

## MSSM Student Welfare Committee book report

*Permission to Feel: Unlocking the Power of Emotions to Help our Kids, Ourselves, and Our Society Thrive.* By Marc Brackett. New York: Celadon, 2019. ISBN 978-1-50-21284-9

Reviewed by Richard Barrans

### From the author's website

“*Permission to Feel* (Celadon/Macmillan) inspires a new mindset around the power of emotions to transform our lives. Using science, passion, and lively storytelling, this book serves as a guide for understanding our own and others' emotions, as well as provides innovative strategies for developing emotional intelligence in adults and children so that emotions help, rather than hinder, our success and well-being.”

### My review

How are you feeling?

It's a simple question. It's a question you may have been asked today. You may have asked someone that question today. Do you know the answer? We are conditioned to hide our feelings, to disregard our feelings, and to focus on things that matter. But, Marc Brackett argues in *Permission to Feel*, feelings matter. Feelings are information. By paying attention to them, and learning about them, we can understand ourselves and each other, so that we can lead happier, more fulfilled lives.

Every self-help book that you have ever read promises a happier, more fulfilled life. What is different about this book? It promises to teach us the tools of emotional intelligence, by which we can learn about our own and others' emotions. Then, it invites us to use the tools to become “emotion scientists.” Scientists aren't born knowing things; they figure things out.

But once we've figured the emotions out, then what? Is it enough to understand what we are feeling, and why? To understand the feelings of our students. or our co-workers? Understanding emotions is certainly an important step, but a step towards what? Emotions are information, so we need to share that information with others and use that information to make decisions, and to take action. Sharing, expressing, and acting on our emotions are also skills of emotional intelligence, which the book addresses.

*Permission to Feel* identifies the skills of emotional intelligence, contained in the acronym RULER: to Recognize, Understand, Label, Express, and Regulate emotions. These skills are not innate; they must be acquired. They can be taught. The central portion of the book presents several tools to implement these skills.

Understanding emotions can equip us to become healers, peacemakers, creators, leaders, ... or con men, manipulators, or demagogues. In our school, if we teach the skills of emotional intelligence, we also need to model applying the skills to decisions and actions that make students and the community thrive. The final section of the book reviews the benefits of applying emotion skills at home, in school, and in the workplace. One recurrent theme in the

book, and especially in this section, is that to create an emotionally intelligent environment requires leadership from the top.

### Relevance to MSSM

Our Executive Director has committed to implementing the ideas of this book at MSSM. The book was the assigned faculty reading for 2020. Three faculty members (including this reviewer) received RULER training from the author's institute in the summer of 2020 and are implementing the training at school over the next two years. Taking these concrete steps, and indeed being responsible in part for implementing them, has goaded me to some soul-searching.

I am unsure about my own ability to even practice these skills of emotional intelligence, much less to teach them to others. It will take substantial effort to make MSSM an emotionally responsive school. But I believe that becoming more emotionally aware and responsive, individually and institutionally, will help MSSM become a better place to teach and a better place to go to school. We can reduce staff turnover, retain more students, and improve academic performance. It's daunting, but it's worth a try.

As the author acknowledges (p. 127), "it's scary to hear other people express their feelings, because we may have to accept some hard truths about ourselves. And in response, we may feel obliged to take some action—even to change, which is usually the last thing we want to do."