spite of a 12% reduction in reading instruction due to implementation of Circle Time.

	2015-16 no Circle Time	2016-17 Circle Time (12%)
Average RIT (Rasch units) increase on NWEA Reading test	6.67 points	7 points
% of students meeting/exceed goal	71%	82%

Above, you can see that my students actually improved on their NWEA Reading test in the 2016-17 school year than in the previous, when I had 12% more time allocated to Reading instruction. This year, the average growth in RIT points was higher than the previous year's average, and a higher percentage of students either met or exceeded their expected goal RIT score. While I can't indicate causation from my research, this does show that my students certainly didn't suffer in a reduction of Reading instruction in lieu of weekly Circle time sessions. If more data were collected across a larger student population and over time, one might eventually make the case that students perform better academically because of the prioritization of SEL instruction and supports.

Policy Recommendations

Next year, I am looking forward to continuing the practice of circle time, allotting weekly time as well as opening up the possibility for more spontaneous sessions so that we can respond to situations as they arise. Ideally, my students will begin to initiate the circle time gatherings and dictate the prompts, within a structure that I will need to offer (e.g. frequency and length of sessions, timing, etc). I would also like to incorporate more journaling into my daily teaching practice so that my students can build on their written forms of self expression and reflection. I'm hoping to add occasional lessons around mindfulness to the repertoire, just to provide some coping strategies that may be used outside of our circle sessions.

In terms of data gathering, I intend next year to interview the kids at the beginning, middle and end of the year to gather feedback from them as well as assess the efficacy of the work. I will be very curious to see how the dynamic shifts, with 7 of the 10 students graduating, and new students joining the Reading class. I will also utilize the amended surveys to see if written responses shed any new light on student perceptions around the practice of sharing and listening.

Schoolwide, I would love to see this authentic SEL opportunity extended to the other middle school students. The format I imagine is a small (10-12 student) advisory that is maintained for the length of middle school (6th-8th grade), led by a trained staff member, not necessarily a homeroom teacher. I believe that it is logistically possible to allocate weekly time into the school schedule, given an open mind. Our district already requires that CPS schools incorporate a minimum quantity of SEL instruction minutes. Typically, this is easily "gotten over with" via daily Morning Meetings, conducted in a homeroom of 30+ students. My advisory concept would be a bit more complex and logistically involved, requiring thoughtful scheduling and planning from the outset. In order for classroom teachers to facilitate this practice with fidelity and confidence, authentic professional development would be necessary.

In the bigger picture, I would recommend that districts across the United States move towards more authentic SEL instruction in order to prioritize growth in emotional intelligence. As there is far more to being a successful human than intellectual aptitude, it makes little sense that

this is all that we measure and hold schools accountable for. I can easily imagine an effective school model where our students are assessed to determine how they might best be served - what particular combination of Reading, Math, Art, Science, Executive Functioning, Self Awareness, Empathy and more might they need most? These subjects would be differentiated to target the unique needs of that particular student or group. After all, schools are meant to facilitate the growth of young people so that they may thrive beyond our classroom walls. The highly interactive, social nature of school is rife for teaching and practicing emotional intelligence skills, and it seems that currently, we are wasting a precious opportunity.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Pre- and Post-Interview Questions

1. How do you generally feel about circle time?
2. From 1-10, how comfortable are you about expressing emotions in front of others?
3. Out of the 9 others kids in this Reading class, how many do you feel you relate to in general?
4. Do you like listening to what other people share in circle time?
5. What do you think the purpose of circle time is? What am I trying to teach you guys?
6. (Pre only) What would make circle time more meaningful to you, or what would you like me to add/change/or continue?
7. If something is bothering you, do you feel like you know some strategies to help yourself feel better?
8. (Post only) What are some of your favorite memories, moments or types of circle times?
9. (Post only) What is something you've learned about someone in the class that has surprised you?
10. (Post only) You've shared some personal stuff a few times; how do you feel about that?
11. (Post only) Has participating changed your perspective in any way, and if so, how?

Appendix B

Participation Tracker

Date:	Prompt/Lesson:		
Students	Engagement	Notes	Engagement Code Key:
Aria			V: Volunteered Response
Emilio			RQ: Responded w/question
Carl			RC: Responded w/connection
Ian			RS: Responded w/sympathy
Larry			I: Introducing topics/?s to group
Wynnie			T: Tears
Ashley			S: Smiling
Maxwell			L: Laughter
Ricky			EC: Eye Contact
Dylan			PT: Physical touch

Appendix C

Student Survey

SEL Self Assessment

Name: _____

This is to help me better understand where you're at right now so I can design some activities around everyone's needs. Please answer honestly and know that this won't be shared with anyone.

	A big issue/ Very Difficult	A medium issue/ Somewhat Difficult	A small issue/ Slightly Difficult	Not an issue/ Not Difficult
Coming to school				
Socializing at Recess				
Thinking before speaking/ acting				
Being vulnerable				
Holding onto friendships				
Dealing with anger or strong emotions				
Being at home				
Handling death/ a loss				
Concentrating on a task				
Empathizing with others				
Feeling excited				
Falling asleep				
Engaging in an activity				

1. What are your three best qualities?
2. What is something you wish you could change about yourself?
3. Who is someone you admire or consider to be a personal hero? What quality do they possess?
4. What positive emotions do you feel most often?
5. What negative emotions do you feel most often?
6. What do you do when you are feeling very upset and need to calm down? Does it work?
7. What difficult event in your life is affecting you right now? How often is it on your mind?
8. Do you believe that you can grow and change as a person?
9. Describe a time someone did something wonderful for you. What did they do?
10. Is there anything else you want to share with me?