

An Auto-Ethnography of the Implementation of Social-Emotional Focused Programming
in a Kindergarten / Grade 1 Classroom

by

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**An Auto Ethnography of the Implementation of Social-Emotional Focused
Programming in a Kindergarten and Grade 1 Classroom**

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Dedication

I dedicate this to the unwavering supportive staff that I have worked with throughout the years and who supported me through this process. I am also truly thankful for the encouragement of my family that helped support me through the last two years as I journeyed through this challenging yet rewarding process.

Abstract

More than 60% of students have experienced one or more traumatic events in their life by the time they reach 17 years of age (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018; Langley, Gonzalez, Sugar, Solis & Jaycox, 2015; Holmes, Levy, Smith, Pinne & Neese, 2015). Despite this statistic, there are not adequate mental health services within the education system to address the growing population of traumatized youth (Cobbett, 2016). This autoethnography study looks at the impact of social-emotional focused programming in a kindergarten and grade 1 classroom to see if this mitigates the impact of trauma challenges such as poor attendance and academic delays. Detailed research notes were taken over 3 months by the classroom teacher/researcher. Upon completion of the study, common themes emerged including, teacher time constraints and stress, the importance of a soft start, environmental influences on calming, and the importance of connections to the engagement and attendance of students during the early years to facilitate optimal learning.

Keywords: *Bounce Back, Child-Centered Play Therapy, Early Developmental Instrument, Friends Resiliency Program, Head Start Trauma Smart, Intergenerational Trauma, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Toxic Stress, Trauma, Trauma-Focused-Cognitive Behavioral Therapy*

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An Ethnography of the Implementation of Social-Emotional Focused Programming in a Kindergarten/ Grade 1 Classroom

Chapter 1: Introduction

Many students enter our schools having experienced a traumatic event. More than 60% of students have experienced one or more traumatic events in their life by the time they reach 17 years of age (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018; Langley, Gonzalez, Sugar, Solis & Jaycox, 2015; Holmes, Levy, Smith, Pinne & Neese, 2015). Despite this statistic, there are not adequate mental health services within the education system to address the growing population of traumatized youth (Cobbett, 2016).

In this paper, I will discuss the challenges for children entering the school system that have experienced adverse childhood events (ACE'S). Possibilities for creating a trauma-informed approach that focuses on the social-emotional needs of young students as they enter the public school system for the first time will be explored. Particular focus on the knowledge and understanding of how traumatic events can impact students as they enter the school system, intergenerational trauma, the importance of ensuring the basic needs of our students, effective research-based social-emotional programs as Fun Friends as well as the effectiveness of the Head Start Trauma Smart program will be reviewed in the literature study. I will propose that using this knowledge to build a culturally safe, social-emotional focused classroom will enhance and support our early learners to enable the students to begin their public-school journey in a successful manner demonstrated by increased attendance and engagement into academic tasks. It is also hoped that the educator/researcher will be able to develop resiliency and coping strategies within each child so they can reach their true potential safely and positively.

Background to the Research Problem

The rates of exposure to traumatic events in early childhood are alarming and can have long-lasting consequences on the child's development (Grasso, Ford, & Briggs-Gowan, 2012). The more traumatic events that a student experiences the higher the risk of emotional and academic issues in school (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018). If left untreated or ignored students will develop into complex symptomology into adulthood (Briere, Kaltman & Green, 2008). Despite this fact, school systems still do not have adequate services to meet the increasing mental health needs of our youth. Research demonstrates that if traumatized youth are not provided supports and therapy early when entering school, many students will demonstrate increased symptoms of traumatic stress such as difficulty expressing emotions appropriately, becoming more aggressive and have less secure attachments with children in their peer group (Graham-Bermann, Castor, Miller & Howell, 2012). Exposure to violence early in a child's life can have profound impacts on a child's brain development which can have further implications in the child's learning, executive functioning and self-regulation (Perkins & Graham-Bermann, 2012) There is a correlational link between exposure to violent events and childhood diagnosis of Conduct disorder and ADHD (Perkins & Grahamm-Bermann, 2012). Specific attention towards social-emotional programming needs to be addressed as children enter the school system to help mitigate some of these effects. Educators and counselors must recognize the negative effects of trauma and toxic stress which may include issues such as short-term memory difficulties, concentration, and problem-solving (Blitz, Anderson & Saastamoinen, 2016). These challenges directly link to further academic challenges within the school setting which may present as language impairments including limited vocabulary development growth and reading disabilities (Perkins & Grahamm-Bermann, 2012)

Knowing a collective history of a group of people will help make sense of the current situation for students within our schools (Bombay, Matheson & Anisman, 2014). Currently, aboriginal populations report staggering reduced literacy and numeracy rates (Arriagada & Hango, 2016). A possible explanation cited in the research to explain this inequity within school populations in the Canadian context is that Aboriginal students may suffer from intergenerational trauma that exists due to relatives attending Indian Residential schools (Bombay et al, 2014; Kirmayer, Gone & Moses, 2014; Barnes, Josefowitz & Cole, 2006). Intergenerational trauma refers to the decades of racial discrimination in schooling which directly impacts the patterns of interactions between Indigenous families and schools today (Milne, 2016). Therefore, educators must ensure equitable, safe access for all students in our system.

The Early Developmental Instrument (EDI) indicates that in British Columbia in 2019, the vulnerability index of our young students entering kindergarten is steadily rising. In the category of Physical Health and Wellbeing which measures such items as a child being appropriately dressed as they attend school, truancy rates, and being hungry or tired on arrival to school, the vulnerability rates increased from 12.0% in Wave 2 (2004-2007) to 15.4% in Wave 7 (2016-2019) (Human Early Learning Partnership, 2019, pg 22). Within the social competency scale that measures getting along with peers, following school rules and class routines, vulnerability rates have increased from 13.3% in Wave 2 to 16.1% in Wave 7 (Human Early Learning Partnership, 2019, pg 23). Finally, our emotional maturation data marks a significant increase in vulnerability from 11.9% in Wave 2 to 17.7% in Wave 7. This is a 49% increase in challenges surrounding emotional regulations such as aggressive behaviors, inattention and impulsivity (Human Early Learning Partnership, 2019, pg 24). This data implies

that more work needs to be done to address the vulnerability of our youngest students entering our system in British Columbia as demonstrated with the continuous rise in vulnerability rates in the areas of basic needs and social-emotional regulation.

Our goal as educational institutions should be to work carefully to provide a trauma-informed practice that is rooted in the ideals of being attuned to each child's unique strengths, needs and individual circumstances (Blaunstein & Kinniburgh, 2019). By being aware of their particular needs and developing a clear, structured rhythm to the day the educator can begin to develop competency in the child to feel safe when attempting challenging tasks within the school day (Blaunstein & Kinniburgh, 2019).

Purpose

The focus of this action practitioner study will be to determine whether creating a supportive and structured nurture group modeled classroom community, focusing on social-emotional programs, can strengthen a young student's resiliency and therefore boost attendance and academic growth. The research questions that I seek to answer through my research are:

How can a school implement a social-emotional curriculum, such as Fun Friends, to help address the social-emotional regulation of students in a Kindergarten to Grade 1 classroom setting?

How does trauma affect the social-emotional regulation of students in an elementary school and can a structured, supported classroom setting with social-emotional curricular focus improve academic performance, attendance and resiliency in students?

As the classroom participants will have a large population of Aboriginal students, particular attention and focus will be made to ensure that the program is being developed in a culturally safe manner with the consultation of the aboriginal support teachers within the school.

It is hoped that this study will replicate other findings and find that the focus on the early years will yield benefits to the student's academic success, resiliency and attendance (Holmes et al., 2015) (Langley et al., 2015). Having a good quality school-based program will remove potential barriers for services such as transportation issues, financial limitations, time constraints or stigma by improving access to mental health services for more students and have a positive impact on their future (Langley et al., 2015).

Theoretical Framework

The research demonstrates that a Trauma-Focused -Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT) approach to treatment in school setting seems to be the most effective practice in reducing somatic responses and negative behaviors (Cohen & Mannarino, 2008; Holmes et al., 2015; Nadeem, Jaycox, Kataoka, Langley & Stein, 2011). The program should be a flexible program that focuses on elements of TF-CBT such as relaxation skills, tools to identify thoughts and feelings, a re-creation of the traumatic event very carefully through writing or play (Cohen & Mannarino, 2008; Norton, Ferriegal & Norton, 2011; Cobbett, 2016). The Bounce Back program created by Langely et al. (2015) noticed a reduction in barriers to services for elementary students when a TF-CBT approach was used in the school. They also found that there was a significant reduction in symptoms of post-traumatic stress in students who had experienced a traumatic event even when parental involvement was minimal (Langley et al., 2015).

Play therapy is also a very good form of therapy for young children. It is done in a manner where the therapist guides but does not direct the play (Brandt, 2013) Norton et al., (2011) has identified and described four distinct phases that a child must go through to heal from a traumatic event with the assistance of a play therapist. The Sensory phase refers to the moment or moments when the traumatic event has resurfaced in their memory and is expressed through a variety of sensory experiences (“visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, or motor responses, but most often are a fragmented combination of these”) (Norton et al., 2011, pg 146). The second phase is the Soma phase which reflects the building of traumatic energy within the child. This is represented with actual physical symptoms within the child such as swelling, stumbling, or pain in the stomach, etc. The child will hold or engage with the area of the body where the trauma was inflicted (Norton et al., 2011). The third phase is the Surge phase where the child releases the traumatic energy out of the body. This may be observed as anger or hostility within the play. In the therapy, the child is allowed to act out in response to the event in which they were unable to do during the actual trauma. This act is often aggressive in nature (Norton et al., 2011). The fourth stage is the Soothe phase where the child can self regulate again. It is reflected in a calm and soothing style of play. Many children go through the first three phases repeatedly and cannot get to phase 4 without the play therapist’s help. (Norton et al., 2011) Over time, the cycles through the phases diminish and the child can self regulate and be calm, having healed and worked through the traumatic event (Norton et al., 2011).

Understanding the different phases a child may express when processing the traumatic event through their play helps the therapist to facilitate the play and support the student. As a kindergarten/grade one classroom is already set up as a play environment this form of therapy would naturally be supportive in an elementary school. Toys and materials would carefully be

selected to better facilitate the play and support the child through their healing journey (Brandt, 2013). The teacher/ facilitator should be trained to understand the play is not to be directed by the therapist but the child should direct the play. The therapist should not label toys, nor ask questions but rather reflect feelings that are being expressed and reflect content being presented. (Brandt, 2013).

The British Columbia Early Learning Framework embraces the importance of play in an early learning classroom setting. A kindergarten classroom working within this framework embraces these theoretical approaches as it is set up with a variety of materials such as sandboxes, rice calming trays, figurines and setting recreations. With the trained knowledge of a counselor who is also a trained and experienced primary teacher provides a unique environment to attempt to address the social-emotional concerns within a classroom setting.

Definition of Terms

Bounce Back: a 10-session cognitive-behavioral group intervention based in an elementary school working with students identified as being exposed to a traumatic event (Langley et al., 2015).

Child-Centered Play Therapy: a form of therapy developed by Virginia Axline where the therapist works under the assumption that play is “inherently therapeutic and does not need structuring, directing or interpreting by the therapist” (Brandt, 2013, pg 173). Careful selection of toys and materials enables the child to work through self-healing and growth (Brandt, 2013).

Early Developmental Instrument (EDI): a questionnaire developed by Dr. Dan Offord and Dr. Magdalena Janus which has 104 questions and measures in five core areas of early child development that are known to be good predictors of adult health, education and social

outcomes. This questionnaire is completed by kindergarten teachers across British Columbia in February for all the students in their classroom (Human Early Learning Partnership, 2019).

Friends Resiliency Program: a program that has been designed to teach young children practical and useful strategies for coping with stress, worry, fear and sadness. It is designed to help students develop resiliency and teach them social and emotional skills (Barrett, 2009).

Head Start Trauma Smart: an early educational/mental health cross-systems partnership designed to work within a child's natural setting which creates an integrated, trauma-informed culture for young children, parents and staff within a classroom setting (Holmes et al, 2015).

Intergenerational or Historical trauma: the “collective trauma experienced by one generation can negatively impact the well-being of future generations” (Conching & Thayer, 2019)

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: a theory of human motivation developed in 1954 by Abraham Maslow, which says that people only satisfy some needs after more basic needs have been satisfied (see appendix for diagram)

Cambridge Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/maslow-s-hierarchy-of-needs>

Toxic Stress: the bodies' prolonged exposure to excessively high levels of stress hormones that can become harmful to the child's development (Blitz et al., 2016).

Trauma: involving actual or perceived harm or threat to life or physical integrity of the child or another individual (Briggs-Gowan et al., 2010).

Trauma-Focused - Cognitive Behavior Therapy (TF-CBT): “ is a flexible and components based treatment program that consists of the individual child and parent treatment sessions as well as joint child-parent treatment sessions.” (Cohen & Mannarino, 2008, page 159). The acronym PRACTICE describes the components of the method. These include psychoeducation/parenting skills, relaxation skills, affective regulation, cognitive coping skills, traumatic narrative and cognitive processing of the traumatic events (Cohen & Mannarino, 2008).

Significance of Study

If traumatized youth are provided supports and therapy early when entering school, students could develop stronger self-esteem and interpersonal relationships and therefore can be more successful in all areas of their school journey as demonstrated in increased, consistent attendance and academic growth (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018; Cohen & Mannarino, 2008; Drake et al., 2014). Some research found that the most important indicators in a student’s educational success were the social aspects of self -regulation (Drake et al., 2014). Educators and counselors must recognize the negative effects of trauma and toxic stress which may include issues such as short-term memory difficulties, concentration, and problem-solving (Blitz et al., 2016).

It is important to research the ways to reduce the impact of trauma in a school setting using a multi-disciplinary approach including the school counselor, specially trained classroom teachers and educational assistance educators to ensure the best chance of success for all the students.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter the need for early intervention as students who have experienced early traumatic events before they enter the public system was discussed. Research indicates that exposure to traumatic events in early childhood can have lasting and profound impacts on a child's social and cognitive development that stretches into adulthood. More research needs to be done to identify whether a trauma-informed practice approach as students enter the school system can mitigate some of the negative effects of trauma exposure and therefore enable students to develop better coping strategies and become more successful in their academic journey. The approach needed should be a multidisciplinary approach that focuses on the social-emotional well-being of the student.

In the next chapter, I will review the literature on the effects of trauma, toxic stress and intergenerational trauma on student success followed by a review of the successes of the nurture group model as described in Head Start Trauma Smart program. The chapter will review Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and demonstrate the importance of having a student's basic needs met before being able to be successful in academic tasks. Finally, a review of the Friends Resiliency program will demonstrate that a proven social-emotional curriculum can be very successful in regulating students and enabling them to have a successful school journey.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Some studies such as the Drake et al. (2014) study on early attachment and its role on engagement with learning in school found that the ‘social aspects of self-regulation are most critical for supporting children’s learning at school’ (pg. 1358). When students are taught within a nurturing curriculum, disruptive behavior decreases and prosocial behavior increases which leads to an increase in academic engagement (Vespo, Capece & Behforooz, 2006). Understanding this association, other studies have attempted to demonstrate that the implementation of trauma-sensitive programs, such as Trauma-Focused- Cognitive Behavior Therapy (TF-CBT) in school settings can show improvements in post-traumatic stress, anxiety and depressive symptoms in youth (Cohen & Mannarino, 2008; Langley et al., 2015). However, only a few studies seek to demonstrate the link between these programs and attendance patterns or academic growth (Blodgett, 2018). The purpose of this study will be to try and replicate the findings of the Bounce Back (Langley et al., 2015) and Head Start Trauma Smart Programs (Cohen & Mannarino, 2008) by adapting their trauma-informed practice into a Kindergarten/Grade 1 classroom setting. To better understand the context of the issues facing schools with traumatized youth, a review of the literature found will focus on several key themes. These themes include: identifying the impact of trauma, toxic stress and intergenerational trauma on students, exploring the importance of a community-based approach, defining a nurture group model, reviewing the importance of ensuring a student’s basic needs are met as defined by Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and finally exploring the social-emotional Friends Resiliency program and it’s effectiveness in a classroom setting as demonstrated in current research.

Trauma and Toxic Stress

The number of students who are entering the school system who have experienced a traumatic event is alarming. These traumatic events can be from a wide variety of reasons including divorce, family violence, community violence, natural disasters, child maltreatment, etc. (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018; Briggs-Gowan et al., 2010; Holmes et al., 2015). The impact of trauma exposure can be described in several categories: affective problems (such as sadness, fear, anxiety or anger), behavioral problems (avoidance and opposition), or cognitive problems (self-blame, shame, worthlessness) (Cohen & Mannarino, 2008). If left untreated these symptoms can lead to toxic stress and other mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety and therefore create barriers in a student's ability to learn in an educational environment (Langley et al., 2015). Students who live in poverty tend to report being exposed to higher traumatic experiences (Blitz et al., 2016; Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018). The accumulation of negative experiences and stress hormones over an extended period can lead to the child experiencing toxic stress (Blitz et al., 2016). Researchers have indicated that a school-based model to address the issues of trauma can positively affect the student's academic growth and attendance (Blitz et al., 2016; Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018; Holmes et al., 2015).

Intergenerational Trauma

In Canada, the ongoing impacts of the colonialization and oppression of the First Nations people are still present today and are linked to high rates of depression, alcoholism, suicide and violence (Kirmayer, Brass & Tait, 2000; Bombay et al., 2014). Cultural genocide was the intent of the Canadian Government in the late 1800s and 1900s (Kirmayer, Gone & Moses, 2014). To fulfill this goal, Indian Residential schools were created where children were removed from their families, as young as three years old, to attend the school in a distant location where many

suffered from rampant abuse, substandard educational practices and hunger and were forced to lose their families, language and cultural knowledge (Kirmayer et al, 2000; Milne, 2006; Bombay et al; 2014). Parents that attended residential schools that were removed from their families did not have the modeling of how to be a parent (Barnes et al, 2006; Bombay et al., 2014). Research shows that those who experience childhood victimization usually underachieve in school and present behavioral challenges which then leads to lower-income status in adulthood (Fernandez et al, 2015). The legacies of residential schools have begun a cycle of disadvantage with our aboriginal families where many have significantly reduced educational attainment and success which leads to lower-income status (Barnes et al, 2006). Therefore, due to the mistreatment in residential school settings many indigenous families, today still feel the effects of intergenerational trauma passed down from their relatives. Parents fear and distrust current educational institutions (Milne, 2016). This fear and distrust have been passed down to future generations where aboriginal students still struggle in schools (Barnes et al., 2006; Bombay et al, 2014; Kirmayer et al, 2014). Special attention must be made by educators and educational institutions to ensure that indigenous families feel safe and welcomed schools (Milne, 2016). Culture and language should be celebrated and immersed in the school community so students can feel safe. It is hypothesized that a trauma-informed, culturally safe community approach that is inclusive to all parents and families will help to begin the healing process and make school more inclusive, accessible and safer for all (Barnes et al, 2014).

Community-Based Trauma-Informed School Programs

The studies that have addressed trauma programs in schools have also noted that a collaborative community approach is necessary to be successful (Nadeem, Jaycox, Kataoka, Langley & Stein, 2011). Parents, medical professionals, teachers, educational assistance

teachers, counselors and outside agencies should all be a part of a comprehensive plan to assist the traumatized student in their healing. Having a team approach within a school system can be far more cost-effective for the parent, many of whom may already be suffering from financial hardships and other stressors (Langley et al., 2015). As many of the team members are already in a centralized location, communication between the professionals to discuss programs and student concerns can remain consistent and work in a timely manner.

In particular, parental involvement is crucial for treatment success (Cohen & Mannarino, 2008; Holmes et al., 2015). Researchers have tried to explore a variety of ways to increase parental involvement, including family group conferences that were explored in a social services model (Hayden, 2009). In the Hayden study (2009) it was noted that families that were able to attend the conferences and reinforce plans at home noticed a difference in student attendance and behaviors at school. Unfortunately, it was also observed that the family group conference model found it difficult to get families to commit to the initiative or make the time for the review sessions (Hayden, 2009). Therefore, many families were not consistent and gains were not noted (Hayden, 2009). Although the research indicates that parental involvement is crucial for success, more research is needed to explore how to get the parents involved.

Research suggests that families might feel more comfortable and connected to the program in a school setting rather than a social services model. Access to counseling and outside agency support is available at no cost, therefore, reducing some of the barriers to accessing support and other stresses impacting the parent (Langley et al., 2015). Ensuring wrap-around support for the student using a variety of professionals all centralized in the same facility will help to create an environment of safety and trust for the child and their family. Also, by having parents as close partners in learning, coping and stress reduction tools and strategies the child is

learning can be used in both the home environment and school and therefore is more likely to be successful (Arellano et al., 2005). Head Start Trauma Smart is an example of a community framework that encompasses best practices for working with students of trauma (Saunders, 2007).

Nurture Group

The British Columbia Early Learning Framework begins to address the issues of working with individual differences of all students from all cultures in a culturally sensitive framework (Province of BC, 2019). It specifically created Principles of Learning that are attuned with the developmental stages that young children are in as they enter the school system. Within the Early Learning principles, three crucial pieces are needed to create a successful entry for early learners. The first is that it is important to design a physical space for early learners that feels welcoming and inclusive to all including parents and other professionals within the building (Province of BC, 2019). Next, a trauma-informed approach is necessary to develop resiliency in all students and finally, clear and consistent routines work best (Province of BC, 2019). The Framework also identifies the First Peoples Principles of Learning to ensure that the rebuilding process of healing is begun in response to the historical damage our Aboriginal families suffered in the residential school system. The Head Start Trauma Smart program that has been developed in the United States has encapsulated these key ideas presented in the BC Early Learning Framework into one successful program focusing on a nurture group philosophy (Saunders, 2007).

A nurture group model addresses the concerns of attendance, behavioral and emotional difficulties and academic challenges within a framework that encompasses the best trauma informed practice. A nurture group is a class of a small group of students, typically 10-12, that

find working within mainstream classroom settings challenging (Saunders, 2007) These students are immersed in a social-emotional focused program as a separate class and reintegrated within their mainstream classes slowly and carefully to ensure the safety of the students (Saunders, 2007).

Saunders indicates in her research that the nurture group should be facilitated in a home-like, warm atmosphere. The classroom for the nurture group is set up to mimic this ideal with a cooking area and a couch or living room space. A day in a nurture school is very structured with specific routines that incorporate storytime and play (Saunders, 2007). The staff work very closely together to monitor and model appropriate behaviors for the children. The goal is to create a very structured and safe community where the children feel trusted and develop higher self-esteem (Saunders, 2007).

The nurture group model is developed to foster social, emotional and behavioral growth so that the students can re-enter mainstream classrooms successfully. When looking at the impact of nurture group models vs a comparison school, the researchers found that the students in the nurture group made significant gains in social and emotional domains comparatively as measured by the Boxall Profile (Saunders, 2007) They also noted that the younger students made more gains than older students in the intermediate grades (Saunders, 2007).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Disproportionally, children who have been raised in poverty tend to experience more traumatic events (Blitz et al., 2016). According to Statistics Canada, in 2015, nearly 1.2 million (17%) of Canadian children younger than 18 lived in poverty. Consequently, studies have shown that these students may exhibit disruptive behaviors and academic disengagement (Blitz et al., 2016; Blodgett et al., 2018; Cobbett, 2016; Holmes et al., 2015). Abraham Maslow was a

psychologist who identified five basic needs that need to be fulfilled in a hierarchical sequence for individuals to reach optimal success in all areas of their life (See Appendix A) (Noltemeyer, Bush, Patton & Bergen, 2012). The base of the needs model relates to the fulfillment of physiological needs such as food, water, oxygen, and sleep (Harper, Harper & Stills, 2003; Noltemeyer et al., 2012). These needs are considered deficiency needs and the concept of love and safety fit in this category as well. If these needs are not fulfilled the child is not able to thrive with positive self-esteem and become self-actualized (Harper, Harper & Stills, 2003; Noltemeyer et al., 2012). Children living in poverty are not able to successfully meet these needs. Without addressing a student's basic needs as they enter the school system, students experience academic failure (Noltemeyer et al., 2012). Evidence shows that malnutrition can be associated with poor cognitive development and behavioral issues in childhood (Grantham-McGregor, 2005).

The design of a good quality breakfast program for all students that enter a school can help fulfill some of the students' basic needs and help them to be ready for a successful day of learning. For example, providing a nutritious breakfast in a school setting has demonstrated increased attendance rates benefited cognition (Grantham-McGregor, 2005). You, Liu & Zhou, 2019, found that primary students who ate breakfast every day performed significantly higher in academic performance than those that did not. Eating breakfast had a positive effect on the student's cognitive development (You, Liu & Zhou, 2019). Creating a nutritious school-wide breakfast program will be a key element in this study to address the mitigating effects of poverty.

Friends Resiliency Program

Friends Resiliency is a school-based Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) program that is well researched in academic settings to help develop resiliency in children of all ages (Barrett,

2013). Anxiety correlates with another psychopathy later in life (Kosters et al., 2012; Zwaanswijk & Kosters, 2015, Miller et al., 2016). Therefore, Friends resiliency is an intervention program that helps address these later developing issues and provides the tools and skills to develop resiliency in our youth today (Barrett, 2013). Using games and activities, children are shown how to recognize symptoms of anxiety and are given both behavioral and cognitive strategies to manage their symptoms. This positive and enjoyable experience does not involve clinical assessment or diagnosis and therefore avoids labeling students (St. Onge, Stephenson & Kumar, 2016).

Mental Health Organizations have indicated there are many barriers for children and youth to access services such as poverty, cost, location, and accessibility (Jorm & Wright, 2007 as cited in Rodgers & Dunsmuir, 2015). Therefore, schools have been determined as an optimal environment to target large numbers of children to make “evidence-based intervention and preventative programs more accessible at a universal level” (Ruttledge et al., 2016, pg. 86). The Friend’s Resiliency program is a sequentially structured and well-scripted series of lessons to address and develop the skills in a developmentally appropriate manner in educational settings (Barrett, 2013). It is designed for any trained professional to implement the program including school psychologists, classroom teachers and counselors.

The World Health Organization has endorsed the Friends program for its effectiveness in delivering social-emotional educational programming that impacts children, families, and communities positively across the lifespan that has been supported within research in many countries around the world such as England, Australia, Sweden and the Netherlands (Barrett, 2013). Research conducted in these countries indicate that Friend’s for Life” is an effective school-based preventative program in providing the tools and strategies to decrease the

symptoms of anxiety and depression in youth ((Kosters et al., 2012; Rogers & Dunsmuir, 2015; Iizuka, Barrett, Gillies, Cook & Marinov, 2015). Further research has been done in Canada to replicate these findings (St. Onge et al, 2016; Miller et al, 2016)

Chapter Summary

Approaching our academic programs with a trauma-informed practice will enable teachers to minimize the long-term effects of students that have experienced numerous traumatic events. The literature shows that a nurture group model in an elementary school that focuses on a TF-CBT approach coupled with play therapy can potentially have a very significant impact on the healing of traumatized youth (Holmes et al., 2015) (Saunders, 2007). The Friends Resiliency Program is a researched-based social-emotional program that teaching students and families, tools and strategies in a play-based program to develop coping strategies (Iizuka et al., 2015; Kosters et al., 2012; Zwaanswijk & Kosters, 2015). The studies also note that having a team of professionals working with the students in collaboration with their families increases success rates (Cohen & Mannarino, 2008) (Holmes et al., 2015) (Langley et al., 2015). Therefore, based on the literature, creating a trauma-informed, culturally safe nurture group model within a kindergarten and grade 1 classroom that uses the Friends Resiliency program to deliver a social-emotional program will develop each student's ability to engage more positively in academic content and see attendance rates more consistent. A community-based approach that involves families, educators, administrators, counselors and other helping professionals will be crucial to the success of the study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

Research has demonstrated that a nurture group model can have a very positive impact on the healing of traumatized youth in a preschool setting (Saunders, 2007). Some studies have designed elementary school treatment models using TF-CBT techniques that have been very successful in reducing the symptoms in traumatized youth (Cohen & Mannarino, 2008) (Langley et al., 2015). This study explored the idea of combining the 2 concepts in an elementary school setting to see which themes regarding their impact emanated from the program. It is theorized that the themes will revolve around students' effective coping and self-regulation skills, an increase in attendance rates and engagement in academic tasks with confidence.

Research Study Proposal

It is proposed that creating a trauma-informed, culturally safe nurture group modeling kindergarten and grade 1 classroom environment that focuses on social-emotional programming will stimulate student engagement with academic tasks and make students more comfortable within elementary classroom settings as indicated by positive self-regulation and positive peer interactions within the class. Particular focus will be made to ensure the physical environment of the classroom resembles a home-like atmosphere and that the student's basic needs such as breakfast are being met.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study are an opportunity sample of primary aged children. Students ranged from 4-6 years of age and were registered in a mainstream Kindergarten/Grade 1 classroom. Eighteen students participated for over 3 months. The class composition was determined by the school district. As the population of the school experiences some transiency, there were some minor changes to the demographics in only the Gender and Grade categories. From September to October, 35% of the students were in Grade 1 and 65% of the students were in Kindergarten. In November, one student moved out of the class and another moved into the class and this changed the configuration slightly to 41% in Grade 1 and 59% were in Kindergarten. From September to October, the class comprised 47% who identify themselves as females and 53% who identify themselves as males and this changed in November to 41% identifying as females and 59% identifying as males. Within the classroom, 24 % were of Aboriginal descent and 12% were identified as English Language Learners (ELL). Thirty-five percent of the students came from split home environments and within that demographic 33% were in Foster Care. Eighteen percent of the students were on official Individual Education or Behavioral Plans, however, the school-based team and district recognized that 59% of the class were identified as vulnerable based on extreme behavioral regulation issues, significant language delay and significantly below academic grade-level expectations plans (See Figure 1). Students ranged from families of a variety of socio-economic backgrounds.

Figure 1:*Participant Demographics Breakdown and Percentage of Class Totals*

Demographic	Percentage of class total
Grade 1 (Sept to Oct/ Nov- Dec)	35% / 41%
Kindergarten (Sept to Oct/ Nov-Dec)	65% / 59%
Male (Sept to Oct/ Nov- Dec)	53% / 59%
Female (Sept to Oct/ Nov- Dec)	47% / 41%
Aboriginal	24 %
ELL (English Language Learner)	12%
One parent home's (or split homes)	35% (of these 33% in Foster homes)
Students on IEP or BEP	18%
SBT identified as vulnerable within class	59%

The teacher/ researcher was on educational leave and therefore was only working 3 consecutive days per week and had a teaching partner that was working 2 consecutive days per week. The teaching partner was aware of the study but had the autonomy to plan and teach as per their teaching philosophy. Therefore, the study was being implemented 3 days a week for 4 months between September and December.

Design

This study focused on an action practitioner approach using auto-ethnography where the teacher is also the researcher. Detailed field notes and journals were kept on the design changes of the classroom to simulate a nurture group model, the development of a breakfast program within the school and how the students within the kindergarten and grade 1 classroom were

responding to the social-emotional programs that were being taught. After careful reflection, as the study period progressed, changes were made to program delivery to best suit the current needs of the students. A collaborative approach was crucial and therefore the school-based counselor, NOYFS (North Okanagan Youth and Family Services) counselors, classroom teacher, parents and educational assistants met weekly to discuss the program and reflect on program delivery.

The classroom environment was designed to reflect a home environment, with a cooking facility, living space with couches and homely touches. Special attention will be given to ensure student's basic needs as described in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (see Appendix A) are met each day such as a nutritious breakfast and lunch will be provided for students in need.

Procedure

Before the school year began, particular attention was made to redesign the classroom space to mimic a nurture group model (see figure 2).

Figure 2:

Class layout before changes





The changes to the layout of the classroom space and furniture was an attempt to make the classroom feel more like a home rather than an institutional setting (see figure 3). Special layout considerations were made to ensure each space had functionality like a home. Natural plants, curtains, lamps, and a couch were added to a section of the classroom to replicate a living room (See figure 4). A sensory corner was established to ensure students had a calm corner to retreat to if needing extra time and tools (see figure 5). Within this corner a sand tray was available and a calming cube with blankets, pillows and books. This calming cube is located at the far corner of the room and close to the classroom door so students do not feel trapped in the classroom space and close to the teacher desk for extra monitoring if needed. Natural elements and plants were placed around the room such as burlap to cover brightly covered tabletops (see

figure 6). It was hoped that this would help calm the space and make it more inviting to the students and their families.

Figure 3:

Post changes with layout changes and addition of couch, plants and curtains.



Figure 4:

New living room space



Figure 5:

Sensory corner with calming cube and sand tray



Figure 6:

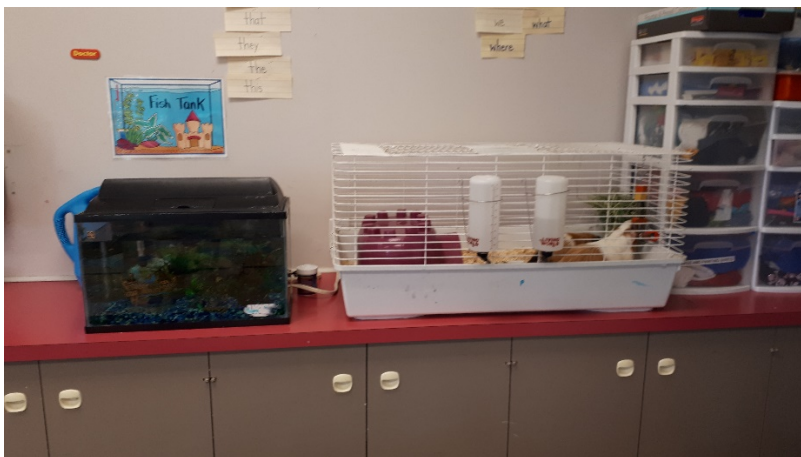
Natural elements placed around the room



Animals continue to be an integral part of my teaching practice to assist students in learning how to be gentle (see figure 7). The sound of the fish tank is hoped to be a calming element within the classroom as students can watch the fish and the sound of the filter running replicates a calming waterfall sound that flows in the background.

Figure 7:

Animals in the classroom: Fish tank and guinea pigs



The breakfast program was set up and prepared to serve the entire school community. The decision was made to have the breakfast room set up in the cultural room with close

consultation and collaboration with our aboriginal cultural teachers. As the cultural room is a welcoming, non-enrolling space it enabled the breakfast program to be turned into a soft start for any students that may need it. The breakfast set up was from 7:30 am until 8:00 am where the teacher/researcher, aboriginal cultural worker, and student volunteers set out a continental style breakfast with cold cereal options, fresh fruit, yogurt, juice, and occasionally muffins or other baking that was made by students within the school (see figure 8). Once a month, a hot breakfast was prepared such as pancakes, French toast, or egg wraps (see figures 9 and 10). Breakfast was open from 8:00 am to 9:00 am. The arrival bell went at 8:25 am for classes to begin but any students that needed a safe and quiet place to start their day could have some breakfast and one on one time with our staff that were in the breakfast room.

Figure 8:

Cereal Options for Breakfast Program



Figure 9:

Hot breakfast preparation in the kitchen



At the beginning of the school year, the students and parents met with the teacher/researcher in a private meeting to discuss the study and were provided with a letter explaining the purpose and design of the study and the option to withdraw from the study if requested, at any time. Attendance records and former report cards were examined and recorded as baseline data.

Special attention will be given during the 4 months to deliver a social-emotional curriculum using the Friends Resiliency program. The program is designed to follow a TF-CBT approach that gives students the tools to become resilient in the face of adversity. The teacher/researcher had specific training in the facilitation of the Kindergarten and Grade One module called Fun Friends. The program is comprised of ten lessons and two bolster lessons that are to be taught sequentially following the Friends acronym which is as follows:

Feelings (talk about your feelings and care about others feelings)

Relax (mindfulness strategies such as milkshake breathing)

I can try (try your best: inner helpful thoughts)

Encourage (be a good friend- thumbs up actions)

Nurture (do fun activities with teachers, family and friends)

Dare to be brave (practice skills every day)

Stay happy (value-based models and support networks)

Within each lesson, there are several reinforcement activities. Each lesson topic ran approximately 1- 2 hours which was broken up into 30-40 min sessions. Parents were invited to classroom events and functions, to help create a warm, supportive community atmosphere.

Qualitative data was collected through naturalistic observations and field notes by the teacher/researcher conducting the study. Adjustments to the teaching and therapy were made throughout the three months based on the observations being made.

Analysis

During the year, careful analysis and reflection of the field notes and journaling guided the curriculum delivery direction. At the end of the study, the field notes were analyzed to look for common themes developed throughout the study. Thematic analysis refers to the process of analyzing qualitative data to look for common patterns that emerge as themes. There were 3 stages in the coding process (Auerback & Silverstein, 2003). To begin this process, I highlighted keywords and phrases that seemed to connect to the research questions. Then areas were grouped with different colored highlighters that demonstrated repeating ideas. From these repeated ideas themes were identified and discussed (Auerback & Silverstein, 2003). Attendance rates were examined at the beginning of the study period and compared to the end of the study period to see if there were any improvements or patterns noted.

Ethical Considerations

As the teacher will also be the researcher there may be researcher bias when reviewing the field notes and observations to establish possible correlations. The researcher met with every family member to explain the study, sent home an informational letter and checked in frequently to maintain informed parental consent. Confidentiality of the students and their families who participate in this program may be a challenge as the students will be selected for a very specialized pilot project within a small school. While reporting findings, confidentiality will be maintained within this paper to ensure all identifying markers are removed. All field notes and surveys will be destroyed within 5 years of the conclusion of this study. Before this time all notes will be secured in a locked cabinet.

Careful consideration must be taken to ensure the researcher and the educational assistants do not suffer from secondary trauma after working with such an intense group of traumatized students. IRB and school administration approval was obtained before the commencement of the study.

Chapter 4: Presentation of Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to see if setting up a trauma-informed, culturally safe nurture group modeled classroom which focuses on social-emotional programming would see benefits in quickly student comfort and engagement into curricular learning and better attendance rates. The careful design of the classroom space was developed before the students arriving to start their school year. A living room space was created using curtains on the single window in the room, numerous plants around the space, a couch, lamps and softened earth-toned colors used by covering bright bins with burlap. The workspace was also designed as an eating space where the students would gather closely around tables and eat their school meals together so that the classroom was more of a community feel. The kindergarten/ grade 1 version of Friends Resiliency, called Fun Friends, was implemented as a 10-week social-emotional program to help teach coping skills immediately to students as they began their school year. Detailed field notes were taken by the teacher/ researcher. After the study's conclusion, the field notes were analyzed and coded where several key themes emerged: Teacher time constraints and stress, the importance of a soft start, environmental influences on calming and finally the importance of connections in attendance and engagement patterns. Each of these four themes will be explored in depth within this chapter followed by a discussion on the implications of these themes.

Themes

Teacher Time Constraints and Stress

The most common theme that emerged throughout my notes was the impact of numerous, multi-leveled pressures that impact teacher stress and therefore impact the delivery of the social-emotional content. The first major impact on teacher stress was the miscommunication or lack

of communication between the various levels within the school system. Frequently no collaboration was given with scheduling or staffing of classrooms. The daily schedule was set up without any consultation when scheduling in teacher prep's, library and pe times. These times, although convenient for administration did not work within the kindergarten timetable. For example, at this school, for the first 3 months of the school year, kindergarten students always have a separate recess so they have more access to playground equipment and all kindergarten staff supervises to help teach appropriate social skills on the playground before they mix with the entire school. The prep schedule had 2 different classes having their music class during the scheduled recess block. The administration refused to move the music blocks and therefore we moved our recess time consulting with the administration so they were aware of the change. A week after we made this adjustment, the administration placed whole school assemblies on Monday mornings during our new recess time. Frustration and mistrust of administration were identified within the notes.

A continual lack of understanding of the importance of understanding developmental abilities and trauma-informed practice in the school made it very challenging as a teacher to advocate for the children. Scheduling was created without consultation of staff and resulted in many challenges with too many transitions for our young children entering the school system for the first time. Another example of this lack of communication was bus safety presentations being scheduled in the middle of the very first day of school for the kindergarten students, one class being scheduled during a recess break. This demonstrated a lack of attunement in the needs and importance of a safe and comforting start to the school year for our students that come from traumatic backgrounds by establishing a calm and consistent routine in the first couple of weeks. Having the knowledge of this and attempting to teach in a trauma-informed manner but not being

supported by administration in the approach is extremely frustrating and led to a continual source of stress for the teacher in attempting to deliver a trauma-focused curriculum.

Having support to assist students entering the school system has been noted in research as having beneficial effects on students from traumatic backgrounds (Saunders, 2007). Despite having requested a team approach and a smooth start for our younger students that included consistent support for our students entering with known special needs, I didn't have educational assistant support consistently until mid- November. There were even inconsistencies in scheduling where 1 classroom teacher would have 3 adults in the room for 15 students and my classroom had only myself with 17 students and several special needs. When this was addressed with our student support services, I was informed that they forgot about the kindergarten classes again and scheduling is just so hard. This situation was a huge source of stress and anxiety in my ability to address the social-emotional needs of all my students. Without this support there were more noted incidents of violence and meltdown that looked like crying, throwing items or hitting others. There were many entries within the field notes that repeated my exhaustion levels, physical pain, and frustration with the inconsistencies with support for my students. When there were two adults in the room working with the students my notes reflected a calmness and lower stress. More attention was able to be made with actual curricular development rather than dealing with continual emotional meltdowns.

Only working part-time was noted as continual emotional stress and pull on the ability to cover all the curriculum and meet the needs of the students. Attempting to deliver the social-emotional content in only 3 days without consistency across the 5 days made it a definite challenge. Music classes, buddies, different recess times, assemblies and other regular interruptions in the day to day made it a challenge to balance the needs of all the challenges

within a school system. Although I intended to purely focus on the social-emotional curriculum, unfortunately, the system requires accountability and reporting in all the curricular areas and therefore you begin to see which core academics aren't being addressed and therefore are challenging to report on. Although, every school I have been a part of expresses the importance of social-emotional curriculum when school goals are created the greatest need always becomes the literacy and numeracy rates. Therefore, these tend to be focused on collecting data and social-emotional programs slip. The balance between academic benchmarks and the need to slow down for the children is a continual source of stress and strain on me as a classroom teacher. Only working part-time compounded these sources of stress and this was repeated in my field notes to the point where I was reporting fatigue, exhaustion, extreme physical pain in my arm and neck and extreme frustration and sadness. On my particularly bad days, I noticed a correlation with student emotional episodes and challenges regulating. Students need their teacher to be calm and focused to do their very best as well. When reflecting on the year, I noticed the importance of letting some of the scheduling challenges go and going with the flow of the classroom. When I began to adopt this philosophy, I noticed a change in my students and we all were able to flow better through our day.

Importance of a Soft Start

One of the largest changes I made to my daily routine and schedule was to create a longer soft start at the beginning of my day. A soft start is a gradual approach to the day where students are given free choice time and allowed to choose their activities and free flow through several tabletop options that were provided. Students were able to mingle and talk with their friends and this in turn developed a sense of deeper classroom community and bonding. Students were always allowed to head to the "living room" area to read books or listen to books on taper if they

needed a quieter start. It enabled parents to come in and say good-bye to their children in a fun manner, enabled me to have more time to connect with the parents and chat as we began each day and thus maintain strong connections to the home and families. Distraught children would have time to say good-bye to their parents during the soft start as a parent could spend this time with their child to say good-bye. On days that I needed to reduce our soft-start time and begin academic activities or assemblies early, I noticed dysregulation in my students. Many students would tire easily, have more tears and get frustrated with work tasks quicker. Therefore, the overall benefits of having a slower start to our day that involves play and interaction with peers far exceeded the time constrictions and pressures. Happier and more confident students equaled better academic engagement.

Every morning options within the soft start always included sensory bins. It was noted that my students that came from traumatic backgrounds more often choose to start their days at one of these tables. One student in particular spent 20 minutes just moving their hands in and out of a rice bin. When I approached to chat about how their evening was the night before I found out that it had been a hard night with an unstable family situation. By moving their hands in the rice and having a moment to have a 1:1 chat, the child seemed to calm and be able to continue on their day without the sadness that they entered with.

During the soft start, the classroom was buzzing with happiness and conversations between peers about their interests. It was noted that students began developing friendships within the classroom by linking similar interests at the tables and chatting about their creations and play. Students would begin planning what they would choose for afternoon center time and who they would play with later during these morning connection times.

The breakfast program became a very important component of my soft start. My classroom became the overflow room for the breakfast room in the mornings when we were particularly busy. One student from my room, in particular, would choose to come into our classroom as it was a quieter space to eat breakfast. It was during these quiet times that stories would emerge about how their evenings had gone the night before. Just this quiet and reflective moment to connect and listen showed patterns of better student engagement as shown with less somatic responses as the student began their day. On days this student was not at the breakfast program, our day would start with tummy aches, headaches and earaches. On days where there was a quiet start with breakfast and 1:1 chat time the student was smiling more, fewer reports of pain and seemed more engaged and confident with academic tasks.

The breakfast program both within the overflow room and in the cultural room became a place where regulars began to feel more like a family. There would be lovely chatter around the room as students shared stories and a meal. When hot breakfast was provided within the breakfast program or in my classroom for my entire class, I noticed a sense of calmness and more attentiveness to classroom tasks and activities.

There were moments when we noticed the breakfast program was not as busy and we were wondering why. One of my students let me know that they tried and tried to get in but all the doors were locked so they thought they weren't allowed. This became a continual challenge as the administrators were the only ones with the special key to unlock the outside door that led to the breakfast program. Many days they would forget to unlock the door and staff would have to continually check the door and let students in who were waiting. The locked door became an unexpected barrier to breakfast program access. The cultural teacher was informed that she would receive a key but every time she asked the administration would tell the teacher that they

would get right on it. The cultural teacher felt that if she was not aboriginal that they would have received a key faster. This thinking demonstrates that the oppression towards our aboriginal colleagues still is felt and expressed today. By the end of the study, the cultural teacher still did not have a key. Students in my class would report that some days they couldn't come to breakfast until I opened the class for our start. On these days my students would head to breakfast and then join us in our soft start.

It was also noted that our numbers in the breakfast program were quite low until we added more hot options. As soon as we added toast to our daily menu we saw our numbers jump from 3 students in the breakfast program to 16 the day we added toast. On pancake days we would have 50 or more students participate in breakfast and many students and staff would chat how the halls smelled so great on hot breakfast days.

Overall the addition of an extended soft start and a consistent and accessible breakfast program demonstrated positive results as indicated by happier students who entered the classroom quicker and ready to engage in classroom activities.

Environmental Influences on Calming

Particular attention was made to create a classroom environment that mimicked a "home-like environment". The very first response noted from any staff or students that knew my previous arrangements was positive and comforting. The janitor even noticed that it felt so more welcoming and inviting for anyone coming into the space. Having plants and classroom pets also helped create this mood and atmosphere. Students who were in my class in previous years would come into the living room area, go directly to the couch and melt into the space wishing they were back in our classroom and asking if they could return to the classroom! An older student whose sibling was in my class this year visited my room during our back to school

barbeque and stated “When you are alone in here it is so peaceful with the plants and the sound of the fish tank”. This student would continue to visit at lunch hours when no one else was around just to relax.

I noticed throughout September that students gravitated towards the “living room” space, especially if they were feeling sad or withdrawn. Many would curl up on the couch for some quiet time and it was a spot that we could chat and connect. Some students would use the couch to have a nap if they were particularly exhausted from the night before.

An unexpected discovery was the importance of lighting for student calming. I noticed a pattern in my notes that when I did not dim the lights and only use my soft lamps around the space the students were louder and more dysregulated. On the days that I used subdued lighting and tried to avoid the overhead school lighting, students were calmer and more engaged. I increased the use of subdued lighting as the year progressed and it is now an important part of my practice.

The arrangement of furniture also enabled students to have very distinct areas for different functions: a workspace, play space and calming reading space. I believe the new configuration of my classroom reflected these areas better and students responded effectively. We were able to move some of the furniture around to create more open spaces daily. This became particularly beneficial when we were doing movement exercises or progressive muscle activities because we had more space to move around and not worry about maneuvering around chairs and tables like in my previous layout. This not only increased student engagement but also increased student safety and access to these important self-regulation activities.

Going outside for programming also demonstrated correlations with increased regulation in my research notes. Students were frequently more settled when we did a walk or longer recess

time for free play with their friends. The importance of having outdoor activities to nurture student emotions has always been a passion of mine but watching at taking notes to see it unfold seemed particularly impactful for the students as well. I rearranged my timetable so that the students got 30 minutes minimum for recess time outside rather than the typical 15 minutes that the entire school gets daily. When my students received 30 minutes of outside play they came in more ready to learn. When we transitioned outside with the rest of the school in November, I noticed that some of my students would cry and not want to come in yet. It appeared that the reduced outside time decreased their regulation however it is challenging to make clear correlations to this as the dysregulation could be a result of being lined up with 5 other classes in a tight space while waiting to be picked up to come inside. When we went out for recess with only the other k/1 classes we were the only class returning and therefore there was less stimulation.

Impact of Connections on Attendance and Engagement Patterns

The importance of a strong relationship between the classroom teacher and student regulation became a clear and consistent message throughout the study. For example, looping children of having students for consecutive years can help alleviate some of the fear and emotional dysregulation that comes with changing classroom and teachers at the beginning of the year. Some Grade one teachers reported students having somatic responses such as experiencing tummy aches and headaches so intense that the students had to be sent home within the first week. When class configurations were changed and many classrooms added some Grade 1 students, students had to be shifted and therefore some students were looped into their previous classrooms. Immediately upon looping, some of the students became chatty, happy and worked very hard. Having relationships with the family and understanding each families unique

situations as well as understanding with the students the previous year, I am presuming that they felt safe and comfortable in the classroom setting. I worked with the looped students to help them understand that there were many teachers and staff in the school that are safe to ask questions such as “can I have some food? “because our school does not want anyone to be hungry. It takes time for students to trust others, especially those who come from complicated and traumatic backgrounds. Having a relationship and connection to this student that was built the previous year enabled her to feel safer quicker and then be able to access the academic content with more confidence.

Another example of the importance of student/teacher relationships on student engagement became clearer to me through a colleague. Within the middle of the study, a student was forced to move due to family situation. When we first became aware of the transfer a colleague approached me very upset and stated this child “ came to your class as a withdrawn, angry and reserved child that put up huge walls and barriers to one that’s eyes light up with you and laughter rings out” This colleague was devastated that a child’s home situation and school environment was changing. The connections we make with our students enable the student to become a part of our classroom family. When the student felt that they could trust the class family and staff then they started to engage in the classroom curriculum. When changes need to occur, we all feel the pain on the loss. It became very important that we ensured that we supported the child in the transition so that they always knew that we would be thinking of them and that we would always care what happened to them rather than continue with the academics at the moment. We took pictures of the child with the whole class and photos of the child with various adults in the building that the child had connected with of whom the child themselves identified. We sent those photos with the child during the transition, hoping it would help the

child recognize the relationships that they made in such a short time can help build new ones to trust in their new classroom environment.

Connections with parents became another key component of my programming. The parent-teacher interviews we do at the beginning of the year where we met with the students and their families individually for 30 minutes each helped to build this trusting relationship. Having opportunities for parents to come into the school to share in a meal such as our back to school barbeque also enhanced the home/school relationships. If the parents are comfortable coming into the school then the students appear to come more consistently. Have a good relationship with the parent also enables me to communicate with the parent on the phone to address attendance issues and see if I can support the family in any way. Trust is a major factor in student engagement. If the family trusts and supports the teacher then the student will have more success in academic programming and regulation. My classroom had an open-door policy so parents could come in at any time to see their child or communicate with me at any time during the day. Parents indicated to me that they appreciated this as it made them feel more comfortable when dropping off their young student. Parent participation and support for school field trips was strongly encouraged and it was noticed that strong parental support enhanced student self-regulation as I noticed students would be so happy and excited when their significant grown-up could participate in our exciting events. Having a strong connection with parents also became evident when they started requesting supplies and tools to help support the social-emotional curriculum that was being taught at the school at home. Students were heading home telling their parents about the milkshake breathing and progressive relaxation exercises we were doing. Having these strong connections between home and school ensured that I would link the parents

with resources and supplies to help support the students as they continued to explore some of the tools they were learning in the Fun Friends program.

Student connection between our cultural teacher and our regulars in the breakfast program was evident with the lack of attendance in the program when this particular teacher was away. When the cultural teacher was present in the program, attendance was high, all our regulars were present and the lovely hum in the room was evident while students shared stories. When the teacher was away our attendance rates plummeted, especially if the administration was present covering for the teacher. The atmosphere in the cultural room was quieter. Students from my class would attend and let me know it felt different. This presents as an interesting pattern of the importance of the connection between students and teachers and the student's perception of student safety.

I also noticed the importance of feeling supported and connected by my support staff. At the beginning of the year, I felt overwhelmed and not supported. I reported being exhausted and strained almost every day but when a regular EA was assigned to my room, I felt relieved and able to do my job again. I reported feeling calmer, happier and more supported. The only factor that got me through the initial 3 months without consistent support in the classroom was the collaboration and support of my colleagues that would allow me to vent and supported me through brainstorming of how to approach challenging situations. Without this strong sense of collaboration with my peers, I feel that my exhaustion would have strained the relationships with my families and students and therefore, I would not have seen such strong teacher/ student connections. Having the classroom assistant enabled a truly collaborative team approach where all the students benefited with greater access and support for the academic content and less

emotional outbursts such as crying and throwing items around the classroom. Their needs were able to be met more instantaneously and therefore the students did not escalate.

It was anticipated that throughout the program attendance rates should improve and thus academic engagement increase. The attendance data that I reviewed did not reflect this pattern. In September, my students attendance was strong. As the term progressed however attendance began to drop and tardiness rates increases. Looking at the whole class average data, in September students were away an average of 1.5 day (absent rate ranged from 0-7 days) and were late on average 1 day (the range of tardiness was from 0-10 days late). October was an average of 1.9 days absent (range from 0-5.5) and tardiness average was 1.7 days as well (range from 0-13), in November the absentee average was 2.3 days per student (range from (0-8 days absent) and the tardiness was 2.0 days tardy (average range from 0-12 late). Although the class average patterns do not indicate significant differences in the data when looking at individual data patterns emerge (see figure 10). Individual attendance data demonstrates that some students showed an increase in absences and tardiness as the term progressed whereas others were fairly consistent in their patterns.

Figure 10:

Individual Attendance Data Patterns Across Term

Student	September # of days: Absent/ Lates	October # of days: Absent/Lates	November # of days: Absent/ Lates
1	0.5 / 0	5 / 0	1 / 0
2	0 / 0.5	1 / 1	3 / 2
3	0 / 0	0 / 0	0 / 0
4	0 / 0	0 / 0	0.5 / 0

5	0 / 1	1 / 1	0 / 0
6	7 / 0	5.5 / 5	8 / 2
7	3.5 / 1	3 / 13	6 / 12
8	3 / 0	4 / 0	3 / 0
9	2 / 0	0.5 / 1	1 / 0
10	4 / 10	3 / 6	4 / 9
11	0 / 0	3 / 0	N/A
12	N/A	N/A	4 / 2
13	0 / 0	0 / 0	2 / 0
14	0 / 2	0 / 3	0 / 7
15	0.5 / 0	6 / 0	6 / 0
16	0.5 / 1	0.5 / 0	1 / 1
17	7 / 0	0 / 0	0 / 0

Despite these individual patterns, the notes reflect that my students seemed to settle into routines and patterns earlier than in previous years and many used the “living room” space and connected all together. There was a sense of a classroom family where we supported and encouraged each other. Students supported each other and connected as friendships blossomed. It is hard to attribute these observations to the social-emotional curriculum being taught or whether it is just the particular composition of this group of children.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter I discussed the four main themes that emerged from the auto-ethnographic study. These themes included: teacher stress and time constraints, the importance

of a soft start, the environmental influences on calming and the impacts of connections on attendance and engagement patterns.

First, the impact of teacher stress and time constraints impacted the ability to support and maintain consistency in delivering the Fun Friends program. When the program was unable to be delivered consistently behaviors of students emerged and therefore there was less success in the program.

Secondly, the importance of a routine soft start helped students regulate into the classroom space. By providing sensory options, time to connect with peers and 1:1 with the classroom teacher as well as free choice with activities as they entered enabled students to connect and relax as they began their day. This routine and structure demonstrated a positive relationship to attentiveness and engagement in academic activities as the day progressed.

The layout and design of the classroom space appeared to have large influences on student regulation. In particular, the subdued lighting by using the lamps around the room and reducing the overhead classroom lights seemed to correlate with increased academic engagement and productivity and calmness in the collective whole of the classroom. Students used the living room space as a sanctity to regroup and relax when they felt overwhelmed.

Finally, the importance of connections and relationships seemed to be indicative of student success. The strong interconnectedness and trust that was built between the students, their families and the teachers appeared to strengthen the sense of classroom family. With this strong bond, students were able to feel safe within their space and take risks within the tasks being asked of them.

Attendance patterns were not noted to improve throughout the study. Possible explanations for this may be that the students are not in control of their attendance patterns.

Parents are needed to drive the students to school or get them to the bus on time. The attendance data may reflect the needs of the home rather than individual students. More research needs to be done in this area.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the literature and how it relates to the main themes that emerged from this auto-ethnographic study. I will describe possible recommendations to follow up based on the findings and then relate the findings to the initial research questions in the conclusion.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusions

Discussion

The aim of this thesis was to explore whether implementing social emotional focused curricula and redesigning a classroom space to replicate a home environment would enable students to feel more comfortable in the classroom setting and therefore increase self-regulation and engagement into academic tasks.

The design of the study was an auto-ethnography of the possible benefits of social-emotional focused programming in a Kindergarten and Grade 1 classroom for student engagement and attendance patterns over three months. Before the study beginning, the physical layout of the classroom was designed and arranged purposefully and thoughtfully to enhance the ideals of a nurture group model (Saunders, 2007). Special attention was also put into the sensory tool choices and toy choices to enable students that enter the classroom with ACE's to have the appropriate tools to work through some of the trauma responses through play (Brandt, 2013). A breakfast program was set up for the entire school to ensure that each student's basic needs were met as they entered the school.

Detailed handwritten field notes were taken by the researcher throughout the study in a notebook and then the notes were coded for distinct patterns. When the patterns were analyzed further distinct themes emerged: teacher stress and time constraints, the importance of soft starts, environmental influences on calming and the importance of connections to student engagement and attendance patterns.

Many sources of stress and frustrations continued to plague day to day functioning in the Kindergarten and Grade one classroom. Many of these challenges needed to be addressed

quickly and efficiently within a calm manner. The more strains that exist on the teacher the greater chance the teacher may experience burn out or teacher fatigue. It was necessary to ensure that I focus on my self-care so that I can help my students when they need it. Hamilton (2008) suggests that focusing on self-care can reduce the likelihood of teacher burn out. A possibility of the additional stressors that occurred throughout the study could be that I was only working part-time and therefore was trying to fit full-time work into only 3 days. These time constraints could be alleviated if I was back working full time and could space different activities over the entire week. Establishing and ensuring clear boundaries between my work environment and my home environment will also help reduce teacher strain and possible burn out (Hamilton, 2008)

Changing my classroom environment helped keep me calmer and therefore benefitted my students as well. The addition of natural plants around the space, curtains and different seating arrangements made the classroom flow better and provided more space to do whole group activities such as relaxation activities or movement breaks. This supports the research done by Mygind et al (2018) which found that natural environments had stress buffering influences within educational settings. The researchers also noticed that cognitive responses improved in natural settings rather than the traditional classroom settings (Myging et al, 2018). I would like to explore this idea more and see if spending more time in outdoor settings or increasing natural elements in my classroom continues to stimulate the cognitive development of traumatized youth.

In addition, having the lighting in the classroom subdued and using lamps around the space seemed to help calm and regulate the students as I noticed fewer emotional responses and a

quieter room when the lights were dimmed. This is something that I will continue to explore in my practice to see if this pattern continues in future groups of students.

Having a slower start to our day that ensured students felt safe and comfortable entering the school was a key element in ensuring students had the best day. Students that had breakfast either at home or the breakfast program demonstrated a readiness to learn. These findings support the research by Yao, Liu & Zhou (2019) who suggest the good benefits of breakfast program help improve a student's cognitive development. Having time to talk to staff before they started their day and discuss the previous evening or the challenges in the morning at home as they were trying to come to school enabled the students that experienced challenging moments to calm and feel safe before beginning the academic components of their school day. I noticed students were happier and more resilient to peer pressures and tasks being asked of them.

Attendance data did not reflect the improvements that I had anticipated, however, there may be several factors that affect this data. Firstly, attendance may not be a significant predictor of the success of the social-emotional programming within a classroom or measure the comfort a child feels within the classroom environment as there are many factors that may influence a student's ability to attend. Research by Ansari and Purtell (2018) found that there were many reasons for student absenteeism in early learning environments such as Head Start such as maternal depression, unemployment, and students being enrolled in larger classes for longer hours. In my student population, parents must drive or get their students to the bus stop in order for students to attend school. The attendance may be a reflection of the turmoil in the home where the parent cannot make it rather than the child not wanting to come to school. Increases of viruses in the fall could also affect attendance as the parents are keeping their children home because they are sick. More research needs to be done to investigate the impact of attendance in

relation to student engagement. The transiency of the population is a concern as well as when there is a change in the sample there is a change in the overall functioning and community feel of the classroom. Each child brings in their own energy and this effects the whole group. When one of my students left the class and another joined the composition was changed and the energy appeared to be calmer. It is hard to attribute this to composition changes as it may just be the fact that we were two months into the school year and students were adjusting and becoming more familiar and settled into our classroom routines. Attendance patterns were not noted to improve throughout the study. Possible explanations for this may be that the students are not in control of their attendance patterns. Parents are needed to drive the students to school or get them to the bus on time. The attendance data may reflect the needs of the home rather than individual students. More research needs to be done in this area.

Overall, it was noted that when a consistent routine with an empathetic approach was used within my classroom, I noticed that the student's settled faster than in previous years as demonstrates with fewer student meltdowns and increased engagement and interest in day to day tasks and activities.

It is important to note that when reviewing these findings, researcher bias is possible within this study as the teacher was also the researcher. It may difficult for me to be objective or see everything clearly as I am also teaching the content and balancing the needs of all the programming. If the researcher was just observing they may have discovered different themes within the study.

Recommendations

The themes that were discovered in this research demonstrates that the idea of a nurture group could have positive results when working with children from traumatized backgrounds.

The importance of paying close attention to the creation of a supportive learning environment, having a strong collaborative approach and using social-emotional strategies consistently were strong themes throughout the study. The Head Start Trauma Smart model is an example that encompasses all these components (Saunders, 2007). Due to the large class size and composition requirements set out by the school district a true Head Start Trauma Smart class was not created in this study. It is my hope as a researcher that a proposal could be placed to the School District to encourage a true nurture group model with 2 enrolling staff and only 12 carefully selected students that may benefit from this programming that are in grades k-2. By reducing the sample size and ensuring a collaborative staff model before students beginning school, the program will become more reflective of the original design of the Head Start Trauma Smart program. This classroom would be set up with the knowledge that the focus would be solely on social-emotional curriculum and students would integrate into mainstream classrooms to gain academic lessons in the core curricular areas of math and literacy. This would reduce the teacher stress and strain and therefore, hopefully, demonstrate more positive results for our targeted students.

Teacher stress and burn out needs to be addressed at the school level. By ensuring adequate and collaborative communication between the levels of the school would benefit the students. A calm and focused teacher is better able to meet the needs of a student from traumatized backgrounds.

Limitations to this Thesis

There are possible limitations that may occur in this study. Firstly, there was a small sample size of only 17 students and therefore the results cannot be generalized to a larger population. Also, students were all from the same school and it would be interesting to see if the same themes were identified with the same age of students in other demographics.

It was the hope is that using the trauma-informed practice to guide our approach to early learning would minimize the long-term effects of trauma that many students have experienced before entering the educational system. Although the research within this study demonstrates a positive trend towards mitigating these effects, long term benefits will not be known without more research on the longitudinal effects and possible benefits. Also, more research is needed to create a program that can focus on the social-emotional curriculum solely and see the impacts on student regulation and attendance. Without this comparison data, it is difficult to attribute the observations to the setting and program.

Conclusions

The aim of this study was to determine whether focusing on social emotional curriculum changing my classroom physical environment would enable my students to adjust quicker to the classroom routines, increase self- regulation and increase student engagement in academic tasks. I used an auto ethnography to address the following research questions: How can a school implement a social-emotional curriculum, such as Fun Friends, to help address the social-emotional regulation of students in a Kindergarten to Grade 1 classroom setting? How does trauma affect the social-emotional regulation of students in an elementary school? Can a structured, supported classroom setting with social-emotional curricular focus improve academic performance, attendance and resiliency in students?

It was discovered that delicate balance and multiple stressors that are imposed on classroom teachers affect their experience of implementing a social-emotional curriculum in a consistent and timely manner. When interruptions occurred to the curricular intention then it was observed that students were more dysregulated and had a hard time engaging in academic tasks.

The observations also noted that the classroom environment and special attention to the layout and design of the physical space made a huge difference in the regulation of students from traumatized backgrounds. The use of subdued lighting correlated to a calmer atmosphere in the classroom. Students also used the living room space as an area to rest and get away from the stressors of academic content in the form of reading or having a nap on the couch. Without these structures in place students that had challenging evenings or weekends before entering the school would begin their day with heightened emotional responses and were unable to attempt academic tasks.

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Appendix A

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



(McLeod, 2018)