

**Are Student Support Plans in Middle Schools  
Effective in Addressing Social/Emotional  
Needs in Young Adolescents?**

By

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Effective in Addressing  
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## **Are Current Student Support Plans in Middle School Effective**

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## Introduction

British Columbia Middle Schools are currently experiencing higher numbers of students with social emotional and behavioral needs. Students attending schools in British Columbia are entering or transitioning through the school system with mental health issues such as anxiety, inattention, focus issues, behavioral challenges, leading to high numbers of teacher burnout and lack of commitment to the profession (Collie, Shapka, Perry 2012). Lack of funding and mental health programs is just one piece of the puzzle to answer the question of why a higher number of needs are becoming prevalent in children within schools. British Columbia lags far behind many other provinces in spending on public education. In 2010, the last time Statistics Canada ([www.150.statcan.gc.ca](http://www.150.statcan.gc.ca), 2015) compared per student spending in a consistent way, BC was second from bottom among the ten provinces, spending nearly \$1,000 less per student than the national average (Rozworski, 2018). In 2014/15, the time of the most recent Canada-wide data for total education spending, our province devoted a meagre 2.57% of GDP to public K–12 education, one third less than the 3.66% we set aside in 2001/02, and nearly one percentage point below the national average (Rozworski, 2018). The school environment or community of learners is impacted by the degree to which the British Columbia Ministry of Education increases teacher knowledge and skills (Ruddy & Prusinski, 2012; Spillane 2015). Teacher’s skills and knowledge shape their performance in classrooms and ultimately what and how students learn and what they can achieve. (Ruddy & Prusinski, 2012; Spillane 2015) The other considerations that must be made: are educators aware of how to address the social/emotional needs of students in Middle Schools? Do educators feel that they have enough training and expertise to address the

challenges that they face in classrooms every day? What is the impact on families and communities when student needs are not addressed? Without consideration of these key questions, educators will find themselves burning out at high rates losing confidence in their ability to educate children in regard to 21<sup>st</sup> century learning and goals, effectively address the rising challenge of behaviors in the classroom, and understanding supports that are needed for children with social/emotional challenges. (Reed, 2016) Furthermore, when children do not feel a secure sense of attachment to their caregiver or parents, they will have a higher need for social and emotional supports in school in order to be successful (Neufeld, 2012).

### **Conceptual Framework:**

To increase teacher knowledge and skills in the area of children's educational needs, we must first look at the area of social/emotional needs of children before anything else. Public perception is that investing time into fostering social and emotional skills in the classroom will unnecessarily take time away from what is perceived to be the main goal of schooling-academic competence. (Schonert-Reichl, 2014) This opinion has been widely criticized by researchers in the field of education and child development (Schonert-Reichl, 2014), Instead, based on growing evidence that students' social emotional competencies and academic success are interrelated, researchers have urged that monitoring and ultimately fostering positive social and emotional development may be the key to enhancing academic growth. (Schonert-Reichl, 2014) Some programs used in schools such as the Mind Up program, helps students to regulate their breathing, heart rate, and bring their mind to a calm and peaceful state so that they can be ready to learn. (Maloney, Lawlor, Schonert-Reichl, Warhead, 2016) Although the Mind Up program is great to implement as a preventative measure to mental health challenges as children grow, the overall structure of mental health programming in schools needs to be looked at through a bigger lens. Furthermore, research by the

Canadian Mental Health Association reports that 10-20% of Canadian youth are affected by a mental illness or disorder and 3.2 million 12-19 year olds in Canada are at risk for developing depression. (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2014) Suicide is among the leading causes of death in 15-24 year old Canadians. Alarmingly, only 1 out of 5 children who need mental health services in Canada, receives them. (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2014) Longitudinal research (Hawkins, Kosterman, Catalano, Hill, & Abbott, 2005) has demonstrated that the impact of a well-designed and executed, school-based elementary SEL program was evident 12 to 15 years later. Those who had participated in the program, now young adults, showed higher educational attainment, better employment, and better mental health (Hymel, Low, Starosta, et al., 2017).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Unfortunately, not all schools are effectively addressing the needs of students in the area of social and emotional learning. It is apparent when looking at research and data, that in many schools throughout North America, children's needs are not fully being met (Buchanan, Record-Lemon, 2017). Trauma informed practice amongst educators is just beginning to break ground in very few school districts within British Columbia, (as is evident by the very recent dating of trauma informed practice guides on district websites), however, trauma is not a brand new concept, humans from the beginning of time have dealt with some form of trauma in their life such as loss or sexual abuse (Buchanan, Record-Lemon, 2017). Previous research has indicated that schools play an important role in supporting students who have experienced trauma, and some authors concur that there is a need for a more formalized system of trauma-informed practices (TIPs) in schools (Record-Lemon+Buchanan 2017). However, formalized TIPs (trauma informed practices) are not yet widespread in Canadian schools and the current Canadian

empirical literature pertaining to TIPs is limited. Furthermore, statistics indicate that 76.1% of Canadians will experience at least one traumatic event in their lifetime (Record-Lemon+Buchanan, 2017).

Psychological trauma is defined as experiences and reactions to experiences that overwhelm an individual's capacity to cope. Childhood traumatic experiences such as maltreatment, family and community violence, natural disasters, illnesses, and loss can have pervasive psychological, physical, and developmental impacts (Record-Lemon+Buchanan, 2017). Young adolescents attending middle school typically lack the strategies to manage stress on their own (Castillo, 2019). The problem does not solely fall on lack of training for special education teachers, but on the number of teachers currently in classrooms throughout British Columbia to meet the needs of special education students: In the year 2000, 4,068 special education teachers were working in schools, in the year 2018, that number dropped to 3,646 (British Columbia Teacher's Federation, 2019). The drop in numbers means vacant teaching positions and higher numbers of students on the caseloads of existing special education teachers, from an average of 16.3 students per caseload in 2000 to 17.1 students in 2018 (BCTF, 2019).

In Canada, the influx of immigrant and refugee children from war-torn countries and the current rate of natural disasters highlight that it is time to examine our preparation within schools to address childhood traumatic events. However, there is a scarcity of empirical knowledge regarding effective trauma-informed practices (TIPs) with children in Canadian schools (Record-Lemon, Buchanan, 2017). Childhood trauma encompasses a range of experiences and/or stressors that a child may experience throughout their developmental years. Trauma can involve direct experience of traumatic events or victimization; however, it can also be experienced by witnessing a traumatic event or by learning about trauma happening to another person (a phenomenon known as vicarious or secondary traumatic stress), particularly if a caregiver and/or important attachment figure is involved (Keats & Buchanan, 2013; Mash & Barkley,

2014). Mental health is also another area that needs a lot of work and development, in fact, in 2012, the Mental Health Commission of Canada identified child and youth mental health as a priority for the transformation of mental health systems in Canada. To this end, comprehensive efforts to promote positive social and emotional development in schools and to foster safe and caring school environments are urgently needed (Hymel, Low, Starosta, Gill, Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Although teachers do not have the training needed to diagnose or treat mental disorders, as adults working on the front lines, they play a critical role in identifying youth at potential risk for mental health difficulties. To provide effective monitoring, however, mental health literacy must become a focus in teacher training and professional development. (Kutcher, 2015)

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this paper is to look at whether current student support plans in British Columbia middle schools are addressing the social/emotional needs of students. Adequate funding, teacher training, and social emotional learning in children are a few key factors as to whether needs of students are being met. These key ideas will be discussed in depth in this paper through a literature review of recent research and findings of various authors in regard to 21st century education in British Columbia.

### **Thesis Statement/Research Question**

Are Current 21<sup>st</sup> century student support plans in middle schools within British Columbia addressing the Social/Emotional needs of students?

## Conceptual Analysis

### Definition of Terms:

*Anxiety* (noun) a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease, typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome.

*Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder* (noun) any of a range of behavioral disorders occurring primarily in children, including such symptoms as poor concentration, hyperactivity, and impulsivity

*Behavior* (noun) The way in which one acts or conduct oneself, especially toward others.

*Caseload* (noun) the amount of work (in terms of number of cases) with which a doctor, lawyer, or social worker is concerned at one time.

*Complexities* (noun) the state of being formed of many parts; the state of being difficult to understand the increasing complexity of modern telecommunication systems I was astonished by the size and complexity of the problem

*Depression* (noun) feelings of severe despondency and dejection.

*Empirical* (adjective) based on, concerned with, or verifiable by observation or experience rather than theory or pure logic

*GDP (Gross Domestic Product)* (Noun) the total value of goods produced and services provided in a country during one year

*Inclusion* (noun) the action or state of including or of being included within a group or structure

*Longitudinal* (noun) (of research or data) involving information about an individual or group gathered over a long period of time

*Maltreatment* (noun) cruel or violent treatment of a person or animal; mistreatment

*Mental-Health* (noun) a person's condition with regard to their psychological and emotional well-being

*Self-advocacy* (noun) the action of representing oneself or one's views or interests

*Social/Emotional* (noun) Social emotions are emotions that depend upon the thoughts, feelings or actions of other people, "as experienced, recalled, anticipated or imagined at first hand". Examples are embarrassment, guilt, shame, jealousy, envy, elevation, empathy, and pride

*Socioeconomics* (adjective) is the social science that studies how economic activity affects and is shaped by social processes. In general it analyzes how societies progress, stagnate, or regress because of their local or regional economy, or the global economy. Societies are divided into 3 groups: social, cultural and economic

*Trauma* (noun) a deeply distressing or disturbing experience

*Trauma-Informed Practice* (adjective) is a strengths-based framework grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma, that emphasises physical, psychological, and emotional safety for everyone, and that creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment

*Vicarious* (adjective) experienced in the imagination through the feelings or actions of another person

*Young Adolescent* (noun) the period following the onset of puberty during which a young person develops from a child into an adult.

## **Trauma Informed Practice of Educators to Address Social/Emotional Needs in Young Adolescents**

There may be times as educators when we have students in our classrooms who may have suffered some form of trauma. Trauma informed care can help educators address the social and emotional needs of young adolescents within their schools. Trauma is an area where research is currently (2020) growing and some school districts in British Columbia are bringing Trauma Informed Practice sessions and information to educators so that they can be well informed on trauma and how to address the needs of students in classrooms through social/emotional approaches. In regard to children who experience trauma and those involved in working with a child who has had a traumatic experience, it is important to consider who are the key stakeholders in a child's education and well-being and what is their role in a child's educational journey to success? Having a warm, healthy relationship with an adult can be healing for children who have experienced trauma. (O'Neill, 2018) These relationships provide safety

and grounding. Fostering these types of relationships in the classroom can create safety for all students. By connecting with students in a compassionate and understanding way, teachers can plant the seed for strong relationships to form. These relationships are integral in providing the safety children need in order to learn and grow at school (O'Neill, 2018). It is also important that as educators we are aware of how to approach situations where students who have suffered trauma are misbehaving: discipline may bring up many difficult and intense emotions for children who have experienced trauma, and these children may react to discipline in a variety of ways. In order to set boundaries and maintain expectations, we need to use discipline as a way of showing children what type of behaviours are safe to express while in school, while also giving them the opportunity to try to learn new behaviours (O'Neill, 2018). It may be of value to really look through the surface of a child's misbehavior to understand the connections between what a child needs and what they are trying to communicate through their emotions (O'Neill, 2018). Maslow's hierarchy demonstrates that basic needs must be met before children are able to focus on learning. A parent's first job is to ensure that their child has their basic physiological human needs met: food, shelter, clothing, security, and safety (Maslow, 2018). A value based approach for supporting students with complex mental health needs, wraparound originated as a grass-roots practice, as mental health and other practitioners struggled to provide realistic options for

youth with serious emotional/behavioural disorders who had traditionally been placed in highly restrictive settings with limited success (Eber, Breen, London,& Tasha, 2008)

One of the reasons that there are many people who are resisting refugees is because they don't understand their behavior; they haven't tried to seek the information and are therefore unaware, which can be dangerous as assumptions can be made in regard to certain actions or behavior of children with trauma (Campbell, 2010). Furthermore, transformative learning is learning that transforms problematic frames of reference-sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mind-sets)-to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change (Campbell, 2010). Such frames of reference are better than others because they are more likely to generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more time true or justified to guide action (Campbell, 2010). Furthermore, without high quality support in an early childhood class, these students' struggles will intensify as they get older. Without knowledge or training in the area of childhood trauma, educators tend to misinterpret emotional and behavioral dysregulation, and consequently, these children are being suspended or expelled, even in the early grades, from the very environment they need for success (Haas, 2018). One of the key roles of a leader in a school is to seek new information and bring opportunities to staff to discuss, learn, and grow from, but to also be present along with staff learning and discussing implementation of new approaches and ideas (Senge, 2013). Team learning is vital because teams, not individuals, are the fundamental learning unit in modern organizations. This is where the rubber meets the road; unless teams can learn, the organization cannot learn (Senge, 2013). Educators would also need to be mindful of helping the child make strong and meaningful connections with other children and to feel that the school is a safe place that they belong to and enjoy being a part of. The support plan would be a common system approach to ensuring that the school team is on board with the plan, that they have the

information that they need, and that the plan is revisited at various times throughout the year to look at what is working and what is not (Senge, 2013). Another key question is how data and information is gathered on students who have suffered trauma but have not shared that information with a trusted adult at home or in the school in order for appropriate supports to be put into place. The Middle Years Development Instrument, developed in British Columbia, is a self-report questionnaire completed by children in Grade 4 and Grade 7 ([www.earlylearning.ubc.ca](http://www.earlylearning.ubc.ca), 2019). It asks them how they think and feel about their experiences both inside and outside of school. Both the Grade 4 questionnaire and the Grade 7 questionnaire include questions related to the five areas of development (physical health and well-being, connectedness, social/emotional development, school experiences, and use of after school time) that are strongly linked to well-being, health and academic achievement. ([www.earlylearning.ubc.ca](http://www.earlylearning.ubc.ca), 2019) The purpose of the MDI instrument is in understanding how populations of children are doing allows us to make informed decisions about investments in new or adapted programs and in broad policies that support children and families, unlike any other tool, the MDI produces data that can be reported and mapped at a neighbourhood level and then made public. This allows us to see variations in children's well-being across time and geographies ([www.earlylearning.ubc.ca](http://www.earlylearning.ubc.ca), 2019). Schools and communities are able to view their own MDI data in the context of other neighbourhoods and school districts in British Columbia and so get a better sense of strengths and weaknesses. The results which are released publicly allow communities, schools, and governments to inform their work and practice in education ([www.earlylearning.ubc.ca](http://www.earlylearning.ubc.ca), 2019). Traumatic events can have a negative impact on the school experience for any student, at any level from any background (Johnson, Magan, Ramos, Zoolkoski, 2019). Young people not only bring their experiences of trauma into the school system, they can also experience events at school that can result in trauma (Johnson, Magan, Ramos, Zoolkoski, 2019)

Focusing on students' SEL can provide educators with the necessary tools to respond to trauma (Johnson, Magan, Ramos, Zoolkoski, 2019). The British Columbia Adolescent Health Survey is another instrument used to measure health and well-being of young adolescents aged 12-19 attending middle and secondary schools in the province (McCreary Centre Society, 2020). Of note is that in the 2020 published results of the survey, across BC there was a decline in the percentages of male and female students who reported good or excellent mental health. Furthermore, the report found that there were increases in local students who reported having anxiety disorder/panic attacks. (McCreary Centre Society, 2020). 52% of students who self-harmed reported "to calm myself down" as the reason and 61% did not seek help as they did not want their parents to know what was happening. The final question of the report asked students if there were topics which affected their health that they wanted to learn more about: students reported that they wanted more information about depression, anxiety, feelings of sadness, sex education, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (McCreary Centre Society, 2020). Clearly, young adolescents want to learn more about conditions or challenges that they are facing to understand how they are feeling and how to address those feelings/conditions. Schools have a duty to provide students the resources that they need to learn about areas of interest. The report claims to be intended for a community audience, the key question that arises is, how will community members use the report to address the social and emotional needs and concerns of young adolescents in middle schools in British Columbia?

### **Focus and Attention in relation to Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and SEL**

Along with trauma informed practice, another current challenge in the area of education; in regard to social and emotional learning, is focus and attention. Children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder are at significant risk for experiencing failure in school. ADHD is a neurodevelopmental disorder

characterized by a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity and impulsivity that interferes with daily functioning and life's achievements (Goodman, 2015). Classroom teachers report that high numbers of school aged children are unable to focus for a large length of time in the classroom environment and have high levels of energy with little to no outlet available to them. Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder are misunderstood and not recognized as having high needs and it is clear that for the vast majority of children with ADHD to be successful in the classroom setting, teachers must be willing to provide individualized support and strategies such as adapting instruction, modifying tasks, using different materials, and making changes to classroom structure (McKinley, Stormont, 2008). Perhaps the key reason that there is a lack of understanding of children with ADHD is that many people still do not believe that ADHD is real (Goodman, 2015). They see it as an "American disorder" resulting from our hyper-fast lifestyle, or even worse: as a consequence of bad parenting (Goodman, 2015). This could not be further from the truth. ADHD is recognized as a valid medical disorder by leading organizations around the world, including the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC.gov, 2019) and the World Health Organization (WHO.int, 1993, Goodman, 2015). Furthermore, thirty years of imaging shows that there are multiple differences in the ADHD brain versus the normal brain. (Goodman, 2015) Brain scans reveal dissimilarities in the size of brain areas, the activation of neuron circuits, and the density of dopamine receptors in deep brain locations. (Goodman, 2015) In addition, according to the Centre for ADHD Awareness Canada: the Canadian government has not documented the obligation of schools to provide students with ADHD the right to an equal educational opportunity, this lack of formal recognition of ADHD as a significant learning risk has allowed the development of the British Columbia Ministry of Education policies and school board policies to create a situation of inequity for students with ADHD. (Centre for ADHD Awareness Canada, 2017) One

of the ways to support educators working in middle schools in British Columbia in the area of building and strengthening their understanding of ADHD in children is informative education and training (Fabiano, Pelham, Evans, Manos et al., 2013). Many teachers also report that they have children in their classrooms that exhibit moderate levels of inattentiveness or hyperactivity, but who do not have a diagnosis of ADHD (Fabiano et al., 2013). In support of this argument, teachers have consistently reported that behaviors such as “lack of concentration” “talking out of turn” and “idleness or slowness” occur frequently in their classrooms (Fabiano et al., 2013). Students with ADHD and/or high levels of inattention struggle frequently with many tasks thought to involve executive functions including planning, time management, organization of materials, and goal-setting (Fabiano et al., 2013). It is imperative that an understanding is built that students with ADHD need to have a goal in their student support plans outlining how they will be supported in the areas of executive functioning in order to be successful in the school setting (Fabiano et al., 2013).

Educators may feel that they are not being given enough exposure, training, or collaboration time to explore the ways in which student behavioral issues can be addressed and corrected in the classroom, furthermore, educational research demonstrates that poor student behaviors are increasingly becoming a challenge to school districts (UBC News, 2018). For example, according to the Canadian Teachers’ Federation, almost 30 per cent of Canadian public school teachers leave their jobs in the first 5 years (UBC News, 2018) Outdated practices may also account for the reason that many educators are finding that behavior challenges are on the rise in schools with little change, it is important to note that program evaluations are needed to evaluate programs, to diagnose their value, and to make suggestions for changes that lead to improvements and desired results (Grogan, 2016). The outdated and traditional zero tolerance approach has shown negative results in being able to effectively address student

behavior and needs (Grogan, 2016). Researchers agree that program evaluation is necessary for schools that strive to improve through the implementation of new as well as existing initiatives. (Grogan, 2016)

In regard to a school's overall improvement plan, student behavior is an important component to take into consideration when developing such a plan because schools that properly utilize program evaluations often reach the goals in their school improvement plan (Grogan, 2016). The program evaluations provide data that drives policy and helps the school administrators and leadership teams make informed decisions to revise the school improvement plan when needed (Grogan, 2016).

Furthermore, finding a program that works to accomplish this task is essential for the creation of safe and successful schools (Grogan, 2016). The findings from this program evaluation gave teachers and administrators the knowledge they needed to refine the newly implemented behavior program so that student behavior will improve, and optimal learning can occur (Grogan, 2016). Consistent universal positive behaviour support systems together with additional behavioural support can facilitate the successful inclusion of pupils observed by teachers to have even severe disruptive behaviours in a mainstream learning environment (Karhu, Hannu, Savolainen, 2017).

### **The Impacts of Social Emotional Learning on Student Success in the Classroom**

The inclusion of the word “learning” in the term “social-emotional learning” is intentional because it indicates social-emotional skills can be acquired (Oberle, Domitrovich, Meyers, & Weissberg, 2016). The term SEL recognizes the complex process involved in the attainment of social-emotional skills. SEL implies a pedagogy for building those skills and an intervention structure to support the internalization and

generalization of the skills over time and across contexts (Hardy et al., 2018). A meta-analysis of 213 studies looked at the effectiveness of universal SEL programs and found SEL programming positively impacted a broad range of skills (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). An analysis of one subset of these studies revealed an 11-percentile point gain in the academic achievement of students taking part in SEL programming (Hardy et al., 2018) Furthermore, Dodge et al. (2015) conducted a longitudinal study to determine the impact of an intervention program on kindergarten students with high ratings of aggressive or disruptive behavior. Half of the students, approximately 445 children, were provided instruction in social-cognitive skills and peer relationships. Eighteen years later, researchers examined the arrest rates, drug and alcohol use, and psychiatric symptoms of all participants. They found lower rates of externalizing and internalizing behaviors with individuals who participated in the intervention. Thus, investing in students' social/emotional development through SEL programming and initiatives can have both short term impacts (e.g. increased achievement and prosocial skills), as well as long term ones (e.g. reductions in negative adult outcomes) (Hardy et al., 2018). Social Emotional Learning, has been formally promoted by the British Columbia Ministry of Education (2015), in a revised curriculum first implemented in elementary schools in the 2016–2017 school year, and in secondary schools the following year (2017–2018). In an effort to equip students with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in today's world; the new curriculum acknowledges non-academic competencies, including SEL, as critical for success both academically and in life (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Although still in an early stage of development and implementation, the new BC education curriculum represents an important step in formally promoting mental well-being in children across the province through SEL in schools (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Having a positive behavior support plan in place is not the only way to address behaviors that we see in schools, the programming and delivery must be strong and well-grounded in research and data. The newly designed education curriculum within the

province of British Columbia is based on core competencies which are sets of intellectual, personal, and social and emotional proficiencies that all students need in order to engage in deep, lifelong learning (Ministry of Education, 2020). Along with literacy and numeracy foundations, they are central to British Columbia's K-12 curriculum and assessment system and directly support students in their growth as educated citizens (Ministry of Education, 2020). The self-determination learning outcome requires that a child be able to successfully say "I can ask for help when I need it and I can make safe choices by myself". The learning outcomes of the competencies that students are expected to show their understanding within require learning to develop independent decision-making skills to think critically through a concept or idea, to communicate findings, and to work towards self-advocacy by developing social responsibility to contribute meaningfully to activities and learning that takes place in the classroom (Ministry of Education, 2020) It is important that current student support plans in middle schools in British Columbia reflect the newly designed curriculum language with a focus on self-advocacy and independence since competency development does not end with school graduation but continues in personal, social, educational, and workplace contexts (Ministry of Education, 2020). The language that a student support plan uses in regard to developing a strong reader or guiding a child to read toward grade level can make all the difference between a fixed and growth mindset. Furthermore, if a child is not positively encouraged by their parents and educators in regard to their academic ability, they may go through their school career believing that their peers are more intelligent than they are which can result in negative behaviors with consequences. (Robinson, 2017) Children naturally will react to what is happening in their environment. When something that is undesired or challenging faces a child, they may react in a negative way such as yelling, screaming, hiding, hitting, or kicking their peers or adults around them, the good news is that a child's fixed mindset with negative thought patterns can easily be changed and that is in the hands of an educator: teachers can help students develop

growth mindsets by explicitly teaching about the brain and how it changes during learning. Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to form and reform new neural connections in response to experiences and changes in the environment. (Robinson, 2017) One of the most important things to be mindful of when teaching students how to develop a growth mindset is being mindful of the language we ourselves use as educators and the language that we expect our students to use when evaluating their own abilities: teach students to replace fixed mindset statements with growth mindset statements. For example, instead of "I am not good at this," students can try thinking, "What am I missing?" Instead of "I give up," students can think, "I'll use some of the strategies we learned to problem solve (when I face a challenging situation) (Robinson, 2017). The plan can state that a child create or choose one or two positive self-reflective statements at the end of each of their school days to submit to their classroom teacher. Putting an expectation that is both realistic and developmental will only help strengthen a child's self-image. Educators who model that the growth mindset framework of thinking is the best way to grow, need to also show that thinking in their own educational beliefs and views (Robinson, 2017). Further to educators modelling and teaching specific approaches and frameworks around social and emotional learning in the classroom, it may be of importance to consider that the foundation to successfully teaching students is the strength of the relationships that we as educators build with the individuals that we work with every day as well as the attachment that a child creates with their caregivers. Children are born looking for attachment and love from their caregiver (Neufeld, 2012). Children need an abundance of sameness, belonging, and significance, love or being known in order for rest to occur, it must be taken for granted before they can be released from the pursuit (Neufeld, 2012). What Neufeld suggests is that children should not have to tirelessly search for the attachment and love of their caregiver, that it should automatically be present.

## **The Universal Design for Learning Framework that Supports the Inclusion of all Learners**

The importance of the implementation of a Universal Design for Learning Framework is that there is a focus on inclusion, it creates learning communities inclusive of all students. Exploration of student engagement and research pointing to high levels of disengagement, particularly in secondary school, have raised concerns about educational systems and pedagogies that do not create social and academic engagement and inclusion for diverse learners (Katz, 2013). Inclusive education means just that – an educational system that creates learning communities inclusive of all students. Exploration of student engagement and research pointing to high levels of disengagement, particularly in secondary school, have raised concerns about educational systems and pedagogies that do not create social and academic engagement and inclusion for diverse learners (Katz, 2013). The presence of students with disabilities does not negatively impact the learning of other students. In fact, typical students in classrooms that include students with disabilities develop stronger communication and leadership skills, have more positive attitudes toward diversity, and may also demonstrate superior reading and math skills to those in classrooms that do not include students with disabilities (Katz, 2013). Drawing on new research in neuroscience, and principles from universal design, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an approach to instruction that promotes access, participation, and progress in the general education curriculum for all learners (CAST, 2012). UDL recognizes the need to create opportunities for the inclusion of diverse learners through providing curricula and instructional activities that allow for multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement. The Three-Block Model of UDL (Katz, 2012c) provides teachers with a method for creating inclusive environments and improving student engagement. To help teachers manage the process of implementation, the model is broken into three blocks. The first block

examines *Social and Emotional Learning*, and involves building compassionate learning communities, utilizing the Respecting Diversity (RD) program and democratic classroom management with class meetings (Katz, 2012a; Katz & Porath, 2011). Results show profound impact in terms of social inclusion and engagement for both students and teachers when this program is put into place. (Katz, 2013) students who are most often excluded, (poverty, Aboriginal, disabilities) are those who become disengaged (Canadian Council on Learning, 2009). For a student to be socially engaged, they must experience a sense of belonging, interact with peers, and be involved in extracurricular and social activities within the school (Katz, 2013) Social inclusion, in which all students experience a sense of belonging and are a part of the social life of their school and classroom (Katz & Porath, 2011; Wotherspoon, 2002). Thus, students who are highly socially engaged can be said to be socially included. (Katz, 2013)

Teacher outcomes reveal improvements in job satisfaction, efficacy related to inclusion of students with significant disabilities, and school climate. Teachers and administrators note that initial training takes significant support and time, as teachers sit in grade groups to plan, and get used to a new way of planning (e.g. building rubrics is a new experience for many). (Katz, 2013)

### **Parental Involvement in the Social/Emotional well-being of Young Adolescents**

Adolescence is a critical period of development. Previous research suggests parent involvement in school directly impacts student success (Cripps, Zyromski, 2009). However, different types of parental involvement and the efforts of middle school personnel to educate parents about these effective practices have received scant attention in the literature (Cripps, Zyromski, 2009). The level and type of parental involvement, as perceived by adolescents, is correlated with adolescent psychological well-being furthermore, perceived parental involvement positively or negatively affects adolescents' sense of

psychological well-being, especially self-esteem, self-evaluation, and peer relationships (Cripps, Zyromski, 2009). The relationship between perceived parental involvement and adolescent psychological well-being is based on two realities. The first reality, the home environment, is the initial social arena in which adolescents have remained more consistently under the influence and supervision of their parents. Later, these individuals begin to seek an alternate reality, separating from parents and seeking inclusion with peers during adolescence (Cripps, Zyromski, 2009). Parents and teachers are the main two educators in majority of children's life. Parental involvement means not only control children's educational progress but also, participating in school meetings and events, contacting with teachers and helping children at home. Parental involvement is the crucial factor during the school life of children, especially in primary and middle schools (Bogar, Karibeyeva, 2014). Scientists found that parental involvement can affect children's academic progress, behaviour, language abilities, social skills, and generally perception of life. These days more parents are becoming less engaged in educational process of their children (Bogar, Karibeyeva, 2014). Despite the fact that most parents want to be involved more, there are a lot of barriers for parental involvement such as parents' education, lack of time and work commitments, not enough money or families belonging to the lower social classes and big schools with different teachers (Bogar & Karibeyeva, 2014).

### **Chapter 3: Summary, Recommendations, and Conclusion**

It is highly recommended that The Ministry of Education in British Columbia and Middle Schools in British Columbia consider looking at restructuring approaches, design, and communication around social and

emotional supports of young adolescents. Funding is a large part of how schools are able to put into place programming, training, and teachers and other support staff to work with students who have special needs. Currently, the government is overlooking two key areas to addressing the issue of teachers shortages across the province. The first is the cost of living, Metro Vancouver is the most highly populated area of the province of British Columbia, and yet is the most expensive place to live and raise a family in the nation of Canada. Second, teacher salaries in British Columbia are the second lowest compared to the rest of the provinces. The high cost of living and low salary are two major reasons for the teacher shortage in British Columbia. Many teachers who are currently working in classrooms have more students in their classrooms and on their special education caseloads than the mandated language in the union collective agreement. Training around trauma informed practice and best approaches to students with attention and focus challenges in the classroom for educators is imperative to being able to build a student support plan that will help a child be successful in their school career.

A support plan can be very well written with strong language and tangible goals for a child to meet, however, if the document is passed around to those adults working with a child and not even given a glance before being filed away in a drawer or cabinet or saved in an online “cloud” somewhere, what purpose does that serve? Administrators spend approximately 2 weeks when students and other staff leave for summer break tying up loose ends and finishing things for the year, they then return 2-3 weeks before the new school year begins to begin planning and preparing for September start up. I highly recommended that administrators focus on two key areas: the first would be to spend time before the end of the school year, meeting with their special education team to look at communicating with their elementary feeder schools to look at information that is important to know about students who will be transitioning into their school. It is important for the school team and the parents to be on the same page

about the child before their big transition. The meeting also serves a purpose to answer questions and ease any fears that a parent of a vulnerable child may feel about becoming a middle school student.

Gathering information on students before they make the transition from elementary to middle schools will allow educators to develop social and emotional goals that will serve a child best as a middle school student.

I also recommended that all resource files should be brought to the attention of the administrators so that they are aware of which children are going to be on the caseload of learning support and resource teachers. If a proper system is not in place, then important information about a child can easily be missed, services that should be in place for a child will be missed, and paperwork that needs to be completed in a time sensitive manner cannot be completed. Once administration has viewed the files, they should then be stored for special education staff to access and gather important information on students that they will be working with. Supports can be put into place at the start of the school year rather than later when communication between teams is present. In regard to electronic files, such as on MyEd BC, students with designations, in need of special accommodations, those in care of the Ministry of British Columbia, should be flagged in the system with special symbols so that administrators, counsellors, special education staff, and classroom teachers are aware of the information at the beginning of the school year. Students who struggle with specific skills such as independently navigating the school, who are at risk of running away, and those with high anxiety for example will have the supports that they need in place immediately rather than when it is too late and an incident has occurred in the school. Resource staff who is aware of the needs can schedule support staff to meet with and work alongside those children who cannot be alone. It is not enough to mention in a support plan that student X needs to develop their social skills. A goal should not only be observable and measurable; but should also have clear objectives of what working towards and

meeting that goal will look like. In order to properly accommodate a social skills goal, those students with social and communication skills challenges should be placed into groups run by, for example, the school youth care worker. Sometimes developing life skills can take precedence over developing knowledge in another language such as French in middle school. School teams need to look at and consider and weigh what the child's strongest challenges are and how those will be met. Parents should also be consulted in this process with administrators aware and involved as well. It is imperative that administrators and teachers find a way to build a community of caring adults around young adolescents to support them throughout their educational journey as research has proven that strong parental relationships with youth as well as a sense of belonging are two of the bigger factors in whether a child will be successful and complete school in grade 12. It would also be valuable for school counsellors to be trained in mental health and well-being in young adolescents and bring that training and information back to their schools to inform their own practice as well as guide educators on how to support students with mental health challenges in the classroom.

When developing school action plans, it is vital to consider students with support plans and answer the question of: are we doing an adequate job of ensuring our most vulnerable learners are going to be able to meet the learning outcomes of the curriculum? Current programming and approaches in some cases allow dependency of students on adults to complete tasks for them and to advocate on their behalf. If schools continue to allow students to be completely or mostly dependent on adults, the detrimental long-term effect will be that the student will not exit the K-12 system with the tools that he or she needs to be able to function independently in the world. If schools in British Columbia can truly state that they are adopting the inclusive education model, then the core competencies should be taken into deep consideration when developing goals and objectives while designing a student support plan as well as involving the child in the

process and design of the plan itself. As part of the school inclusion model in British Columbia, children should have a full understanding of their strengths, deficiencies, designation(s) and be involved in creating goals to work towards as part of their education to strengthen skills in areas that they feel need work and further development. Students of all abilities need to feel a sense of belonging and inclusion in the classroom. In regard to leaders and educators developing a viable and strong school action plan, I recommend that when schools consider what could be the most powerful example of inclusion in schools: that it be along the lines that all children are learning in the classroom. When children are pulled out of their classroom to work on academic skills, for example, we are showing the child that they do not have the ability to learn along with their peers. One way to combat the issue of pull-out support is for leaders and educators to consider a push-in model of support for resource teachers where the teachers are going into the classrooms and working alongside classroom teachers to co-plan and co-teach. Resource teachers can work alongside their colleagues to create support plans, adaptations to lesson plans that work within the universal design for learning framework, the classroom teacher can collect data and assessment on students important to building an understanding while the resource teacher manages and teaches the students. Both educators can break students into small groups during work time and create targeted goals to reach within each group. The push-in model aligns perfectly with the newly designed curriculum and its learning outcomes as well as the inclusive education model. School districts need to improve on the professional development opportunities that they provide to their educators. Often times, teachers report that they do not feel that workshops offered relate to their current practice. It is recommended that all rather than some school districts within British Columbia offer trauma informed practice workshops and training to educators as well as more support for classroom and resource teachers in the area of behavioral support and interventions. Teachers should also be encouraged to seek out resources to support their current

practice, such as a book study on a relevant topic which can be discussed as a group or department, for example the importance of relationships of how hypersensitivity in the classroom affects learning.

Collaboration among administrators and staff around current needs can help build a strong and viable action plan that everyone wants to be a part of because they feel that there is something that can be personally contributed to the process. Such an approach will go a much longer way than presenting a new approach and being told to start implementing it as soon as possible. I would also recommend that schools incorporate the results of the Middle Years Development Instrument as well as the BC Adolescent Health Survey into their action plan and actually use that data to serve the needs of the student population.

For example, if a high number of students do not feel a sense of belonging in their school, administration and staff can work together to develop approaches to address belonging and inclusion within the school.

The research and data speaks for itself, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the educational needs of students have changed from the past and as educators we need to support that learning by providing opportunities for students to grow and thrive. By the time a student exits the K-12 school system, he or she should be able to answer the question: Who am I in this world and what do I have to contribute to it? Building a positive self-identity is key to a bright and successful future. Schools in British Columbia are now requiring students to begin building a portfolio of their educational journey on a program named My Blueprint. Schools that pride themselves on being a safe place to be, built on the ethics of care and belonging are going to create the pathways to success for those students who enter their classrooms. The leaders of the schools have a duty to build a culture with the staff by modelling what it means to be an inclusive school and part of a team of caring educators. By working together from Ministry, to district, to schools, to staff, to parents and considering all areas of current needs from both educational and psychological standpoints in our schools and building strong action plans that will be funded, practical, implemented, monitored, and regularly

reviewed, we can hold on to our kids and guide them towards finding a sense of purpose in this world that is built on wisdom and experience of the adults in their lives. Children, including adolescents, need a safety structure, a village, around them in order to be able to thrive. We need to hold on to our children until our work is done. We need to hold on not for selfish purposes but so they can venture forth, not to hold them back, but so they can fulfill their developmental destinies. We need to hold on to them until they can hold on to themselves (Neufeld, 2012)

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