

**Social Emotional Learning Programs: Creating Mindful Students**

**By**

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## ABSTRACT

This paper sets out to look at the important role social emotional learning programs play in educational settings. It explores various SEL programs including: Mind Up, Second Step, FRIENDS for Life, Zones of Regulation and The Incredible Five Point Scale. This study looks at how these programs support the increasing need to provide today's students' tools and strategies to foster mindfulness and develop intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies.

In today's complex and changing society, it is imperative that schools partner with parents to teach social and emotional competencies. Teaching students how to deal with the overload of stressors in their lives opens the door to understanding successful attitudes and behaviors.

These research- based programs anchored in neuroscience teach students to use metacognition to support the idea that as human beings they have ultimate control over what they think and how they feel. When students have good insight into their own states, they are able to reflect and respond with an increased level of awareness; a life long skill that will serve them in becoming responsible global citizens.

Research indicates that SEL programs create strong, healthy classrooms and school cultures; creating a warm and caring environment where students are able to take risks in both their social and academic learning. Schools provide the perfect social emotional learning setting and research shows that when students are calm and ready to learn they are able to retain and transfer learning in a more productive and permanent way. SEL programs teach self and social awareness, self-management, relationship skills and responsible decision- making. Teaching students to solve problems in peaceful ways will create strong future leaders who will be able to lead with both heart and mind.

This paper also explores how social emotional learning programs help to create optimism and positive self-concept. Helping students to understand how to be mindful opens the door to self-reflection and the powerful skills of listening, communication and perspective taking. In understanding metacognition, students are better able to understand themselves, their body and mind connection and their very important role on life's stage.

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## **CHAPTER ONE – THE PROBLEM**

### **INTRODUCTION**

As an educator who has been teaching for over twenty- five years, I have experienced an increase in student struggles. Anxiety and stress disorders are becoming more prevalent throughout the school system. Listening to classroom teachers during class review meetings to determine how to spend our school’s learning improvement fund, I noticed a common concern. Thirteen out of fourteen classroom teachers asked for more student support in the area of social-emotional learning. Teachers shared concerns regarding students: self -regulation, self -awareness, poor executive functioning, various forms of anxiety, lack of social and emotional awareness as well as behavior difficulties. Changes in society are affecting families and schools throughout the world. Parents and teachers must now more than ever before, become partners in educating our children. Teaching core values will help to shape our students lives and help them become strong confident, caring members of society. We can all contribute to this very important goal and smile when we see the fruits of our labor blossom in tomorrow’s generation of caring and mindful human beings.

### **BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM**

In today’s changing world, children are facing more anxiety than ever before (Barnes, Bauza, & Treiber, 2003). According to Anxiety Disorders Association of Canada (2007), “Anxiety is the most common mental concern in Canada” (p.1). Furthermore it identifies that the seven primary anxiety disorders in children are: social anxiety, panic attack disorder, post traumatic stress disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, specific phobia, generalized anxiety disorder and separation anxiety. As I ponder these anxieties and disorders as a mother and an



experienced teacher, I quietly reflect on the lack of balance in most children's daily lives. There is no doubt that modern western families live in a fast paced whirlwind, always rushing from activity to activity with iPhones and iPads in hand. Children's lives are overscheduled and lack a healthy balanced lifestyle. In my opinion, it could be that all these demands are creating behavior problems in many children. It also concerns me that as parents are caught up in their hectic life styles, they are not able to provide their children the gift of time or be the role models that children so desperately need. Anxious overworked parents can create anxious families.

Parker Palmer (2013) in his article "Rethinking the Violence of Modern Life" describes how living in such a mechanical way destroys the gifts of our inner soul where our passions and creativity lie. He shares a quote from Thomas Merton's journal, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* where he states:

There is a pervasive form of modern violence to which the idealist ... most easily succumbs; activism and over-work. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence.

To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything is to succumb to violence.

The frenzy of the activist neutralizes his (or her) work...It destroys the fruitfulness of his (or her)...work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful (Merton, as cited in Palmer, 2013).

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In my role as a support teacher, I have worked with students with many of these disorders and am noticing that other students, though they may not have the disorders, certainly have symptoms of anxiety. There are a number of sources of anxiety for students from both within and outside schools. “Stress in children may be a result of over scheduling, pressure to exceed their ability level, excessive time on the computer, limited time spent with parents due to work schedules and disrupted or blended homes and families” (Witkin, 1999 p. 2). Teenagers may suffer similar stresses yet these can be magnified due to rapid changes in hormones. At risk students have additional stressors. In a report regarding the quality of public education in Canada, factors that can place children at risk can range from lack of basic needs, exposure to trauma, deprived environments, parental addictions, physical, mental or emotional disabilities (Quality, Education, & Canada, 2003). In addition school can add both academic and social stress. Some school related anxieties that I have witnessed are: eating disorders, bullying issues, poor self-awareness and management, difficulty with perspective taking, test anxiety and separation anxiety.

According to Thompson (2013) school life experiences cause multiple stressors in students; included stressors are “fear of failure, school phobias, difficulty in peer and adult interactions, fear of violence and or bullying, separation anxiety, and uncertainty about future aspirations ( p. 230). Furthermore, if anxiety is left untreated it can interfere and block students’ development in all areas of their lives. Thompson recommends that counselors take a leadership role in promoting and delivering SEL programs, as research indicates that such school-wide programs are extremely helpful in diminishing the manifestation of anxiety in children.

In today's world, many students are also facing technology overload and are facing health problems, which are linked to too much screen time. According to the article, "Kids Need to Offset 'Screen Time' with 'Nature Time,'" Louv (as cited in Dakin, 2014) believes that insufficient time in nature is associated with rising rates of depression and attention deficit disorder. He strongly encourages schools to implement nature exploration into the social emotional learning curriculum, a point I will address later in this essay.

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

While it is important to remember that stress can provide opportunities for growth, as an educator I believe it is important for educators to understand when stress stops or delays learning. I would argue that providing stress management skills for students could allow better, more enjoyable and meaningful learning to take place and, I will present evidence in this paper to support this claim. Daniel Siegel's (2009) research on how stress impacts learning, demonstrates hope when he expresses, "Mindful awareness has been demonstrated to alter brain function, mental activity, and interpersonal relationships toward well being" (p. 137).

Daniel Goleman is another author that I have connected to. I am fascinated by his work on emotional intelligence and its importance in today's school system. In an interview with Daniel Goleman, John O'Neil (1996) asks some very interesting questions. O'Neil poses questions around the development of social emotional learning to which Goleman informs, stating, "The good news about emotional intelligence is that it is virtually all learned" (p.8). This statement in itself motivates me as a teacher! Goleman goes on to state to O'Neil that,

We're finding that the repeated emotional lessons of a child's life literally shape the brain circuits for that response. So if a child learns to manage his anger well,

or learns to calm or soothe himself, or to be empathetic, that's a lifelong strength (p.9).

As an educator of twenty-five years, I acknowledge the desperate need to teach students' social skills as well as self-awareness in order to thrive in today's world. Goleman (2008) highlights this new direction that education is taking to increase academic achievement. In his article "The Secret to Success," Goleman (2008) indicates that, "When schools offer students programs in social and emotional learning, their achievement scores gain around 11 percentage points" (p.8).

David Adams (2013) speaks to the support teacher in me in his research around social emotional learning and special education students, specifically those with autism spectrum disorder. He confirms my belief that a school wide social skills program benefits everyone. Adams states, "When students and staff share a language and common understanding around social-emotional development, students are exposed to a consistent message around social-emotional skills that supports the generalization of skills across contexts" (p.108).

Following from this brief overview of the scholarly and professional literature, the purpose of my paper is to look at existing social emotional learning programs in schools and determine how they are creating mindful, responsible students who are able to show awareness of themselves and others. I will also look at how I personally would implement strategies from the various programs to create a social emotional learning program that would be specific to my teaching style and student needs.

## STATEMENT OF RESEARCH QUESTION

The aim of this paper is to answer the question: Do social emotional learning programs for students increase self-awareness (meta-cognition) and their sense or enactment of social responsibility?

## IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

As a teacher, I feel that I can make a difference by teaching students how to calm their minds as well as support them in developing their social emotional intelligence. My research explores the question of how social emotional learning programs improves mindfulness in students. As one becomes mindful, they are able to look at situations through various perspectives. In the article, “Mindfulness and Intelligence: A Comparison,” the authors describe mindfulness as a process; “rather than moving directly from problem to solution, a person in a mindful state remains open to several ways of viewing the situation”(Brown & Langer, 1990, p. 314). In the article, “Calm, Alert and Happy,” Stuart Shanker (2012) reminds us that:

When children are calmly focused and alert, they are best able to modulate their emotions; pay attention; ignore distractions; inhibit their impulses; assess the consequences of an action; understand what others are thinking and feeling, and the effects of their own behaviors; or feel empathy for others (p. 3).

Furthermore, my research also examines how social emotional programs can be of great benefit to individual classrooms, teachers and schools.

Research tells us that the social emotional climate of a classroom can influence cognitive development in students. Daniel Siegel’s research expresses how mindful practice “changes a person’s relationship with self” and further states that, “mindful awareness expands our sense of self by dissolving the prison of repeating patterns of thought and response” (Siegel, 2009 p. 146).

Students are able to think outside the box while at the same time are giving themselves a different lens to look through, by standing on the outside and looking in.

At a CASEL forum, Neuroscientist Richard Davidson discusses his research on how social emotional learning actually changes the brain, producing “adaptive emotional and cognitive functioning” (Davidson, 2008). He expresses that students who are trained in SEL skills are able to more effectively regulate their emotions and thinking which allows them to solve problems more effectively. Furthermore, Davidson explains how teaching students to lessen their anxiety lowers the levels of the stress hormone cortisol which when present in the brain interferes with both memory and learning (Davidson, 2008). By teaching calming strategies, teachers are not only encouraging a more powerful kind of thinking for their students but they are also lowering their own anxieties and improving their brain function which will allow for calmer clearer teaching. In a recent study on Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction for primary teachers the authors noted that:

Stress within the teaching profession has a negative impact on the health and well-being of individual teachers and on retention and recruitment for the profession as a whole. There is increasing literature to suggest that Mindfulness is a useful intervention to address a variety of psychological problems, and that Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) is a particularly helpful intervention for stress.(Gold et al., 2009, p. 184).

In the article, “Heart at Work,” Parker Palmer (2007) calls our attention to the importance of allowing our students to express their feelings. He expresses how teachers need to:

help students honor and attend to their feelings, especially painful ones like anxiety, anger, guilt, grief and burnout. Students need to learn how to explore feelings

about themselves, the work they do, the people with whom they work, the institution settings in which they work and the world in which they live ( p. 30).

Furthermore, Parker Palmer (2007) stresses the fact that “pedagogy requires attention to emotions has been demonstrated time and again across half a century of educational research” (p. 31).

As Daniel Goleman reminds us in his interview with O’Neill (1996), “The good news about childhood is that it’s a wonderful palette to work with. It may look like it’s been painted on, but you can keep painting and eventually children can learn healthier emotional responses (p.10). We must prepare our students for tomorrow. More than ever communication and perspective taking will be the key that opens doors and embraces problem solving in peaceful ways.

### **DEFINITION OF TERMS**

**SEL** – social emotional learning

**Mindfulness** –to be intentionally open and attentive in the moment / perspective taking

**MBSR** – mindfulness based stress reduction

**CASEL** – Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning

### **SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

I will be reviewing North American literature, both in theory and research, on the benefits and applications of mindfulness and social emotional learning in elementary school settings. My findings are limited to the application of mindfulness and social emotional learning in elementary schools and do not extend beyond that. I am interested in how mindfulness practices and various approaches to social emotional learning and self-regulation can be integrated in elementary

school settings.

### **SUMMARY**

Anxiety and mental illnesses is a growing concern for today's students. Societal changes and family dynamics are adding to the pressures that students are facing. Stress management along with the teaching of social emotional skills and competencies will support student learning and provide students life-long strengths as they will be able to access their toolbox of strategies in times of need. Social emotional programs that are delivered in schools are a great benefit to students and society as a whole. Teaching students how to become mindful allows them to manage their emotions better, become peaceful problem solvers and understand others at a deeper level as they develop both interpersonal and intrapersonal intelligences. In the article, "Transporting a School-Based Intervention for Social Anxiety in Canadian Adolescents," Miller, Gold, Gindhu, Martinez, Yu and Waechtler (2011) state that, "With early intervention for anxiety management, evidence suggests that the problems associated with anxiety can be curtailed" ( p. 287).

### **OUTLINE OF THE REMAINDER OF THE PAPER**

Two chapters follow this introduction. Chapter Two provides a detailed review of research into mindfulness- based practices and their possible benefits, starting off with a conceptual analysis where I define and describe some of the key terms. It also describes specific social emotional learning programs that foster children's capacity for sustained attention. Chapter Three includes suggestions on the implementation of a social emotional program in an elementary school with students in kindergarten to grade seven.



## CHAPTER TWO – REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### INTRODUCTION

One of the primary ironies of modern education is that we ask students to “pay attention” dozens of times a day, yet we never teach them how. The practice of mindfulness teaches students how to pay attention, and this way of paying attention enhances both academic and social emotional learning (Salzman, 2011).

I will begin my literature review with an analysis of key terms, defining and describing them and how they are used by scholars and professional educators.

### DEFINITION OF TERMS

**EF** – Executive Functioning – cognitive control (planning and problem solving)

**MAP** – Mindful awareness practice

**ADHD** – Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

**SEL** programs – Social emotional learning programs

**Core** practice – a calming breathing technique used in the MindUp program

**SD42** – School District 42 – Pitt Meadows/Maple Ridge

**JECIC Grant** – Joint Educational Change Implementation Schedule

#### **Executive Functioning and Self- Regulation**

Executive functioning and self- regulation refer to the ability to manage and work information in our brain, organize our thoughts, focus our attention and feel in control of body and mind. In the article, “Effortful Control, Executive Functions, and Education: Bringing Self-

Regulatory and Social-Emotional Competencies to the Table, Liew (2012) shares this important information

executive functions involve working memory and higher order processes such as hierarchical representation or planning (Zelazo, 2004; Zelazo & Frye, 1998), which are not shared with effortful control. Executive function is relatively plastic and responsive to training beginning as early as 4 or 5 years of age (Diamond et al., 2007). (p. 108)

As teachers, we are noticing that kindergarten students are entering the school system with poorly developed executive functioning. The good news is that we can work to help develop these skills. In the article, “Interventions Shown to Aid Executive Function Development in Children 4-12 Years Old,” the authors express that:

To be successful takes creativity, flexibility, self-control, and discipline. Central to all those are ‘executive functions,’ including mentally playing with ideas, giving a considered rather than an impulsive response, and staying focused. Diverse activities have been shown to improve children’s executive functions – computerized training, non computerized games, aerobics, martial arts, yoga, mindfulness, and school curricula. (Diamond, A., & Lee, K. 2011 p.1)

School districts are responding to the growing science of self-regulation and the need to integrate these skills into today’s classrooms. By providing our students with the tools and opportunities they need to self-regulate, we transition them and prepare them for life-long learning.

For reporting purposes, school district 42 uses a Conferencing Model that is student inclusive. Self-regulation is a vital component that must be imbedded in student conferences in both kindergarten and the primary grades. In the intermediate grades, there are five competencies that are reported on; included are: Communication, Social Responsibility, Critical Thinking,

Innovation and Personal Responsibility. The implementation of social emotional learning programs allows teachers to assess with purpose. As teachers assess for, of and as social emotional learning, they are able to identify effective strategies and tools to support and develop individual needs. This is very much in line with the way we must teach today's learner so that we teach to both heart and mind.

### **Mindfulness**

Teaching students about mindfulness means teaching the concepts of attention and awareness. An interesting lesson to help students understand how busy and how hard their brains work is as simple as asking them to close their eyes and think of nothing. I then ask them to raise their hand the second a thought or idea comes to them. As expected, students raise their hands almost immediately. This quick lesson is the perfect segue to an introduction to understanding the heart of mindfulness as it relates to using all our senses and paying attention in a larger way.

In his book, *Mindfulness for Beginners, Reclaiming the Present Moment and Your Life*," Jon Kabat-Zinn (2012) describes his operational definition of mindfulness as, "paying attention on purpose in the present moment and non-judgmentally" (p. 30). He acknowledges the Buddhist roots of mindfulness and the connections to what he calls the sixth sense awareness. "Buddhism explicitly includes mind as a sixth sense, And by 'mind,' Buddhists don't mean thinking. They mean awareness, the capacity of mind that knows non-conceptually" (p 76). Furthermore, he eloquently expresses that attention and awareness are trainable skills. Teaching students to be present in the moment allows for greater enjoyment of learning. Instead of teaching students to pay attention, students are able to explore this skill on their own terms and with creativity.

According to Weare (2013) in the article, “Developing Mindfulness with Children and Young People: A Review of the Evidence and Policy Context”:

Mindfulness is hard to convey adequately using words as it is essentially about developing forms of awareness which are not verbal but are meta-cognitive, i.e. being aware of the inner processes involved in doing, feeling and thinking and being aware of impulses, thoughts and feelings as they arise in the mind and body. It is a sometimes elusive process which lies above, in some sense behind, thoughts and words. Learning to be mindful includes gradually acquiring the ability to be aware of and pay close attention to inner states such as thoughts, emotions and physical sensations, as well as what is happening in the outside world, and with curious and interested attention rather than critical and premature judgement. (p.142)

Teaching students to be mindful is teaching them how to be happy. When students are able to understand their thinking, they can also see that they can change it. Instead of being imprisoned by negative thoughts, students can be freed by their awareness and understanding of metacognition. By using the strategy of positive thinking they are able and in control of changing any negative thoughts to positive thoughts, which brings happiness. Teaching students to listen to their feelings and to focus on the areas of their pain or discomfort, in my opinion allows for development of self-awareness. In the article “What are the Benefits of Mindfulness,” Davis and Hayes (2011) share research around new advancements and how mindfulness affects interpersonal behavior:

With the advancement of neurological technology, mindfulness researchers are examining distinct components of mindfulness meditation such as focused attention, open monitoring (nonjudgmental moment-to-moment observation of one’s experience), and loving-kindness

compassion practice and their specific physiological outcomes (Davis & Hayes, 2011, p.199).

### **Social Emotional Learning**

Making sure that teachers have a good understanding of mindfulness and how they can use mindful strategies in their classrooms is key to the transfer of any social emotional program.

Social and emotional learning (SEL), according to the organization Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2012)

... involves the processes through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. These intrapersonal and interpersonal competencies can be taught and measured, and research shows that students with these skills do better in school and in life (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Goleman, 2005; Greenberg et al, 2003; National Research Council, 2009, 2012).

Social emotional learning programs create emotionally healthy classrooms where students are able to take risks in both their learning and emotional development. When teachers are attentive to students' social and emotional needs, a greater understanding and a true sense of belonging develops between teacher and student. Teachers are able to support student stressors with strategies to effectively manage various needs. Social emotional learning programs allow teachers and students to develop classroom goals around responsible decision- making, improving student attitudes, developing empathy skills and positive relationships. Teaching self-

regulation is an important part of any social emotional learning program as the strategies help to calm students, allowing for focused attention, and better self-awareness, leading to deeper learning.

## **CASEL**

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), out of the University of Illinois at Chicago was founded in 1933 by Daniel Goleman and Eileen Rockefeller Growald.

As stated on the website: [casel.org](http://casel.org), CASEL's mission is:

To help make evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) an integral part of education from preschool through high school. Through research, practice and policy, CASEL collaborates to ensure all students become knowledgeable, responsible, caring and contributing members of society. The 2013 CASEL Guide: Effective Social and Emotional Learning Programs (Preschool and Elementary Edition). Provides a systematic framework for evaluating the quality of classroom-based SEL programs. It uses this framework to rate and identify well-designed, evidence-based SEL programs with potential for broad dissemination to schools across the United States(CASEL, 2013).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

In a randomized control study of sixty four students ages seven to nine, researchers examined mindful awareness practices (MAPs) during thirty- minute sessions, two times per week for an eight week period. Parents and teachers completed questionnaires using the Behavior Rating Inventory of Executive Function (BRIEF) (Gioia, Isquith, Guy, & Kenworthy, 2000). This nationally validated survey instrument was used directly before and after the MAPs

program. The results of the study suggested that mindfulness introduced in a school setting is very beneficial for students who have difficulties with executive functions as they demonstrated a greater improvement in EF compared to the control group (Flook, Smalley, & Kitil, 2010).

Similar studies by Napoli, Krech, and Holley (2005) found that once students completed a twenty- four week Attention Academy Program, students demonstrated “an increase in selective attention or the ability to choose what to pay attention to, and a reduction of both test anxiety and teacher’s’ ratings of students’ ADHD behaviors provided the greatest variance in terms of performance improvement” (p. 113). The study authors also suggested that “the consistent reinforcement of using the mindfulness activities in each class will have long lasting effects and can filter through the children’s school experiences and personal lives” (Napoli et al., 2005 p. 114).

In a quasi-experimental Portuguese research study, three hundred and eighteen students participated in a year long SEL program “Slowly but Steadily” that followed CASEL recommendations. The aim was to develop “social emotional competencies, enhance psychological adjustments and foster academic performance by preventing or reducing behavioral and emotional problems in elementary school children” (Raimundo, Marques-Pinto, & Lu, 2013, p. 166). The results demonstrated that the average student who participated in this SEL program improved in peer relations and social competencies. It also determined that boys who participated in the program exhibited “better self-management and lower levels of aggressiveness than their male peers who did not participate” (Raimundo et al., 2013, p. 176).

Research suggests that mindfulness training can reduce stress and improve school related behaviors in youth (Barnes et al., 2003). In a study to determine the effect of stress reduction using the Transcendental Meditation program, a mental relaxation technique, it was determined

that in a school setting it had a beneficial impact upon absenteeism, code of conduct, and suspension rates in African American adolescents. Although the findings were positive, limitations of the study included sample size and duration of evaluation. Rempel (2012) in her article “Mindfulness for Children and Youth: A Review of the Literature with an Argument for School-Based Implementation” suggests that “mindfulness based practices can have a positive impact on academic performance, psychological well being, self esteem, and social skills in children and adolescents” (p. 216).

Most studies on social emotional programs over the past thirty years have been evaluated over a one -year term or shorter. However, in the article *Effects of Multiyear Universal Prevention*, the researchers examined the impact of a three- year long prevention program. The program, Fast Track PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) focused on skills to help students increase positive social behaviors. It also addressed friendships, turn taking, sharing, manners, and good listening. This longitudinal American study involved two thousand nine hundred and thirty seven children of multiple ethnicities ranging from ages five to ten. “The results of this universal-intervention models at the end of third grade provide evidence of the model’s effectiveness both for promoting social competence and for reducing aggressive behavior problems” (Conduct Problems Research Group, 2010 p. 164).

Although there are many social emotional programs to choose from, my research will explore these social emotional learning programs: *MindUp*, *Second Step* and the *FRIENDS for Life* programs as well touch on strategies used in the *Zones of Regulation* program and the *Incredible Five Point Scale*. As stated in the article, “Educating the Heart as well as the Mind/ Social and Emotional Learning for School and Life Success,” the authors clearly point out that, “Social emotional learning (SEL) offers educators, families, and communities relevant strategies



and practices to better prepare students for “the tests of life, not a life of tests” (Schonert-Reichl & Hymel, 2010 p. 20). Furthermore, the article expresses that it is ideal to implement SEL programs into schools as student learning is relational. The authors state,

Social and emotional skills create responsive, caring and inclusive classrooms and provide the Hawn Foundation for building and sustaining learning relationships that lead to academic success and responsible citizenship. Because many of our students’ interpersonal interactions occur there, schools provide adults with a unique and natural setting in which they can intervene to foster the development of social and emotional skills (Schonert-Reichl & Hymel, 2010, p. 21).

In addition, the article shares the exciting fact that in the year 2000 in British Columbia, the Ministry of Education included social responsibility as a foundational skill, and Vancouver schools include social responsibility as a primary goal. The core competencies in British Columbia’s new Education Plan (BC Ministry of Education, 2015) focus on the intellectual, personal and social aspects of the whole child. These competencies open the door to a new way of teaching and learning. Social emotional learning is an integral part of the Plan as the focus is on student centered learning. According to the program, “Defining Cross-Curricular Competencies – Transforming Curriculum and Assessment”:

The cross-curricular competencies are the set of intellectual, personal, and social skills that all students need to develop in order to engage in deeper learning—learning that encourages students to look at things from different perspectives, to see the relationships between their learning in different subjects, and to make connections to their previous learning and to their own experiences, as members of their families, communities, and the larger society. Thinking competency, which encompasses critical, creative, and reflective thinking,

represents the cognitive abilities that students develop through their studies. Personal and social competency represents the personal, social and cultural abilities that students develop as individuals and members of society. Communication competency represents the abilities students need to interact and learn effectively in their world. Together, these three **cross-curricular** competencies represent a holistic and unifying approach to learning, spanning all courses and grades in the common purpose of enriching students' learning experience and preparing students for the future (BC Ministry of Education, 2013, p. 3).

The cross-curricular competencies will certainly help to prepare students for the future. With all the learning outcomes directly linked to the competencies, students will be continually immersed in developing the skills needed for deeper learning and social intelligence. Students will be learning these skills starting in kindergarten and will grow in their social/emotional intelligence in strategic stages. Students will have opportunities to self reflect on these competencies allowing for awareness followed by improvements, making their learning very personalized. Teachers will be able to be very selective in their formative assessment, as opportunities will present themselves throughout every subject area. Teachers will learn to use a new lens as they pay more attention to how individual students solve problems, communicate and show responsibility.

### **MindUp Program**

The MindUp Program is a powerful social emotional learning program that is anchored in cognitive neuroscience. This research based curriculum involves students in hands on activities that teaches them strategies to help focus their attention, reduce stress and anxiety, improve self-regulation, develop empathy, and develop a positive mind-set and attitude for both school and life. Students learn to manage their emotions and reactions as they developing mindful- attention

toward themselves and others (The Hawn Foundation, 2011). Furthermore, the curriculum, which is accredited by CASEL, presents fifteen lessons that can be easily integrated into any classroom.

The lessons are divided into areas of competency, which are:

**Self-Awareness:** Assessing our feelings, interests, values, and strengths; maintain self-confidence.

**Self –Management:** Regulating emotions to handle stress, control impulses, and persevere in overcoming obstacles.

**Social Awareness:** Understanding different perspectives and empathizing with others: recognizing and appreciating similarities and differences; using family, school, and community resources effectively.

**Relationship skills:** Maintaining healthy relationships based on cooperation; resisting inappropriate social pressure; preventing, managing, and resolving interpersonal conflicts, seeking help when needed.

**Responsible Decision Making:** Using a variety of considerations, including ethical, academic, and community-related standards to make choices and decisions (Hawn Foundation, 2011; p. 8)

The fifteen lessons are also organized into four separate units. Unit one introduces students to brain physiology and the concept of mindful attention. During this lesson students learn about Core Practice -which teaches students mindful breathing and attentive listening. Teachers use a gentle chime that signals the opening and closing of the Core Practice. There is a script for teachers to read that allows students to hear the same message each time:

- Sit down in a comfortable position. Close your eyes or look down at your hands.
- Pay attention to your breathing.

- Take calm, slow breaths. Gently breathe in through your nose then let go of each breath.
- Keep your shoulders relaxed. Picture the air coming into your body and going out again.
- If your mind tries to think about other things, bring your attention back to your breath.
- Feel your stomach rising and falling. Keep your belly soft and relaxed.
- Open your eyes slowly and take another slow, deep breath with your eyes open.

(Hawn Foundation, 2011; p. 45)

The authors of the MindUp curriculum suggest that Core Practice be done three times per day. It is suggested that first thing in the morning, after recess and lunch to help students settle and calm their body and mind.

As children regularly exercise control of their breathing, a new “brain habit” – one that automatically reacts to anxiety by taking control of breathing – becomes the default pathway leading to reflective rather than reactive responses. The more controlled breathing is practiced, the more self managed and mindful children can become (Hawn Foundation, 2011; p. 44).

Unit one also teaches students the importance of their brains, specifically the three parts that are involved in thinking and learning; the prefrontal cortex, the amygdaloid, and hippocampus. The MindUp program empowers students to understand what is going on in their brain by teaching them about metacognition. Dr. Judy Willis, M.D., M.Ed., a neurologist and the co-creator of MindUp in the article, “Golden Opportunity,” expresses that a key component of the MindUp program is to teach students about how stress can stop their learning and how they can develop brain strategies to put them in control of their learning (Gora, 2010). In the article, Dr. Willis explains,

When we’re stressed, information doesn’t get to the prefrontal cortex—instead, it gets

routed by the amygdala (located in the temporal lobe of the brain and an essential component in memory and emotion), into the lower brain, where the options are fight, flight, or freeze. Once it's down there, if it doesn't pertain to fight, flight, or freeze, the info is basically lost. (p.16)

Explaining to students that their brain may go into fight, flight or freeze during a lesson can help them to get out of the situation. For example, students may experience that during a lesson they panic because they perceive the work as difficult and may, as a result, freeze (stare forward, without taking anything in). During flight, students may feel the need to leave the room or doodle to escape the situation and in the experience of fight, students may cause a disturbance or hurt others to help them escape their perceived bad situation. When children understand or catch themselves behaving this way or make the connection, they have the power to use strategies to change their thinking patterns.

Unit two teaches students about sharpening their senses as they learn. They learn about mindful seeing, listening, tasting, smelling and moving. In the article, "Golden Opportunity", Dr. Willis explains that, "students become more in-tune with their surroundings by learning mindfulness exercises, such as focusing all their attention a particular taste, scent, or sound, and breathing exercises (Gora, 2010).

Unit three focuses on attitude. Students are provided lessons and are involved in discussions around perspective taking, optimism and the appreciation of happiness and how it relates to their learning. Adele Diamond, neuroscientist, founder of developmental cognitive neuroscience and one of MindUp's program researchers, expresses that happy children with little stress learn better (Blair, Clancy and Diamond, 2008). Furthermore in the article "Biological Processes in Prevention and Intervention: The Promotion of Self-Regulation as a Means of

Preventing School Failure,” Adele Diamond shares, “In acquiring the capacity for self-regulated learning, social emotional skills that foster the relationship and executive function skills that promote self-regulation are quite literally foundational for learning (Blair & Diamond, 2008 p. 908). In the article, “The Evidence Base for Improving School Outcomes by Addressing the Whole Child and by Addressing Skills and Attitudes, Not Just Content,” Adele Diamond conveys the importance of providing students warm caring role models who will “give children boundless opportunities to practice kindness and to experience for themselves how happy making someone else happy makes them (Diamond, 2010 p. 789).

Unit four completes and compliments the program with the teaching of mindful action. Students learn the importance of expressing gratitude, the joy of performing acts of kindness and transferring mindful action to the world. By looking at learning through big world ideas, themes, or subjects we allow our students to bring their background knowledge to the learning process. As Parker Palmer openly brings forth in his article Teaching and Learning in Community:

Subject-centered education does not ignore students. Instead it honors one of the most vital needs our students have: to be introduced to a world larger than their own experiences and egos, a world that expands their personal boundaries and enlarges their sense of community (Palmer, 1997 p. 6).

There is so much to learn and share in this world. As teachers, students and people we need to be able to do this with joy in our hearts and minds, leaving behind any fears and anxieties that only paralyze our learning and growth as individuals as well as human beings.

According to Katz in her book Teaching to Diversity, she states, “As children develop their awareness of and respect for others, they gain perspective, develop social skills, build positive relationships, and work cooperatively with diverse others” (Katz, 2012 p. 32). Furthermore, she

explains how “self awareness and self respect allow children to answer broad spiritual questions with a resounding, “Yes, my life has meaning. Yes, I have gifts that the world wants and needs. Yes, I matter” (p.32). She explains that it is very important for students not only to see the power within themselves but the belief that they are connected to their community and world.

Dr. Kimberly Schonert and Molly Stewart Lawlor, through the University of British Columbia evaluated the MindUp program in a small (n=246) quasi experimental study. Students from grades four through seven were drawn from six MindUp program classrooms and six comparison classrooms. The study looked at the effectiveness of the MindUp program in optimism, self -concept, positive affect and social and emotional functioning in school. The hypothesis that the MindUp program would show positive changes from pretest to posttest in all four domains proved correct. There was significant improvement in teacher rated social and emotional competence (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). Furthermore the data reported through The Hawn Foundation for this study revealed:

**Improved Optimism and Self-Concept:**

- 82% of children reported having a more positive outlook
- 81% of children learned to make themselves happy
- 58% of children tried to help others more often

**Healthy Neuroendocrine Regulation:**

- Measurement of salivary cortisol revealed MindUP children maintained a healthy, regulated diurnal pattern

**Increased Executive Function:**

- Children demonstrated faster reaction times while performing tests such as “Dr. Diamond’s

- “Flanker Fish” trials. This correlates to heightened self-regulatory ability.

**Positive Teacher Response:**

- 100% reported that MindUP positively influenced classroom culture and that students were significantly more attentive.

**Academic Achievement:**

- 15% of students improved their math achievement scores

(Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010); The Hawn Foundation, 2011; p. 1).

The limitations of the study were that the study was performed in a shortened school year from March to June. It would be beneficial for research to extend a one-year framework to ensure or determine whether positive impacts of the program are validated. To date there is no current longitudinal research to support the results of the program and developing longitudinal studies will be important in assessing the long-term impacts of programs such as these.

As an educator reflecting on the Mind Up Program, I am very impressed with the brain research that compliments the curriculum. Programs such as this one need to be well grounded in theory and research. I am looking forward to further longitudinal studies that will determine the effectiveness of the skills taught.

Another study by Orberle, Schonert-Reichl, Lawlor, and Thomson (2011), on 99 grade four and five students, examined the relationship between self-reported dispositional mindfulness and the executive function of inhibitory control. Using a survey that was based on the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS), a computer program to assess inhibition control, and assessment of salivary cortisol levels, the researchers demonstrated the positive contribution that mindfulness teaching can have on cognitive processing. It was noted that self-reported mindfulness significantly improved inhibitory process in early adolescence. At present however,



there is limited evidence as most research has been conducted with an adult population. Further studies would benefit from a larger sample size.

The units in the MindUp program are very well organized, building on foundational and personal skills. Students gain incredible knowledge about themselves; from understanding how their brains work, to making connections about how feeling and emotions affect their bodies, mind and spirit. It is exciting to witness students understand how their thinking can change their actions. Moving from “me to we” is where learning is demonstrated and celebrated, as students move from taking control of themselves to understanding and participating in the richness and diversity of the world around them.

The Mind Up program supports the integration of its material into different subject areas. The Journal, Curriculum, and Literature links allow teachers the flexibility and creativity to take lessons to a deeper level when and if necessary. Teachers may decide to use various books to demonstrate understanding through various perspectives. Using their creativity, teachers are able to add strategies that support student learning in specific areas. The Core Practice is, in my mind, the essential part of the Mind Up curriculum. It is astounding to witness students who practice controlled breathing become more self-managed, confident and mindful. In my practice, I have noticed that practicing the Core Practice deep breathing strategy before a test or important lesson enables a student’s ability to show their learning in different ways. It is evident that the calming of the brain allows brain functions to work without restraint. Informing and educating parents about the program will help to alleviate any parental concerns that meditation will bring religion back into schools. As an educator, I have certainly helped parents to see the incredible benefits of deep breathing in various situations.

## Second Step Program

The Second Step program is a universal prevention social emotional program that focuses on reducing impulsivity, impulse control and problem solving, as well as anger management. Founded by the Committee for Children (CFC) in Washington during the late 1970s, this program contains curriculum for students from kindergarten to grade eight. In the article, “Second Step: Preventing Aggression by Promoting Social Competence,” the authors describe the program as based on sound research. They state:

The program provides (a) classroom lessons to teach core competencies and behavior skills, (b) teacher and staff training to encourage student generalization of skills and create consistency throughout the school, (c) follow-up and preparation of on-site trainers to sustain ongoing implementation, and (d) a family component to encourage complementary home practices. Although more work in the area of program evaluation is needed, studies reviewed in this article suggest Second Step can effectively decrease physical aggression, change attitudes that support aggression, and increase sociable interaction between students (Frey, Hirschstein, & Guzzo, 1997 p. 111).

The CFC (2015) has created a new Second Step program for kindergarten students through grade five. The program consists of units that are easily integrated into daily curriculum. The scope and sequence are very teacher friendly and although the units are similar throughout the grades, additional teaching of specific skills is added with the maturity of the students. Teachers introduce units using cards that provide specific information to the theme. Classroom posters are provided to put up in the classroom that help students by providing information and steps on how to calm themselves, how to solve problems and quick strategies to use when really angry. Teachers have access to lesson videos to support story sections of lessons, and puppets are used

with the younger students (Impulsive Puppy, and Sow Down Snail) to help them learn and practice impulse control. Family sessions are also part of the program and sessions led by facilitators introduce the program through the use of videos and discussion groups. Family guide videos are also available to parents that are unable to attend the sessions. The videos provide a general overview of the Second Step program.

The four main units are:

**Unit 1 – Skills for learning** – where students learn all about listening, focusing their attention, Following directions, self-talk for learning and being assertive.

**Unit 2 – Empathy** – where students identify and learn more about feelings, feeling confident, similarities and differences, showing compassion and predicting feelings.

**Unit 3 – Emotional Management** – Looks at identifying own feelings, calming down anger, managing worry and embarrassment as well as managing anxious feelings.

**Unit 4 – Problem Solving** – Examines steps in solving problems, fair ways to play, inviting others to join in and handling name calling. Brain builder games are also integrated into the program and throughout the units CFC (2011).

The BC Performance Standards in the area of Social Responsibility describe the standards and expectations of students in four specific areas. The areas include: (a) Contributing to the classroom and school community, (b) Solving problems in peaceful ways, (c) Valuing diversity and (d) defending human rights as well as Exercising democratic rights and responsibilities. The quick scales allow teachers to assess student development at any time in the year. Assessing students in October, March and June not only allows teachers to see a clear picture of growth but also informs instruction. The four main units in the Second Step program fall nicely into place with the social responsibility standards. The skills can be directly taught as well as integrated into

daily curriculum in the elementary grades.

A qualitative 17 week study involving 455 students in grades four through five in a small urban school district was conducted to explore the effectiveness of the Second Step program (Edwards, Hunt, Meyers, Grogg, & Jarrett, 2005). Lessons were taught by school counselors or trained staff persons from the university research project. There were 24 participating teachers who rated the children's social abilities and disruptive behavior using subscales from the Behavior Assessment Systems for Children (BASC) (Reynolds and Kamphaus, 1992). Compared to the control group, students who had been trained in the program increased in following of directions as well as social competence. Teacher interview data indicated that students benefited most from role plays, anger management lessons, problem solving steps and learning to read body language (Edwards et al., 2005). Furthermore student report cards demonstrated gains in the areas of social growth development. Data from student interviews indicated that 98% of students felt strongly that other students should also learn the Second Step program as the lessons were very helpful in teaching students how to solve problems in peaceful ways and how to avoid being bullied (Edwards et al., 2005). Further longitudinal research would benefit stronger conclusions for this social emotional learning program.

In the article, "Improving Student Social Skills Through Cooperative Learning and the Second Step Violence Prevention Curriculum," Kohn includes that "school is a logical place to actively teach and practice social skills because children are in regular contact with their peers in a learning environment (Kohn, as quoted by Pirello, 1994, p. 19). Pirello's nine month qualitative study of fourth grade students in an urban school, evaluated students' social skills through cooperative learning strategies as well as the Second Step program. Students were assessed through social skills questionnaires, informal class assessments and journal entries. The

author concluded that after the SEL program, students became more competent in using appropriate social skills and demonstrated growth in cooperative learning groups. The research confirmed the importance of integrating social emotional competencies throughout the curriculum and at all grade levels. As a result, Pirello stands behind Kohn's belief that social skills must not be taught in isolation, but rather integrated into the curriculum (Pirello, 1994).

In the article, "Preventing Aggression by Promoting Social Competence" (Frey, Hirschstein, & Guzzo, 2000), the authors discuss how vital a Principal's role is in implementing and guaranteeing long term commitment for social emotional programs such as Second Step. The authors give the program credit for meeting the needs of all students including those needing more intensive behavior interventions. They claim that students with behavior concerns are able to connect to peers who are looked up to as role models, teaching them both the language and strategies to solve problems peacefully.

As an educator, my experience with the Second Step program has been successful. Co-teaching the lessons with the school counselor in a grade two classroom created an opportunities for better classroom and student observations. Through our observational data, we determined that students not only gained pro-social behaviors but their attitudes and behavior around special needs students improved significantly. My recommendations would be to implement this program school wide. This program supports anti-bullying prevention and will enable all classroom teachers to focus on common language and strategies that would be reinforced throughout all aspects of a school day. The free live webinars and online training sessions are an excellent resource to teachers and parents as the program supports parental involvement with home lessons. I would also highly recommend that youth community services support the program as it supports making good choices around peer pressure, bullying and substance abuse

for older students.

### **Friends For Life Program**

The FRIENDS program developed by Paula Barret includes four small-scale social emotional learning programs that focus on anxiety and depression prevention. The programs help students learn socio-emotional skills required for resilience during one's lifetime. The programs overlap in content but differ in the way they are presented to varying age groups. The four programs are: Fun Friends ages 4-7, Friends For Life ages 8-11, My Friends Youth ages 12-15 and Adult Resilience For Life for ages 16 years and over. All the programs align with the BC Ministry of Education initiatives addressing prescribed learning outcomes in the Health & Career education K-7 curriculum (BC Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2010a).

The programs are sponsored by the Ministry of Children and Family development, and teacher training and materials are free of charge for both teachers and counselors. The FORCE Society for Kid's Mental Health provides parent programs both online and through community workshops ((BC Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2010a) ). The FRIENDS program is in 60 school districts, has trained six thousand teachers and one thousand parents (BC Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2010b). Furthermore, the FRIENDS program has been supporting a ten- year plan to address mental health and substance use in British Columbia. As stated in the article, "Healthy Minds, Healthy People": "Positive mental health is determined by a combination of factors—from an individual's ability to enjoy life and deal with life's challenges, to experiencing emotional well-being and social connections in a safe, equitable environment (BC Ministry of Health, 2010).

The programs consist of ten sessions with two supplementary exercises. The lessons are between

60 and 75 minutes long. According to the *FRIENDS for Life: Group Leaders' Manual for Children* (Barrett, 2004), skills are taught to help students:

- Cope with difficult and/or anxiety-provoking situations
- Normalize the emotional state of anxiety
- Build emotional resilience and problem-solving abilities
- Encourage peer learning and build peer support networks
- Promote self-confidence in dealing with difficult or anxiety-provoking situations
- Effectively prevent anxiety and depression in children and youth. (p. 10)

Furthermore, the program uses the acronym FRIENDS to help students practice skills around F – feelings, R – relaxation, I – I can try, E – encourage, N –nurture, D – Don't forget, S- Stay happy. There are also a number of FRIENDS iPad apps that allow younger students to interact with characters to learn these skills.

A Canadian controlled study looking at replicating past findings that showed the effectiveness of the FRIENDS for life program demonstrated that all children in two Grade 4 classrooms in an urban elementary school in western Canada reported reduced levels of anxiety regardless of receiving the program or being part of the control group. Although a major limitation of this study was the small sample size (N=52), a qualitative question that was posed to students proved very intriguing. When asked what they thought was the most helpful thing they learned in the FRIENDS program,

Forty-four percent of students responded that learning how to control their inner thoughts was most helpful while twenty-eight percent of students felt exploring coping step plans and learning to problem-solve was best. Sixteen percent felt learning about their feelings and how to react to them was most helpful while twelve percent felt learning relaxation

techniques was best (Rose, Miller, & Martinex, 2009, p. 404).

Furthermore, eighty three percent of parents felt that programs such as FRIENDS for life should be included in schools.

As an educator, I believe that having parents as partners in student learning and development is of primary importance. The Friends program supports this concept and it is very apparent that parent are very happy with the program. As society and its structures are changing, I believe that parents are looking to the schools to support the social emotional development of their children. Research has demonstrated that when parents and teachers work together, everyone benefits. I would certainly like to see researchers of this program switch to a different methodology to investigate a research question around a strong home-school partnership promoting positive attitudes, self-esteem building and solving problems in peaceful ways.

### **Zones of Regulation and the Incredible Five Point Scale**

The Zones of Regulation and the Incredible Five Point Scale are also two social emotional programs that allow students to gain an excellent understanding of their emotions and assist them in developing social, emotional and sensory regulation. Both programs help students recognize different levels of stress and anxiety and students are taught strategies to reach a specific target. The Incredible 5 point Scale (Buron & Curtis 2003) uses a scale to teach students about the severity of their emotional states and then teaches students how to calm or regulate themselves. This program works well with individual students as well as with a whole class. If working with an individual student who has explosive behaviors in class, the teacher would fill out a frustration scale that would help the student determine what number they are at (level 1 being a little frustrated – 2 frustrated – 3 extremely frustrated – 4 mad, angry, 5 – out of control /



devastated. The teacher would help the student work up the rating scale and for each of the numbers would ask the student for examples of what each number might feel like, what might trigger the feeling and in the last column how he would react when he is at that number. The teacher would then brainstorm ideas or strategies with the child that would help them cope at each of the levels. For example, when at a 1 some calming strategies may be: taking 3 deep breaths, calming affirmations (“I can handle this”), seeking help from an adult. Strategies for a level 2 might be: getting a drink of water, stretching. Strategies for a level 3 might look like: taking a walk, putting on headphones and listening to music in a quiet space or using a fidget toy. Strategies for levels 4 and 5 might look like: drawing, deep breathing, stopping and walking away, drinking cold water.

The Zones of regulation text (Kuypers, 2011) originally written as a capstone, uses a cognitive behavior approach as students use reasonable and rational thoughts to change the way they think and feel about situations that they perceive as difficult. Students are able to access tools that allow them to gain skills in controlling their impulses. Students learn new ways of reacting to difficult emotions by using strategies that support various colored zones. Students learn to recognize when they are in the different zones. Each zone is represented by a color and each zone explains how people are feeling (Kuypers 2011).

The Blue Zone is used to describe low states of alertness, such as when one feels sad, tired, sick, or bored. This is when one’s body and/ or brain is moving slowly or sluggishly.

The Green Zone is used to describe a regulated state of alertness. A person may be described as calm, happy, focused, or content when in the Green Zone. This is the zone students generally need to be in for schoolwork and for being social. Being in the Green Zone shows control.

The Yellow Zone is also used to describe a heightened state of alertness; however, a person has some control when in the Yellow Zone. A person may be experiencing stress, frustration, anxiety, excitement, silliness, nervousness, confusion, and many more slightly elevated emotions and states when in the Yellow Zone (such as wiggly, squirmy, or sensory seeking). The Yellow Zone is starting to lose some control.

The Red Zone is used to describe extremely heightened states of alertness or very intense feelings. A person may be experiencing anger, rage, explosive behavior, panic, or terror when in the Red Zone. Being in the Red Zone can best be explained by not being in control of one's body. (Kuypers, 2011 p. 9)

Creating classroom posters of the different colored zones that look like traffic signs are perfect references for students that are visual learners. Complimenting the signs, teachers can put up charts that describe tools/strategies that students can use to get to the controlled Green Zone. A common strategy in all the SEL programs is the deep belly breathing, which is referred to as figure eight breathing in the Zones curriculum. Students learn to breathe in and breathe out as they create a figure eight with their fingers.

As an educator, I have experienced a lot of success teaching the Zones of Regulation both in the classroom, with my special needs students and school wide. The program allows for common language and therefore enables teachers to understand at a deeper level for example, if a child expresses that they are feeling in a blue zone. As educators we must be very conscious of the cultural significance of colors and establish at the very introduction of the program that colors are never bad but rather they are just helping us to express to ourselves, and others how we are feeling; red and yellow are often used in conjunction with stopping or caution messages. Unfortunately the program is lacking the research needed to support its benefits. I believe that

qualitative studies from teachers, students and parents are desperately needed to examine the benefits of this social emotional learning program.

## **SUMMARY**

Social emotional learning programs certainly have a place in today's schools. It is very evident in looking at the research that social emotional learning programs enable students to increase their social responsibility while fostering meta-cognition making students more self-aware. Fostering students' social emotional skills ensures student success in life. Through these programs, students learn a great deal about themselves, what their triggers are, the body-brain connection to their feelings and thoughts and how to become reflective human beings. Learning to understand and calm their feelings and emotions puts students in the driver's seat. Learning with and from other students who become excellent role models, supports the idea that schools are the perfect place to implement social emotional learning programs. As lessons are easily integrated into all subject areas SEL programs are relatively easy for teachers to implement. Watching classrooms and school climates transform from institutions to family like settings is inspiring and rewarding. Creating an inclusive classroom community means students feel a sense of belonging, feel valued and understood. Students thrive in a setting where they feel accepted by both adults and peers. These feelings contribute to students' social emotional well-being, which research has demonstrated improves their academic performance.

Unfortunately, many schools are implementing social emotional programs that lack research into their effectiveness. The importance of SEL for successful academic learning could be further strengthened through studies that demonstrate their effectiveness as well as how they will be successfully implementation into curriculum.

## CHAPTER THREE – PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

### SUMMARY

Brain research has certainly provided me with another lens into social emotional learning. Neuroscientist Richard Davidson’s research has demonstrated that emotional learning changes the brain as our senses are connected to our ability to remember things (Davidson, 2008). My idea of a good social emotional program would support the physical, emotional and cognitive domains.

Understanding the damaging affects that cortisol and stress hormones have on brain function convinces me that any social emotional learning program should start with the physical body. Teaching students strategies to calm their brains is essential. In many situations, students act out because they don’t know how to make better choices. Teaching students that they have control over what they think and how they feel is very empowering. Dr. Rudolph Tanzi’s research on unleashing the explosive power of your brain explains how being conscious of your thoughts and feelings allows more control over them (Buczynski & Tanzi, 2013). Furthermore Dr. Tanzi states, “The main concept is that you are not your brain. You can be conscious of feelings and thoughts that your brain is bringing you, and rather than identifying with them, we can observe them” (p. 8). Teaching students about feelings and emotions allows them to express themselves using words rather than through possible harmful behaviors. Social emotional learning programs that allow students the opportunities to role play the management of emotions provide lifelong strategies. When students have a better insight into their own states, they can then use the tools we provide them to self regulate and make better choices as well as learn responsible behavior by being mindful of what they can and should control in their life. Students

gain the essential tools that allow them to focus and pay attention while developing insightful methods of reflecting and responding. Being present and aware of themselves and their surroundings allows students to take in new information, and make connections in their learning.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Social emotional programs can easily be integrated into any classroom and transition into any subject area. As I pointed out in my literature review, the new BC education plan that encourages inquiry learning and big ideas allows teachers to easily integrate mindful strategies and activities into the curriculum. The integration of the competencies allows teachers to help students look at how often they are demonstrating these skills throughout the different curriculum areas. Teachers are able to help students focus on certain areas as well as celebrate their strengths in others. It is through the teaching of perspective taking that many students will be able to make connections and see relationships between what they are learning and how it applies to other facets of their lives. Self-reflection, journaling and group perspective taking sessions will help to bring and solidify awareness. Embedding the competencies into all areas will be key and teachers will have to find ways to naturally and appropriately integrate them.

As I reflect on the research and examples of social emotional learning programs, I feel confident that social emotional programs can be tailor-made by classroom teachers for their individual classrooms and students. I also understand from the research, that social emotional programs that include the whole school create a universal language that allows for a deeper understanding and commitment.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

As a classroom teacher, I would start with class meetings. Class meetings, when approached in a warm caring, non- threatening way, create a family structure that enables students to feel supported and cared about. Students are able to take risks in their learning and social emotional problem solving. Teachers are able to carefully protect students if necessary by laying ground rules that call for anonymity when problem solving. Many times the problem discussed serves more than just one student and others learn through peaceful problems solving strategies and perspective taking. I believe that class meetings should take place in a circle where there is no beginning or end. Making reference to this style of sharing will allow students to feel part of the wholeness.

In supporting the physical domain, I would teach the students the core practice that I learned in the Mind Up curriculum. I would teach the importance of breathing and discuss the benefits to the body and brain. I would have the students take part in this core practice first thing in the morning, after recess and after lunch allowing students to feel the calming effects after periods of high energy. During the day, I would bring in body breaks / sensory breaks which might include stretching and body awareness activities. Having students experience nature and awareness of their senses might include a walk in a nearby forest or neighborhood. I would certainly teach my class that we are all individuals who need breaks at different times and I would encourage and demonstrate appropriate ways for individual students to meet their needs while being mindful. I would create a tool- box / chart – ideas for students to refer to and use. With special education students, I would include the educational assistant and encourage that he or she support the specific student but also include others in the class when taking a sensory break. Having students be aware of their bodies and the connection to their emotions is key.

As a support teacher, I work closely with autistic students and understand their limits in Theory of Mind, which refers to their inability to perceive how others think and feel. In my 25 years of teaching experience, I have certainly learned that it is very important when integrating an autistic student that their classmates understand their challenges. This knowledge creates a better understanding and provides teachers a perfect introduction to the importance of listening to our emotions, the emotions of others as well as understanding empathy. Second Step, Mind Up as well as the FRIENDS for life programs all provide lessons that teachers can pick and choose from; helping students understand perspective taking, as well as learn ways to reduce stress, observe their thoughts and feelings and use strategies to calm themselves. I would also use the program Zones of Regulation and create charts with the whole class around strategies to calm – or get to the green zone where students are in a calm state of alertness. For specific student needs, I might create an individual five point scale with a particular student that would be specific to him or her. This program creates a real self- awareness of what triggers certain emotions and strategies to get from a 5 (explosive zone) to a 1 (calm point). In order to understand their setting events or triggers, students need to learn the importance of their brain body connection.

The cognitive domain is where students develop critical thinking skills. Role playing situations are the perfect way to help students think on their feet. Here they have to analyze situations, communicate effectively, problem solve as they look at situations from different perspectives. As a reflective and strategic teacher I may create role-plays that mimic problem situations that I have observed. By providing students an opportunity to be directly involved in the role- play or by having them observe by sitting on the outside looking in, a new perspective may be reached. Discussions on how outcomes might have been different or changed will allow

for greater perspective and insight.

District 42's Achievement Contract has a specific section that focuses on student wellness.

It states:

Personal and Social Responsibility:

We value a place where everyone has a sense of belonging. From this sense of belonging comes consideration for self and others. Through personal engagement, all take responsibility for themselves, others and their environment. We support opportunities that develop leadership and citizenship capacity (School District 42, 2014, p. 19).

It would also be my recommendation to support social emotional learning by applying for a JECIC grant that would support the implementation and integration of SEL strategies through collaborative meetings and discussions. Meetings would introduce ways to support and teach executive functioning skills including strategies and environmental modifications. I would then introduce individual SEL programs with information that would help teachers decide on further workshops or teacher training. These meetings would be a perfect way to have teachers share what works for them in their classrooms. It is also the perfect way to work towards implementing an existing or creating a personalized school wide program.

I would also recommend as a culminating activity to have teachers plan a school wide Mindfulness student conference. It could be as simple as having each teacher plan a single half-hour lesson on social emotional learning —possibly a strategy learned during the workshops— and then have students rotate through each classroom. Students would be exposed to many strategies as well as teaching styles. This could be extended to the community by inviting motivational speakers, members from the community and parents.

When people connect with passion, excitement and acceptance an incredible family culture



is created. Creating mindful students is a gift we give the world. Mindful people create peace within and then extend it outward. Teaching students that they have control over their brains and their learning is important. Understanding the various areas of executive functions and knowing that these skills can and will improve with good practice is essential knowledge. Students need to be reminded that they can and will become more mindful with practice.

By explaining what it looks like to be mindless, students get a good idea of the importance of being present in the moment and enjoying the experiences it brings with them. Having students see that teachers experience mindless moments is important, too. I have shared stories about forgetting to unplug a curling iron, or arriving at a destination with little memory of the journey. Students soon understand that mindful strategies require focused attention.

Teachers can help students practice mindful strategies through body awareness and sensory breaks. These physical exercises create immediate attention putting students in the present moment and turning on their brain's focus control. Teachers must focus on external teaching and be confident that with practice students will transfer the learning and cue their own internal strategies. Breathing and working with the breath are strategies that students will automatically begin to use once they are practiced.

Introducing teachers to the social and emotional learning core competencies as researched through CASEL and infusing each competency with mindfulness examples is the perfect way to help teachers understand what is at the heart of understanding the self. The MindUp program does a very good job of integrating the five competencies: self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, responsible decision making and relationship skills into unit lessons.

As an administrator, looking at the needs of individual classrooms and students is always a good starting point. Class profiles and review meetings are always an excellent way to assess a

classroom or a school as a community of learners. Knowing students' unique learning preferences, interests and needs provides foundational information that gives teachers and administrators a good starting point. Integrating a social emotional learning program school wide supports greater learning in that not only is there common language being used and reinforced throughout the school, but the collaboration and potential for co-teaching inspires creativity and innovation. As a leader I would support the implementation of the program by ensuring that all students have common background knowledge. This can be achieved by having the school counselor and support teacher introduce a specifically planned lesson to all classrooms. This not only supports all students, but in many ways could inspire and be the springboard that launches the program successfully.

As a servant leader, I would support the growth of my teachers in this area by providing in-service in the form of committees, Joint Educational Change Implementation (JECIC) grants, or release time to learn and work on collaborative and team teaching lessons and ideas. Creating school vision and trust among the staff would be key to building a good program. Teachers need to have a clear understanding of what needs to be taught and how it will be implemented.

Creating lessons that integrates many SEL programs is a skillful way to meet the needs of teaching styles and content. Having teachers share their background knowledge and experience with specific lessons, could support the creation of a program unique to the needs and strengths of staff and students. As an administrator or leader –facilitator, building the structure and organization of the program and assessing its implementation readiness would be essential.

My recommendation to teachers would be to take the time to be reflective of their own emotional states and then that of their students. By understanding what zone most students are in, teachers are able to adapt not only their teaching, but the physical environment of the

classroom. Applying strategies and having discussions with students at just the right time, will allow for mindful change that creates a world or classroom with more clarity.

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