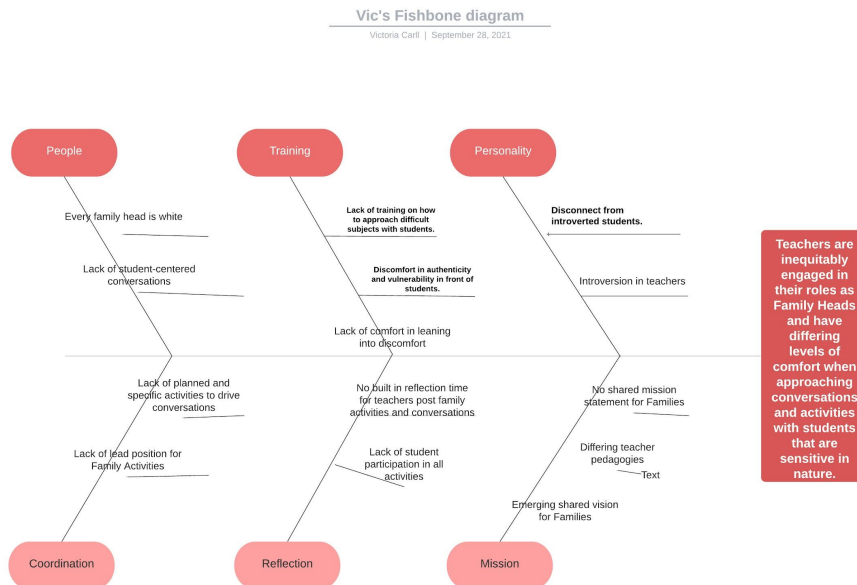


Vic Carll's Theory of Action

Issue/Focus of Practice

Open High School is a specialty admissions-based high school in the city of Richmond. The ideology and mission behind its “specialness” is that it hopes to grow great human beings who are committed to making the world a better place. It’s small personal setting and emphasis on curiosity, creativity, and community, allow students to develop into their best selves while pursuing a college preparatory education. Some of these tenets are supported by our weekly “Family” meetings that are meant to be safe spaces for students to express themselves, discuss issues of interest, and facilitate deep and meaningful relationships. However, there has been little training or accountability of the facilitators, “Family Heads,” which has led to inequitable experiences for students. While some have experienced truly cultivated activities and a deep level of trust with their facilitators, other students have simply sat in a room for an hour. Over the last few years, there has been an effort to improve the quality of the family experience but little has been done to identify specific issues, develop and initiate plans, and provide training in the social, emotional learning of students.

Problem statement: Family heads have differing levels of comfort and engagement in creating safe spaces for students.



Root Cause Analysis

In the effort to create better safe spaces at our school, it has become evident through research and empathy interviews that while both school culture and its policies and practices are at play in the inequity of family experiences, another underlying and potentially more important factor stems from the level of comfort that teachers feel in their facilitation of activities that revolve around sensitive issues, such as race, gender, politics, etc. As Harpalani confirms, “the goal of safe spaces is to facilitate engagement of uncomfortable issues and to provide a supportive atmosphere for this endeavor” (2017) and the importance of leaning into that discomfort is what marks an effective practice. Through the empathy interviews of Family heads, it is evident that their individual willingness to be authentic and empathetic in front of students in what are often difficult conversations to lead differs and has caused inequitable experiences for students. Digging deeper into teacher personality, training and coordination of SEL led activities and the lack of consistency in reflective practices will illuminate areas of growth that are tangible and actionable.

Personality - Authenticity, Empathy, Introversion

Authenticity, empathy and introversion are three realms of personality that affect student relationships and efficacy in SEL delivery which is the main component of creating safe spaces with students. In a study conducted by De Bruyckere & Kirschner, high school students found that a teacher’s willingness to be themselves, demonstrate passion for the subject matter and the creation of unique and deep relationships were markers for that which they perceived as authentic (2016). This then creates a culture where students feel that they can show up with their authentic selves. As the primary drivers of excellent SEL delivery, teachers must authentically believe and be committed to cultivating comfort and culture through empathy, practice and passion (Bracket, et al., 2012). In addition, it has been increasingly evident that a teacher’s personal level of introversion can indeed influence their comfort in discussing difficult subject matter, and thus providing specific, planned, and include prescribed structures for teachers in SEL contexts is crucial (Chuhkran, 2020).

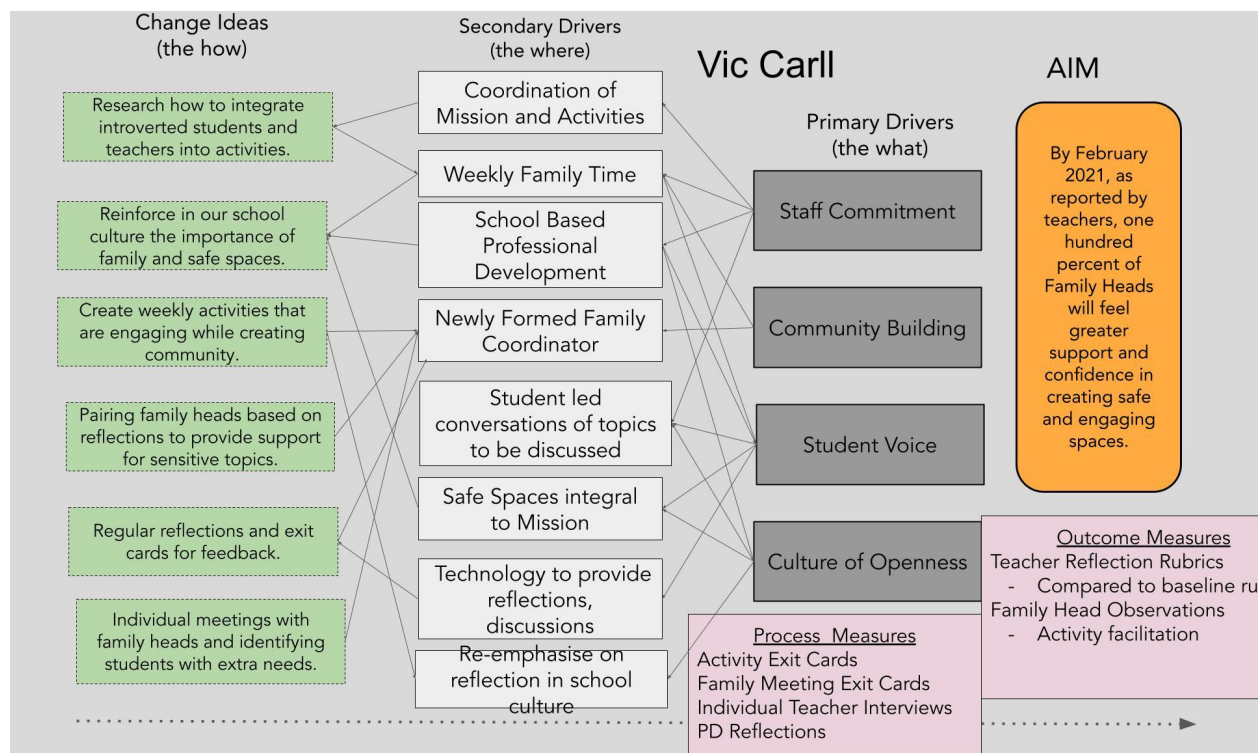
SEL Training & Coordination

Even though my school prides itself on its culture of relationships and whole child education, there has been a total lack of training for teachers in SEL. As Schmoyer discusses, if the teachers don’t have a good sense and control over this aspect of their own social and emotional lives, then the students will feel that from them (2020). Hence, both personal work and the practices of creating ground rules, norms, and practices directly influences the ability for “people across

cultures and settings to peacefully and safely discuss the most sensitive and charged topics (Silverman & Mee, 2018). The direct effect of SEL competencies and student achievement are well known, and yet my school has not sought to implement training. However, according to Schmoyer, this is not a rare issue, as “teachers are getting limited preparation in the area of student SEL” nationwide (2020). Delving into the types of SEL programs shows that there are several approaches from which teachers can learn and integrate consistent practices. Circle of Dialogue Wisdom (CDW), an indigenous practice now educational practice, provides a scaffolding practice through creating affection, co-creating solutions and taking solutions to practice (Moreno-Cely, et al., 2021). Other programs, such as CASEL, RULER, Mindfulness Interventions, CARE and MSBR provide similar frameworks that echo those of CDW. Deeper investigation is needed in order to match an SEL program and our school. Through the new Family Head Coordinator position, these decisions and program implementation can be coordinated and delivered to the staff through professional development training.

Reflection

In addition to any coordinated activities or SEL training, overall, our school has not implemented reflective practices as an important component of the creation of safe spaces. According to Smyth, sustained critical reflection is the keystone to creating environments in which teachers better themselves while cultivating relationships and practices to inform them. “If teachers are going to uncover the nature of the forces that inhibit and constrain them, and work at changing those conditions, they need to engage in four forms of action with respect to their teaching: describe, inform, confront and reconstruct (1989). Developing a reflective practicum involves looking beyond the assumption that “reflection is a natural trait” to providing meaningful mechanisms to move from mere “thinking back” to transformational reflection which is highly important in the realm of educational practices (Slovak, et al., 2017). Without inclusion of consistent reflective practices, teachers will be less prepared in providing and improving SEL practices in their classrooms.



Preliminary Theory of Action

The aim of this work is to provide, through the role of Family Head Coordinator, training, activities and practices to help teachers enhance their comfort in providing safe spaces for students. Teachers should feel supported in their personal growth and development as well as be provided with specific practices that aid in the development of SEL practices and the use of transformative reflection as a means of developing the environment of authentic personal relationships where both students and teachers feel willing to lean into the discomfort that is important in the work of restorative pedagogy and practices. In this year, post pandemic it is even more important than ever to prioritize key socio-emotional skills, as hoards of students have lost a sense of belonging which has had a direct correlation with student engagement at school (Salmela-Aro, et al., 2021).

Hence, sharing information about the importance of the work that they are doing in providing social emotional competencies will help set a tone for teachers about the work we are about to begin. Seeing that there is not a single state that includes SEL teacher education standards and often professional development training in SEL often comes as a single class or workshop approach it will be utterly important for teachers to fully dedicate themselves to improvement in their practices (Murano, et al., 2019). Potentially even more difficult, may be teachers' commitment to practice meta-reflective practices to evaluate their own socio-emotional practices (Ojala, 2020). Yet, this is the foundation on which all other training will be built. Hence, this will begin the process of learning how to be uncomfortable. Because, according to Ojala, "the explicit acknowledgment that discomfoting emotional aspects are part of educating about sensitive and controversial societal issues and that educators and students need to engage in a critical inquiry

of emotional positions toward the issue at hand” (2020). It will be utterly important that through my new role as Family Head Coordinator, that I consistently frame the professional development training through the lenses of authenticity, modeling, and reflection in order to cultivate a culture of willingness for others.

Utilizing the CDW framework and through the lens of co-leadership and management, I will create a presentation of a few of the SEL framework to the teaching staff and administration so that as a collective, we can choose and/or adapt a current program to integrate into our school. CASEL’s framework of five competencies will be first used to explain the goal of SEL training; self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making (Borowski, 2019). Once we have chosen an appropriate SEL program, I will begin creating professional development training sessions and integrating our learning into our weekly Family meetings. These weekly activities will be pre-planned and discussed with the staff so that even our introverted staff members will feel supported. Through empathy interviews and the teachers’ responses to levels of comfort in discussing difficult topics, I will also pair teachers with differing styles of engagement together to help provide a balanced approach to aid in discussions of sensitive topics. And finally, and most importantly, we will practice reflection through weekly exit cards on the efficacy of the activities and family meetings as well as have individual meetings to discuss personal growth and areas of strengths and weaknesses. It is through this information that I will continue to reshape and improve practices so that all family heads feel supported. Because as Srinivasan purports, teachers are the most important factor in SEL and their attitudes and level of competence directly affect the outcomes for students (2019).