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Reflections on the Application of the Self-Science Program From the Perspective of Students, Parents, and Teachers

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Introduction:

During my 14-year sojourn as the Executive Director at The Nueva School, the institution was presented with numerous awards, tributes, certificates of recognition, and letters of gratitude from alumni parents and alumni students. After Daniel Goleman's book, *Emotional Intelligence*, hit the market and Nueva became "the school to visit" for parents, teachers, and administrators, I wished more than ever I had some hard-core data to share with the public about the power of the Self-Science program. Of course, there were Self-Science oral legacies from previous students now in high school, in college, or married with children of their own that were delivered from one person to another. These stories of development, of transformation, of change and growth, and of accomplishment were, at least for me, the data of conviction. These personal anecdotes of how Self-Science continued to be their individualized *manual of instruction* for their lives astonished me. Of all the rewards ever received, I must confess that the tributes from these students were the most satisfying to my brain, to my heart, and to my soul.

Therefore, beginning in 1995 I requested that the alumni director, Anne Bennett, begin to gather data about the Self-Science program from the school's product--the students-- and the school's client--the parents. As a result of this informal study, which asked questions of approximately 1000 Nueva graduates and their parents and teachers, spanning a time period of 30 years, the following general information emerged:

1. Seventy percent (70%) of the students reported Self-Science as the class that had the most significant impact on their lives;
2. Alumni parents shared that Self-Science developed many vital skills including self-awareness, empathy, altruism, consequential thinking, and self-advocacy; and

3. Educators (former and concurrent teachers and administrators) indicated that Self-Science was a significant factor in the development of leadership skills, building community ties, and positive emotional risk-taking.

Students' Reflections:

It was intriguing that 70% of the graduates had identified Self-Science class (with a variety of instructors through the years) as the most influential of all the courses they had ever taken at Nueva. Those same students may have had math class from an educator identified as one of the top 100 teachers in America (Mary Laycock), or a master's music class with an internationally reknown musician (Yehudi Menuhin). The consistent reasons were three-pronged: 1) it was in Self-Science class that I discovered who I am and what my strengths and challenges are (self-awareness); 2) it was in that Self-Science class that I learned how to empathize with the struggles of others and how to negotiate for a win-win situation (compassion and compromise); and 3) it was in Self-Science that I learned to be responsible for my choices, my thoughts, my feelings, and my actions - and to weigh the pros and cons of these choices (accountability and ethics).

One story that stands out is the eighth grade graduation recital of Brad Livermore who, along with an older and younger sister, lost his mother to a virulent, accelerating form of breast cancer in 1997. He stated:

My mother was my anchor – my support system. I confided everything to her – my fears, my anxieties, and my uncertainties. Without her I felt totally adrift. As a result, I often acted out – misbehaved in the classroom, or picked on my classmates. It was in Self-Science that I heard her messages repeated and reinforced. It was there that I recalled her generosity and kindness. It was there that I was reminded of what she wanted me to become. It was there that I promised to do so.

Because of these stirring moments, I have worked throughout the years to continue to collect special anecdotes that reveal the purpose, the power, and the significance of Self-Science. For example, in April 1999, shortly after the Columbine High School shootings in Littleton, Colorado, two students from Odyssey School were interviewed about whether or not such an incident could occur in their school. Their answers were extremely revealing. Aaron Dawes, 13, Odyssey School, San Mateo, California said:

Self-Science gives me methods to solve my own problems. For example, if someone stole something from me, I would try first to understand their reasons for stealing, and then I would look at why he had chosen me as his victim. Someone without a program like Self-Science might react with more anger, and just “blow up.”

How often does a 13-year-old boy look first at his culpability in a situation rather than jump to a conclusion about the guilt of the other party? How often is it that an adolescent would *not* enjoy playing the innocent victim? Self-Science promotes thoughtful introspection, increases impulse control, and improves the ability to think before you act. Rebecca Fureigh, another 8th grader at Odyssey School, shared her thoughts as well:

While participating in Self-Science meetings I've learned to read people, their body language, their voice tone, and their inflection. If I knew people as upset as those boys were, I'd suggest to them that they bring it up in Self-Science class. If they did not, I would warn them that I am going to take my concerns about them to the teachers. I would put the safety and wellbeing of the group over loyalty to a friend.

In a community where all students are members of the in-group, no one student would slip through the cracks. Someone -- a student, a staff member, an administrator -- would have noticed and called attention to the out-of-sync behavior. Self-Science creates a forum where no subject is taboo, but because communication principles have been established and followed, students feel emotionally and psychologically safe.

Wondering how Self-Science has affected students' lives when no longer participating in regular classes, Six Seconds contacted Luke Hatton, age 26, a burgeoning actor in Chicago, Illinois. Luke immediately produced the following scenarios.

As a sophomore at Sacred Heart High School in California, I was invited to attend a national Sacred Heart Schools leadership conference in New Orleans. One of the goals of the workshop was to identify high school issues and brainstorm potential solutions. At the end of the first day, I was approached by the facilitator of my group and asked where I had developed my sophisticated group communication skills. She told me I was demonstrating what she was hoping to teach. I replied, "That's easy. I learned those lessons in Self-Science."

Later, at Northwestern University, I signed a two-year contract to live with a group of very divergent roommates. I initiated and led monthly "buddy meetings" with the purpose of identifying concerns and finding solutions before they erupted into major problems that tore the group apart. Of course, my buddies didn't know we were having Self-Science meetings and using Self-Science principles, but that's what I did. We were the only group I know of that remained together the full two years until we graduated.

For Luke, Self-Science's tools and techniques became internalized. He used them regularly to facilitate respectful communication among people with varying needs and wants. He understood the necessity of creating "buy-in" where cooperation and compromise are required for successful problem solving.

Katie Jinkerson, 29, San Francisco, California, recently shared via email the emotional support Self-Science classes gave her as a sixth grader:

I remember a Self-Science class in which fears were the major topic. At the time my grandfather was about to die. As the group discussed old age, death, and dying, I realized others share my fears. I was relieved and felt comforted. Because of this experience, I shared in Self-Science that my parents were getting divorced. It was here in Self-Science that I learned to process my feelings and to find appropriate outlets for my anger and frustration through such practices as journaling.

She then adds:

As I begin a new career teaching high school students, I will most definitely incorporate the Self-Science curriculum into my classroom. I believe it should be an integral part of any learning experience, because it is a preventative vs. crisis model for resolving personal issues (drug abuse, eating disorders, self-mutilation, suicide, etc.) and group issues (bullying, teasing, exclusionary behavior, hazing, etc.).

She went on to elaborate that an old technique, journaling, was also helping her to deal with the stress of a broken long-term relationship and a disappointing career path.

Her experience prodded me to do some current follow-up on the effectiveness of the Self-Science curriculum with students at various ages who had experienced the program in different school settings, including public, private, church affiliated, elementary, and secondary. Summarized below are the interviewer's questions and the responses from Remy Franklin, age 13, of Taos, New Mexico; Sam Bertken, age 13, of San Mateo, California; Wesley Brown, age 13, of San Mateo, California; Lauren Keane, age 21, of San Francisco, California; Susan Ryan, age 32, of South San Francisco, California; and Caleb Jensen, age 28, of New York City, New York.

What is Self-Science? How would you explain it?

...learn about emotions...solve issues...share insights and advice...get stuff off your chest so they don't build up...a safe place ...self-awareness...studying yourself using the scientific method...focus on life skills vs. issue-oriented discussions...more integrated approach than traditional peer counseling...a class that encourages emotional intelligence...learning about relationships...learning to change...choice and consequences activities

How did Self-Science change your class/school/community?

...improved cooperation...more inclusion...creates strong bonds between kids and teachers... working together to make everybody's life better...discover common concerns and fears...it really helped decrease the amount of hate in our school...broadened perspectives...recognized the different sides of people...group became more supportive of other people's problems...recognize

the unique gifts each person brings to the group...encourages shy person to come out of their shell and the more rambunctious to calm down, a leveler for all kids...taught respect for privacy and the value of maintaining confidentiality...no one needs to be alone with their problem...it's not just about me, it's about the group

How has Self-Science helped you?

...builds friendship skills...become more conscious about choices...don't judge people by what's on the surface...encourages self-disclosure...taught me to listen instead of just waiting for my turn to talk...one Self-Science class cleanses me for the rest of the week...I think before giving feedback to people...learned how to give effective constructive criticism...I try to think of the other person's perspective before responding...I learned that I perpetuate my own anger, and I can change that...seeing the real issue beneath the surface...I wouldn't have gotten through high school and college without my Self-Science background...healthy techniques for handling adversity...more willing to engage with others on an emotional level

Why is a program like Self-Science important?

...values reflection...consider consequences of actions...counteracts "social hierarchies"...builds empathy for others' problems and challenges...lowers anxieties of academic performance...builds appropriate self-esteem...helps people understand the scope of human emotions...teaches that no goal is too awesome to pursue...prevents escalation of small annoyances and disappointments... encourages conscious acts of kindness...all I ever needed to know I learned in Self-Science...helps people consider their role in the world

What advice would you give a teacher thinking about starting a Self-Science class?

...make it fun, hands-on...sit in a circle...keep voices quiet...no issue is silly or unimportant...keep it serious but not deadly...have it more often, more than once a week...integrate the skills into the total curriculum...give power to the kids, allow students to formulate solutions...be a true facilitator, not a lecturer...be patient

Parents' Reflections:

Many parents sent their gifted children to a school whose approach was embedded in emotional intelligence because they were aware that their children could survive academically, but were significantly concerned about the social/emotional side of their lives. Would they have friendship skills? Would they be accountable and responsible? Would they develop their character, their integrity, and build tools necessary for a

meaningful life? One story from Marsha Rideout, an especially poignant one in that she shared how Self-Science *literally* saved her son's life:

At the age of 9, my son, Eric, was probably the most delightful, inquisitive, creative person I knew. I loved to walk and talk and discover the world with him. He was popular at school and earning straight As. By fourth grade, however, things had begun to change. I watched anxiously as the bright light that was Eric grew dimmer and dimmer. With me by his bedside, he cried himself to sleep each school night, dreading the morning, and he withdrew from his classmates, begging me to home school him. My little kinesthetic learner told me that he would rather be dropped from a helicopter into the wilderness to find his own food and build his own shelter than to go on learning like this, filling in the blanks and memorizing.

And then, one awful evening, when I went into his room to kiss him goodnight, he had taken his camping knife and made a tiny practice cut in his chest. I was frantic. I made an appointment with a child psychologist who diagnosed him as clinically depressed and suicidal. She said that he was a 10-year-old boy asking the "what's the meaning of life" questions of a 20-year-old adult. Yet he did not have the emotional maturity/skills to match his intellect. He could not see hope in his future.

Fortunately, the superintendent of his school district referred me to The Nueva School, just 20 minutes away. What Eric and I discovered was an educational institution that gave equal weight to social-emotional and academic growth, an environment that encouraged children to be accountable for their own education, and their own feelings. He was intellectually stimulated and emotionally engaged in a positive way once again.

Self-Science classes gave Eric the tools and strategies to understand himself and others, to navigate and take responsibility for his own feelings, and to chart his own future. He began journaling with his teacher in middle school, and I was both stunned and relieved to read (with his permission) the final passage in his 8th grade journal in which he wrote, "I have definitely decided not to commit suicide."

Eric is alive and well, literally climbing the mountains of his dreams, Mt. McKinley in Alaska and Chulu West in the Annapurna Range, happily married to Robyn, and enjoying the adventure of fatherhood with seven-year-old June. I truly believe that learning the life skills and experiencing the community values taught in Self-Science saved Eric's life. I am forever grateful.

Chris Hatton, mother of the previously mentioned Luke Hatton, and whose four sons attended Nueva and all participated in Self-Science classes, reveals the following contributions that Self-Science made to her family:

As the boys learned the concepts of Self-Science, they brought them home. We began to use these principles and tools to hold our family meetings. I learned from them techniques on how to become a better listener, how to be more tolerant of individual differences, and how to be more accountable for my feelings. It would not be unusual for any one of the boys to say to me, "Wait a second, Mom. You can't blame those feelings on me. I think you have to take responsibility for choosing to feel that way yourself."

Teachers' Reflections:

Nueva staff members were as appreciative of the benefits of the Nueva community as the students and the parents. Many of the teachers/educators who left Nueva because of maternity leave, or the transfer of a partner, or a significant change in family circumstances, missed the clearly defined humanistic model, the emphasis on shared decision-making, and the shared values/ philosophy which resulted in a nurturing atmosphere for all.

Some former Nueva classroom teachers wrote pleading for a Self-Science book; they wanted to use the program in their new classrooms. Some even asked for Self-Science teachers to come and share their knowledge and skills so that a new culture could be cultivated in their present schools. One individual, Stephen Smuin, left Nueva to found Odyssey, an independent middle school for gifted students. As Executive Director for this unique program based on experiential/discovery projects, he states:

Self-Science makes the life of a principal practically stress free. Instead of the staff spending numerous hours disciplining students, the students use Self-Science principles to solve many of issues themselves, allowing us to concentrate on creating interesting lessons and unique projects to stimulate and engage their brains. I wouldn't run a school without it.

One of the most powerful testimonials ever given as to the value of Self-Science was in an acceptance speech by Karen Stone-McCown upon receiving a lifetime achievement award in 2002. Listed among her many accomplishments is over 30 years of teaching Self-Science. Her pioneering efforts in promoting emotional intelligence in the field of education have changed thousands of children's lives. She stated:

First, let me tell you what Self-Science is not; it is not therapy. Second, let me tell you what Self-Science does. It teaches attention-deficit kids how to sit still. It teaches bullies to abandon their inappropriate behaviors and to develop compassion for their previous victims. It teaches students to accept responsibility for lost lunches and missed homework deadlines. It teaches kids to consider the consequences before they break a classroom rule. It teaches children of divorcing parents not to feel guilty for their parents' choices. It teaches students to be optimistic when they've failed their grammar test. It teaches kids how to take charge and be in control of their lives.

Conclusion:

A look at the nightly news is enough to validate the need for Self-Science around the globe. We have not made significant progress in helping our youth create emotionally intelligent lives. Obviously, thinking alone is not enough: instead, wisdom is forged through the fusion of the intellect with emotions in order to generate creative and compassionate actions. Fortunately, some seeds have been planted. The students, parents, and teachers quoted in this article are representative of the many who are working diligently to spread the lessons they learned in Self-Science at school, in business, and in their new young families.

Currently, as the president of Six Seconds, I have been in a position to collect specific data on the effectiveness of Self-Science within a variety of schools. The first study was done in a sampling of public and private institutions in the Bay Area of California during the 2000-2001 school year. The results are encouraging as 100% of the teachers reported that the Self-Science curriculum (taught approximately 30-40 minutes once a week) promoted increased cooperation and produced students who were both more collaborative and more able to solve problems. The 2001-2002 study compared teachers who had support from their principals with those who did not. Again, 100% of the supported teachers reported improved cooperation and 100% noted improved student focus.

Moreover, 100% of the supported teachers reported both improved student to teacher relationships and improved student to student relationships. Continued research data that validates the value and effectiveness of Self-Science is essential. For me, however, it is the personally reported adventures of how Self-Science continues to change lives that is the cincher. This is the evidence needed to sway any judge or jury.

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