

Michelle's Keynote Speech at PEC 4: April 27, 2016

So you might be wondering why I'm the keynote speaker today. I know I am. I don't have a PhD in social emotional learning theory. I was an English major in college, not even a psychology or communications major! You might not be wondering at all because, well, I'm the principal so it kind of makes sense for me to get up here and talk at you for a while. Or perhaps you aren't wondering because your coffee hasn't kicked in yet. Or maybe rearranging your life to get to this conference left you a little frazzled this morning and all you know is you're here you haven't given much thought to anything else. Regardless of where you're at in this moment, I want to start by telling you a little bit about me and "why me."

I volunteered myself as the keynote speaker and that is really, really NOT LIKE ME. You may have noticed that I'm not much of a ra-ra-get-up-in-front-of-the-crowd-and-look-at-me kind of principal. I'm going to tell you a bit about my story and then you'll know why.

So I'm 40. Side note: A little self-celebration (because that's part of social emotional learning)...I'm 40 and this is the first time I'm giving a speech and not nervous. I was born in 1975 and I had a pretty normal babyhood. My dad is a mechanic and my mom started out as a special education classroom aide and opened a home day care when I was 3 and my sister was born. When I was in first grade I apparently was having a hard time. Fast forward: Several years ago I was looking for my birth certificate at my mom's house and came across a curious document. I was a teacher at the time so the document was curious but familiar. It was a stack of papers with my name on every few pages and phrases like, "Michelle has a hard time focusing when the teacher is talking." "Michelle distracts her classmates." "Michelle has trouble working in groups with others." I knew immediately that it was my IEP and even though I knew growing up that I was in "resource" and got pulled out of class for extra help, I never knew that I *actually* had an IEP. I *actually* had a diagnosis and was tested and had accommodations and my parents went to meetings to talk about what was wrong with me (and they probably said nice things too). A lot of things started to fall into place. (Flash back) All those times my parents took me to see Dr. _____...it wasn't just so I could drink tea and play in the sandbox while she chatted with me? All the times I had to leave class to go work in the other room on math and kids laughed when I left... The times in English class when a kid named Michael called me "spare parts" because I wasn't very helpful to my group... You get the idea.

Okay, so I was a mess. I had dyslexia, I had low self-esteem, I didn't understand what was wrong with me but I knew there was *something* wrong with me. I didn't know how to self-advocate or even what that was. I did well enough in school to get by for probably 2 reasons: 1) I had a horrible guilt complex and 2) my parents always told me that as long as I tried my best they were proud of me, which of course was so nice that I felt even more guilty...and now I'm talking about my childhood like it wasn't perfect, which it was, so I feel even more guilty.

Fast forward. I graduated from high school. I had no idea what I wanted to do or how to achieve it. I went to community college for 2 years because I didn't know what I wanted to do other than "go to college." The survey I took in the college center said I'd make a great interior

designer. Go figure. I am not completely sure how I eventually graduated from UCLA but I did. And I discovered I was actually really good at English. I was a decent writer and I liked reading but I was the slowest reader on the face of the planet. I took every class I could from an English professor named Emily Schiller and in my senior year I took Education 180 from a professor named Chip Anderson. I remember the day he taught us the phrase “self-efficacy” and it rocked my world. Wait, what?!? Our efforts and belief in our own ability has a strong influence on success? How come nobody ever told me that? And before each exam he told us “Good effort. No such thing as good luck...good effort.” What, what again? You mean I’m not just the unlucky kid born with dyslexia who still couldn’t memorize her times tables no matter how many cabbage patch kid outfits awaited my success if only I did? My junior and senior year at UCLA literally changed my self-perception completely. And still today I can’t tell you what super lucky things happened to land me in college, at UCLA no less, in Chip’s class, learning about self-efficacy. But the universe took me there.

So fast forward some more. I decided to become a teacher and I went back to high school and asked my favorite teacher, Mr. _____, what he thought of me going to grad school at UCLA to get my teaching credential and Masters in Education. He said 2 things: “UCLA is terrible, go to USC” and “Don’t go into a credential program that teaches that group work crap.” I did anyway. I learned a lot about group work crap, a lot about myself, a lot about my students.

Fast forward again, after 10 years teaching in local schools, somewhere in there getting married and having 2 kids, I landed at Da Vinci. By that time I thought I knew a lot and let me tell you, being hired at a project based learning homeschool program that practices compassionate communication—it was a triple whammy of “wait, what am I doing?” Very humbling. I definitely put “learning by doing” into practice 😊

So here I am. I’m your principal. I still see myself as the kid who couldn’t master her times tables, clung to friends to feed my self-esteem, lucked out when things went right and had no locus of control when things went wrong. But I also see myself as this: I’m humble (I’m an English major so I get the irony of saying that while talking about myself for the last 15 minutes...it’s okay to laugh), I’m resilient, I’m reflective, I listen to my intuition, I give myself time to process things, I try to have empathy for those around me, I work hard, I try not to get offended and take things personally, I realize I can’t please everyone but I still try, and I listen to what’s alive for people around me and try to problem solve. I’ve also finally learned about myself that not acting immediately on something isn’t procrastinating, it’s giving myself time to think. There’s no way I could recognize those things about myself 10 years ago let alone in high school or even college. Because none of my teachers ever talked about those things. It honestly took working at DVIA and being surrounded by amazingly open, thoughtful, reflective and compassionate people like all of you to allow me to put my guard down and just be. So one thing I hope you hear in this keynote is that the way you have chosen to educate your children, the way you listen, the way you seek input from others, the way you question then listen then question then listen, the way you express concern by being kind, specific and helpful, the way you assume positive intentions in others...all those things have the potential to mold our children into caring, compassionate, empathetic, self-reflective kiddos. And all of our talk about

social and emotional learning, all the time we spend talking about instead of punishing, connecting rather than pushing away, discussing together rather than gossiping about, dialoguing rather than questioning or judging...it all leads toward self-confidence, self-awareness, and self-efficacy for our kids. The kind of start we probably all wish we had. My friend recently told me (and I don't think she was joking) that "All of us NVC parents are just trying to get over our own trauma." That may be an exaggeration but my privileged life with two loving parents, a stable home life, enough food and clothes and the opportunity to go to good schools and "be whatever I wanted to be" still felt traumatic at times. And I got lucky. I've told people many, many times that I got lucky. Whatever combination of people I came across influenced my thinking enough that I was able to side step the insecure "not that smart" kid. And I think it was because I was able to read people really well, identify what worked or didn't work about their personal style (what I would now refer to as their social emotional way of being) and use the good and toss much of the bad. But most kids don't just get lucky. They have to be taught explicit skills modeled carefully by thoughtful adults. And when we model a behavior in a way that isn't effective, they are either going to mimic it or rebel against it so we have to stop, acknowledge what we did, and repair.

So I want to stop talking about myself and talk as a school leader. As your principal. As the instructional leader for our staff. My narrative matters because most schools don't teach soft skills. Or they say they do because they bought a character building curriculum and they spend 17 minutes a day on it. Most schools think that kids go to school to learn academic skills and knowledge. That's what we were taught right? Well, that's partially true. But if you look at the pipeline from kindergarten to adulthood, what we are really preparing kids for is how to get along with others for the rest of their life. How to work in groups. How to make and keep friends. How not to annoy people by participating too much or not participating enough. How to share ideas without downgrading others. How to listen. How to show we care. How to make eye contact. How to express disagreement in a way others can hear it. How to take initiative. How to follow though. How to be responsible. How to stay motivated when it's really, really hard. How to stay motivated when it's really, really easy. How to work with people who don't understand it as quickly as us. How to keep up when you need more time than others. How to self-advocate. How to develop coping strategies to compensate for weaknesses. How to tolerate ambiguity and chaos. I literally could go on and on. I don't know about you but I didn't get those lessons in school. And at DVIA, we believe those aren't canned lessons. There's no, "Okay kids today we are going to learn how to be flexible. Let's all practice. Very good." Because these soft skills aren't lessons, they are modeled, learned, mimicked behaviors that become part of who someone is...part of their way of being. Sometimes parents give feedback on the parent survey like, "DVIA says they do social emotional learning but my child doesn't come home talking about the lessons they do." There are no lessons. There's just conversations, many, many times a day. With the whole class, with a group, with an individual. When there's a problem. When there's no problem at all. It has to be relevant, timely and modeled, not taught out of context.

Here's another interesting perspective I want to share in my remaining minutes. After the last Parent Educator Conference in February, which you recall was focused on math, the staff got

together to talk about next steps. We spent some time exploring a website called [Inside Mathematics](#), specifically a page on the site about social emotional learning and mathematics. I really recommend exploring the page and watching the video of a teacher named Cathy Humphreys and how she helped kids acknowledge the hard learning and thinking the math problem was asking of them. They were thinking about their thinking, also called metacognition. She was priming them to understanding why it may feel hard for them, what difficulties they were likely to encounter. I'll be sure to link the site in the next newsletter and it will be posted on the davincik8 site under the mathematics tab.

What the staff realized that day, was that we are very aware of how embedded social emotional learning is in the academic content skills kids are encountering, but we don't message out to parents that compassionate communication and social emotional learning aren't just about "being nice." And it's not as simple as how adults treat kids. I've seen plenty of people treat their kids very nicely but not treat other adults nicely at all. Kids soak all of that up...every bit of it. I would say it even overrides the messages they get about how they are treated because it's confusing. In really looking at the math standards and what we are asking of kids, social emotional learning isn't fluffy. It isn't kind all the time. It isn't softening the edges of everything that's difficult (a difficult conversation, a difficult math problem, a difficult skill) so that kids don't feel pain. I don't know about you but I get frustrated, overwhelmed, stressed, feel like I have no idea how to solve something just about every day! I feel that as a parent, as a wife, as an educator, as an employer. Social emotional learning is about having the right set of skills to also push kids when it's hard. Building resilience. It's helping kiddos know what to do when they are stuck so they can get themselves unstuck. It's helping kids know what to do when they already get it and others are still learning. Because all of that is life. It doesn't go away after high school, we just have fewer people around to help us.

On the site I'm referring to, [Inside Mathematics](#) teases out the social and emotional learning skills kids need when doing math, and more specifically, common core math. A lot of people criticize common core and others praise it. Regardless of your stance, learning math in a deeper way calls on skills beyond solving a math problem. And these are skills that time and again, our staff is told by professionals that employees need to be successful in the workplace. I have visited with many, many businesses that Da Vinci calls "professional partners" and I often ask the question, "What are the skills that you want me to teach kids so they can be truly successful doing this job?" And time and again the answer is, "We want employees who show initiative, figure it out when they get stumped, get creative to solve a problem, follow through with a task, and get along with others," They also say they need to be able to read critically, write effectively, have an understanding of the core subject areas that schools teach. But that's actually not what people say first. What they are basically saying is "We need people with really good social skills and an ability to handle the job when the going gets tough." How do you put that on a syllabus?

So back to [Inside Mathematics](#). The math we are teaching kids today asks them to do more than just solve math problems. It's calling on a whole host of social and emotional skills. And being successful with those skills in part determines a child's ability to be successful in math.

Yikes! I wasn't taught this, were you? So when we are working with kids on any content area, this is where the art of teaching comes in. There's *what* we are teaching but also *how* we are teaching, and *why* we are teaching, and *who* we are teaching... All layered together into an experience that teaches kids how to think about new things, how to solve problems, how to articulate those thoughts, how to troubleshoot, and how to manage and self-regulate while doing all of that. Very "meta." It's tricky stuff and although it's easy to say that as an educator I went to college to learn this, the thing is, I didn't. I don't think any of your child's teachers learned this stuff in college. Because our society hasn't been thinking and talking about it for very long.

So in closing... You're all here for the right reasons. You get it. And from a philosophical standpoint it's somewhat easy to understand. We want to better ourselves and better our children to make them better ready to tackle the world. But there's no manual. You learned that the day your child entered your family, right? There's just a desire to seek input from a variety of sources. So I'm really excited that we've been able to bring so many fabulous resources together for all of us to learn from today. You'll get a chance to learn about stress management, love language for children, compassionate communication during conflict, executive functioning, adolescent development, supporting kiddos in sports in a social emotional learning way, self-care for parents, the science behind connection, mindfulness...so many fascinating and inspiring topics!

And I also want to make sure to take a moment to again acknowledge all of you for being here, for all that you did to arrange to be here, to our staff who supported the logistics of today, particularly to Janette and Ethel who literally coordinated this entire event (round of applause), to all of our presenters and to all of you who donated to our raffle. We have an awesome day in store!