

# *BU Journal of Graduate Studies in Education*

Volume 7, Issue 2, 2015

Special Issue – Interpreting Educational Research: Literature Reviews



Common Tern, Fairford, Manitoba



**BRANDON**  
UNIVERSITY



**CENTRE FOR**



**ABORIGINAL AND RURAL EDUCATION STUDIES**

# *BU Journal of Graduate Studies in Education*

**Volume 7, Issue 2, 2015**

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## INTRODUCTION BY THE GUEST EDITOR

**Helen Armstrong, Ph.D.**

Within this special issue of the *BU Journal of Graduate Studies in Education*, you will find 12 invited papers. All papers were written and submitted as the final requirement for the graduate course entitled Interpreting Educational Research (see course outline, pages 4-10). The objective of the course is to mentor the ability to locate and judge excellent research; as such, each student searched for and reviewed research articles in a professional area of choice. Each student was then required to write a final paper that involved a research synthesis, which would both mentor the ability to create a themed understanding of the work and propel the student into a thesis, should the student choose that route, with a substantial start to the literature review chapter.

Many students are reluctant to choose a thesis route due to the perceived workload and, perhaps, also due to their views of their own ability. Upon completing this course, all students knew they had the ability to complete a thesis because they had just completed the essence of the most time-consuming and difficult part of that thesis, the literature review. They also knew that, like most other tasks, they could complete the thesis just like they completed this course, one step at a time. Recently, I published an article in the *Canadian Journal of Native Studies* entitled "Mentored High Expectations as a Praxis of Empowerment,"<sup>1</sup> which elaborates the rationale for the manner in which I structure a course and mentor students.

I am pleased to present the work of these 12 graduate students, and even more pleased that they are teaching our children and grandchildren. They are committed, passionate educators, and we can be proud that they have chosen Manitoba to practise and Brandon University to expand their professional expertise. Well done, indeed!

– *Helen Armstrong*

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<sup>1</sup> Armstrong, H. D. (2014). Mentored high expectations as a praxis of empowerment. *The Canadian Journal of Native Studies*, 34(1), 1-24.

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# BRANDON UNIVERSITY

## Faculty of Education Graduate Studies Program

### 07:751 (NET, NT1, NT2) Interpreting Educational Research Regular Session 2014/2015 Term 2

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**Telephone:** 306-373-1080 (h); 306-270-4854 (c)

**Email:** armstrongh@brandonu.ca

#### **Course Description:**

Students will be critically analysing research in education. The course will approach the topic of research design and data analysis from a “consumer perspective,” and students will be guided to develop their critical thinking and reflection abilities to recognize the qualities of well-designed research. Topics in the course will include observation and measurement, ethical considerations, research design strategies, and the development and communication of research ideas.

#### **Course Objectives:**

- To develop an awareness of the elements of valid research and good research reporting.
- To become adept at searching for relevant research for one’s topic area.
- To collect and analyse research in one’s topic area.
- To develop the ability to address the research writing process.

#### **Required Texts & References:**

Hittleman, D. R., & Simon, A. J. (2006). *Interpreting educational research: An introduction for consumers of research* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Columbus, OH: Merrill Prentice Hall.

American Psychological Association. (2009). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (6<sup>th</sup> ed.). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

#### **Recommended reference:**

Fowler, H. R., Aaron, J. E., & McArthur, M. (2010). *The little brown handbook* (6<sup>th</sup> Canadian ed.). Toronto: Pearson Longman.

#### **Course Assignments and Mark Allocation (APA version 6.0 required):**

There are assignments due on a regular basis. All assignments must be submitted on time unless extenuating circumstances prohibit such submission. In such instances, students will inform the instructor prior to when the assignment is due and make alternate arrangements.

## 1. Class participation

*Students are expected to 'attend class'. More importantly, they are expected to have read and critically thought about the evening's chapter and its implications for their professional practice. While 'in class', they are expected to participate actively in both their own seminar discussion and all other relevant discussions. The following criteria (as well as those listed in #5 of each assignment's rubric) should be used to guide your 'in-class' substantive participation on-line, and also should guide the weekly off-line preparation that allows for that substantive, thoughtful involvement in on-line discussions:*

- engagement
- evidence of critical thought and reflection on course readings/text chapters and on articles integrated with text chapter readings and with practice.
- ability to relate course readings/text chapters and articles studied to the reality and challenges of teaching, resource, guidance and counselling, and/or school administration
- active 'listening' and demonstrated evidence of an open mind
- response to a large number of colleagues and over a wide range of issues.

**Students will compile a professional course portfolio consisting of the following:**

## 2. Review of professional research area (10%)

During the first week of the course students will converse about their professional position (current and/or former, and future aspirations). Following the conversation, by Thursday of the first week (but written during the week), they will post a three (to four) page paper that articulates their professional and research interests, providing a rationale for their choice (no references required). This paper will serve as a measuring stick for suitability of the selected articles for the next assignments, particularly assignment #4. Students may make changes to their plans as the course progresses, but if they do, they must retrieve this first paper and revise it to provide the rationale for the change in direction. The paper should include a summary of the student's graduate program thus far so that it is evident how the student is integrating all of their courses toward a professional focus.

CRITERIA	ASSESSMENT									
1. Submitted on time	<6	7	8	9	10					
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Overview of professional position	<6	7	8	9	10					
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Overview of and rationale for research interests, given professional position	<6	7	8	9	10					
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Degree to which above articulation allows for evaluation of article selection	<6	7	8	9	10					
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Leading discussion: On-line development, (e.g. creativity, inclusiveness), substance	<6	7	8	9	10					
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Quality of writing and APA conformance	<6	7	8	9	10					
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mark assigned for paper: _____										
General Comment (see specific comments on paper itself)										

**2. Chapter/article reviews and critiques, including class discussion (2 x 10 marks = 20%)**

Students will complete a formal review and critique (of approximately three pages) on two chapters, which they will present in class/on line. *These assignments must be posted by Monday evening of each week.* The primary purpose of the on-line presentation is to ensure that everyone has a clear understanding of the content and the application of the chapter, and that everyone is engaged in the conversation. *The reviews/critiques by the students selected for the week's chapter are not intended to replace the full reading of the chapter by each and every student.*

All points of good writing (e.g., conceptualization, content, clarity and coherence, grammar, punctuation) will be considered in the evaluation of the review/critiques. Papers must be double-spaced, using 12-point Times New Roman font, with 1" margins all-round. Students will be expected to complete the assignments with proper APA referencing and with access to *The Little Brown Handbook* and other writing aids. When appropriate, students may choose to use point form for some portions of their paper.

CRITERIA	ASSESSMENT									
1. Submitted on time	<6	7	8	9	10					
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Overview of content & synthesis of key concepts & ideas	<6	7	8	9	10					
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Balanced critique (With what do you agree? Disagree? Where do you stand?)	<6	7	8	9	10					
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Application to issues of administration and/or teaching, resource, or counselling	<6	7	8	9	10					
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Leading discussion: On-line development, (e.g. creativity, inclusiveness), substance	<6	7	8	9	10					
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Quality of writing and APA conformance	<6	7	8	9	10					
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Mark assigned for paper: \_\_\_\_\_

General Comment (see specific comments on paper itself)

**3. Compilation and review of research articles (10 articles x 5 marks = 50%)**

Students will compile a portfolio of research articles in their chosen topic area, accessed from a variety of sources. These areas will be discussed and decided during the first week (with some change encouraged, as noted). Each week there will be an assigned chapter reading that informs the reader of another approach to interpreting educational research. *As well as reading that chapter, each week the students will locate (at least) one good article in their field that relates to the chapter topic area. These assignments must be posted by Monday evening of each week, or marks will be subtracted from the grade.* All accessed literature must be accompanied with the APA reference and with a statement from the student that the literature was a new addition to their professional portfolio. Although all students will have accessed literature in other courses, *absolutely all literature submitted for this assignment must be accessed as a new assignment for this course.* Note that Chapter 11 of the textbook provides guidance for the location of articles.

As well, many tutorials are available from Brandon University's John Robbins Library to assist with article searches. See <http://www3.brandonu.ca/library/infoservices.html>

Accompanying the APA reference for the article the student will include a two to three page summary of the nature of the article, how it conforms to the topic/focus of the week's chapter, and how it will add to the professional knowledge of the student. Every week each student will be expected to post their paper to Moodle, as well as provide an additional conversational post telling how the article they have chosen reflects the topic area and the rationale for why the article is an excellent addition to their professional portfolio. That way, colleagues might access a broad range of literature, as introduced by others, as they progress through their studies.

CRITERIA		ASSESSMENT									
1.	Submitted on time	<6	7	8	9	10					
		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.	Degree to which chosen article matches chapter topic & research area	<6	7	8	9	10					
		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.	Overview of purpose and design of reported research	<6	7	8	9	10					
		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.	Overview of method and results of reported research	<6	7	8	9	10					
		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.	Critique of value of article for student's professional portfolio	<6	7	8	9	10					
		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.	Quality of writing and APA conformance	<6	7	8	9	10					
		<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Mark assigned for paper: \_\_\_\_\_

General Comment (see specific comments on paper itself)

#### 4. Final paper (20%)

With the purpose of propelling them into their thesis work, students will write a literature review paper that integrates the literature that they have accessed. The integration will focus on a cohesive, coherent, and clear approach toward an integrated purpose; a 'clothesline' approach that simply lines up the ten reviews one after the other is not acceptable. With the integrated, purposeful approach, the paper will provide the seeds for Chapter 2 of the thesis, which is the literature review. This initial paper allows students to continue to address and refine their area of study going forward. Students will consult with the professor regarding their paper's direction. As the seed rather than the final literature review, the paper will be 15 to 16 pages in length, exclusive of references. All points of good writing (e.g., conceptualization, content, clarity and coherence, grammar, punctuation) will be considered in the evaluation of the paper. Students will be expected to complete the assignments with proper APA referencing using APA Version 6.0, and with access to *The Little Brown Handbook* and other writing aids. Papers must be double-spaced, using 12-point Times New Roman font, with 1" margins all-round.



CRITERIA	ASSESSMENT							
1. Submitted on time	<6	7	8	9	10			
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Articulation of paper's direction, including its key concepts & ideas	<6	7	8	9	10			
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Degree to which paper succeeds in synthesizing the learning experiences throughout the student's course work	<6	7	8	9	10			
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Balanced critique (What is your position as a change agent? Where do you stand?)	<6	7	8	9	10			
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Application to issues within profession of teaching, counselling, resource, or admin.	<6	7	8	9	10			
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Quality of writing and APA conformance	<6	7	8	9	10			
	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Mark assigned for paper: \_\_\_\_\_

General Comment (see specific comments on paper itself)

### Course Grade Evaluation:

-Assignments & Due dates: Weekly, must be submitted for the week's on-line dialogue

-Minimum grade requirement for graduate program: B

-Grade Equivalencies:

A+ 96-100

B- 70-74

A 90-95

C+ 65-69

A- 85-89

C 60-64

B+ 80-84

D 50-59

**B 75-79**

F Under 50%

***Academic dishonesty will cancel out all the calculations above and result in a final grade of F-AD (Fail-Academic Dishonesty)***

*(refer to the Graduate Calendar, section 4.2.2)*

### Instructor / Course Evaluation:

The anonymous course evaluations will be completed online. All students are expected to complete the evaluation. Dates of the evaluation will be communicated by the instructor through the Graduate Studies Office.

### Proposed Class Schedule:

1. January 5 week

Introductions. Postings of first papers (by Thursday, January 8) and on-line dialogue from each student around their own direction, as well as response to others.

2. January 12 week  
Review of Chapter 1 of the textbook (as assigned to one or two students, with feedback from all class colleagues) and related articles (one introduced and facilitated by each student). The instructor will co-facilitate with the presenters for each week. Posting of chapter assignments by Tuesday evening, January 13 (just for this week, then to be posted for successive weeks by Monday evenings).
2. January 19 week  
Review of Chapter 2 of the textbook (as assigned to one or two students, with feedback from all class colleagues) and related articles (one introduced and facilitated by each student). The instructor will co-facilitate with the presenters for week. Posting of chapter assignments and article reviews by Monday evening, January 19.
3. January 26 week  
Review of Chapter 3 of the textbook (as assigned to one or two students, with feedback from all class colleagues) and related articles (one introduced and facilitated by each student). The instructor will co-facilitate with the presenters for each week. Posting of chapter assignments and article reviews by Monday evening, January 26.
4. February 2 week  
Review of Chapter 4 of the textbook (as assigned to one or two students, with feedback from all class colleagues) and related articles (one introduced and facilitated by each student). The instructor will co-facilitate with the presenters for each evening/week. Posting of chapter assignments and article reviews by Monday evening, February 2.
5. February 9 week  
Review of Chapter 5 of the textbook (as assigned to one or two students, with feedback from all class colleagues) and related articles (one introduced and facilitated by each student). The instructor will co-facilitate with the presenters for each week. Posting of chapter assignments and article reviews by Monday evening, February 9.
6. February 16 week  
Review of Chapter 6 of the textbook (as assigned to one or two students, with feedback from all class colleagues) and related articles (one introduced and facilitated by each student). The instructor will co-facilitate with the presenters for each week. Posting of chapter assignments and article reviews by Monday evening, February 16.
7. February 23  
Review of Chapter 7 of the textbook (as assigned to one or two students, with feedback from all class colleagues) and related articles (one introduced and facilitated by each student). The instructor will co-facilitate with the presenters for each week. Posting of chapter assignments and article reviews by Monday evening, February 23.
8. March 2 week  
Review of Chapter 8 of the textbook (as assigned to one or two students, with feedback from all class colleagues) and related articles (one introduced and facilitated by each student). The instructor will co-facilitate with the presenters for each week. Posting of chapter assignments and article reviews by Monday evening, March 3.
9. March 9 week  
Review of Chapter 9 of the textbook (as assigned to one or two students, with feedback from all class colleagues) and related articles (one introduced and facilitated by each student). The instructor will co-facilitate with the presenters for each week. Posting of chapter assignments and article reviews by Monday evening, March 9.

10. March 16 week

Review of Chapter 10 of the textbook (as assigned to one or two students, with feedback from all class colleagues) and related articles (one introduced and facilitated by each student). The instructor will co-facilitate with the presenters for each week. Posting of chapter assignments and article reviews by Monday evening, March 16.

11. March 23 week

Final paper due. Deadline March 29.

**Instructor suggestions for getting the most out of the course:**

Students in the class are colleagues who are participating in a professional development opportunity. A participatory approach allows for class colleagues to interweave their experiential knowledge with the curricular content for the construction of collective knowledge. To that end all students are expected to consistently engage in substantive on-line class dialogue.

**Attendance at Lectures and Practical Work:**

(refer to the Graduate Calendar, section 5.3.1)

1. All students are expected to be regular in their attendance at lectures and labs. While attendance *per se* will not be considered in assessing the final grade, it should be noted that in some courses participation in class activities may be required.
2. For limited enrolment courses, students who are registered but do not attend the first three classes or notify the instructor that they intend to attend, may have their registration cancelled in favour of someone else wishing to register for the course.
3. Students who are unable to attend a scheduled instruction period because of illness, disability, or domestic affliction should inform the instructor concerned as soon as possible.
4. Instructors may excuse absences for good and sufficient reasons.

## LITERATURE REVIEWS

### Families with Special Needs Children and Stress: Research Review

Lisa Ott

#### **Abstract**

*This research review provides a synthesis of articles that analyse the impact of the educational system on families with special needs children and the potential ways that these families can be empowered and equipped. The articles selected focus on research participants and schools found in North America and Great Britain, in order to give the research consumer a corresponding picture of the impact of stress on Canadian families with special needs children. The assessment of the research articles illustrates that the educational system does create high levels of stress for families with special needs children. However, teachers can use empathy, compassion, and mutual understanding to help empower families with special needs children. There are also practical tools, such as instructing parents in teaching skills to assist their children, which can be used to equip these families and help them to reduce their stress levels exacerbated by the educational system. Further study should be done to look at changing teacher attitudes toward special needs students, and at learning more about how the stress of a special needs child specifically affects fathers and other male caregivers, non-special needs siblings, and non-middle class families.*

#### **Background and Research Process**

The Office of the Auditor General – Manitoba (2012) reported that between the 2000-2001 and 2009-2010 school years, special needs enrolment in Manitoba increased by 86%, going up from 3,850 students to 7,156 students (p. 249). Special needs students are growing in numbers in Manitoba schools, and various organizations and individuals are attempting to discover the most effective ways to address the educational needs of these students (VanWalleghe & Lutfiyya, 2013). However, schools must also not forget the family as a whole unit and the potential influences that a special needs child can have on parents and siblings. Schools need to identify and acknowledge that stress caused by special needs children's educational needs and experiences affects the entire family unit. As well, educators need to figure out the best ways to support these parents and their children in order to minimize the effects of stress, empower the family unit, and equip them to succeed in the educational system and in their overall daily lives.

All parents have desires and aspirations for their youngsters' lives, but parents with special needs children have a harder time meeting these goals (Hanvey, 2002; Janus, Kopechanski, Cameron, & Hughes, 2007; Morinaka, 2012; Reio & Fornes, 2011). Parents take on many responsibilities with raising a special needs child, such as caring for the child's physical requirements because of disability, helping the special needs child to create and maintain relationships, and creating a place in the community for the special needs child to belong (Hanvey, 2002). Special needs families often experience higher levels of stress than non-disabled families (Gottfried & McGene, 2013). These higher stress levels are created by various factors that influence a special needs family. Special needs families are often in a lower income bracket due to the need for one parent to become the primary caregiver of the special needs child (Hanvey, 2002; Moriwaka, 2012). When that aspect is compounded with the high financial necessities for a special needs child, the situation can create even greater stress for the family

unit (Hanvey, 2002). Families with special needs children also experience higher levels of breakdown in the family unit, resulting in divorce and single parenting (Daire, Dominguez, Carlson & Case-Pease, 2014; Hanvey, 2014). These various factors intensify anxiety levels, creating a situation in which high numbers of parents with special needs children report being discouraged, stressed out, and exhausted (Gottfried & McGene, 2013; Hanvey, 2002; Reio & Fornes, 2011). This has a spill-over effect on the family as a whole unit and influences the health and well-being of all family members (Gottfried & McGene, 2013; Hanvey, 2002; Orfus & Howe, 2008; Van Haren & Fiedler, 2008). The health of the family depends on the well-being of the entire household unit (Orfus & Howe, 2008).

For this paper, definitions have been established to create a cohesive understanding of the research topics studied. Special needs are defined as including all students who require specialized programming or services to benefit from elementary and secondary education (The Auditor General's Report on Special Needs Education, 2012; VanWalleghem & Lutfiyya, 2013). The term *special needs families* refers to families who have at least one special needs child as a part of the family unit. Stress is described as being related to the impact of a special needs child; the chronic, long lasting periods of time that stress is maintained; and how that stress affects other aspects of family life or family members in potentially negative ways (Beck & Hastings, 2004). Empowerment is explained as the result of helping families to gain control over the events in their lives, and imparting abilities to aid them in getting what they want and need to raise a special needs child (Van Haren & Fiedler, 2008). Parent education can be defined as "providing parents with specific knowledge and systematic activities with the goal of promoting the development and competence of their children" (Reio & Fornes, 2011, p. 55).

This paper acknowledges that all sources of stress for special needs families are important. Special needs families require support and skills to deal with these stressors. It is important to the special needs family unit that these areas of need are addressed and that assistance is given. However, as well, this paper seeks to create a better understanding of how the schooling process creates stress for special needs families. Once a better understanding is gained of how educational systems may create stress, that information can be used as a springboard to research ways that schools can empower special needs families, and what practical tools can be implemented to aid special needs families with their anxieties.

To provide an overview of this professional research, first an introductory paper was written to initiate the research process for this review. That paper identified an interest in supporting families with special needs children in the educational system (Ott, 2015). Using the ideas in the paper as a starting point, Internet searches were done to locate information that fit the topic, employing Brandon University's access to the ERIC database and Google Scholar. As research was refined, specific categories were created for investigation, which included examining the potential sources of stress for special needs families, and how schools could potentially help these parents. Searches were done by using key phrases such as "special needs families and stress," "parents of special needs children," "school impact on stress of special needs families," and "special needs children and the effects on siblings." Research was limited to articles found within the last 15 years, in an attempt to keep them as chronologically relevant as possible. Research was also limited to studies that occurred in North America and European countries (particularly Great Britain), since these countries have educational systems most common to Canada's. Analyses of the data collected at this point were done, and from this juncture the Internet search was widened to include "perceptions of special needs families," "empowering special needs families," and "supporting special needs families in education." Thirteen articles were found that best fit the parameters of the starting position paper. As well, information garnered from the class text, *Interpreting Education Research: An Introduction for Consumers of Research* (4th ed.) by Hittleman and Simon (2006), was used to create guidelines of what constituted reliable and valid research sources (e.g., pp. 123-133, 137-138). Article reviews were written on a weekly basis, and the chapters from the text were read and analysed so as to achieve a better understanding of the research elaborated in the articles. The articles were

assessed and reassessed in order to develop a better understanding of the research information and results. Articles were studied multiple times and then put in clusters based on their common themes. The categories created were intended to answer the questions set out at the beginning of the research process. Sections were reread and analysed to make sure that the research articles were in the correct categories. One article was moved from the category on equipping parents to the category on empowerment, since it fit in better with the latter theme. However, it could be potentially be moved back into the equipping category, because it did elaborate a few aspects related to this area as well. Two articles were found not to fit into any of the main categories being researched. However, these two articles were similar to each other and were incorporated into their own separate section on siblings, since the information was valuable.

Some limitations were discovered in the articles studied. Most of the research articles analysed relied on volunteer participants in their research studies; only three articles relied on random sampling engaged through the educational system (Gottfried & McGene, 2013; Moriwaka, 2012; Ollison-Ford & Vernon-Dotson, 2009). When educational professionals or parents were engaged in these research processes, most of the participants were middle-class females. Only two studies had a reasonable mixture of men and woman from various class backgrounds (Moriwaka, 2012; Ollison-Ford & Vernon-Dotson, 2009). The impact of stress and the access to tools that can equip families from lower classes should be analysed more in depth. More research needs to be done on the effects of stress on men, since males may handle stress differently than females, in order to discover whether there are better ways to empower and equip males in dealing with special needs children. Another area that needs more research is the impact that special needs children have on non-special needs siblings. This attention can give educators insight on the factors that create stress for non-special needs siblings. It was difficult to find research studies that occurred in Canada or that were based on the Canadian educational system (Janus et al., 2007; Orfus & Howe, 2008). Most studies that were used for this paper were conducted in the United States. Therefore, the results may not be as transferable as a review wherein more of the research studies had been done in Canada.

Even though the research articles studied did not address the above-mentioned issues, they contained vital information to aid educators in their understanding of the impact of stress on the special needs family unit. This research review analyses three important aspects of stress addressed in these articles. The first concept covered is that the schooling process itself creates high stress levels for special needs families. After an analysis of the stress caused by the educational process, this review examines the various ways that schools can empower special needs families as they navigate the educational system. The research articles are then analysed to discover practical ways that educators can help to reduce the stress of special needs families. Lastly, a separate section addresses the effects that special needs children have on their siblings.

### **How the Schooling Process Creates Stress for Special Needs Families**

With reference to the research articles that matched the theme of how the schooling process creates stress for special needs families, all were qualitative studies that relied on volunteer participants. The three studies accessed used interviews and observation techniques to collect data on their research subjects. Most of the special needs students in these studies were younger children, pre-school to early elementary grades, with only one study using some students in grade 11 in its results (Edelman, Giangreco, Luiselli & MacFarland, 1997). Janus et al. (2007) elaborated the solitary study to interview only parents and not educational professionals as well. The three studies researched different aspects of stress for special needs families that can occur in the educational system.

As noted in two of the studies, parents often do not see their special needs child as the source of their stress, but rather the school system, the lack of support within the educational

setting, and educational professionals' biased perceptions of special needs families (Broomhead, 2013; Hanvey, 2002). Children with special needs are often less likely to do well in the educational system compared to non-disabled students and, in one Canadian study, only 19% of special needs students reported having their needs met in the educational system (Hanvey, 2002, p 18). The special needs child's success in education is most affected by the classroom teacher and his/her willingness to support the requirements of the special needs student (Giangreco et al., 1997; VanWalleghem & Lutfiyya, 2013). However, some classroom teachers may view themselves as having little responsibility for the special needs student's education and leave it in the hands of others, such as educational assistants and resource teachers (Giangreco et al., 1997). Teachers can also have negative opinions of special education families, which can affect home-school relationships (Broomhead, 2013). Parents have likewise stated that poor communication or no communication between the school and home can be very frustrating and causes their stress levels to increase (Janus et al., 2007). Positive steps taken by schools will help to relieve stress by empowering special needs families.

### **How Schools Can Empower Special Needs Families**

Three reviewed qualitative studies highlighted ways that schools, and specifically special educators, can help to empower families of special needs children. All three studies used parents of children from various age groups and had input from special needs teachers. None of the studies commented on interviewing or receiving input from classroom teachers. The data collected in these sections had to do with intangible aspects of human relationships that can be hard to measure, such as empathy, compassion, and mutual respect. Van Haren and Fiedler (2008) reported on a study that not only looked at the unquantifiable resources needed to support families with special needs children, but also suggested practical methods for special educators to help special needs families; therefore, this article straddles the last two categories of this research review.

All three articles dealt with the importance of giving empathy to families with a special needs child (Moriwaka, 2012; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2015; Van Haren & Fiedler, 2008). Educators who display empathy to a special needs family help to empower the family members. Educators may accomplish this goal when they focus on cooperative and healthy communication between home and school (Moriwaka, 2012; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2015; Van Haren & Fiedler, 2008). When educators recognize and acknowledge that every family's situation is unique, and that the family is the expert in knowing and understanding its special needs child, they are practising empathy and compassion (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2015; Van Haren & Fiedler, 2008). When empathy and compassion are used as the bedrock for home-school relationships, educators can move on to find practical methods to empower parents and help reduce stress levels involved in special needs children's school experiences. In fact, establishing relationships based on empathy, compassion, and mutual respect is the first step in alleviating stress for special needs families.

### **Practical Tools To Aid Special Needs Families with Stress**

The research studies done in this next category looked at various practical ways that schools can help families deal with the stress of raising a special needs child. The main theme in these studies was parent education, or giving parents the skills and knowledge that they need to promote and aid in the development of their special needs child (Reio Jr. & Fornes, 2011). This can be done by training parents with specific teaching methods to support their special needs child's education, or by setting up support groups and mentors to assist parents in knowledge and awareness of what steps they need to implement for lowering family stress levels (Daire, Dominguez, Carlson, & Case-Pease, 2014; Hastings & Beck, 2004; Reio Jr. & Fornes, 2011). All studies were qualitative, except for the study reported by Daire et al. (2014),

which used a quantitative approach. All studies had a large number of participants, but the study reported by Ollison-Ford and Vernon-Dotson (2009) had the most ethnically diverse group of participants in the investigation. Special needs children in these inquiries were stated to be young, with the oldest age group participating being children in grade 5 (Hancock & Kaiser, 2003; Ollison-Ford & Vernon-Dotson, 2009). All studies reported high levels of positive feedback from both parents and teachers. One study went beyond looking at parent feedback and examined the level of learning that children experienced from having parents teach them. This learning was immediately assessed and then reassessed six months later to find out whether parent teaching is a viable method for special needs children to learn new skills and information (Hancock & Kaiser, 2003).

The results of these studies show that when practical tools are used to aid families in the education of their special needs child, there are many positive consequences. Parents who were given tools to identify stressors, knowledge and support systems, and helpful educational skills felt empowered and had more positive views of their special needs child's educational journey (Daire et al., 2014; Hastings & Beck, 2004; Kaiser & Hancock, 2003). Parents reported being extremely satisfied with the tools given to them (Hastings & Beck, 2004; Ollison-Ford & Vernon-Dotson, 2009; Reio Jr. & Fornes, 2011). As schools and families implemented these practical tools, more open and positive channels of communication began between schools and homes (Ollison-Ford & Vernon-Dotson, 2009; Reio Jr. & Fornes, 2011). Schools reported that parent involvement in school activities increased as parents felt championed and encouraged by the practical tools implemented to aid them (Ollison-Ford & Vernon-Dotson, 2009; Reio & Fornes, 2011).

When educators provide opportunities for parents to learn practical skills for dealing with stress, they empower the family unit. Subsequently, when parents are given useful tools to teach their special needs children, it helps to decrease their stress levels. Likewise, it is important to examine the effects of special needs children on their non-special needs siblings. They, like their parents, need to be given the skills and tools to be empowered, because this will further strengthen the family unit.

### **Extra Research Studies Examined: The Effects of Special Needs Children on Siblings**

Two research papers were examined that focused on the effects of a special needs child on non-special needs siblings in the family. These studies might fit somewhat into the other categories, yet because of the focus on the impact on siblings, they require their own section to address them.

In the first research paper, Gottfried and McGene (2013) reported on a quantitative study that examined the academic and non-academic effects that special needs siblings may have on their non-special needs brothers and sisters. The researchers conducted a six-year study and used a sampling of students in elementary schools. The criterion for students studied was that they needed to have one sibling who lived in the same household as a diagnosed special need. Data were collected from various sources and analysed with three different methods in order to ensure that results were consistent. The researchers asked three questions in their study. First, the researchers inquired into what were the achievement and non-achievement consequences for children who had a sibling with a special need, and whether these outcomes were positive or negative or both. They discovered that in achievement-based areas, siblings of special needs children were academically stronger than students with no special needs siblings, thus showing a positive result. Second, the researchers studied the effects of special needs children on non-achievement areas by examining truancy, tardiness, and behaviour of non-special needs siblings. They discovered that the presence of special needs siblings had almost no effect in these three areas for their non-special needs siblings. Third, the researchers questioned whether there were any effects of special needs children on their non-special needs siblings,



and whether those effects were uniform overall or only domain specific. They discovered that across the board academically, students with a special needs sibling had higher academic achievement than children with no special needs siblings. There was little to no effect in non-achievement areas between both groups of students.

In the other research paper, Orfus and Howe (2008) reported on a qualitative study that examined coping skills that siblings of special needs students use to adapt to a special needs sibling. This qualitative study used interviews and two sets of questionnaires to assess sibling coping skills, with attention to various potential hassles and uplifts derived from living with a special needs sibling. The researchers' requirement for the participants in the study was that they have at least one sibling with special needs. The children who participated were upper elementary students whose special needs siblings averaged 10 years old. The study had only a small sampling of families, with only 12 participating; therefore, more research needs to be done to establish the validity of this study's findings. This report found that non-special needs siblings primarily employed two different skills, wishful thinking and problem solving, to cope with the daily hassles and uplifts that their special needs sibling created. Wishful thinking was used to control the emotional aspects of the stress, and problem solving was used to deal practically with difficulties that may come up from coping with a special needs sibling. Parents' positive attitudes and matter-of-factness about the potential stress of a special needs child helped non-special needs children to cope with stress in constructive ways.

The reader of research gains understanding of the impact of special needs children on their non-special needs siblings from the above articles. Educators must acknowledge the ways that special needs children impact the social abilities, academic careers, and coping mechanisms of non-special needs siblings. The ways that non-special needs children learn in order to cope with their special needs sibling have a ripple effect in their own academic lives. Educators must have empathy and compassion that extends to the non-special needs siblings and awareness that they can support these siblings in practical ways, as well.

The research articles studied provide educators with essential information to aid them in helping special needs families in the educational system. The articles help educators to identify the ways that the schooling process creates high levels of stress for special needs families. This understanding can be used as a springboard for focusing on empowering special needs families. Through learning from these articles, educators can gain practical tools to reduce stress for special needs families, thus creating a positive educational experience for the whole family unit.

## **Summary and Discussion**

This review of research articles has demonstrated that considerable amounts of stress can occur for families during a special needs child's school years. Often, these stressors are caused by various problems in the educational system, such as misuse of resources or poor communication between school and home. There are, however, many practical initiatives that educators can implement to help decrease family stress. The research articles reviewed also demonstrate that there are specific strategies, such as strong communication between home and school, that educators can use to empower parents and families to reduce family stress levels. These methods of empowering and equipping can create positive effects in special needs families, which then are refracted back into the school community and home-school relationships.

Researchers need to continue studying possible causes of stress for special needs families in the educational system, and various ways that educators can empower and equip parents to address the effects of stress. A disturbing trend in the origins of stress for special needs families involves teacher attitudes and views toward special needs students. Further study can be done to discover the sources of these negative views and attitudes acquired by teachers, and to address them. Research is also needed to find approaches and instructional methods to change

teachers' views of special needs families and to train educators in compassion and empathy for all. Also, schools may not be using current resources to the best of their ability to benefit special needs families. Research needs to be done to learn how schools can improve their use of human and material resources in order to benefit special needs families in the most positive way.

As already stated earlier in this paper, there are three important categories where more research is needed for understanding the impact of special needs children in their lives and stress levels. More research needs to go into how the stress of a special needs child affects male caregivers, and what ways males can be empowered and equipped to handle this stress. Similarly, more research needs to be done on the impact of special needs siblings on non-special needs siblings. Investigators should examine what empowering and equipping supports can be put in place to aid non-special needs siblings in their growth. Finally, the effects of a special needs child on non-middle class families' stress levels and daily lives need to be scrutinized at a deeper level.

In summary, it is important to acknowledge the role that the educational system plays in creating stress for families with a special needs child. Teachers need to be taught in their preservice training to identify potential stress factors for special needs families and to be given skills to reduce or eliminate these triggers in their classroom. For teachers already in the educational field, time and energy must be provided to foster understanding of special needs families' stresses, to develop empathy and compassion for these families, and to employ practical tools with these families and within their classrooms. As teachers begin to adjust and adapt for families with special needs children, their initiatives will create change at the micro level of the classroom. Administration and specialty teachers, such as resource teachers, as well as school division and provincial personnel, need to focus on creating change at a macro level. This focus would involve implementing change in the school system itself. The school system as a whole, with insightful policies and practices, must be willing to do what it can to help special needs families. The stronger and more empowered the family unit is, the more it will aid the special needs child in his/her development.

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# Fostering a Sense of Belonging for Aboriginal Students

Allisa Denbow

## Abstract

*The Canadian educational system is at a crossroads when it comes to embracing the future of Aboriginal people. Over the years, researchers have reported on the poor performance of Aboriginal students due to the effects of Eurocentric teaching pedagogies and culturally irrelevant curricula that do not reflect Aboriginal culture, language, values, or worldviews. Literature reviewed throughout this paper highlights the significance of integrating Aboriginal perspectives in school curricula and of fostering a sense of belonging. The literature examines four themes: past Eurocentric teaching models and the encompassing effects that they have had on Aboriginal students, changes needed to prepare teacher candidates for teaching Aboriginal content, inclusion of Aboriginal content in classroom teaching, and positive effects that inclusion of Aboriginal content has had for Aboriginal people. The paper concludes with suggestions for further research that will address what is missing in education for Aboriginal youth today with regard to self-identity and sense of belonging.*

School attainment and success rates for Aboriginal students are much lower than for their non-Aboriginal counterparts across Canada. Although there has been an increase in educational opportunities for Aboriginal people, public education is still failing Aboriginal youth (Agbo, 2004; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; Kanu, 2007; Ledoux, 2006). Research indicates that in Canada, the proportion of Aboriginal youth who do not complete high school is 40%, compared to 13% for non-Aboriginal youth (Agbo, 2004, p. 1; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011, p. 94; Ledoux, 2006, p. 266; Richmond & Smith, 2012, p. 1). These statistics are cause for concern, because education seems to be leaving behind one of the fastest growing populations across Canada. With increased public accountability spotlighted on achievement, and pressure on schools to improve student performance, there is continued discussion about how to increase Aboriginal student achievement; however, little seems to have been done to improve the situation (Ledoux, 2006; Marsiglia & Kulis, 2008; Tremblay, Gokiart, Georgis, Edwards, & Skrypnik, 2013). Ledoux (2006) noted that “while educators are busy revamping curriculum and designing evaluation tools, . . . Aboriginal peoples are being left further behind” (pp. 266-267).

Far too often, Aboriginal students and their families are blamed for their low achievement rates. However, with increased research in the area of Aboriginal education, it has been confirmed that the problem lies within the school system, not within Aboriginal students or their culture (Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; Ledoux, 2006). Several Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators and researchers are at the forefront of efforts to change the school system. They are trying to help people realize that the real reason for poor academic performance of Aboriginal students is the lack of sensitivity to Aboriginal learning styles and the use of teaching strategies that do not reflect Aboriginal culture, language, or worldview (Agbo, 2004, Ledoux, 2006; Richmond & Smith, 2012). Interestingly, literature on curriculum development indicates that curriculum should be in harmony with students’ life experiences; however, curriculum is frequently not culturally relevant for Aboriginal students and often takes a minutest approach to teaching Aboriginal content (Agbo, 2004; Hare & Pidgeon, 2011; Ledoux, 2006).

As Aboriginal youth continue to be enrolled in urban schools, educators struggle with challenges of providing adequate education that is meaningful and relevant, and that fosters a sense of belonging (Agbo, 2004; Deer, 2010; Ledoux, 2006). Creating meaningful and relevant education for Aboriginal students requires fundamental changes. It requires the creation of curricula that affirms Aboriginal identity, language, values, beliefs, and practices not only in content but also in teaching and learning activities (Hare & Pidgeon, 2011). Only when Aboriginal students find a sense of belonging will achievement levels and general health

improve (Deer, 2010; Kanu, 2007; Napoli, Marsiglia & Kulis, 2008). The focus throughout this paper is to review the literature geared toward schools fostering a sense of belonging for Aboriginal students, and what such schools might look like.

### **Effects of Past Eurocentric Teaching Models**

Canadian history prides itself on the idea of a mosaic, wherein all cultures are accepted and treated equally. However, one of the darkest chapters in Canadian history relates to the poor treatment of Aboriginal people and their culture during colonization and particularly with reference to residential schooling. Throughout the literature on Aboriginal education and issues, numerous reports have indicated that education both in past and present forms has been used to oppress and marginalize Aboriginal people (Ledoux, 2006; Richmond & Smith, 2012). For over a hundred years, schools were used as an instrument to oppress Aboriginal people, stripping their cultural practices and languages. Residential schools were widely supported because European politicians felt that Aboriginal cultures, beliefs, and languages were inferior and that Aboriginal people needed Western civilization and its standards to become successful members of society (Richmond & Smith, 2012). Aboriginal children were forcibly moved into residential schools and compelled to conform to Western culture and to reject traditional Aboriginal culture, language, and spirituality (Ledoux, 2006).

As Aboriginal children were continually removed from their homes and cultures, the literature repetitively explains that the treatment in residential schools was inexcusable. Teachers forced Aboriginal students to surrender their way of life and to accept European cultures as their own. Aboriginal children were often punished if they spoke their traditional language or practised Aboriginal traditions. Residential schools had one purpose: to impose European cultures, supposedly for a better life; however, they produced generations of Aboriginal people who lost their culture, language, worldviews, spirituality, self-identity, and sense of belonging (Ledoux, 2006). Many Aboriginal people who attended residential schools became caught between two worlds, as “people who belonged neither in Aboriginal culture nor in western culture – and [residential schools] created widespread social and psychological upheaval in Aboriginal communities” (p. 269). For countless Aboriginal people and families, residential schooling inflicted one of the biggest negative effects on Aboriginal communities within Canada.

The historic trauma experienced by Aboriginal people attending residential schools extends into present times. Even though residential schools no longer exist, the intergenerational impact continues, strongly shaping the sense of belonging and well-being for children and grandchildren of residential school survivors (Agbo, 2004; Richmond & Smith, 2012; Tremblay et al., 2013). With the past history of residential schools, “negative attitudes and mistrust towards education continue within Aboriginal communities on and off reserves due to the generations of lost parenting and the loss of cultural knowledge” (Ledoux, 2006, p. 269). Furthermore, the literature supports that the intergenerational impact of residential schools has hindered the likelihood of many Aboriginal families and youth seeking contemporary educational supports. Fear of revisiting past schooling experiences makes it difficult to increase school attainment, and to create a sense of self-esteem, positive identity, and belonging (Richmond & Smith, 2012).

The literature acknowledges that improvements have been made with regard to Aboriginal education and that healing has begun with respect to residential schooling; however, the school system still operates on a Eurocentric model (Ledoux, 2006). Aboriginal students continue to be caught between Western ways of thinking, while still grasping at traditional Aboriginal concepts. Manitoba has begun to take steps to rectify the situation by mandating the teaching of Aboriginal perspectives across the curricula; however, many teachers feel uncomfortable or inadequately trained, further perpetuating the internal struggle between two cultures. To support their initiatives, there needs to be sensitivity toward the repercussions of residential schools so as to

generate an environment that is welcoming of all cultures and builds a sense of belonging for every student.

### **Changes to Teacher Education**

Throughout the literature, it is stressed that education needs to revamp training strategies for preparing teacher candidates to accommodate the learning needs of Aboriginal students. In the research conducted by Nardozi and Mashford-Pringle (2014), it is clear that many teachers feel a lack of confidence in teaching Aboriginal perspectives. Nardozi and Mashford-Pringle (2014) reported that 27.6% of their participating pre-service teachers felt ill equipped to teach Aboriginal students because they lacked general knowledge of “who Aboriginal people are, the histories and trauma experienced by Aboriginal people during residential schooling, and potential ways to include Aboriginal perspectives into curricula” (p. 57). After short presentations to pre-service teachers, 34.3% felt somewhat confident in teaching the subject material to Aboriginal youth. Although there was a slight increase in the number of teachers who felt equipped to teach Aboriginal perspectives, many teachers do not receive the needed initial training or ongoing professional development to feel fully confident in teaching the history of Aboriginal people to Canadian students.

As education continues to move toward becoming more culturally relevant, the training of beginning teachers needs to build an understanding of the past histories of oppression and marginalization that Aboriginal people have faced. Hare and Pidgeon (2011) analysed the stories that Anishinaabe youth shared and “coded the transcripts for patterned responses that emerged, and for themes that became apparent across all their stories” (p. 99). In their analysis of the transcripts, the researchers identified the major theme of racism. Upon further review, all participants (n=39) reported that they experienced racism while attending public high school and that non-Aboriginal peers and teachers created an unwelcoming school environment that directed negative attitudes and stereotypes toward the Aboriginal students. Given this response, it is important that educators are aware of the effects of historical and present day racism because these effects contribute to a lack of success and belonging that many Aboriginal students currently face. In order for all students to feel a sense of belonging, teachers must familiarize themselves with the cultures of their students (Agbo, 2004; Kanu, 2007; Nardozi and Mashford-Pringle, 2014) so as to make the learning enjoyable, authentic, and relevant for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students alike (Deer, 2010).

Kanu (2007) supported preparing teacher candidates to integrate Aboriginal perspectives. In Kanu's qualitative research involved 31 Aboriginal students: 15 were from an enriched classroom that integrated Aboriginal perspectives throughout the course work, and 16 were from a regular classroom wherein occasional integration of Aboriginal perspectives took place. Students participating in the enriched class performed noticeably better than those students in the regular class. In both the written and verbal responses, students in the enriched class demonstrated better understanding, higher level thinking, and overall improvement in self-confidence, which is linked to strong sense of belonging. The teacher in the enriched class demonstrated the ability to understand and, more importantly, the confidence in teaching to and for Aboriginal students, which was supported by Nardozi and Mashford-Pringle's (2014) later research, which added that teachers need support to understand Aboriginal issues in order to teach them effectively.

As Aboriginal populations increase throughout Canadian schools, it is necessary for educators to learn, understand, and incorporate knowledge about Aboriginal worldviews into classrooms and curricular outcomes. The studies by Nardozi and Mashford-Pringle (2014), Hare and Pidgeon (2011), and Kanu (2007) all support that teachers require additional training and professional development to feel increased confidence in teaching and speaking about Aboriginal issues. The conclusions from the research indicate that increasing training for teachers will hopefully reduce racism, stereotyping and discrimination, and will create more

inclusive relationships among teachers, non-Aboriginal students, and Aboriginal students. It is important that educators take a proactive stance in creating and delivering instruction so that First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and all other Canadian children are equally affirmed in order to foster a sense of belonging to the school community.

### **Aboriginal Perspectives in Education**

Across the literature, it is evident that education needs to include Aboriginal perspectives and develop culturally relevant learning opportunities for all Aboriginal youth within the classroom. Kanu (2007) discussed effective integration of Aboriginal perspectives in curricula and the effects on academic achievement, class attendance, school retention, and sense of belonging. As mentioned earlier, Kanu studied the growth of two grade 9 social studies classrooms within the same school: one was enriched with Aboriginal perspectives, and the other had only occasional integration of Aboriginal perspectives. The students who participated in the enriched class demonstrated overall improvement. Additionally, pass rates on tests were significantly higher for the enriched class: 80% in contrast to the regular class's at 44% (Kanu, p. 32). The discrepancy between pass rates for the two classes is cause for cautious optimism about increasing academic achievement solely based on the integration of Aboriginal perspectives. Kanu's results cannot lead us to conclude that culturally responsive pedagogy alone can provide an effective means for reversing the trends of low achievement. However, the increased inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives in this instance motivated all students to do well, especially the Aboriginal students, because they respected that their culture was being incorporated throughout all areas of the grade 9 social studies curriculum.

Citizenship development within classrooms plays a crucial role in creating a sense of belonging for all students within school communities. Deer's (2010) research supports that of Kanu's (2007) in its finding that Aboriginal people do support Canadian citizenship values of equality, respect for cultural differences, freedom, peace, law and order, and environmental stewardship associated with citizenship development. The inclusion of sensitive, culturally relevant teaching is needed to bridge the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and their values. Much like Kanu's findings, Deer stated that by establishing effective citizenship programs within the classroom for Aboriginal students, an increase in attainment, belonging, and identity will be achieved. Furthermore, through citizenship development, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students will begin to understand past histories, the effects that colonization has had, and the struggles that continue today for identity and autonomy. Deer further stressed that "Aboriginal perspectives are crucial to the identity of Aboriginal peoples across Canada and important aspects of those identities are not only traditional cultural practices but language" (p. 5). Within his research, Deer further emphasized issues of a lack of first language use and instruction for Aboriginal students in Canada, and how that aspect creates an environment wherein Aboriginal students often feel like "strangers in the classroom" (p. 5). Deer discussed educational shortcomings resulting from a lack of trust in the educational system by Aboriginal people, the concern for lack of suitable educational environments that meet the needs of Aboriginal students, and the lack of community involvement in Aboriginal schooling.

Enhancement of Aboriginal students' achievement through culturally responsive teaching practices is a challenge that faces education today. Agbo's (2004) research paralleled Deer's (2010) and Kanu's (2007) research by examining community perspectives and attitudes concerning Aboriginal language and culture teaching practices within the contemporary classroom. Agbo identified issues of disintegration of traditional beliefs that affect the development of initiatives to renew and to integrate culture and language within classrooms. The participants interviewed in Agbo's study believed that children should learn from Elders inside and outside the school setting, and that those traditional values may be relevant to their social well-being and sense of belonging. Furthermore, participants indicated that it is not only

the responsibility of the school to provide Aboriginal perspectives education to all students, but that community members need to take an active role in creating a cohesive “two-way system of education” (p. 18). Agbo’s study supports a reciprocal learning relationship between the school and community members (e.g., Elders) for all students across Canada to learn and share the history, customs, and cultures of Aboriginal people. Therefore, in order for Aboriginal students to take ownership over their culture, all students need to be exposed to the rich, authentic, traditional practices that Elders can provide.

The research reviewed by Kanu (2007), Deer (2010), and Agbo (2004) illustrates that education needs to include Aboriginal perspectives in all areas of curriculum. The results indicate that by including Aboriginal perspectives, students respond positively and attainment increases, along with a sense of belonging. However, educators must exercise caution and not become discouraged if student performance does not immediately increase with the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives. School attainment and a sense of belonging for Aboriginal students cannot be improved solely based on Aboriginal perspectives being taught within classrooms. Teaching Aboriginal perspectives is one piece of the puzzle, and educators need to continue building trusting relationships and forming bonds with and among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.

### **Positive Effects of Inclusion of Aboriginal Students**

With increased teacher training and professional development with reference to the inclusion of Aboriginal perspectives, a number of positive initiatives for Aboriginal students have surfaced within the Canadian educational system. Provincial and federal education is changing to accommodate the Aboriginal learner both academically and socially. Recently, social-emotional competence of young Aboriginal children has gained attention with regard to preventing social, emotional, educational, and health problems later in life (Tremblay et al., 2013). Tremblay et al. (2013) identified crucial elements for the healthy development of Aboriginal children, while paying particular attention to social-emotional development. Their research has demonstrated that early interventions for Aboriginal students with respect to social-emotional needs have positively influenced the developmental growth of Aboriginal students. Programs noted by Tremblay et al., such as Head Start, have a foundation in Aboriginal ways of knowing and being that contribute to youth learning who they are, and being confident, proud, and accepting of their cultural backgrounds. The study conducted by Tremblay et al. addresses the importance of children knowing and understanding their cultural history. The Head Start and the Friendship Centre programs create opportunities for young Aboriginal youth to become immersed in their culture and to learn from Elders. Tremblay et al.’s research strengthens attention to the need for more Aboriginal intervention programs to use the lived experiences and perspectives of Aboriginal people. The enhanced programming supports Aboriginal children to do better in school and to develop pride in their culture and a strong sense of belonging, instead of turning to negative self-perception and activities, including substance abuse.

Drug and alcohol abuse is quite common among adolescent youth in the Canadian school system. According to Napoli et al.’s (2008) study, 87% of Aboriginal students have reported using drugs or alcohol while attending school (p. 33). These results are daunting, because all students (n=243) surveyed responded that school isolation and disconnectedness contributed to turning to drugs as a coping mechanism for their feelings of lack of belonging and self-identity. However, when educators focused on Aboriginal perspectives and building positive relationships with Aboriginal students, the reports of drug abuse diminished. The research findings cannot be generalized to all Aboriginal adolescents across Canada; however, a strong sense of belonging does play a proactive role against the use of drugs and alcohol, and ultimately improves school completion rates.



School dropout rates for Aboriginal youth are alarming. MacIvor (2012) found that higher than average dropout rates for Aboriginal people contribute to a disproportionately higher poverty level for Canadian Aboriginal people. MacIvor examined the lived experiences perceived by Aboriginal middle school youth and factors that contributed to their school engagement. Results of the study revealed that cultural learning environments, workloads that accommodate learning capabilities, and teachers and principals who build relationships with students positively affect Aboriginal student success and completion rates in high school. This research supports the need to build positive relationships with all students, in order to reduce high dropout rates.

MacIvor's (2012) results confirm that culturally affirming environments motivate school engagement for Aboriginal learners, because participants identified that inclusion was important to their school life and social well-being. Participants further stressed that joining in school activities (e.g., sport teams and clubs) created a sense of belonging and was an important aspect in maintaining school engagement. While all participants communicated that peers, family, and their communities positively influenced school engagement, they identified their teachers as the most influential and important contributing factor to their educational success. Participants noted that building positive relationships with teachers significantly influenced their engagement to return or stay in school. These results demonstrate the importance that teachers have in fostering belonging for Aboriginal students through culturally inclusive learning environments in which Aboriginal students perceive that they are valued learners.

Much like MacIvor's (2012) research, Richmond and Smith (2012) examined the importance that quality social supports have in improving the learning and educational achievement of Aboriginal youth within Canada. By interviewing urban Aboriginal youth about their opinions of school environments and the social supports that shape a sense of belonging, Richmond and Smith gained a better understanding of the programs and resources that 14 Aboriginal youth needed in order to remain in school. The most compelling results indicated that all of the research participants were affected by violence and other negative experiences at some point throughout their schooling. Lack of trust and feelings of segregation across social, cultural, and curricular lines contributed to marginalization and a feeling of not belonging within the school environment. Richmond and Smith further reinforced that establishing culturally safe supports, whereby Aboriginal students can seek help from Elders and teachers to navigate between two cultures, has increased school attainment rates and promoted a sense of trust and belonging among Aboriginal learners and their peers.

The literature reviewed by Tremblay et al. (2013), Napoli et al. (2008), MacIvor (2012), and Richmond and Smith (2012) reveals that Aboriginal youth are caught between two distinctive cultures and that they require support and guidance to feel accepted and valued. Each study researched the numerous social-emotional needs of Aboriginal learners and what some educators are doing to support their Aboriginal students' well-being and sense of belonging within society. The results indicate that policy-makers and educators need to listen to the voices and concerns of Aboriginal youth. Once that dialogue has been initiated, nourished, and sustained, together all parties can do what is truly needed to support success in both the traditional and non-traditional sense for Aboriginal youth. The foundational concern remains the building of meaningful teacher-student and student-student relationships so that all citizens of the school feel welcomed and valued for who they are.

## **Discussion**

The literature reviewed throughout this paper has identified key elements of Aboriginal education that need attention. The same issues and problems are identified, and the same recommendations are made across the literature, time and again. It is apparent that some changes have resulted from recent initiatives in Aboriginal education; however, more significant change is needed if the situation will ever be rectified and learning environments created wherein Aboriginal people feel a sense of belonging and ownership over their future. It is evident

from the research examined that fundamental changes must be made and that educators need training and professional development so that outdated pedagogical theories and teaching practices of the dominant white society are no longer relied upon and perpetuated.

Perhaps the most compelling and troublesome results are that, despite the fact that most educators know the importance of teaching culturally relevant pedagogy, little seems to have been done and education is still seen as a form of oppression for many people. Aboriginal education cannot be exclusively approached by Aboriginal or European cultural perspectives alone, but rather through a blend of these two and other worldviews. Through a combining of several approaches, all students will gain a richer sense of culturally appropriate ways of life, while developing sensitivity, a stronger sense of belonging, and higher school retention rates. The literature available reveals that further research is needed in several areas of Aboriginal education and that we are now only beginning to see empirically based research that answers important questions related to social-emotional and educational success for Aboriginal children (Ledoux, 2006). Currently, most of the research is based on descriptive or narrative results rather than on quantitative research, which is understandable as changes begin to take place in some classrooms. It is important to discuss the significance and need for fostering a sense of belonging with Aboriginal students; however, the research lacks extensive in-depth studies of Aboriginal learning styles. That situation may influence views on achievement and sense of belonging due to the expository nature of many of the contemporary studies. Further research is needed in the area of Aboriginal language programs and the effects of their integration on students' academic and social-emotional success in school and in the broader society.

Although the literature communicates an urgency to expand the qualitative data, researchers must be careful of racial biases and appropriately target their research for change. A participatory action research approach is conducive to being respectful of Aboriginal cultures and philosophies. This approach provides Aboriginal communities with the autonomy to establish which concerns are important. Researchers and educators continue to face several challenges related to Aboriginal education. However, with persistence by collaborative advocates, genuine integration of Aboriginal perspectives will increasingly help to meet the needs of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

The need for change within our classrooms has inspired me to add a whole new set of authentic stories related to Aboriginal cultures. Before I began my research, I thought that I understood the importance of teaching Aboriginal perspectives, but I admit that I did not do a great job of integrating Aboriginal content in all areas of curriculum. Now, I look for ways to support the Aboriginal students and their culture within my classroom. This past year, I taught the Seven Teachings of wisdom, love, respect, bravery, honesty, humility, and truth to my kindergarten class by using Aboriginal author Chad Solomon's book series (e.g., *Rabbit and Bear Paws Sacred Seven: Truth*, 2011) and The Treaty Education Initiatives (Treaty Relations Commission of Manitoba, 2015) as support. From these teachings, I found that both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children learned to make authentic connections with one another and developed a greater sense of self-worth. Students became confident in expressing feelings and forming a caring environment wherein everyone was supported and welcomed. Conflicts within the classroom were easily resolved by using the language given within each teaching. I felt delighted and enthusiastic to witness a diverse classroom coming together, sharing, and being proud of who they were and willing to learn in-depth about another culture. Over the course of a few weeks, students were willing to share their culture in a judgment-free environment and to create their own stories about the Seven Teachings. Learning about the Seven Teachings benefitted both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in my classroom.

## **Conclusion**

This literature review strengthens the notion that for Aboriginal students to feel successful, they must first feel valued. For this reason, it is important that educators nurture culturally

inclusive learning environments and recognize their responsibility to influence Aboriginal students' sense of belonging through their interactions, curricula taught, and instructional strategies used. It is clear from the research that innovative ways to include culturally relevant learning must take precedence if we as educators are serious about improving Aboriginal students' achievement and sense of belonging. Continued efforts need to be made to improve the quality of education that Aboriginal people receive so that they see themselves represented equitably within the curriculum. Hopefully, such an approach will develop an environment of trust and create generations of lifelong learners who feel valued, respected, and included.

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## About the Author

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# How Trauma Affects Student Learning and Behaviour

Stephanie Frieze

## Abstract

*Each year, more and more students are entering the school system having experienced different forms of trauma, such as violence, death, abuse, and illness. Children who are exposed to trauma run the risk of facing negative long-term effects that include mental illness, depression, and anxiety. This literature review provides an overview of how exposure to trauma affects children's mental health, as well as student learning and behaviour. Academic performance, school attendance, and overall intelligence are affected by exposure to trauma. Suggestions for supporting students with trauma exposure range from everyday interactions to intensive intervention programs, which include traditional and non-traditional practices as well as group and individual programs.*

Throughout my teaching career, I have observed children entering school with a variety of traumatic experiences that teachers cannot imagine facing themselves. Such experiences may cause students to live in fear and pain, and may also lead them to struggle in areas such as learning and behaviour. As a teacher in a school where many of the students have experienced situations such as abuse, violence and loss, it is important for me to educate myself on how to support these students in coping and working through such detrimental experiences.

My passion is to make a difference for students and to guide them to reach their always expanding potential. My goal is to learn more about the different effects of trauma on student learning and behaviour. In order to help students affected by trauma, I hope to acquire strategies to connect with them, understand their home and community life, and provide guidance for coping with their experiences. I want to provide a supportive environment in which my students feel safe expressing their concerns. As this environment is nourished and sustained, my goal is to work with students to debrief in relation to their experiences and to develop coping strategies. As I become more skilled in supporting students with exposure to trauma, I would also like to provide ongoing support for other teachers and students division wide. I hope that the information I acquire through my research will help me, and others, to support students with trauma exposure. My first step in supporting my students is to learn how trauma exposure affects mental health.

## The Effects of Trauma Exposure on Mental Health

Trauma exposure includes witnessing and/or being involved in one or more of a broad range of traumatic experiences. Such experiences affect children in many different ways. Some children suffer negative long-term effects from trauma exposure, often resulting in symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These symptoms are similar to the symptoms of people who attended residential schools, for example, because residential school survivors continue to experience negative long-term effects from their experiences.

Traumatic events include a vast range of experiences. Jaycox et al. (2009) defined trauma as "a sudden, life threatening event, in which an individual feels horrified, terrified, or helpless" (p. 49). While exposure to, and experiences with, violence are detrimental to mental health, violence is only one type of experience that is considered to be traumatic. Duplechain, Reigner, and Packard (2008) considered traumatic events to include "hearing gunshots, witnessing muggings, stabbings, or shootings; or seeing a dead body" (p. 118). According to Kuban and Steele (2011), traumatic events also include "medical procedures, drowning accidents, house fires, car fatalities, substance-abusing parents, divorce, and living with a terminally ill relative" (p. 41). Experiences are considered to be traumatic if they happen to the child directly, but also

if they happen to their loved ones or to other people around them. These experiences include, but are not limited to, divorce, death, injury, sexual and physical abuse, severe accidents, cancer or life threatening illness, natural or man-made disasters, war, terrorism, physical punishment, female genital mutilation/cutting, child labor, prostitution, pornography, bullying, and suicide (Little, Aiken-Little, & Somerville, 2011). Living in poverty, displacement from homes, and having a parent serving in a war zone are also experiences that are considered to be traumatic for children (Sitler, 2009).

Witnessing, or being a victim of, any of the previously mentioned traumatic events can have detrimental effects on children's mental health and well-being. *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV) describes a traumatic experience as "a serious threat to a person's physical and/or psychological being" (as cited in Duplechain et al., 2008, p. 118). After experiencing trauma, children often view themselves and the world differently, because they lose their ability to make sense of their experiences (Kuban & Steele, 2011). Not only is their rational thinking altered, but their emotional brain is also affected. Symptoms of trauma include "posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety problems, depressive symptoms, and dissociation" (Jaycox et al., 2009, pp. 49-50). Further effects of trauma include "school drop-out, violence perpetration, internalizing problems (i.e., posttraumatic stress disorder), alcohol-related problems, and illicit drug use" (Zahradnik et al., 2010, p. 409).

The most damaging experiences with violence affect a child's microsystem, such as physical and sexual abuse, because they involve violence that is directed at the child (Voith, Gomoske, & Holmes, 2014). Voith et al. (2014) examined both the individual and cumulative effects of the following domains of violence: direct violence, family violence, and neighborhood violence. The results revealed that children with experiences in more than one of the domains displayed greater symptoms of trauma and depression when compared to those with experiences in only one domain. For example, the symptoms of a student who has witnessed his/her mother being abused may be less severe than the symptoms of a student who has been directly physically abused him/herself, because the direct physical abuse affects the child's microsystem. A student who has witnessed his/her mom being beaten, and who has been beaten him/herself, may have more severe symptoms than both of the previously mentioned students, because this student has had violent experiences in more than one of the domains.

As noted, traumatic experiences can have long-lasting effects. First Nations residential school experiences are an example of a traumatic context that has not only negative long-lasting effects on the people who attended the schools as children, but also negative multi-generational effects on the survivors' children and grandchildren (Dionne & Nixon, 2014). First Nations residential school survivors continue to experience trauma as a result of their experiences at residential schools. The students at residential schools were stripped of their beliefs and were often abused by the adults at the schools. An example of a multi-generational effect of the residential school experience is a lack of parenting skills. When the schools were closed, or when the students went home, they no longer knew what good parenting consisted of because they had been deprived of their parents for most of the year, just as their parents had been deprived of them. The lack of parenting skills resulted in residential school survivors often raising their children in neglectful and/or abusive circumstances. It is possible that students in today's schools are still being raised in neglectful or abusive homes due to the influence of their grandparents' or great grandparents' experiences in residential schools.

While it is important to understand the effects of trauma exposure on children's mental health and well-being, as teachers it is also important to explore the effects of such experiences on children's learning and behaviour in school.

### **The Effects of Trauma Exposure on Student Learning and Behaviour**

Exposure to trauma can "impact learning, behaviour, and social, emotional, and psychological functioning" (Kuban & Steele, 2011, p. 41). Maslow's Hierarchy of Developmental

Needs suggests that children whose physical needs are not met, such as the need for safety, struggle to achieve to their full potential (as cited in Duplechain et al., 2008). If children are focused on basic needs – such as physiological needs, a sense of security, and emotional needs – they are more likely to be unable to concentrate in school. These children tend to have “attention problems, lower cognitive functioning, behavioural problems, decrease in school attendance, grade repeats, [and] achievement problems,” including lower reading achievement (p. 119). Clearly, trauma exposure can lead to “impairment in school functioning and aggressive and delinquent behaviour” (Jaycox et al., 2009, pp. 49-50). In terms of achievement, children who have experienced trauma have “poorer school performance, decreased IQ and reading ability, lower GPA, and more days of school absence” (Kuban & Steele, 2011, p. 41). Confirming the research, it has indeed been my experience that students who have experienced trauma display poor academic performance overall, with poor attendance and low reading levels. In examining classroom behaviours, researchers have found that students suffering from the effects of trauma may present with behaviours such as passivity, inability to concentrate, verbal and physical blow-ups, frequent absences, and “spacing out” (Sitler, 2009, p.120). I have observed that students with trauma exposure do, in fact, display these behaviours.

It is evident that exposure to trauma has negative effects on student learning and behaviour. Student achievement is highly affected by students’ experiences with traumatic events. Duplechain et al. (2008) found that exposure to violence specifically has a negative impact on reading achievement. The researchers attributed low reading achievement to the fact that after being exposed to trauma, students’ experiences cannot be left outside the classroom, and are brought into their reading situations. Furthermore, children cannot concentrate on their school work when they do not feel safe, and as a result are anxious, fearful, and focused on suppressing the traumatic memories. Moreover, after being exposed to a traumatic event, children struggle with motivation, concentration, focus, and personal connections, all of which are essential in promoting reading achievement.

Surprisingly, Duplechain et al. (2008) found that students with moderate exposure to trauma had lower reading achievement than students with high exposure to trauma. They attributed the lower reading achievement to the fact that educators recognize students who experience high exposure to trauma more easily than students who experience moderate exposure due to the high exposure students’ “low achievement, grade repeats, discipline problems, attention problems, and poor school attendance” (Duplechain et al., p. 129). When it is recognized that a student is overtly experiencing trauma, educators may identify the problems and work to help the student. When the needs of the high-exposure students are addressed, their reading achievement may also improve. The reading levels of the most at-risk group – the moderate exposure group – progressively declined over the three-year period of the research by Duplechain et al. Educators may not notice these children as at-risk because they may not overtly exhibit school-related concerns like the high exposure students. Due to this lack of identification of the students in the moderate exposure group, and thus less attention to addressing their needs, their reading achievement is more negatively affected by violence exposure than students in the high exposure group. The researchers did observe a decrease of achievement in the high exposure group from year two to year three. It is suggested that these inconsistent results indicate that over time, students with high exposure to violence become less able to adapt and may become exhausted, which affects their long-term reading performance.

Student behaviour and learning are affected by exposure to trauma. Deficits in meeting Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs can have a major impact on students. Educators strive to meet the needs of all learners, so it is important to provide recommendations for supporting students.

### **Supporting Students Through Everyday Interactions**

Some children are more resilient than others and may not develop the symptoms of post-traumatic stress after a traumatic experience (Little et al., 2011). Other children, however, may

develop a number of post-traumatic symptoms, and if intervention is not implemented, the severity of the symptoms of PTSD can worsen. Post-traumatic symptoms negatively impact student learning and behaviour.

It has been my experience that most teachers are not trained in supporting students who suffer from trauma exposure. To help students with trauma exposure, teachers need “a greater understanding of how trauma manifests itself in learners” and they also need to “pay greater attention to learners as whole persons with physical, emotional, and cognitive needs” (Sitler, 2009, p. 122). For children who have experienced violence, undesirable classroom behaviours can often be attributed to students wanting “teachers to engage them at Maslow’s third level of caring” (p. 122). Researchers have suggested many recommendations for engaging students at this third level of caring. Some of these recommendations include asking how a student is feeling, helping students to stay focused on tasks, and offering positive outlets for students to express their concerns. Teachers can also display attention and caring by making sure that students have the physical tools needed to be successful, such as a lunch and school supplies. Additionally, teachers can show that they care by greeting students when they arrive, encouraging students, and giving students strategies to cope when they become overwhelmed.

Duplechaine et al. (2008) provided suggestions that teachers can use to help students whose struggles to read have been exacerbated by trauma exposure. Their suggestions include increasing one’s awareness and attention to such students by referring them to school counsellors, developing a professional awareness of the harm traumatic exposure can have on school achievement, and monitoring students for exposure to traumatic events. As well, teachers can help by providing students with a role model or a mentor, by encouraging students to read books that show people who have overcome difficult situations, and by providing opportunities for students to journal or express their emotions through other forms of creativity.

It is important for teachers to get to know their students and to interact with them daily in order to help them cope with their experiences. Having said that, sometimes those everyday interactions are not enough to help children who have been exposed to trauma, and more intensive intervention is required.

### **Supporting Students Through Intervention**

Researchers have studied programs that have been effective in supporting traumatized children. Some have recommended the following intervention programs: traditional and non-traditional practices, the Support for Students Exposed to Trauma (SSET) program, Trauma Focused Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (TF-CBT), Cognitive Behavioural Intervention for Trauma in School (CBITS), Project Fleur-de-lis, and the Structured Sensory Intervention for Children, Adults, and Parents (SITCAP) program. Furthermore, with a variety of initiatives, communities can support young people and provide opportunities for them to develop resilience, which will help them to overcome response symptoms of exposure to traumatic events.

Dionne and Nixon (2014) suggested that a combination of traditional and non-traditional practices may be beneficial in helping First Nations people “gain spiritual wholeness” (p. 335). Traditional healing practices include the medicine wheel and sweat lodge ceremonies, face painting, and pow-wows. Non-traditional healing practices include one-on-one counselling and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings. Non-First Nations teachers may not be able to implement the suggested traditional practices, but they could recommend that students whom they are concerned about take part in such practices by connecting them to traditional people with the help of school division personnel or organizations as the local Friendship Centre.

In the Support for Students Exposed to Trauma (SSET) program, teachers or school counsellors engage students who have been exposed to traumatic events in 10 lessons designed to reduce symptoms of PTSD and depression (Jaycox et al., 2009). The 45-minute lessons focus on “psycho-education, relaxation training, cognitive coping, generalized anxiety, processing traumatic memories, and social problem solving” (Jaycox et al., p. 50). The lessons

are divided into four sections: review the previously taught skill, learn a new skill, take part in activities to master the new skill, and create a plan to practice the new skill every day. In measuring the outcomes of the SSET program, Jaycox et al. (2009) observed a decrease in students' symptoms of PTSD and depression. The students were identified as having either high or low symptoms, based on their scores on the Child PTSD Symptom Scale. Children with scores of 11 or higher were identified as having low symptoms, and children with scores of 18 or higher were identified as having high symptoms. Children with scores lower than 11 were ineligible to participate in the study. The intervention effects were more distinct among children with high symptoms, and there was no significant change in students with low symptoms.

One limitation of the work done by Jaycox et al. (2009) is that the researchers did not measure the long-term effects on the students who participated in the SSET program. Also, students of specific ethnic minorities were predominant in this study; therefore, the results may not generalize to schools with students of different ethnicities. Furthermore, the study did not evaluate the effectiveness of the program in relation to school performance and behaviour, but in relation only to changes in presentation of symptoms.

Trauma Focused Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (TF-CBT) is specifically designed to meet the needs of individual children and their families, while respecting the families' religious and cultural beliefs. The sessions include "relaxation training, reviewing the traumatic event, and creating a permanent product," such as a journal (Little et al., 2011, p. 452). A study done by Roberts and colleagues in 2009 revealed that for people with a clinical diagnosis of PTSD symptoms, the only intervention to make a significant difference within three months of a traumatic event was TF-CBT (as cited in Little et al., 2011).

Cognitive Behavioural Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS) is a group intervention program for children ranging from ages 10 to 15 who have been victims or witnesses of traumatic events (Little et al., 2011). The group sessions begin with a review of the previous session and then the introduction of new activities. The six main components of the group sessions are "education, relaxation training, cognitive therapy, real life exposure, stress or trauma exposure, and problem-solving" (Little et al., 2011, pp. 453-454). Little et al. (2011) found that the children involved in CBITS showed lower levels of "psychosocial dysfunction, PTSD symptoms, and depression" (p. 454).

CBITS may be a good intervention program to consider for schools with First Nations students. Morsette et al. (2009) studied the effects of the program on Native Americans who lived on reserve and displayed symptoms of PTSD and depression (as cited in Little et al., 2011). The results of the study revealed that symptoms of PTSD and depression were significantly reduced through the implementation of CBITS.

Project Fleur-de-lis is a three-tier model that was designed in response to the needs of children who were exposed to traumatic experiences during and after Hurricane Katrina (Little et al., 2011). Project Fleur-de-lis incorporates the TF-CBT and CBITS intervention models. Schools, social services agencies, trauma researchers, and clinicians were all involved in developing Project Fleur-de-lis. Tier 1 of the intervention, entitled Classroom-Camp-Community-Culture Based Intervention, was intended to support as many children as possible in a short amount of time. If students needed further intervention, they were referred to Tier 2, which was the Cognitive Behavioural Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS). If PTSD and depression symptoms were not alleviated after 10 months, the students were referred to Trauma Focused Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (TF-CBT).

In order to overcome their traumatic experiences, children must feel safe and have a sense of control. The Structured Sensory Intervention for Traumatized Children, Adolescents, and Parents (SITCAP) program is intended to help traumatized individuals to think more clearly and develop positive coping strategies. Kuban and Steele (2011) described the goal of the program as turning traumatic memories into a resilience resource rather than a trigger for panic. The main idea of the SITCAP program is to have individuals experience their traumatic memories in a safe environment on a sensory level. The sensory activities include drawing and specific



questioning that “target the sensations which are experienced in a traumatic event,” such as terror, fear, worry, and powerlessness (Kuban & Steele, p. 42). Re-experiencing the event allows individuals to think differently about what has happened, eventually moving from “victim thinking” to “survivor thinking” (Kuban & Steele, p. 42). Once the individuals develop a survivor mindset, they become “actively involved in their own healing process” (Kuban & Steele, p. 42). If the individuals can see themselves as survivors, they strive to heal, and the healing process becomes a more positive experience. The intervention is implemented over 8 to 10 sessions that address the following major themes: “fear, terror, hurt, worry, anger, revenge, guilt, accountability, absence of safety, powerlessness, and victim thinking versus survivor thinking” (Kuban & Steele, p. 43). Kuban and Steele claimed that with the support of school counsellors, social workers, and psychologists, the reduction of PTSD symptoms in children with trauma exposure will have long-term effects.

The SITCAP program is concerning to me, because making witnesses or victims of trauma relive the event re-victimizes the person and thus seems needlessly frightening. If children need to feel safe and in control in order to overcome their traumatic experiences, making them relive the event is perhaps not the best approach. Kuban and Steele’s (2011) article addresses only the results of one student’s intervention, which does not present sufficient evidence of the program being successful. It is possible that Kuban and Steele’s purpose was promotion, because Kuban is the director of the National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children (TLC), and Steele founded the institute.

While some youth experience severe PTSD symptoms from being exposed to violence, others are resilient, and continue to succeed despite their trauma. Zahradnik et al. (2010) discovered that resilience can protect children from PTSD symptoms. Communities can help children to develop resilience by teaching them how to access community resources such as “education, economic security, cultural traditions, and housing” (Zahradnik et al., p. 409). Zahradnik et al. recommended that communities with youth who have experienced trauma develop programs that offer “involvement with community and cultural traditions, thus experiencing the community as fair” (p. 418). It is important for communities to provide resources and support for youth with exposure to violence, because resilience “protects from the development of more severe PTSD” symptoms (Zahradnik et al., pp. 416-418).

As an educator, I have taught students with both high and low levels of resilience. For example, one student’s father had been in and out of jail multiple times for domestic violence. It was highly likely that this student had witnessed the violence, and had possibly been a victim of the violence him/herself. The student worked hard, was polite, had friends, and was academically successful. He/she would be considered to have a high level of resilience, because despite the exposure to trauma, he/she continued to be successful. Another student in the same class had witnessed his/her mother being abused and had been abused him/herself. This student was aggressive with other students, was disrespectful, and struggled academically. He/she would be considered to have a low level of resilience, because his/her behaviour and academic achievement were negatively affected.

Klasen and Crombag (2013) reviewed the literature to “identify the most promising interventions as well as most urgent research gaps in the area of global child and adolescent mental health (CAMH) interventions” (p. 596). Group and individual interventions showed hopeful results in reducing the symptoms of anxiety and depression in children and adolescents. Klasen and Crombag recommended involving parents when treating children who experience anxiety and depression. Klasen and Crombag found that community, group, and individual treatments, as well as prevention strategies, are effective; however, they were unable to determine when, why, and with which children and adolescents specific interventions should be used. Their final suggestion is to use a multi-tiered approach that touches on different intervention techniques. There were very short follow-up periods in many of the research reports that Klasen and Crombag reviewed. Without long-term follow up, it is difficult to know whether the programs and interventions had significant effects on the children and adolescents.

It is hoped that through the implementation of one or a combination of traditional and non-traditional practices – the SSET, TF-CBT, CBITS, and/or SITCAP programs – educators can address the needs of children who have been exposed to trauma, and help the children to develop resilience. Supporting teachers in developing an awareness of the effects of trauma, and providing them with supporting strategies, would be beneficial for the children in need.

## **Discussion**

Teachers need to have an awareness of how trauma affects children. Not until I researched the effects of trauma on the mental health, learning, and behaviour of children did I truly realize that students' negative behaviours and learning deficits may be caused by underlying issues in their personal lives. Prior to my research, I responded to misbehaviours by immediately serving consequences, often involving the principal. Now that I am aware of the effects of trauma on children, I meet with students following behavioural incidents, and we work together to identify why they have behaved that way and to come up with a plan for working through their feelings the next time (instead of yelling or fighting, for example). Our plan often includes the strategies suggested in this review, such as journaling, drawing, and other avenues to express their feelings and to achieve a sense of self-control, such as deep breathing and intensive exercises.

I have also changed how I interact with students on a daily basis. Before conducting my research, while my students arrived at school in the morning and got ready for recess, I would prepare for my next lesson or spend time in the staff room. My research has taught me that taking time to greet students in the morning and asking them how they are can make a big difference in showing the children that I care about them. Since I have started greeting students in the morning, I have found that I can help the students start their day on a positive note. If a child has had a bad night or morning at home, I can recognize the negative emotions when the child enters the school, and can help turn the child's day around by simply saying good morning, asking the child if he/she is all right, and giving the child an opportunity to talk to me.

I believe that the changes I have made in interacting with students have made a difference in their behaviours and their learning achievement. I have seen improvements in the behaviours of my most challenging students. I also anticipate seeing improvements in my students' learning achievement over time, because they are now receiving some of the attention and caring from me that they may be lacking at home or from their peers. Also, by providing a safe learning environment, it is hoped that the children will be able to focus on their learning rather than being in a constant state of fear and worry.

Numerous articles recommend specific intervention programming to support children who have been exposed to trauma. While aspects of the programs that I researched have been successful, it is not possible in my current context to increase my expertise to the point when I know how and when to implement such programs, and which programs are most appropriate for my students. Little et al. (2011) confirmed my suspicion that teachers and school personnel are often not trained in supporting students with trauma exposure, and that only clinicians typically receive this type of training. Clinicians are rarely in our schools, and students suffering from the effects of trauma need to meet with someone more than a few times throughout the year.

My learning about the lack of training for teachers, and my feeling of inadequacy in supporting my students with trauma exposure, have motivated me to continue my research in this area. I have taken it upon myself to continue my studies in guidance and counselling. I hope that by furthering my education, I will become trained in implementing programming to support students who are suffering from the effects of trauma exposure. In the future, I would like to teach educators about the effects of trauma on children, and to provide them with strategies that they can use to support their students with such experiences.

Educators can apply the recommendations made in this review for everyday interactions with students. However, due to a lack of training, most teachers will be unable to implement the programs suggested. Further educator training would help to address this problem.

## Conclusion

Teachers struggle to support children in coping with the effects of trauma exposure. Children who have had traumatic experiences display various types of mental health, behavioural, and learning challenges. Classroom teachers are not trained in implementing the intervention programs suggested to support students in overcoming the effects of trauma. There are changes that teachers can make in their everyday teaching practices and interactions with students, in order to help children to be successful despite their traumatic experiences. As a teacher, I have implemented some of the suggestions and have noticed positive changes in students who have been affected by trauma. Through further teacher training regarding the impact of trauma on student learning and behaviour, teachers will feel more confident in recognizing, supporting, and meeting the needs of all students.

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## About the Author

Stephanie Frieze has recently started her Master of Education, focusing on guidance and counselling. While having taught children who have been traumatized, and experienced the feeling of helplessness in knowing how to support these students, she has developed a passion to further her expertise in this area.

# Literature Review: Differentiation in Education

Chantel Bushie

## Abstract

*The purpose of this literature review is to explore the nature of differentiated instruction in education. Through the duration of the graduate course Interpreting Educational Research, I extensively researched the topic of differentiated instruction. My belief is that differentiated instruction is an expected approach to teaching and learning, because teachers offer choice of authentic and relevant activities that engage and motivate all learners of all academic abilities and ways of learning. Differentiated instruction calls for teachers to reflect upon their practices and methods in order to make changes as needed to provide a quality education for all. The purpose of this paper is to review the research relevant to and supporting differentiated instruction. What is/is not differentiated instruction? Why does differentiation work, and what does differentiation look like? These questions are addressed in the paper. The relevancy of differentiated instruction in education is discussed, and a suggestion for further research is noted.*

Education is an integral component in my life. As a lifelong learner, a current teacher, and a professional in the field of education, I consistently strive to reach, expand, and then again reach my full potential both academically and professionally. As a First Nation woman working on a Manitoba First Nation reserve, I persevere to attain a higher level education in order to become a positive role model and to serve as an active and committed representative within my community. Equally important, I want to play a role in the excellent level of education that Wanipigow School has and continually aspires to offer. Teachers who are strong leaders and who strive to succeed along with their students are needed in First Nations schools. These teachers must reflect upon and adapt their teaching methods in order to cater to the needs of the students, so as to decrease school dropout rates while increasing the number of high school graduates each year. My passion lies in math education, and I strongly believe that math curricula must be delivered as a balanced approach, one that incorporates both traditional teaching methods and differentiated instruction and learning. Likewise, differentiated instruction should be employed in all subject areas. All students deserve a quality education, which may then lead to a brighter future with more opportunities in careers and life in general. Differentiating instruction in today's classrooms, particularly on Manitoba reserves, is a fundamental building block to a quality education that may lead to a positive and productive future for First Nations students.

## Defining Differentiated Instruction

Children entering today's schools possess qualities that reflect diverse backgrounds, encompassing differences in race, ethnicities, cultures, and family histories. Coupled with these qualities is the variance of learning profiles, learning styles, abilities, and interests. As more children with diverse backgrounds complete the profile of today's classrooms, it is imperative that educators plan to work to meet the needs of all students. To respond to the ever-increasing number of diverse students, there is a call to differentiate instruction.

## What Differentiated Instruction Is

Carol Tomlinson (2001), a leading expert in the field of differentiated instruction, stated that "a differentiated classroom provides different avenues to acquiring content, to processing or making sense of ideas, and to developing products so that each student can learn effectively"

(p. 1). This approach requires active and continuous planning on the teacher's part that considers and reflects understanding of student differences, and that accommodates the various ways that students learn. To accomplish this approach, teachers must be knowledgeable in the theory and research of contemporary education (Tomlinson, 2015a). Tomlinson also stated, "Differentiated instruction is a systematic approach to planning curriculum and instruction for academically diverse learners. It is a way of thinking about the classroom with dual goals of honoring each student's learning needs and maximizing each student's learning capacity" (as cited in Osuafor & Okigbo, 2013, p. 556). To differentiate instruction, then, depends significantly on teachers' professional knowledge and ability to ensure that what they do in their classrooms involves meeting the needs of all learners. The approach takes both expertise and insight. Because each child is different, so then are the ways in which they learn; as such, teachers must recognize what opportunities for learning are appropriate for each child within the classroom and how to provide those opportunities.

Osuafor and Okigbo (2013) suggested that differentiated instruction means creating multiple parts of a learning outcome, "so that students of different abilities, interests or learning needs experience equally appropriate ways to absorb, use, develop and present concepts as a part of the daily learning process" (p. 556). This enables students to take greater responsibility and ownership for their own learning and provides opportunities for peer teaching and cooperative learning. In their study, Osuafor and Okigbo (2013) wanted to determine whether differentiated instruction would improve the understanding and performance of Nigerian students if employed by biology teachers. They determined that in a setting with students who had previously received only a traditional style of instruction led by lectures, there were significant improvements made by all students who received differentiated instructional methods. The findings helped to define differentiated instruction and further support differentiated instruction as a means to deliver a quality education.

Chamberlin and Powers (2010) discussed the research concerning the core principles that guide differentiated instruction. The first tenet of differentiated instruction is for teachers to identify clearly what students must learn about a particular subject, which links assessment to curricular outcomes and to instruction. Next, teachers must attend to student differences. While doing this, they are accepting students as they are, while simultaneously challenging them to reach and then to expand their full potential. Further, students participate in respectful work as they are challenged at an appropriate academic level. Working at an appropriate level promotes critical thinking. Moreover, teachers and students work collaboratively while maintaining a balance between the teacher-led and the student-led roles. Additionally, teachers are flexible; they use groups and whole-class discussions interchangeably. Students are placed in groups that are based on their readiness levels, interests, and/or learning profiles. A final tenet of differentiated instruction calls for teachers to be proactive as opposed to reactive. Initially, teachers prepare lessons beforehand that consider learner differences, which ultimately saves time and effort to adjust instruction when all aspects of the lesson do not work out. As well, space, time, and materials are used flexibly to suit the needs of students. When combined, these principles of differentiated instruction can guide teachers as they incorporate this practice into their teaching repertoires.

Differentiated instruction is a critical component in the education of all students, and it is important that all teachers consider and use it in order to deliver a quality education. This approach to teaching requires active planning and continuous assessment of one's own practice, while continuously providing opportunities for different avenues to acquire and apply knowledge that is meaningful for students. As teachers engage in this reflective practice, it is imperative to distinguish between what differentiation is, as outlined in this section, and what it is not.

## **What Differentiation Is Not**

While most research has focused on what differentiation is, it is also important for teachers to distinguish what it is not. This enables teachers to be more insightful as they prepare to implement differentiated instruction in their professional repertoire. Chamberlin and Powers (2010) stated that “differentiated instruction is not synonymous with individualized instruction in which the teacher varies instruction for every student” (p. 114). This approach can be extremely time consuming and may eventually lead to teacher burnout. Further, a commitment to differentiating instruction does not mean that a teacher has to follow that approach for each class. Whole-class instruction of certain concepts is integrated as well, as long as there is a meaningful purpose and it is well balanced. In a typical classroom, instruction may be differentiated one-third to one-half of the time. Moreover, differentiation in instruction does not result in an unbalanced workload for students, such that gifted students are expected to complete more assignments while students who are struggling do less work. Rather, all students work on activities that are at a suitable level for them and include opportunities for critical thinking. Finally, there is not just one way to differentiate instruction. The actual implementation is as varied as the needs of students in the classroom. Differentiated instruction is not a recipe for teaching, or a single strategy; rather, it is a process that is as varied as the number of students in a classroom.

A common misconception about differentiated instruction is that it is extremely complicated. When addressing differentiation, Strahan, Kronenberg, Burgner, Doherty, and Hedt (2012) noted, “Many educators mistakenly think that differentiation means teaching everything in at least three different ways – that a differentiated classroom functions like a dinner buffet. This is not differentiation, nor is it practical” (p. 3). This misbelief about differentiation is what discourages teachers from even considering the possibility of incorporating it into their teaching pedagogy.

It is imperative that administration teams are themselves conversant with differentiated instruction, and that they properly inform and effectively train teachers to deliver genuine differentiated instruction. While differentiated instruction may initially seem difficult to implement, it is the duty of all teachers to ensure that they work to their full professional potential as they educate each child to achieve to the best of his/her ability. Differentiating instruction is a means to fulfill one’s duty as a teacher. There is substantive research available for access by teachers as they learn the use of differentiated instruction in education.

## **Research Supporting Differentiated Instruction**

Differentiated instruction has proven to be successful for student learning. Vygotsky’s (1896-1934) socio-cultural theory of learning and the zone of proximal development are two theories that strongly support the use of differentiated instruction (Vygotsky, 1986). The socio-cultural theory is particularly relevant with respect to teaching, schooling, and education because it is based on the belief that in order for learners to develop cognitively, they must be exposed to social interaction in a cultural context. Vygotsky’s theory is crucial for differentiation because it approaches education not as a product, but as a process. With its attention on social interaction, this theory views the student-teacher relationship as collaborative, and the learning experience as reciprocal. It is evident that this theory has implications for differentiation. As teachers use differentiation in their classrooms, they build a classroom community wherein interaction and cooperation are required, and the students’ cultural contexts are included in instruction and learning.

Likewise, Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development is another grounded theory for differentiation, because it refers to the level of development attained as learners engage in social behaviour (as cited in Subban, 2006). Learners can progress only in relation to their zone of proximal development. They learn independently if a teacher or expert first guides them, and

if instruction incorporates existing knowledge prior to the delivery of new information. Furthermore, according to Vygotsky, language and speech are tools that humans use to learn and to live within their social environments. Consequently, scaffolding instruction can be an appropriate strategy to reach and then to expand the range and complexity of learning outcomes within the zone of proximal development. The zone of proximal development relates to differentiated learning because while teachers instruct and challenge students at their appropriate levels, they are aware of and working within each student's level or zone of proximal development, which promotes learning, and then they are continuously expanding that student's zone to a higher level of learning. Clearly, Vygotsky's theories support differentiated instruction.

Howard Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences holds that students learn through various intelligences (as cited in Subban, 2006). The eight intelligences are logical-mathematical, verbal-linguistic, musical, visual-spatial, bodily kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist. Children's natural learning styles should be taken into account when determining or assessing their learning profile and then responding to that profile with appropriate pedagogy. The principles of Gardner's multiple intelligences theory have important implications for a differentiated approach to teaching.

The findings in brain research also have significant implications for differentiated instruction. Brain-based research is relevant to education because a brain's ability to process, store, and retrieve information relies on the environment in which the student is situated, the challenges proposed, and a student's ability to make meaning of the information through connections that are relevant to his/her life (Tomlinson & Kalbfleisch, 1998). Consequently, teachers should nourish classroom-learning environments that are safe and non-threatening. Moreover, students should be appropriately challenged to think critically at a level that is attainable to them, not too easy or too difficult. Overall, the skills and content should be meaningful to the students' personal experiences.

Tomlinson (2015b) argued in favor of differentiation. Recent work in neuroscience and psychology reveals two findings that should be central in educational planning (Tomlinson, 2015b). The first is that all brains are malleable, meaning that when teachers teach as though all students are capable, they (both students and teachers) become ever more capable of addressing increasingly complex concepts. The second is that teachers who believe in the capacity of each learner will demonstrate to students that they can achieve their goals by working hard while simultaneously knowing and taking advantage of their own strengths. With such an approach, all students achieve better results, because teachers no longer believe and teach as if only some students are smart, and others are not. Considering this research, it is critical for teachers to believe that every student is capable of learning, and that each student can be successful.

Combined, Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of learning and zone of proximal development, Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, and the implications of brain research provide substantial support with respect to differentiation and its positive effects on student learning.

### **Delivery of Differentiated Instruction**

According to Tomlinson (2001), "In a differentiated classroom, the teacher proactively plans and carries out varied approaches to content, process, and product in anticipation of and response to student differences in readiness, interest, and learning needs" (p. 7). Tomlinson (2001) clearly articulated what differentiated instruction entails. A significant element of differentiated instruction is the performance of teachers, and their self-efficacy. It is apparent that teachers must have not only the potential, but also the belief in oneself, in order to deliver a quality education.

Self-efficacy and how it affects teacher delivery of differentiated instruction were elaborated by Dixon, Yssel, McConnell, and Hardin (2014): "Self-efficacy beliefs are an assessment of one's capabilities to attain a desired level of performance in a given endeavor" (p. 115). Self-

efficacy, with respect to education, encompasses the teachers' ability to judge their capabilities to reach specific outcomes both professionally and with their students, which includes their ability to engage and motivate all learners. Dixon et al. noted that self-efficacy beliefs apply to the effort that teachers invest in teaching and goal setting, and their ability to persevere and remain resilient when situations become difficult. Therefore, it is critical for teachers to believe in themselves and in their abilities for self-improvement. Dixon et al. (2014) asked the following questions to determine the self-efficacy beliefs of their teacher-participants:

To what extent can you use a variety of assessment strategies? To what extent can you provide an alternate explanation or example when students are confused? How well can you implement alternative strategies in your classroom? How much can you do to adjust your lessons to the proper level for individual students? To what extent can you gauge student comprehension of what you have taught? How well can you provide appropriate challenges for very capable students? (p. 124)

To agree that these questions are important, and to answer positively, would imply a strong sense of self-efficacy, which is precisely what teachers need in order to be strong advocates for differentiated instruction.

Ollerton (2014) explained that quality teaching is based upon certain conditions. One condition is that teachers should begin planning with questions such as "How can I get my students to be actively involved with and engaged in . . . ?" (p. 46). Other conditions include a teacher's ability to provide stimuli, to offer strategies with open-ended questions, and to provide problem-solving approaches that build upon higher-level thinking. Additionally, quality teachers provide opportunities for project-based learning. These conditions, essential characteristics of a quality teacher, are also compatible with a differentiated approach to teaching. Self-efficacy and teacher performance are therefore crucial factors when delivering differentiated instruction and considering strategies of implementation.

The foundation of differentiated instruction is that teachers take advantage of every student's ability to learn. One way to accomplish that goal is for teachers to determine each student's preferred intelligence or style of learning, which takes into account Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences. To plan with multiple intelligences at the forefront is important to a differentiated approach in planning for content, process, and product or learning outcome. As teachers adopt a praxis that embraces multiple intelligences, they offer opportunity for students to reveal their creative side. Knowing how multiple intelligences improve learning is beneficial for teachers, and acting on that knowledge can reap rewards in student learning.

Kondor (2007) reported that differentiation entails more than just providing extra activities for students. Kondor found that students should be provided with authentic activities that are meaningful to their lives. She also established that offering students choice to construct knowledge in their own ways further meets their learning needs while motivating them to do well. When teachers provide students with the opportunity to make choices in their learning, it not only captures their interest, but also allows students to show their creativity through their learning.

When teachers take a responsive approach to teaching, they create a caring environment and build positive connections with students, which are fundamental to the differentiated approach to teaching. In their research, Strahan, Kronenberg, Burgner, Doherty, and Hedt (2012) found that as teachers take this responsive approach, thus establishing a caring learning environment, students respond by showing an improvement in their performance. Strahan et al. revised an existing logic model for the purpose of guiding the participant teachers through critical stages of responsive teaching. The stages included creating a classroom learning community, learning more about students as individuals, scaffolding instruction, and developing supportive interventions with students – all leading to the students' demonstration of higher



levels of reasoning in the final stage. This logic model for responsive teaching displayed differentiation in action. The model identifies the critical components of differentiation.

Correspondingly, the stages of the logic model in relation to responsive teaching can be applied to a differentiated approach to teaching. For instance, as teachers build a safe and caring classroom environment through positive classroom management, their approach develops trust, which in turn fosters the interpersonal skills necessary for shared responsibility, creating an environment that is fundamental to a differentiated classroom. While teachers learn about students as individuals, they create a respectful connection that nourishes the foundation of the teacher-student relationship necessary for learning. In their study, Strahan et al. (2012) created an interdisciplinary unit called *The Hungry Planet*; some strategies included in the unit were concept maps, vocabulary and inquiry activities, personal reflections, content journals, dialogue sessions, peer tutoring, and digital learning projects. Since responsive teaching is a component of differentiated instruction, the logic model can be adapted for use in contemporary differentiated classrooms.

In another study, Marshall and Horton (2011) found that as teachers gave students more time to explore concepts before explaining them, and especially if students were involved in the explaining process of the lessons, the approach resulted in improved student performance and greater ability to think more deeply about content. On the other hand, when the teacher used only the traditional lecture-based approach to teaching, it did not provide the opportunity for students to reach and then expand their full potential. Further, Marshall and Horton indicated that teachers should provide adequate time for students to explore the concepts in a given lesson and to discuss real-life problems relevant to the topic, prior to explaining. This fosters deeper cognitive levels and improved performance. The results of this study reveal that the time spent on certain stages of lesson planning is critical to the depth of achieved student learning, which is a fundamental component of differentiated instruction.

Strahan et al. (2012) reported a study that examined the classroom practices of five participant middle school teachers who were considered experts by their colleagues, and found that all teachers used strategies that addressed individual needs. The four common characteristics illustrated that all teachers offered personalized scaffolding, provided flexibility to achieve defined results, maintained subject area expertise, and created caring classrooms wherein student differences were viewed as assets and not deficiencies. The reported findings reveal additional strategies that teachers may use to differentiate instruction.

Ollerton (2014) asserted that differentiated learning happens regardless of what teachers do. Ollerton stated that the quality and nature of the stimuli that a teacher offers greatly affect the quality of thinking and the depth of sense making in students. Ollerton further explained that differentiation “happens at as many different levels of cognition and depth of sense making as there are students in a class” (p. 43). He suggested ways to ensure that differentiation is delivered at its best, which includes teachers seeking tasks intended to provoke active student engagement, planning tasks at different depths of learning, providing extension tasks that further develop thinking, and offering problem-solving opportunities through rich mathematical tasks. Ollerton suggested that rich mathematical tasks should be accessible to everyone, while providing challenge and opportunity for children to make decisions, and to promote discussion and communication among students. Each of these elements describes quality teaching, which in turn automatically embraces differentiated learning. Equally important, Ollerton further suggested that a flipped classroom model can be a possible strategy to differentiate learning. In the flipped classroom, students are given responsibility and ownership to teach information and concepts to their peers, with the intention of developing personal qualities such as independence and responsibility for their own learning.

Differentiation in education is an ongoing process that takes planning, dedication, and an open mind. As research has indicated, differentiated instruction is a necessity in education because it is an approach to teaching that addresses student differences such as learning styles, intellectual abilities, and personalities. There are numerous ways that teachers may

differentiate their instruction, because this pedagogy may be approached with the use of a variety of strategies.

## Discussion and Conclusion

All classrooms include students with disabilities, students with different races and ethnicities, students with different cultural backgrounds, and students with various academic abilities and learning profiles. Differentiated instruction in education is paramount to student success, because it is an approach to teaching that accommodates the variation of differences in students. Effective teachers use a differentiated approach to teaching in order to deliver a quality education to all learners.

Differentiated instruction is not a recipe for great teaching, but it is a process that integrates several core principles in instruction and learning. There is no single way to teach, and to differentiate means to offer a multitude of ways for students to learn. By providing students with choice, by offering assignments that reflect the variance of learning styles, and by assessing students regularly, decisive approaches to the delivery of a quality education can be nourished. Differentiated instruction requires teachers to use their professional expertise and common sense to build upon their teaching methods, while continuously reflecting upon their practices as they develop self-efficacy. Equally important, in a differentiated setting there is a strong sense of community with positive connections among students and teachers. Additionally, this setting fosters a sense of welcoming, safety, and caring in the classroom environment. Differentiation involves a profusion of possibilities that open up if teachers actively use the approach in their teaching repertoire. Differentiated instruction in today's classrooms can lead to improved student performance, which in turn can lead to more high school graduates. Education is the key to nourishing positive and active citizens in today's society.

After researching the topic of differentiated instruction through the duration of the graduate course entitled Interpreting Educational Research, I have discovered areas that require further research. One area of concern regards teachers who seem to lack the willingness to adopt different techniques, such as differentiation, into their teaching practices. As Ollerton (2014) suggested, "Differentiation is perhaps the most complex and critical issue for teachers to engage with" (p. 43). I believe that there should be more research conducted in the area of teacher motivation to improve student performance through differentiated instruction. As well, more research is needed to determine whether professional development opportunities for teachers on differentiated instruction will, in turn, have a greater impact on student learning.

Because there are many negative social factors affecting First Nations communities, which is the context in which I teach, the school should be the main place to prioritize a positive change; therefore, teachers who are willing and motivated to adhere to change should be teaching in these schools. Because I yearn for a better future for my community, I take my role as an educator very seriously. I hope that as a First Nations teacher working in my home community, I will make a positive impact on many youth, so that they too may one day become positive leaders and make a change for First Nations People.

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### **About the Author**

*As a current high school teacher and graduate student working to earn a Master of Education, Chantel Bushie strives to be an active role model within her Manitoba First Nation community of Hollow Water. Her experiences in the field of education have included working as an educational assistant, a former PENT student, and a middle years teacher.*

# **Literature Review: Promoting Successful School Programming for Students Living in Poverty**

**Nicole Olson**

## **Abstract**

*The purpose of this paper is to highlight the need for effective educational programming for students living in poverty. The reviewed literature outlines research that stresses the importance of self-regulation and working memory in learning, particularly for students living in poverty. As well, the paper provides a review of the research regarding the value of building relationships within classrooms, schools, and communities in order to encourage academic and social-emotional growth for students. Within the paper, the promotion of academic programming that integrates kinesthetic activities and social-emotional learning is also examined. Finally, the discussion section provides a focus and direction for the author's current and future practice as she aspires to be a change agent within her school for students who are experiencing poverty.*

As professionals, we are constantly searching for current research that focuses on enhancing student growth and creating positive learning environments for all of the students in our classrooms and our schools. The many insights that I have gained from my teaching experiences in grades 1 through 8 have left me with a passion to learn more about how all students learn, especially students who are living in poverty and dealing with chronic stress.

To explore these issues, the following paper reviews my evolving learning experiences emanating from a study of current research and literature of the effects of poverty on the brain. I began my research by searching the keywords of "poverty" and "stress." The articles that I selected included research from American and Canadian studies; however, preference was given to quality journal articles that contained Canadian content. As I learned more in each research article, my searches expanded, building on topics from the previous studies that I wanted to learn more about. Within the reviewed research, I discovered studies that provided successful research-based initiatives that will assist me in implementing programs that increase student and parent engagement. In improving my understanding of the current research, I am striving toward my goal of continually enhancing student achievement for all of the learners in my classroom, while using an affirming approach.

The following literature review provides an overview of current research on the effects of poverty on learning and the brain, including research examples that address the positive effect of developing and promoting relationships in order to assist students living in poverty, and strategies for promoting student growth by implementing effective programming. To conclude, I discuss how I will integrate this new knowledge within my professional role.

## **Understanding the Effects of Poverty on Learning and Teaching**

For educators, the implications of student stress that may be brought on by living in poverty can be noticeable in our classrooms. When thinking of the current statistics regarding child poverty in Manitoba, we must be aware, and have an understanding, of the experiences and challenges that many of our students deal with as they enter our classrooms. As recently reported by Campaign 2000, Manitoba's current child poverty rate is 29%, which is the highest among the provinces and 10% above the national rate (Frankel & Lewycky, 2014). This statistic reminds us to acknowledge that within our classrooms we will have students living in poverty who could be exhibiting signs of poverty-related stress. We must accept individual students as they come to us, and program accordingly for them from their areas of strength.

Statistics Canada uses a low income cut-off (LICO) measure to describe poverty. To be recognized as living in poverty in Canada, families must spend 20% of their income toward

meeting their basic needs (D'Angiulli & Schibli, 2011, p. 1). Having noted that, in their article regarding high achievement and the impact of poverty, Burney and Beilke (2008) reminded readers that there can be differing definitions of poverty in research literature. They also reminded the reader not to consider income as the lone factor when defining poverty, because that does not sufficiently depict all of the differences between those who have resources and those who do not. Burney and Beilke added that to define poverty is complex, and that both the length of time that a family has been in poverty and the poverty level of the family when the child was younger than five can influence student achievement. An important reminder for teachers, however, is that not all children living in poverty will react negatively or be unhappy (D'Angiulli & Schibli, 2011). Nevertheless, for many of our students, poverty will affect their performance in our classrooms.

### **The Effects of Poverty in Schools**

D'Angiulli and Schibli (2011) summarized the significance of poverty and how it can affect the neurological development of children. In their article, D'Angiulli and Schibli provided examples of corresponding student behaviours that could be exhibited in a classroom. Students may exhibit attention and concentration difficulties, have trouble blocking out distractions, exhibit trouble with recall, display higher emotional reactivity, and have difficulties forming peer relationships.

In addition to the above review of the research, White (2012) conducted a qualitative study to discover what teachers regard as the effects of poverty on students, how they respond to poverty in the classroom, and what they view as necessary to support students in overcoming barriers related to poverty. In the results, White described participant discussion points about the meaning of child poverty and how it affects students. Students coming to school hungry arose repeatedly in the group dialogue. Teachers in the focus group stressed the importance of offering subsidies for meals in a way that students would not be singled out. Participant teachers also explained extra challenges faced by students living in poverty. These challenges included students presenting with learning difficulties, students entering school not ready for the demands of kindergarten, students learning English as their second language, and students exhibiting with low attendance rates that in turn affected their learning. One of the biggest issues encountered by the focus group teachers was the unmet health needs of students.

Within her research, White (2012) also identified cuts to educational services and the negative attitude of some members of the school community toward families in poverty as being barriers to supporting students. In order to provide support for students, the participants in the research study stressed the importance of inclusive classrooms, of schools that care, and of strong community connections in order to promote learning. Connections with our students can create open lines of communication, which in turn can promote student achievement and help to offset poverty's negative effects on learning.

### **The Effects of Poverty on the Brain**

The article by D'Angiulli and Schibli (2011) provides a brief overview of how stress from living in poverty can affect the brain. The stress hormone cortisol affects the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex parts of the brain. These parts of the brain influence memory, planning, attention, and organization. Living in chronic stress can also result in emotional memories being more easily accessible than factual knowledge, which can then affect how, or if, new learning takes place in the classroom. Of particular interest in the article is the reviewed research on the effect that living in poverty may have on the brain's ability to filter out irrelevant information: higher socio-economic status (SES) students, on average, tend to be able to block out distracting information better than low SES students. D'Angiulli and Schibli also reported that low SES students' inability to block out irrelevant information may contribute to delays in oral

language and literacy development. As educators, it is imperative that we program accordingly for our students and remember to not treat students from a deficit approach, but to plan from areas of strength.

To understand the effects of poverty on the brain, it is important to understand the role of working memory and self-regulation on learning. Within their research, Evans and Fuller-Rowell (2013) used the following definition of working memory: “a temporary storage mechanism that enables human beings to retain a limited amount of information for a short period of time” (p. 688). This short-term storage, needed for information to be transferred into long-term memory, is imperative for basic skills such as language, reading, and problem-solving. As well, Evans and Fuller-Rowell described self-regulation as the ability to remain in emotional and behavioural self-control with competing social and physical demands. They predicted that children who have greater self-regulating capacity will experience fewer effects of poverty on chronic physiological stress and working memory. Evans and Fuller-Rowell referenced previous research that documents how childhood poverty and chronic stress can harm children's executive functioning capacities, including working memory.

The participants in Evans and Fuller-Rowell's (2013) study were 241 young adults with an average age of 17.33 years. The study consisted of half female and half male participants with thorough data collection on the duration of childhood poverty exposure, allostatic load, working memory, and self-regulatory behaviour. Evans and Fuller-Rowell defined allostatic load as “an index of cumulative wear and tear on the body caused by repeated physiologic mobilization in response to environmental demands” (p. 689). Approximately half of the sample in the study was below the American poverty line, and the other half grew up in average SES American families. The testing happened in each child's home, and data were collected from the child and his/her mother by two experimenters working independently.

Evans and Fuller-Rowell (2013) explained that stronger evidence was needed, but they also noted that children with better self-regulation appear to be protected in some capacity from the harmful effects of poverty on their working memory. This positive finding highlights the need for schools to provide opportunities for students to develop their self-regulation skills. Those opportunities may be mentored in schools that create a culture of supportive relationships.

### **The Importance of Relationships**

The impact of positive relationships in the profession of teaching is extremely significant. As teachers, we have the capacity to build those relationships with our students, with the families of our school community, and with our colleagues. Through first-hand experiences, I have found that encouraging relationships can motivate our students to work harder, to take more learning risks within the classroom, and to feel safe and accepted. This is especially true for students who live in poverty and experience stress. In their research, D'Angiulli and Schibli (2011) offered some suggestions for what we, as educators, can do to promote positive relationships and by doing so help our students who are dealing with stress. They stated that we must keep our expectations high. It is important to respect differences and plan with attention to learning styles. Finally, we must try to make our classrooms as stress free as possible and strive to build positive relationships between the school and home. As teachers, it is particularly imperative that we build our capacity to create meaningful relationships with our students.

### **Teacher-Student Relationships**

Schmitt, Pentimonti, and Justice (2012) examined to what degree the quality of the teacher-child relationship and behaviour regulation are related to the grammar gain of preschoolers from low SES backgrounds. As well, Schmitt et al. asked, “To what extent are the relations between the quality of the teacher-child relationship and grammar gain moderated by children's behaviour regulation?” (p. 686). They defined at-risk students as those from low-SES homes.

Teacher-child relationships were explained positively as being those of closeness, which included warmth and approachability, and were explained negatively as being those of conflict, which included strained interactions with a lack of rapport.

Schmitt et al. (2012) conducted their study of teacher-child relationships within a larger study that examined instructional practices in preschool classrooms that were identified as working with at-risk populations. The research participants were 173 children of various ethnic backgrounds, with a mean age of 52 months and from 30 United States childcare centers. Most of the centers had only one participating classroom and were identified as Head Start programs and state-funded/Title 1 programs.

Schmitt et al. (2012) found that the quality of a teacher-child relationship had an association with a student's grammar gain over the course of a year. They also noted that there was no significant relationship between children's behaviour regulation and their grammar gains during the year; however, children with strong behaviour regulation and conflicted teacher-child relationships showed greater grammar gains than their peers with low behaviour regulation skills and conflicted teacher-child relationships. The results validated that nurturing classroom environments with positive relationships can enhance academic learning and language development, as well as social development. The culture of inclusive relationships must also extend to include each student's caregivers.

## **Relationships with Parents**

It is important to get to know and understand the parents of our students. When the school creates a welcoming atmosphere among parents and community members, that positive approach engenders collaboration that can then provide support for all involved. Based on focus group findings, White (2012) emphasized the importance of building connections with parents because the parents' own experiences in the educational system could have been negative. In her research, Hands (2013) focused on strategies for connecting with and supporting parents who deal with challenges that affect their engagement with their child's education, such as poverty and cultural diversity. As referenced within the article, parents who are engaged in their children's learning promote student achievement and well-being. Hands defined parent engagement as shared control over education, with an understanding that parents hold knowledge that contributes to teaching and learning.

Hands (2013) addressed the challenges of family engagement and elaborated the strategies and initiatives used in the study that might facilitate more parental involvement for all families. One strategy discussed was to build resources for parental engagement, such as translation services, childcare services, transportation services, and free programming. Another successful strategy that promoted inclusion was giving parents the opportunity to be involved in student learning through programs such as the Get Involved: Volunteer in Education (GIVE) program and Families and Schools Together (FAST) program. Through providing access to these initiatives and strategies, Hands' study supported student achievement through collaboration.

Hands' (2013) research findings confirmed many of my personal experiences when working with families that live in poverty. I have been fortunate to be a part of the FAST program at my school. As a classroom teacher, I see the major rewards of the program as connections and relationships are formed that promote home-school partnerships. My colleagues and I have discussed how to attract and include more teachers in this program, because it is a positive experience for everyone involved.

I have also been involved in parent-teacher evenings designed to inform parents of school programming, in which fewer than 10 parents attended. Hands (2013) encouraged educators to be aware of the format of the presentation, to know where to hold the function, to know what the parents want, and to know how to encourage attendance. For me, this means rethinking how to plan for upcoming events in my school. As elaborated by Hands, our initial step may include

going into the community and listening to what our families identify as beneficial. This is an approach that I will be discussing with the administration at my school when planning for school-wide events and when planning for the next school year with my colleagues.

### **Relationships and Collaboration Among Colleagues**

Teamwork has always been an important component of my professional role, and one that I feel has benefited me, my students and their families, and my colleagues. Ciuffetelli- Parker, Grenville, and Flessa (2011) discussed a Canadian qualitative case study funded by the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario. Over a one-year period, narratives were collected from adult groups of teachers, parents, and administrators who discussed what made schools successful when working with students who live in poverty. The 11 schools selected for the study consisted of 6 small schools in an urban area, 3 large schools from the same urban area, 1 suburban school, and 1 rural school. The demographics of the schools ranged from all-English speaking students to schools with 50% of their population identified as English language learners. The student population of one school consisted of a majority of Aboriginal learners. The schools in the study were nominated based on their reputation for success.

One of the key findings of the study was that successful schools had a committed teaching staff. As stated by Ciuffetelli-Parker et al. (2011), "Teacher participants attributed school success and a positive school climate to teaching excellence and high-quality collaboration" (p. 144). As teachers, it is important that we make collaboration a priority for the benefit of our students. When schools can provide time for colleagues to work together, it helps students, teachers, and families. Teachers reported that it could be hard to find the balance between addressing social-emotional learning and academic learning. They relied on collaboration among colleagues for support; the schools and teachers in the study reported that they felt a collective responsibility for all of the students in the school. The successful schools implemented new initiatives, including peer modelling and coaching, and Professional Learning Communities. As reported by Ciuffetelli-Parker et al., the staff cared about students and each other, with the goal being to improve students' social-emotional well-being and academic achievement.

The narratives in this study were relevant, and I could easily relate to what the teachers in the study were feeling. In my experience, working as a team with students, colleagues, families, and community members has been immensely rewarding because it has provided me with personal knowledge of how effective collaboration and the sharing of ideas can be facilitated across classrooms, and into homes and the community. I believe that all students within a school are our responsibility, not just the students in our homeroom. When we collaborate as a school community, we promote student academic and social growth through joint approaches to student programming.

### **Programming To Support Student Success**

While a common theme among the reviewed articles was the power of relationships in making a difference for our students, another theme that emerged was the necessity for early intervention. It is important for schools and teaching staff to recognize students' strengths and areas of need in order to program for success. School staffs need to identify through collaboration the current level of performance of individual students early in their school years. This will enable teachers to put supports in place to help each student grow to his/her maximum capability. Burney and Beilke (2008) described the impact of poverty on achievement in school. Students living in poverty have limited access to resources to build their foundational skills and they have fewer opportunities for activities after school. With a positive and assertive statement, however, Burney and Beilke also stressed, "Low-income students of academic promise offer the nation's best hope for reversing the trend of an increasing number of families living in poverty"



(p. 188). They suggested initiatives for schools working with students who live in poverty, while emphasizing the importance of early intervention and better school programming.

Many programming suggestions were offered by various authors throughout my reviewed research. In particular, to assist students living in poverty to reach their maximum potential, Burney and Beilke (2008) stated that schools must identify high-ability students living in poverty early in their school years, develop resilience in students, encourage family support for students, provide students with access to accelerated instruction, deliver professional development for educators, and offer mentorship to students.

Programming suggestions stated by teachers in the study reported by White (2012) highlighted the importance of a structured approach with clear expectations. White also noted the importance of small group learning, of responding to emotional issues at the start of the day, of confidence-building techniques, and of positive reinforcement for attendance. In middle/secondary school, strategies that were reported as effective were making learning meaningful, understanding the causes of poverty, creating an inclusive community, teaching to strengths and interests, and empowering students. All of the programming aspects speak to the importance of addressing the needs of the whole child.

### **Programming To Integrate Academic and Social-Emotional Skills**

Meeting the complex needs of children and adolescents requires reflection about one's own context and students. For me, relevant research and integration of practices that facilitate both social-emotional learning and academic success are imperative. Daunic et al. (2013) acknowledged the link between social-emotional learning (SEL) and academic learning, while recognizing the pressures within schools to find time to promote social-emotional learning. As a way to provide time and context for social-emotional learning, Daunic et al.'s study combined SEL with acquisition of literacy skills, such as vocabulary development and comprehension, in order to create a Social-Emotional Learning Foundations (SELF) curriculum. The purpose for the pilot research study was to determine the usefulness of integrating the selective, small-group SEL intervention with literacy instruction, to pilot implementation protocols, and to collect data to initiate an examination of potential for improving social-behavioural outcomes.

Daunic et al. (2013) conducted their research in 8 kindergarten classrooms in 2 schools that expressed an interest in the program. Kindergarten teachers chose 3-4 students who were identified for behavioural risk, not including students with other disabilities. The study implemented five social-emotional learning components: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management, and responsible decision-making. The lessons were taught for 20 minutes, two to three times per week in small groups (3-4 students), in order to increase opportunities to promote language, especially language related to SEL. The pilot study findings revealed a positive indication that both literacy and self-regulatory skills that are associated with SEL were improved by using the integrated program.

By further exploring the strengths of effective programming, Welsh, Nix, Blair, Bierman, and Nelson (2010) investigated the association between developing working memory and attention control skills, and acquiring emergent literacy and emergent numeracy skills in pre-kindergarten. The researchers conducted a quantitative research study of a large sample of children in the Head Start pre-kindergarten program. Welsh et al. hypothesized that growth in working memory and attention control would be related to growth in emergent literacy and numeracy skills over the course of the pre-kindergarten year, and that growth in these skills would each influence reading and math achievement in kindergarten. Attention control was described as the ability to focus and shift attention, and to ignore irrelevant stimuli.

After analysing the data compiled in the research study, Welsh et al. (2010) concluded, "The data provided convincing evidence that development in working memory and attention control during the preschool period might be an important contributor to later academic achievement in reading and math" (p. 51). They acknowledged the need for more research in

this area in order to strengthen the findings. As well, Welsh et al. examined the growing evidence within their findings of a close association between working memory and attention control, and ability in mathematics. They speculated that pre-kindergarten math activities make demands on working memory and attention control. In addition, Welsh et al. suggested that working memory and attention control experience rapid development during the preschool years. For me, this statement highlighted the need for programs to encourage growth in these domains during preschool and kindergarten years, especially for students living in poverty. This is certainly something that I will be sharing with my colleagues and the parents of my students when I return to my numeracy support teaching role next school year. In that role, while addressing the needs of my students and their families, I will also work with an understanding that I must program from my students' areas of strength.

### **Learner Factors for Effective Programming**

In my professional experience, when planning for student achievement, it is important to identify and plan from the strengths of the students in the classroom, from their prominent learner factors. Olivares-Cuhat (2011) conducted a pilot research study to explore learner factors that are common in high-poverty urban schools. She used a comparative research design with descriptive statistics to measure the relationships among learner factors such as learning style preferences, language learning strategies, and emotional intelligence of students from an American high-poverty middle school. She also examined differences in learner factors between students of distinctive ethnic backgrounds. Learning style preferences were explained in the article as matching teaching and learning styles. Olivares-Cuhat described language learning strategies as activities such as mnemonic devices and relaxation methods chosen by learners in order to regulate their own learning. The final learner factor of emotional intelligence was defined as intelligence that is broken into various cognitive abilities.

Olivares-Cuhat (2011) discovered that the students had a strong preference for kinesthetic and sensing-perceiving learning styles. She also found that these students were significantly below average in emotional intelligence. As well, different learning style preferences and abilities were found across different ethnic backgrounds. When students can find their culture and learning style integrated in the teaching and learning process, more learners will benefit.

These findings indicate that educators must deliberately plan for and integrate programs for students who live in poverty and experience the symptoms of stress that students living in poverty often present. Integrating social-emotional programs with academic programs is a practice that requires attention in our classrooms. As well, the need to be aware of learner factors within classrooms is paramount (D'Angiulli & Schibli, 2011; Olivares-Cuhat, 2011).

While considering all of the factors needed in order to engage and encourage our students to be lifelong learners, we must first get to know them as individuals and then program for their interests in a learning style that enables them to excel. When educators program for success, we can then also program for students in areas that require further growth. Knowing that demands of the teaching profession can be overwhelming and that teachers are constantly under time constraints, we must look at integrating social-emotional programming with academic programming, because the social-emotional aspect can greatly influence academic growth. Supporting our students fully and programming for achievement will help every student to feel a sense of accomplishment.

### **Summary and Discussion**

Within our classrooms, it is vital that we are aware of the strengths and needs of each of our students. When we connect with students and make learning meaningful, we are more able to provide opportunities for each student to succeed. The research and literature reviewed within my paper provide a foundation of information regarding the effects of poverty on student

learning. In order to help my students reach their full potential, I must be aware of the current research regarding the effects of poverty on learning. This research will help me to improve my programming and to incorporate practices such as social-emotional learning initiatives throughout the teaching day for all of my students.

As referenced throughout my review, the need to build self-regulation strategies into the span of a teaching day is imperative, because being able to self-regulate may provide protection from the harmful effects of stress related to poverty. It is important to identify students who would benefit from this programming, and to identify each student's strengths, in order to provide opportunities for individualized learning. Early recognition of the needs of each student and classroom within the school, followed by appropriate intervention, is important when assisting students who live in poverty. Part of the early identification is forming positive relationships within a classroom so as to gain a clearer understanding of each student's abilities. Emphasized in the research is the need for positive relationships within schools as a foundation for learning. When schools can plan and deliver programs that are proven to be effective for students living in poverty, they will facilitate the student success needed to promote continuous growth. These programs could include relationship-building initiatives, and opportunities for social-emotional growth and hands-on learning.

Although I feel enlightened by my new knowledge, I know that this is only the beginning of my work in developing programming to meet individual student needs. Through this research, I am reminded not to treat students from a deficit approach, but to work from their strengths. I am further motivated to build empathy, understanding, and support for students who are dealing with poverty in my school and school division. Further to this, I would like to encourage constant dialogue and collaboration at my school about the impact of poverty and its associated stressors on our students. As a head teacher at my school, I have recently started conversations with my administration team and colleagues regarding the impact of teacher mentoring. We are beginning to plan for the following school year on how we can more effectively support each other, which will in turn support our students to achieve to their highest capabilities.

In my classroom and within my school, I feel it is absolutely essential that we check in with our students every day and provide an environment wherein we all are aware of everyone's well-being, because then new learning is more likely to take place. As well as providing an environment that is engaging and safe, I know that I must give my students opportunities to learn from their peers. The influence of the peer group, especially in the middle years of school, is another important factor related to motivation. Belonging to a peer group that is serious about school and achievement can enhance the academic performance of students (Burney & Beilke, 2008). That reminder has prompted me to think of the positive influence of my school's Student Leadership Team. I am encouraged by the number of students who aspire to be a part of the Student Leadership Team. For me, it is important that we create these positive environments and teams for students within our schools. This will be an area of focus for me next year as I move into a learner-support teaching role.

Within my research, there was an introduction of strategies and programs that could promote self-regulation and attention control. Two such programs are the Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) program and the Tools of the Mind (ToM) program (Welsh et al., 2010). I have started to research these programs further. The ToM program is especially intriguing to me because it incorporates play. An area of future study for me will be the importance of play in the development of self-regulation, because I have witnessed students who are experiencing stress use quiet play as a coping mechanism in order to regulate their emotions. This is an area that I am anxious to learn more about through future research.

## **Conclusion**

As teachers within school communities, we must work cooperatively to provide the support that all students need. The knowledge that I have gained from the research regarding the

influence of poverty on learning will help me to achieve my goals of effective programming for students within my classroom. The reviewed educational research has confirmed for me that teachers and schools can be positive change agents for our students living in poverty. With this new knowledge and through collaboration with my students, their families, and my colleagues, as well as through student engagement built through strong relationships and programming, I am confident that I can help more learners to experience success.

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## About the Author

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# Literature Review: Supporting Struggling Readers

Katherine Dudych

## Abstract

*In 2013, the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program identified Manitoba as the province having the lowest reading achievement scores of grade 8 students across Canada. These poor results serve as an indicator that changes to the way teachers support struggling readers in the classroom and beyond its walls are essential. Struggling readers require specific skills to be taught to them in order to make gains in reading. Research in the area of identifying teaching strategies that support struggling readers in the classroom has highlighted several emergent themes. Increased student engagement results when teachers use strategies such as teacher-led read-alouds and e-books, and when students have choice in what they read. In addition, explicit instruction in phonological awareness and abundant opportunities to practise reading, both at home and at school, improve reading skills. When classroom instruction is not enough, research identifies that both Levelled Literacy Intervention and Reading Recovery are effective out-of-class intervention programs. Teachers are the ones who make a difference in supporting struggling readers through the use of concise and direct teaching methods. This paper addresses aspects that will assist the struggling reader to achieve success.*

The purpose of this paper is to synthesize research in the area of teaching strategies that support struggling readers. Reading is an important area of academic research because “many students struggle academically because of their persistent reading problems” (Abler-Morgan, 2006, p. 273). This paper takes a close look at several studies and their findings, including recommended teaching strategies that have proven to be effective in supporting struggling readers. The need to find ways to refine teaching practice, particularly to teach more effectively and concisely, serves as the motivation for this literature review. When teaching students at varying reading levels, with specific strengths and weaknesses, teachers need to be directly attuned to individual students’ needs and work to create some immediate change in an effort to increase students’ engagement in their own learning. This paper examines the essential skills that students need, and specific teaching strategies and programs that have been proven through research to support struggling readers both inside and outside the classroom setting.

## Research Rationale

Focusing my research on identifying ways to support struggling readers in the classroom has been driven by my professional experiences as an early years teacher over the past 15 years. As a teacher, I am always looking for ways to improve my practice, and I have used many different programs to support my teaching over the years. In my experience, when new teaching approaches have been offered or shown to me, it has been with the assurance of embracing what “research says” is the latest and greatest way to teach, without my really knowing, directly and for myself, what the research has actually found. Any publishers of programs or initiatives can provide research that is biased in efforts to support their particular programs. Throughout the Interpreting Educational Research course, I have learned that as a consumer of research, I need to look directly at research studies to determine the best practice for teaching reading and which methods to use when supporting struggling students in the classroom.

I currently work in a school with declining enrolment, with current school enrolment at 145 students and class sizes of around 20 students. This is a manageable number of students for a teacher to have in a class, but within each class are many social, emotional, and academic needs, both diagnosed and undiagnosed. Teaching in a small school has advantages for

teachers in that we are able to build relationships with all of our students on a personal basis. This positively affects student learning due to an increased sense of belonging and connectedness to caring adults. However, a small school also has disadvantages for teachers. With declining enrolment comes decreased support staff time allotment. This directly affects teachers, as well as student learning, because the available classroom support is insufficient to meet the learning needs of every student. Teachers need to be able to identify strategies that support learning for their particular context, because it is the teachers and not necessarily the program used that engenders student success. While all areas of learning are important to support, recent scores of Manitoban students on the Pan-Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP, 2013) identify that our students are lagging behind the rest of Canada in reading (O'Grady & Houme, 2014).

### **PCAP 2013 Reading Results**

The PCAP is a program designed to inform Canadians about how well our educational system is doing. In addition to providing current achievement data, it records changes over time in grade 8 students' scores in reading, mathematics, and science. Within the reading domain, the PCAP assesses reading comprehension, interpretation, and response to text (O'Grady & Houme, 2014). The reading portion of the 2013 PCAP painted a less than favourable picture of Manitoba's students in reading achievement.

Manitoba's reading scores were the lowest in Canada at 469, well below the Canadian mean of 508 in both English and French language schools (O'Grady & Houme, 2014, p. 42). Changes over time indicate that Manitoba's reading scores have continued to decline steadily (when assessed in 2007, 2010, and 2013). The 2013 study has some identifiable limitations that lead a research consumer to question the overall validity of the results: (a) participant selection did not clearly identify whether any (or which) private schools with a strong academic focus were included in the data; (b) the role that socio-economic factors played in affecting Manitoba's scores due to our high child poverty rate was not explored; (c) without explanation, the northern territories were not included in the PCAP data; and (d) specific assessment questions were not identified. Having this information would identify the specific areas of weakness in Manitoba students' reading skills. It is hard to improve practice when we do not have a clear picture of what we need to improve.

Regardless of the limitations to the PCAP study, the results are clear that Manitoba teachers need to reflect on current teaching practice and make changes to improve the quality of reading instruction that our students receive. We cannot simply continue to teach in our current manner and expect our students to do better on future PCAP assessments.

### **Classroom Instruction**

Research in reading identifies several reoccurring themes deemed essential to support struggling readers. Teachers are the ones who make a difference in the classroom. By increasing student engagement, providing explicit instruction, teaching phonological awareness, and developing strong home-school connections, teachers can assist struggling readers in making gains toward closing the reading gap.

### **Student Engagement**

A key factor that influences student success in reading is student engagement. When readers struggle, engagement in classroom activities is often decreased. Early on, students identify and begin to compare their own skills (academic and not) to those of their siblings and classmates. Reading skills are observed by students; as such, without ever identifying specific reading levels, children quickly determine who is a "better reader." Wiseman (2012) studied the

effects of not measuring up to classmates in a case study of kindergarten student Kevin, who at five years old had already disengaged during literacy instruction due to his low reading skills. Because no two learners learn at the same rate, teachers need to be aware of learning needs and support their students in fostering an eagerness to learn at a rate and in a way that enables individual success.

Wiseman (2012) cited a study by Good and Nicols (2001), which indicated that performance gaps in “at-risk” students are partially linked to instructional opportunities in classrooms. I agree with Wiseman that a deficit-based approach to teaching is often taken in schools rather than one that builds on strengths. In efforts to improve reading skills, I often become disenchanted and overwhelmed by what individual students cannot do, and I forget to look at all that they can do and how far they have progressed as readers. Wiseman also cited the work of Allington and Cunningham (2002), to provide an example of an ineffective teaching strategy that decreases engagement: “When students spend more time on isolated skills instruction and extensive repetition, the end result is disengagement and frustration” (p. 257). Understanding this statement, and seeking to teach in a manner with which all students can be successful, active participants in lessons, Wiseman identified interactive read-alouds to be an effective strategy that increases student engagement and literacy skills.

Interactive read-alouds provide all students with the opportunity to be challenged and to extend their thinking and understanding of reading through teacher-directed modelling and higher order questioning. During Wiseman’s (2012) nine-month qualitative study, a three-member study team observed the kindergarten classroom four times a week from October to May. Data were collected during morning meeting, read-aloud, and writing times. Field notes focused on teacher instruction, student interaction, and responses to read-alouds by student participant Kevin. The study findings indicated that despite Kevin’s struggles due to low reading skills, which led to disengagement and frustration during instruction, read-alouds “provided Kevin with opportunities to contribute in class in ways that extended his thinking about reading” (Wiseman, p. 264). As the year progressed, Kevin’s responses became increasingly sophisticated, and demonstrated deeper understanding, personal connections, and higher levels of engagement. Kevin’s “responses paralleled the teacher’s emphasis on complex thinking and open-ended responses” (Wiseman, p. 266). Wiseman used the case study data to determine that read-alouds are an effective teaching strategy to increase student understanding and engagement in literacy.

Just as read-aloud books are carefully chosen by teachers to promote interest and engagement by students, so too should appealing books be chosen for both guided and independent reading opportunities. Teachers need to have many books available at all reading levels, so that students can choose what they want to read. Interest in a book’s topic and relatability to characters are important elements that foster reading engagement. E-books have quickly become available for readers of all skill levels, and many websites and publishing companies identify them as an effective tool to increase student engagement.

Jones and Brown (2011) detailed a study with the purpose of examining reading engagement and comprehension of children as they read e-books. The participants were 22 grade 3 students who were determined by their teacher to be reading at grade level. Study data were obtained through enjoyment surveys and comprehension scores. The results indicated that most students did not have a preference between reading e-books or traditional print book format, but rather that the key factor of reading satisfaction was having a wide selection of books from which to choose. That does not mean that teachers should not use e-books, but that they can be used in addition to a print book library in order to increase book and format choice, and thus contribute to student engagement in reading. “Reading motivation and engagement are enhanced when students have choice in reading material” (Jones & Brown, p.16).

In order to engage students in reading, especially those who struggle, teachers need to orchestrate the reading process with success for all students as the end goal. Read-alouds are an example of modelling what good reading sounds like. They also invite students to participate

in rich literature-based discussions. Book discussions increase student confidence in that a teacher can acknowledge all responses and purposefully choose students to participate, thus facilitating strong student engagement. Choice of books is essential in promoting reading. Just as adults will not easily engage in books that are too difficult or that they are not interested in reading, neither will children. Regardless of the format, whether e-books or traditional print materials, teachers need to have an abundant library and give students freedom to choose what they read in order to have truly engaged readers. Once a student has the freedom to choose a book of his/her interest area and reading level, explicit teaching is essential for the student to acquire the necessary skills and strategies to become a better reader and be fully engaged in reading.

### **Explicit Instruction**

Explicit instruction involves individualized or small-group instruction that is specific to student learning needs. It targets a skill or strategy that the student needs to work on in order to become a better reader. Explicit instruction often occurs during small-group guided reading sessions wherein a teacher can focus on, but is not limited to, strategies such as phonological awareness, decoding, and segmenting skills.

Guided reading involves an opportunity for a teacher to read with students in small groups. In guided reading, students can be grouped either homogeneously or heterogeneously by reading abilities or by strategies that are being worked on, such as rereading or chunking letters. During guided reading sessions, the teacher provides direct instruction that meets individual student learning needs. This is essential for student learning, as Wiseman (2012) explained from Stevens, Van Meter, and Warcholak's (2010) research results that "explicit instruction in reading strategies, such as understanding story structure or using context clues to identify unknown words, has been shown to increase student reading abilities and comprehension" (p. 257).

McIntyre, Rightmyer, Powell, Powers, and Petrosko (2006) undertook a study to determine the amount of time that students should spend reading connected text in school. Their participants were 66 grade 1 students who were identified by their teachers as struggling readers in 26 classrooms in the United States. These students had scored in the lowest 20% on reading assessments in their classes. McIntyre et al. collected data through observations and interviews of the teachers with reference to their teaching practices. They looked at the amount of time that students spent reading connected text, defined as text with meaningful sentences, one or more sentences in length. The reading contexts included echo reading, choral reading, guided reading both silent and oral, and independent reading time. Read-aloud time, direct instruction to the class, word work, and non-print responses to literature were also addressed.

McIntyre et al.'s (2006) study did not provide a numerical value to answer the following question: How much should young children read? Rather, the results show that the most important factor in predicting and supporting reading success for struggling readers is "the kind of reading practice (and other instruction) that is occurring in the classroom" (McIntyre et al., p. 64). McIntyre et al. stressed the importance of teacher mediation for early readers to build reading skills, because "the first-grade children who gained the most were either provided guided reading practice or independent reading with feedback" (p. 66). Grade 1 learners are not typically ready for independent reading and are not usually able to apply what has been taught during reading instruction independently. McIntyre et al. suggested that phonics instruction is effective in supporting reading growth, but it needs to be child specific to be most effective.

### **Phonological Awareness**

Much research has been done into the importance of phonological awareness and phonics skills for beginning readers. Phonological awareness is a "strong and significant predictor of



word reading skills in elementary children” (Park & Lombardino, 2013, p. 83). These decoding skills are especially important in the early stages of reading, when students are learning to read and need to be taught directly by the teacher. Phonological awareness is essential for word recognition, and word recognition is a foundational skill for reading comprehension.

In efforts to support struggling readers, Park and Lombardino (2013) recommended specific strategies that teachers can use during instruction time to improve phonics skills: phonological awareness, phonics/decoding instruction, spelling instruction, vocabulary instruction, and morphological instruction. These components work together to increase students’ phonics skills during word study instruction. Effective teachers use all of these during reading instruction time, in order to engage, model, coach, and provide direct instruction that supports students in developing reading skills.

### **Beyond Classroom Instruction**

When classroom instruction is not enough, struggling readers require a more intensive approach to instruction in order to improve their skills. Intensive instruction is most effective when a highly skilled teacher of reading administers it. Choosing an effective reading intervention program from the many available can be difficult. Research consumers need to be cautioned by claims made by publishers that their programs are the “best” or “most effective.” Publishers have the ability to create a study whose results are favourable toward the product that they want to sell. Having noted that, two programs that I am familiar with for intensive support are Levelled Literacy Intervention (LLI) and Reading Recovery.

#### **Levelled Literacy Intervention (LLI)**

LLI is a program that was developed by Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell and is published by Heinemann. Schools within Pembina Trails School Division, where I teach, use Fountas and Pinnell’s assessment kit to determine our students’ reading levels. With a developing trend of experiencing an increased number of students in grades 1 and 2 who were reading below grade level expectations, my school purchased the LLI intervention kit to augment classroom reading instruction. LLI is designed to support students in kindergarten to grade 2. Its goal is to provide intensive, rich instruction that will elevate reading scores at a rate more rapid than with regular classroom instruction.

The LLI program requires little teacher training, and includes instructional videos to support program implementation. Ransford-Kaldon et al. (2010) conducted a study to determine the efficacy of LLI as an intervention program to support kindergarten to grade 2 students. In each of the three grades, student achievement in reading was greater for those who received LLI instruction than for those who did not receive LLI intervention. This was determined through benchmark assessments to determine the number of reading levels that each student increased post-intervention compared to initial testing scores. When surveyed, the teachers who took part in the study agreed that the LLI program was effective and positively influenced their reading instruction for their struggling readers.

In my experience with LLI, it is laid out in simple-to-follow lessons. Each lesson has reading, comprehension, word work, and phonics/phonemic awareness components, and follows the same basic structure. Books have reoccurring characters that students can relate to. LLI is conducted in a small-group setting; three students is the recommended number for small-group LLI instruction. Each lesson is designed to be 30 minutes in duration. As a classroom teacher attempting to administer the intervention, this time frame is often difficult to achieve. I have had to modify lessons, often shortening them so as to work within the confines of regular classroom routines. Despite the need to make modifications to the program, because of the success that my students have experienced I agree with Ransford-Kaldon et al. (2010) that LLI

is an effective intervention for struggling readers, which is more intensive than regular classroom lessons.

## **Reading Recovery**

For students who require an even more intensive reading intervention, Reading Recovery is available in many schools. Reading Recovery is designed to accelerate a student's literacy skills. It takes place through intensive, daily, one-on-one instruction and includes a nightly home reading component. Daily lessons are 30 minutes in duration and have three sections: (a) familiar reading and a running record, (b) alphabet, word work, and writing, and (c) introducing and reading a new book. Each of the three segments of a lesson receives equal amounts of emphasis and time (10 minutes). Students selected for Reading Recovery are in the lowest achieving 20% of grade 1 students within the school. This is determined through standardized assessments from An Observation Survey of Literacy Achievement (Clay, 2013). A student is typically in Reading Recovery for 10 to 20 weeks. When students are discontinued from Reading Recovery, it is because they demonstrate reading and writing skills that are equivalent to the average level of their peers at that particular point in time.

Jesson and Limbrick (2014) found that students who receive Reading Recovery intervention continue to be at risk and require monitoring by teachers to ensure that their skills continue to be at par with their peers. As well, a school focus on literacy, home-school connections and communication, high levels of literacy expectations for all students, and a collective responsibility by all staff are all necessary for Reading Recovery students to sustain their reading skills post-intervention.

Although the selection process and the number of students who can receive Reading Recovery support in a school each year is small, the program itself is effective. Having said that, every student may not be successfully discontinued (graduated) from the program after 20 weeks, and might need to be referred to other resources for additional support. Even so, those students are still farther ahead than they would have been if they had received only classroom instruction. Reading Recovery instruction is not prescribed, nor does it follow a specific lesson sequence. Teachers are trained and receive ongoing training to identify areas in reading where individual students require support. One drawback of Reading Recovery is that there are specific books from which a teacher must choose. There is a variety, but for some students the books are not engaging and this impedes their reading development. Because Reading Recovery teachers are highly trained, classroom teachers who are fortunate enough also to be Reading Recovery trained have a special set of skills that they bring to the classroom to support all struggling readers.

## **Reading Practice**

While it is important for students to have book choice, as well as a teacher who models good reading and provides ample opportunities for rich literacy instruction, all readers need practice to get better. This practice, coined "repeated reading," can be achieved both at school and at home. "When students are provided frequent opportunities to orally read text, they make significant gains in fluency" (Alber-Morgan, 2006, p. 273). Repeated reading is more likely to be achieved when the books are familiar to the child and are at an independent reading level. Repeated reading situates the child to practise fluency and orchestrate good reading. Alber-Morgan (2006) identified daily repeated reading as a crucial supplement to a reading program that includes immediate and constructive individualized feedback; such an approach is an effective strategy that helps students to attain optimal reading performance. Repeated reading can be done at home or at school through partner reading.

Creating peer partnerships with student mentors is an effective strategy to foster student success in reading in a manner that promotes student engagement. "Learning buddies," as the

strategy is often referred to, pairs up a student in an older grade with one in a younger grade. The younger student has the opportunity to read aloud and receive immediate praise, feedback, and encouragement from the older buddy. When this initiative is done in cross-grade groupings, even weaker readers in the older grades are typically able to support the younger readers and in turn gain confidence in themselves as readers. In my experience, cross-grade buddy reading is an effective strategy to facilitate engaged reading practice. A benefit to teachers is that it is not labour intensive for teachers to prepare, beyond creating effective partnerships and ensuring that students have books that are appropriate to their grade level to read aloud. This method is further enhanced if a teacher can meet with the older students prior to buddy reading, in order to teach the older students specific strategies or reading prompts to use with their younger buddies.

## **Home Reading**

An effective reading program includes a home reading component. Time spent practising reading at home is essential to consolidate the reading skills being taught at school. In order for students to be successful readers, they need to read; the more practice reading they have, the better they will get. A teacher needs to foster the home-school connection and create an open relationship with families in order to foster parental participation in school programs. No parent wants to see a child struggle academically, but parents often are challenged by not knowing how to help. It is a teacher's responsibility to promote reading at home and to make efforts to provide parents with the support that they need to make home reading a successful experience for both parents and children.

Martin (2011), a classroom teacher, observed that families of her students wanted to help their children academically at home, but were often frustrated due to lack of skills and understanding how to help. From this observation, Martin conducted a study to determine how to remove the barriers that inhibit parental support of a child's reading development at home. She determined that in order for home reading to be effective, giving parents easy-to-understand directives, academic support, and the necessary tools is essential. Giving parents specific guidance for homework removes the barrier that inhibits parental support.

When a teacher uses a variety of strategies within classroom programming, meets individual learning needs, accesses extra supports when needed, and works in partnership with parents to support struggling readers, success is more likely to be achieved. Learning to read cannot be forced, but each step along the way must be celebrated and seen as growth toward developing a lifelong reader.

## **Conclusion**

Struggling readers require extra support to decrease the achievement gap by developing reading skills that are at par with those of their peers. Due to staffing limitations, classroom teachers need to differentiate teaching pedagogy and provide programs that meet individual needs. Effective teaching practice includes direct teaching instruction that includes teaching phonological awareness skills, affording opportunities for immediate feedback, providing students with a rich choice of books, and creating opportunities to practice reading both at school and at home. It is the teacher who influences the approach to a specific program and who is the facilitator of learning. When classroom instruction is not enough, interventions such as Levelled Literacy Intervention and Reading Recovery are needed to supplement, but not to replace, daily classroom instruction. Teachers must work to ensure that all students receive daily, rich, quality, targeted reading instruction and provide the necessary tools for effective home reading practice to occur. When home and school teams work together to support struggling readers, growth in literacy skills is more likely to occur and the students will have the necessary skills to catch up to peers who are working at grade level.

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## About the Author

*For the past 15 years, Katherine Dudych has been an early years teacher in Pembina Trails School Division. She is currently working on her Graduate Diploma in special education at Brandon University, with a special interest in the area of literacy.*

# **Mature Students in Community College: Two Supports To Improve Student Success**

**Lynn Cliplef**

## **Abstract**

*Mature students are making up an increasing proportion of the student population at Canadian colleges and universities. At Assiniboine Community College (ACC), in southwestern Manitoba, an average of 360 mature students enrolled in various programs each year from 2008 to 2013. These mature students bring with them unique strengths and challenges. The purpose of this paper, after defining the term “mature student,” is to describe the barriers that mature students face in returning to college or university, to elaborate the importance of mature student success for themselves and their families, and to propose orientation and professional development programs at ACC in order to help the mature students of Assiniboine Community College to be successful.*

A significant number of mature students attend Assiniboine Community College (ACC) in southwestern Manitoba. These students are returning to school for a variety of reasons, for example, after working, serving in the army, or parenting for some amount of time. Because of their varying life experiences, mature students often have needs and expectations that are different from those of traditionally aged students and, thus, their college experiences are also likely going to be different. Mature students often do not have the same amount of time to commit to the entire “student experience,” because they are balancing their lives as students with outside responsibilities such as parenting, earning an income, and caring for aging parents. It is important to note that mature students, like any students, are individuals who do not all have the same characteristics or needs as learners. O'Shea and Stone (2011) remarked on this diversity, “When family commitments, employment status, past education experience and full- or part-time enrolment are considered, some idea of the melting pot of the mature-age student experience becomes apparent” (p. 275). Similarly, Fragoso et al. (2013) cautioned against viewing mature students as a homogenous group, because of their wide range of individual commitments and responsibilities outside of being students. In this paper, I describe the challenges that may face these mature students and propose supports that could be put in place in order to help these students to succeed.

There are differing definitions of mature students. Tones, Fraser, Elder, and White (2009) stated that 25 years old is a logical cut-off point because of “the significant difference in life circumstances between students aged less than 25 years . . . and mature-aged students” (p. 506). Fragoso et al. (2013) noted that mature students are often characterized by their inability to predominantly prioritize their academic life, but instead must make room for their studies among other responsibilities such as career, family, and personal factors. ACC defines mature students as those students who are over 25 at the beginning of their studies.

Because mature students often face barriers that differ from their younger, traditionally aged classmates, it is important for ACC to understand and meet the needs of these students. In this paper, I explore the following: the barriers that mature students face in their return to education, the concepts of self-investment and perseverance, and the implications of the success of these students for themselves, the college, and their communities. With this focus in mind, I then propose orientation and professional development programs that will help the college to meet the needs of these students and assist the students to transition successfully into their academic studies.

## Barriers for Mature Students

Upon returning to formal education, mature students often face various barriers that make it more difficult for them to make the transition to the role of the student. Petty and Thomas (2014) categorized these barriers as situational, dispositional, and institutional. Situational barriers are factors within their lives over which mature students may have little control, including childcare, finances, and legal difficulties. The term *dispositional barriers* refers to the barriers created by the students' own attitudes about learning, their level of self-confidence, and their resiliency. Institutional barriers can include difficult course material, class locations that can be difficult to find or get to, and institutional attendance policies.

Many mature students must overcome situational barriers in order to be successful in their academic studies. In order to overcome these external barriers, students must balance different aspects of their lives, including studying, working, and fulfilling family commitments (Fragoso et al., 2014; Petty & Thomas, 2014). Erisman and Steele (2012) found that the most significant barrier to adults returning to school was competing priorities. For example, because mature students often have to continue to earn a living for their families while returning to school, the students are forced to prioritize their time among their work, their families, and their schooling responsibilities. For students who are parents, this transition can be even more difficult because the students' children also have to adapt to their parents' new schedules (Fragoso et al., 2014). During the transition to academic life, the students' children may have an increased need for parental support and affirmation, and because parents returning to study have less time to spend with their children, this need can lead to an increase in parental stress and guilt.

These feelings of guilt have been found to be common in female students. Fragoso et al. (2014) found that students struggling with balancing work, family, and study reflected that they often have feelings of guilt. Study participants expressed feelings of guilt for being a burden to those supporting them and for prioritizing, at least seemingly in their minds, their education before their families. Participants reflected that they had to learn to let go of the idea that they could "do it all" in order to transition successfully into the role of the student. In order to be successful in their return to school, female students need to remember their motivations, including wanting to create a better life for their families, and put aside the guilt over prioritizing their studies.

In order to be successful, many mature students must overcome internal, dispositional barriers in order to transition to being successful students. In a survey conducted by Erisman and Steele (2012), more than half of respondents reported that the fear of failure was a significant barrier to their return to education. Mature-aged students who are returning to education sometimes lack the qualifications of their traditionally aged peers and, additionally, some do not have positive memories of formal education (Anderson, Johnston, & McDonald, 2014). Students who lack traditional qualifications may feel like they do not deserve to be there, creating lowered self-esteem. As well, having to attend classes with much younger peers can add to the psychological barriers faced by mature students (Erisman & Steele, 2012).

Mature students must also overcome institutional barriers in order to become successful students. Erisman and Steele (2012) found that many students cited bureaucratic barriers such as financial holds, difficulties with transfer credits, and receiving conflicting advice from different departments.

Mature students may face many barriers when returning to their education, and each student is unique in his/her history and the challenges that he/she has faced. Administrators, instructors, and counsellors of adult education programs should be aware of these barriers and assist mature-aged students as much as possible in overcoming them (Petty & Thomas, 2014).

## **Self-Investment and Perseverance**

One way to overcome the barriers that mature students face is for them to learn to understand and appreciate their own value, in order to use their own strength to maintain motivation and perseverance. Petty and Thomas (2014) found that students use motivation to overcome barriers to their participation in education. One study reviewed by Petty and Thomas found that many adult learners begin their studies with the motivation to be successful students, but as they proceed through their studies barriers to their education can act to de-motivate them. It stands to reason that creating an environment in which individuals can excel helps to maintain the high level of motivation for learning with which they began their studies. While not all students are motivated by the same things, it has been found that appropriately challenging tasks, good instruction, continuous success, and peer recognition in the classroom can combine to maintain motivation in students.

In order to overcome barriers to their education, students must rely on perseverance to maintain their motivation. One source of perseverance for students is self-investment (Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010). Vaccaro and Lovell (2010) defined self-investment as understanding one's own value enough to believe that "personal growth, learning, and education [are] needed and deserved" (p. 173). They stated that if a woman experiences self-investment, she will persevere in her education even with outside forces such as family and work pulling her away. This self-investment encourages mature students to see the value of education to them outside of just getting a better career; they see the education as a way of improving themselves and achieving success.

## **The Importance of Success for Mature Students**

For many mature students, the positive effect of returning to school reaches far beyond a different job or promotion. In Fragoso et al.'s (2013) study, students stated that the positive effects that their new education had on their lives far outweighed the hardships and barriers that they faced during their transitions to student life. Indeed, a return to formal education can change more in mature students' lives than their job prospects. O'Shea and Stone (2011) found that returning to education can improve all aspects of mature students' lives, from feeling more confident – "I feel like, all of a sudden, I've got a brain . . . My opinion is worthy" (p. 282), to a feeling of well-being – "Feeling fulfilled, completely filled the void" (p. 283).

Returning to education can also change how mature students view knowledge and learning. In Fragoso et al.'s (2014) study, students reported developing an intrinsic love of learning and knowledge, said that they were glad to have broadened their horizons, and reported a sense of pride for taking ownership of their future and making changes to their lives. By overcoming the barriers that they faced and by engaging in their education, the mature students in the aforementioned studies were able to grow in all aspects of their lives.

By returning to school, mature students improve not just their own lives; they also improve the lives of their whole families and their communities. Vaccaro and Lovell (2010) reported that for some students, there is a link between being good students and feeling successful as mothers. In O'Shea and Stone's (2011) study, students spoke of becoming role models for their children: "With them watching me read all the time, they're kind of improving themselves at school" (p. 284). By watching a parent go to school, students learn to see themselves as post-secondary students one day. One of the study participants stated that returning to school was the start of a positive cycle for the family: "I've now started a new cycle and my children can start too. . . . It's like breaking a vicious cycle" (O'Shea & Stone, 2011, p. 284). By returning to school, mature students become role models in their children's education.

While mature students have barriers for their study that are different from those of their traditionally aged counterparts, by overcoming these barriers students can change the lives of both themselves and their families. Because of all the advantages to students, their families,

and their community, it is important for ACC to work with and assist mature students to succeed in their programs and to meet their goals.

### **Mature Student Orientation**

One way that ACC could better meet the needs of mature students would be by creating an orientation program specific to their needs. Petty and Thomas (2014) found that orientation programs that include details about program expectations, relationship-building activities between staff and students, and goal-setting exercises are important to the success of mature-aged learners. ACC's orientation sessions would help students to prepare for their studies by providing instruction on study and on information technology (IT) and computer skills, informing students of student services available to them on campus, counselling the students on school-life balance, guiding the students through a goal-setting session, inviting the families of the students onto campus, and giving mature students the opportunity to network. Petty and Thomas (2014) found that mature students often drop out of adult education programs in the first few weeks, and that orientation programs can help students to understand the expectations and program procedures and ensure that the students feel welcomed to the program.

The orientation program would ideally include some instruction on study skills. The participants in Frago et al.'s (2014) study identified the need to overcome a lack of self-confidence in their academic skills. Instructing students on academic and study skills such as how to take notes, read textbooks, manage their time, write papers, and study for tests would assist students to feel more confident as they begin their studies. In another study by Anderson et al. (2012), most mature students reported using only the rudimentary study technique of reading over assigned reading and lecture notes repeatedly. Instructing students in various study strategies encourages students to choose an effective strategy for the type of material that they are learning and the assessment for which they are preparing. Anderson et al. found that instructing students in study skills, which fosters a deeper understanding of course material, acts as a scaffold to encourage a more sophisticated and satisfying learning experience. By learning study skills before they enter the classroom, mature students gain confidence in their academic skills, because they are able to choose appropriate and effective study strategies for each situation.

Another area of instruction that would be included in the orientation program is IT and computer use skills. Tones, Fraser, Elder, and Whitle (2009) found that older mature-aged students (over 45) and students with a low socio-economic status are likely to have difficulties with computer skills. Students could have a short tutorial session on basic computer tasks that are essential for class participation. Students would have a chance to sign into the computers, learn to use their college e-mail so they can remain up to date on campus events, and print class notes. For example, the mature students could be shown how to print power-point slides six to a page, so that they do not use their entire printing budget when they print the notes for the first week of class. By receiving some computer skill and IT instruction in the orientation program, mature students would not have that extra cause of stress during the already busy first few weeks of class.

An important aspect of the orientation program would be to introduce the student services that are available to the students at the college. Frago et al. (2014) found that mature students may need more support during the transition to the role of the student. While services that support students during this transition may exist, students need to be told about them. Tones et al. (2009) found that many of the students in their survey did not know about the services that could support them during this transition. Likewise, mature students at ACC may very well not know about all the services available to them or how to access them. Because ACC currently has multiple campuses, students may not be aware of the services based out of the rural campuses, and this session would help to ensure that students are aware of all programming on all campuses. It would be a beneficial component of the orientation program to



ensure that mature students know what supports exist and how to access them when they need them.

The mature student orientation program could also include counselling sessions on how to achieve a successful work-life balance. Anderson et al. (2012) found that students expressed difficulty with balancing work demands, family commitments, and school responsibilities. This balance is often difficult; one study found that students had given up sleep and personal hobbies in order to be successful in their studies (Vaccaro & Lovell, 2010). Many students need to access the assistance of family members or others in order to balance their responsibilities and complete their studies. Receiving this assistance can be difficult; many of the women in Filippioni-Berardinelli's (2013) study expressed guilt for using supports, because of the social expectations put on women to maintain traditional roles of housekeeper and primary caregiver. Some of the participants expressed feelings of guilt for being a burden to those supporting them and for seemingly, in their minds, prioritizing their education before their families. Students, especially female students, must realize that it is not possible for them "to do it all," and that attempting to do so and not using available supports will increase their stress levels. Counselling students on ways to manage the difficult work-life balance, and encouraging them to use supports if they need them, may help students with busy family lives make the transition to being students. Women re-entry students must have an opportunity to engage in conversation about the perceived barriers to seeking the supports that they need in order to succeed academically (Filippioni-Berardinelli). This counseling session could also include information on time-management and would encourage students to take time to look after themselves in order to help the students make a successful transition to being students.

The orientation sessions could also include a session on career counselling and goal setting. Petty and Thomas (2014) found that mature-aged students who had received career counselling as part of their return to school had greater job satisfaction and achievement after completion than those who were not counselled. These career counselling sessions can help students keep their vocational goals in mind and set specific academic goals that will help them to meet their vocational goals. Petty and Thomas found that adult students who set specific goals were more likely to remain motivated and to overcome barriers than students without clear goals. Institutions should therefore guide students to set goals and to monitor their own progress by helping them to develop self-reflective skills. These goal-setting workshops should include modelling or instruction on how to create motivating short-term, medium-term, and long-term goals while ensuring that the goals are specific and measurable. It is also important to help students evaluate their progress toward their goals, because this helps them to learn how to self-evaluate and to recognize and celebrate their own progress toward their goals.

An important component of the mature student orientation session would be to invite the families of the mature students to campus. In Vaccaro and Lovell's (2010) study, many of the women spoke of their families as sources of inspiration and support. When students' families are invited to campus, the entire family has an opportunity to make a connection with the campus, which may become an even greater motivating factor to the mature students.

An orientation program specifically for mature students would also have the advantage of giving students the opportunity to network with other mature students. In the study by Fragoso et al. (2014), participants cited relationships with peers as an important factor in successfully navigating the transition associated with returning to school. The connections with other mature students may serve to help students navigate the transition back into the academic world.

The transition to the role of a student can be difficult, but a well-planned orientation program could assist students in this transition. Orientation sessions give students information, resources, and contacts that help them to make the transition easier. By holding an orientation session for mature students, ACC would put these motivated students in the best position to start their education in the best frame of mind.

## **Instructor Professional Development**

My second proposition is that ACC could provide professional development to instructional staff so as to improve their understanding of the mature adult learners' experiences and what they, as instructors, can do to help these students to be successful. Many of the studies that Petty and Thomas (2014) reviewed found that the instructors were an important factor in a successful adult education program. Petty and Thomas found that mature students are inspired to learn when instructors are "friendly, helpful, knowledgeable, and respectful of adult students," and when instruction is focused on the needs of the students (p. 476). The following topics should be included in a professional development program aimed at helping mature students: empathizing with the barriers which mature students must overcome, giving effective feedback, communicating clear expectations, building community, and helping students to use motivation in order to be persistent and continue their schooling in spite of barriers. Because instructors play a key role in the mature student experience, it is important to support instructors so that they can best meet the needs of these students.

When working with mature students, it is important for instructors to have empathy for the barriers that mature students must overcome in their transition to the role of the student. Petty and Thomas (2014) stated that in order to reach mature students, instructors must have an understanding of the negative past experiences that mature-aged students may bring with them to the classroom. During professional development, instructors can learn and dialogue about the barriers faced by mature students in returning to studies, and the effect of negative experiences that many mature students have in their histories. Filipponi-Berardinelli (2013) affirmed that institutions could help female re-entry students by ensuring that faculty members have an understanding of the "cultural and systematic factors that affect non-traditional students – especially women re-entry students" ("Significance," para. 2). When educated on both the difficult transition that mature students face, and their balancing act, instructors may make decisions with a more complete understanding of the students' situations.

Another important topic for the professional development program is how to give helpful feedback. Fragoso et al. (2014) noted the difficulty that some mature students had in adjusting to being evaluated and receiving feedback. Instructors must learn how to give feedback that fosters growth and learning in the students. Instructors can encourage learning by including supportive and encouraging feedback, because this helps students to see feedback as an opportunity to learn (Tett, Hounsell, Christie, Cree, & McCune, 2012). Comments should be specific and encouraging in order to improve motivation and persistence in students. Another identified characteristic of good feedback is that it should be easy for the student to understand and should include an explanation for corrections. Finally, comments that are based on skills development, rather than on specific content, are most useful to students on assessments, because skills development is transferable. Assessment is a major part of students' educational experiences and it can play an important role in student success (Tett et al., 2012). Because of the importance of assessment to student success and mature students' fear of assessment and feedback, it is important that instructors know the characteristics of good feedback and understand how to give feedback with the purpose of improving student learning.

The importance of clear expectations must be included in the staff professional development program. Tones et al. (2009) found that many mature and low socio-economic status students reported not understanding the instructors' expectations, especially in terms of writing assignments. Mature-aged students from low socio-economic backgrounds stated that staff awareness training would be both relevant and helpful for them, because they tend to be unsure about the expectations of university study. Instructors should learn how to ensure that students understand the expectations for assigned work so that figuring out expectations is not a source of additional stress for students as they return to academic life.

Building a learning community should be also included in the instructor professional development program. Kahu, Stephens, Leach, and Zepke (2013) found that the most important

factor for predicting student learning was a supportive learning environment. Instructors are in the position to encourage the formation of a positive and supporting community formation. The mature students in Fragoso et al.'s (2014) study noted that a more interactive style in the classroom led to a stronger learning community outside the classroom. In order for cooperative learning to be effective, instructors must be purposeful about the addition of cooperative learning in the classroom, and students must see the value in working with and from each other. In the study by Anderson et al. (2012), most of the students viewed peer interaction and group learning as having questionable value in helping them to learn. The students' dislike for peer interaction seemed to come from different sources: viewing their peers' knowledge as being less valid than that of the tutor or lecturer, lacking confidence in their own knowledge, and perhaps being unable to address the practical difficulties of group work due to the nature of a part-time program. Instructors must understand students' possible aversions to group work and ensure that scaffolding is in place to assist students in their group work and in their adjustment to a new learning style. For example, in initial group work, students can be given very specific roles within the group, because this approach gives structure to the group work.

It would also be beneficial for instructors to understand the connection between mature student motivation, and persistence and retention in education. Petty and Thomas (2014) found that students use motivation to overcome barriers to their participation in education. It has been found that students are motivated by appropriately challenging tasks, good instruction, success, and recognition. Instructors can therefore plan their instruction to help students stay motivated in their education even when barriers to their study may act to de-motivate them.

By receiving professional development targeted at assisting mature students to be successful, instructors will be more equipped to help mature students maintain their motivation and be successful in their studies. One thing to note about the professional development program described here is that if instructors integrate empathy, helpful feedback, clear expectations, and community building in their classrooms, they help not only the mature students but all students in the classroom, whether mature or younger traditionally aged students.

## **Conclusion**

Because of their already full lives, mature students often have barriers to their returning to education that are not encountered by traditionally aged, younger students. These mature students must be encouraged to understand their own value and see education as self-investment, in order to maintain motivation to overcome these barriers and be successful in their schooling. Success for these students goes beyond just getting a better job, because it can be the beginning of an "upward spiral" for the entire family. The addition of an orientation program that is tailored to meet the needs of these mature students will help them to start their education in a good way, feeling prepared. As well, ensuring that instructors know the barriers that mature students face, and how to assist students to overcome these barriers, will make the transition to the role of the student as smooth as possible.

Mature students make up a significant part of the ACC student population; therefore, it is important for the college to meet their needs as students. A targeted orientation program would help these students to overcome some of the barriers that they face as they return to school. As well, it would ensure that students are aware of the supports that already exist on campus if they need to use them at a later time. ACC is committed to the retention of students, and an orientation program targeted for mature students – those who are at a higher risk of dropping out because of the barriers faced – would help them to maintain motivation and to be successful in the program.

For students, instructors are the face of the college. Having instructors who are understanding and empathetic to the struggles faced by mature students as they overcome the barriers associated with their return to college will help students to maintain motivation and to

persist. As well, instructors who are knowledgeable in providing feedback that encourages learning and growth will help students to be successful and continue in their programs.

By implementing orientation and professional development programs tailored toward mature students, ACC will assist these students in overcoming their unique challenges in returning to school. These mature students will be able to maintain their motivation and be successful in their programs. This success will change not only their lives, but also the lives of their entire families and the communities in which they live.

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## About the Author

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# **Practical Teaching Strategies for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A Review of the Literature**

**Jannelle Murray**

## **Abstract**

*The number of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is rapidly increasing, and there is a struggle within our educational system to meet the needs of these students. While there is a growing awareness among general classroom teachers about strategies that can be implemented to ensure positive gains for students with ASD, there is still a need for continuous professional development in the area. This literature review addresses the various challenges that students with autism face in educational environments due to their disorder. It also suggests practical social, behavioural, and academic strategies that teachers can implement within their classrooms to improve the performance and educational experiences of students with ASD.*

The number of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) who are included and participating in mainstream classrooms has increased over the past few years (Fleury et al., 2014). This presents teachers with additional responsibilities to meet the social, behavioural, and academic needs of these students. Unfortunately, supports are not always in place to ensure that the needs of autistic students are being met appropriately. Many general education teachers are not informed about “(a) how characteristics associated with ASD can impact student performance, (b) academic profiles of individuals with ASD across content areas, and (c) interventions found to be successful in improving academic outcomes across individuals with ASD” (Fleury et al., 2014, p. 69). As a result of this lack of teacher awareness and education, students with autism may spend most of their time at school disengaged from learning activities (Muchetti, 2013). On the other hand, according to Manti, Scholte, and Van Berckelaer-Onnes (2013),

A vast majority of children with ASD who are provided with appropriate education show improvements not only in academic learning and functional language but also in socialization, adaptive skills and communication, while many of them can take better advantage of their abilities and skills, in this respect that they can use them in a more productive and generalised way. (p. 64)

Additional research, specifically to determine what methods might be best for each individual with ASD, is necessary to ensure that teachers have knowledge of the initiatives needed to make a positive difference in their students' lives (Muchetti, 2013).

The purpose of this literature review is to address social, behavioural, and academic teaching strategies that can be implemented to improve the educational experiences of students with ASD. The strategies that are discussed are practical and easily applicable to both general education and special education learning environments. Each strategy can be used for students with ASD, regardless of age, but modified appropriately for their individual needs throughout their school years. These strategies address common issues related to the social, behavioural, and academic challenges that most students with ASD experience.

While dividing the strategies into the three areas of social, behavioural, and academic interventions, there is still some overlap among the categories because the three domains are interrelated and directly affect each other. For example, improved social skills lead to a decrease in repetitive behaviours (Boyd, Woodard, & Bodfish, 2011). The decrease of repetitive behaviours can lead to increased engagement in learning activities, which directly affects knowledge acquisition (Muchetti, 2013). There is also a noted relationship between the impacts of enhanced social abilities and academic learning; therefore, improving students' social skills

will in turn improve their academic performance (Fleury et al., 2014). The social abilities of students with ASD also directly affect how they interact with their peers and what types of relationships are formed (Ostmeyer & Scarpa, 2012). Improved peer relationships potentially affect the students' emotional well-being and confidence, which also contribute to improved engagement, and again improved academic performance.

### **How Autism Spectrum Disorder Affects Student Performance**

ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder that typically affects a person's ability to communicate and interact socially with others (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015). Most people with ASD also exhibit challenging or repetitive behaviours. Autism can, but does not always, affect an individual's cognitive ability. Because autism is a spectrum disorder, it affects each person differently and presents with varying degrees of severity. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2015), one in every 68 children has ASD ("Who Is Affected," para. 1). The disorder affects people from various racial, ethnic, and socio-economic backgrounds, and it occurs in males five times more often than in females. The exact cause of autism is unknown; however, certain factors increase the risk of autism, such as an existing family history of it and children born to parents of an older age (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015).

Children with ASD experience difficulties in their ability to communicate and effectively interact with others (Jacklin & Farr, 2005). Approximately 30-50% of children with ASD are minimally verbal upon entering school (Muchetti, 2013, p. 359). Most experience impairments in receptive and expressive communication (Fleury et al., 2014). The ongoing struggles for individuals with ASD in social contexts can be attributed to their inability to interpret social cues (Jacklin & Farr, 2005). Individuals with ASD often appear socially awkward, leading to rejection by their peers, while also sometimes becoming victims of teasing and bullying (Ostmeyer & Scarpa, 2012). These circumstances directly affect a child's emotional well-being. For high-functioning children with ASD, such experiences create an ongoing cycle of these children feeling increased anxiety and depression as a result of their social incompetence; in turn, their increased anxiety and depression contributes to their social incompetence.

Considering that schools are social environments, one can see a problematic issue for children who are socially impaired (Fleury et al., 2014). Poor academic performance is often noted for autistic children because their social abilities affect their capacity to learn within a classroom (Ostmeyer & Scarpa, 2012). Through a survey of teachers, researchers Elliot and Gresham compiled a list of 10 social skills deemed necessary for successful learning to occur within a classroom environment: "listening to others, following steps, following rules, ignoring distractions, taking turns, asking for help, getting along with others, staying calm, taking responsibility for one's own behaviour, and doing nice things for others" (as cited in Ostmeyer & Scarpa, 2012, p. 932). Students with ASD often experience difficulty with all of these social skills. In addition, some aspects of the school experience may exacerbate the presented characteristics of ASD. For example, a classroom is typically crowded and noisy. In most schools, there are frequent transitions among various teachers and classrooms, most with a different mixture of peers and with different rules (Fleury et al., 2014). All of these challenges may prevent autistic students from engaging in learning.

Individuals with ASD often engage in repetitive behaviours or routines (Fleury et al., 2014). Their struggles to cease these behaviours also contribute to their social discomfort. The existence of these repetitive behaviours in autistic individuals is attributed to the impairment of their executive functioning system. Executive functioning regulates an individual's behaviour; its impairment compromises an autistic individual's ability to self-regulate behaviours.

Transitions are particularly difficult for autistic students, because they experience anxiety and discomfort in new or changing situations (Perfitt, 2013). These highly stressful situations, or

any situation that inhibits their repetitive behaviours or routines, affects their ability to manage their emotions and typically results in disruptive behaviours (Boyd et al., 2011).

Students with autism experience various other difficulties, as well, all of which affect their ability to learn as a typically developing child might learn. Autistic children experience deficits in imitational and observational learning (Field et al., 2010). Although they often have superior visual processing skills, they also often process auditory and linguistic information at a rate much slower than their peers (Fleury et al., 2014). The previously mentioned impairment to their executive functioning system prevents them from being able to process multi-step directions, maintain the organization of their materials, and sustain self-motivation. It is often extremely difficult for them to generalize information across settings and to see a situation from another person's perspective (Ostmeyer & Scarpa, 2012). Children with autism may fail to see "the picture . . . [but] can still see the individual puzzle pieces in the completed picture" (Frith, 1989, as cited in Jacklin & Farr, 2005, p. 202). Rather than view the puzzle as a picture comprised of the individual pieces, as a typical child would, many autistic children will continue to focus on the individual puzzle pieces and not see the picture that has been created by putting them together.

Literacy skills are also affected by autism, because many autistic children are unable to progress past sight word recognition (Muchetti, 2013). Depending upon cognitive abilities, autistic children may be able to decode text but have problems understanding what they have read, because their reading comprehension capabilities do not match their decoding abilities (Whalon & Hart, 2011). They also often have an inability to make inferences (Jacklin & Farr, 2005). As well, poor fine motor skills and poor visual-motor speed result in difficulties holding writing utensils, and even when they can hold a pencil their printing may be illegible (Fleury et al., 2014).

The combination of communicative, social, and behavioural impairments directly affects the chances of students with ASD excelling academically. Considering that schools are social environments, children with autism enter the educational system already at a disadvantage when compared to typically developing children. For this reason, supports need to be in place that will promote the success of students with autism both academically and socially. Numerous social, behavioural, and academic strategies can be implemented within both mainstream and special education classrooms, in order to assist students with ASD and contribute to creating positive experiences for them at school.

### **Social Strategies**

Educators can initiate strategies within their classrooms to cultivate the social skills of autistic students. Because many children with autism have limited imitation skills and are unable to pick up on social cues, social interactions literally need to be taught to them (Jacklin & Farr, 2005). Social skills are most effective for students with autism when they are taught within the natural environment in which their demonstration is expected. This approach recognizes that many autistic students have an inability to generalize skills across various settings (Fleury et al., 2014). For that reason, students with ASD may also not transfer social skills learned outside school (e.g., playground, home) to a specific situation within school (Ostmeyer & Scarpa, 2012). Teaching social skills that are appropriate within school will be most effective when taught within a school environment. Peer models and tutors are often successful in helping to increase social skills in students with ASD. Even if a school-wide program is not available, classroom teachers can use a similar approach and initiate their own peer modelling program that is individualized for the children's needs. Engaging students in playful imitation games and using strategic classroom computer applications are practical strategies that can be implemented within schools to enhance the social skills of students with autism.

Children with ASD lack imitative skills, which affects their ability to learn skills by observing others (Fleury et al., 2014). Because observation is an effective method of social learning for typically developing children, this places autistic students at a large disadvantage. One strategy

that is effective in encouraging imitative behaviour from students with ASD is the teacher imitating the behaviour of the autistic child in a playful manner. Mimicking their behaviour encourages them to do the same and can result in them copying the teachers' behaviour for other desired actions, as well. Field et al. (2010) conducted a study that involved 20 nonverbal children with ASD to determine how an imitative adult would affect the children's imitative and social behaviour. The results confirmed that children with ASD do have impaired imitation skills, but when an adult is engaging in imitative behaviour with a child, the child can display social imitations. Considering that the children displayed higher percentages of imitative behaviour while they were being imitated themselves, parents and teachers should consider using game-like reciprocal turns of imitation to increase the children's ability to imitate. Imitation is a way for autistic children to learn new skills, therefore increasing their social and cognitive development.

Computers have emerged as an effective aid for individuals with autism in the communication, social, behavioural, and academic areas. As a social strategy, the use of computers can encourage turn-taking with a parent, teacher, peer, or even the computer itself (Jacklin & Farr, 2005). Jacklin and Farr's (2005) qualitative study led to a finding that computers can be useful tools in increasing positive social interactions by students with autism when they are used properly. "Being used properly" refers to individualizing programming to meet the specific needs of the students, as well as teacher interventions that encourage social engagement. Without carefully planned social interactions by the teacher, however, computers can be used in an unguided and obsessive manner, resulting in little improvement toward social skills. This type of compulsive behaviour is common in individuals with ASD, and there are teaching strategies that can be applied to help reduce such behaviour.

### **Behavioural Strategies**

Children with ASD sometimes exhibit problematic behaviour that can inhibit their own learning and disrupt other students in the classroom (Ostmeyer & Scarpa, 2012). Possible examples of problematic behaviour can be difficulty in listening and following instructions, difficulty in abiding by classroom rules, and displays of repetitive behaviours that can be disruptive. In some cases, introduced situations that are meant to limit their repetitive behaviour can be stressful for individuals with autism and can instead lead to "severe irritability, aggression, self-injury, or other repetitive and problem behaviours" (Boyd et al., 2011, p. 197). For students who experience these types of behaviours, instructional and behavioural supports are usually implemented to encourage participation in academic studies (Fleury et al., 2014).

Boyd, Woodard, and Bodfish (2011) conducted a study to determine whether adapted exposure and response prevention (ERP) interventions that are used to treat obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) would be effective in diminishing the repetitive behaviours of children with ASD who have intellectual disabilities as well. The results showed that after ERP interventions, the amount of time that the participants engaged in academic tasks, the amount of time that the participants delayed their engagement with the trigger stimulus, and the length of time that the participants went without displaying the repetitive behaviours all increased throughout the course of the study. Also, how often the repetitive behaviours were displayed decreased. These results are promising because, in addition to the desirable outcomes, during the study teachers were trained to conduct the ERP interventions. Future research is necessary to ensure the effectiveness of ERP as a treatment strategy for limiting behaviours that interfere with learning; however, the results of the study and the encouragement of informed implementation by teachers are exciting for the future.

With reference to technological interventions that might assist student with ASD, the use of iPads is emerging as a new and effective intervention for decreasing challenging behaviours in the classroom (Neely, Rispoli, Camargo, Davis, & Boles, 2013). Neely, Rispoli, Camargo, Davis, and Boles (2013) compared the use of iPads to traditional paper/pencil teaching methods for two male participants who had autism and who exhibited challenging behaviour. Both students



showed higher levels of academic engagement when using the iPads, as compared to traditional methods of instruction. The iPads acted as motivational factors for the participants and the tasks did not seem like academic “work,” even though the two students were completing the same academic demands. iPads are common within most educational settings, and their informed use may be appropriate to implement.

iPads might also be used to improve transitioning skills for students with ASD (Neely et al., 2013). Transitions between schools, classrooms, and even activities can be extremely stressful for individuals with ASD, and thus can often trigger challenging behaviours (Perfitt, 2013). Considering that many individuals with ASD are visual learners, iPads have numerous applications that can provide students with visual schedules and visual timers that make transitioning much easier. Perfitt (2013) conducted a qualitative study while in the process of transitioning her students with ASD to a new school. After doing so, she made the following recommendations to help decrease stress for autistic students during transitioning:

- Include students in the development of their transition plans to ensure they have a clear understanding of what is going to happen.
- Individualize transition plans to ensure that they meet the needs of each student rather than implementing a generic transition plan for everyone.
- Predict stressors that students may encounter to pre-teach coping strategies to deal with them.
- Provide students with general strategies to deal with various forms of stress.
- Ideally, implement independent learning programs to decrease students’ reliance on adult support. (Perfitt, pp. 194-195)

These are realistic strategies that can easily be incorporated into transition plans to encourage smooth and successful transitions for students with autism. Support with transitions will improve the school experience for students with ASD and will lead to fewer social and behavioural challenges, which in turn will lead to their improved attention to academics.

### **Academic Strategies**

While behavioural strategies have been applied to aid in decreasing undesirable behaviours, educators can also implement formal academic strategies to accommodate students with ASD in reaching their academic potential. Some strategies are as simple as using technology to present learning material in a different way. Because individuals with ASD are visual learners, they typically respond well to using computers and iPads. Along with the integration of technology, adapted shared reading programs, detailed instruction, and structured learning environments are just a few strategies that can be used in the classroom.

The benefits of using computer applications for teaching social and behavioural skills to children with ASD have been articulated; however, computers can also be useful tools for teaching academic skills. Computers can be used in the same manner as iPads to engage students. Informed use of computers can also be highly motivational for students with autism (Jacklin & Farr, 2005). In Jacklin and Farr’s (2005) research, a teacher noted the benefit of using computers with autistic students because they provide a “visual impact on what they are learning” (p. 208). For participating students with autism in Jacklin and Farr’s study, the use of the computer was also seen as a break from traditional methods of learning, and provided the additional support necessary for those more traditional methods to be successful. Using the computer reduced, for a time, the amount of stress that the students experienced, because they were not challenged with the task of using the social skills that are required for human interactions. The computer also gave the students a sense of predictability that they may have been unable to get from humans, therefore giving them a sense of confidence and self-control when completing academic activities.

Adapted shared reading activities are emerging as a second way to enhance the literacy skills of students with autism. Shared reading is a method in which an adult reads aloud to a student while engaging that student in interaction through the use of questions and discussion (Muchetti, 2013). Shared reading activities can be modified to meet the individualized needs of students with autism. When the amount of text is shortened, while maintaining the theme, plot, and important elements, age-appropriate literature can be used (Fleury et al., 2014). Muchetti (2013) conducted a study to examine whether teacher-led shared reading activities with modified text, visual supports, and objects affected student engagement and the reading comprehension of autistic children with limited verbal communication abilities. Four children with autism between the ages of six and eight years participated in shared reading activities with trained classroom teachers. Student engagement and reading comprehension increased for all four participants during the intervention phase, as compared to the baseline phase. These outcomes are promising because they illustrate that children with autism can be engaged in early literacy activities that have been adapted to meet their needs, and that they can enhance their reading comprehension abilities in the process. Because reading comprehension is an issue for many autistic students, adapted shared reading activities are methods that classroom teachers can implement to develop their literacy skills.

To compensate for the executive functioning deficits often experienced by individuals with autism, it is necessary to break down tasks into manageable components that can be taught in several steps (Fleury et al., 2014). As a third strategy, detailed instruction is important for students with autism to acquire new academic skills. Visual supports and verbal prompting are often used, and then gradually phased out, as students learn each step individually. When teaching academic content, teachers need to provide “clear explanations of the skill or task sequence, modeling, guided practice, and multiple opportunities to independently practice and apply the learned knowledge” (Fleury et al., 2014, p. 72). When skills are taught incrementally, students have a better chance of successfully learning and eventually being able to execute the learned skills independently.

As a fourth strategy, establishing structured learning environments has been proven effective for creating conditions that will enhance the academic development of students with autism (Muchetti, 2013). Manti, Scholte, and Van Berckelaer-Onnes (2013) studied teaching strategies in a special education school located in the Netherlands, in order to determine what methods were most effective in promoting academic knowledge acquisition. The participants were 89 students, 45 of whom were autistic, and their teachers. Over a period of two years, the students participated in repeated standardized testing and the teachers completed surveys. Manti et al. discovered that the provision of structure was the strongest factor influencing the academic attainment of the students who had ASD. This result underlines the importance of well-structured educational environments because they help to decrease disruptive behaviours, anxiety, and confusion for students with ASD, therefore increasing their academic performance. Fleury et al. (2014) reiterated the importance of this approach: “Being able to anticipate and understand activities, schedules, and expectations improves students’ ability to appropriately participate and respond to classroom demands” (p. 72). Teachers can establish consistent routines for their students, which will reduce the unknown and alleviate anxiety. Creating written schedules will also support autistic students who struggle with organizing their own schedules.

Using technology as a learning tool, implementing adapted shared reading activities, applying detailed differentiated instruction, and creating structured learning environments are strategies that can improve the academic performance of students with ASD. All of these strategies are practical and may not take a lot of preparation to implement. Attention to these initiatives greatly increases the chances for students with autism to excel academically.

## Discussion

This literature review highlights various strategies for assisting students with ASD, which can be implemented by educators within general education or special education learning environments. All of the reviewed interventions cater to the social, behavioural, and academic challenges typically experienced by individuals with ASD. The strategies suggested are supported by research results that the elaborated initiatives contribute to the improvement of student performance in social, behavioural, and academic areas. Improvement in these areas, and increased engagement in classroom settings, will contribute to creating positive and successful experiences for students with ASD within our educational system.

Some of the strategies provided can be incorporated into teachers' repertoires without extensive preparation. That is important, because a barrier for teachers is the limited time that they have to learn about and integrate new ideas for the benefit of special needs students (Ostmeyer & Scarpa, 2012). Technology, such as computers and iPads, is available in most classrooms, and various applications can be instrumental in teaching skills in social, behavioural, and academic domains. Curricular outcomes already focus on improving literacy skills for children; therefore, the time that it takes to modify a book to include visual supports and objects for the benefit of autistic students may not be extensive. Including students in the preparation of their transition plans, and/or creating visual schedules to make transitions easier for them, will take less time out of a teacher's day than dealing with their challenging behaviour as a repercussion for not doing so.

Because of the rapidly increasing number of students who are being diagnosed with ASD, continuous professional development on this topic should be mandatory for all teachers (Fleury et al., 2014). Professional development opportunities will give educators a better understanding of what ASD is and how it affects student performance. More emphasis also needs to be placed on effective communication and collaboration between general education teachers and special education teachers (Whalon & Hart, 2010). Mentoring general education teachers about the individualized needs of their students with autism will help them to identify what areas they need to target for each student, and to create a more streamlined approach to meeting each student's specific needs (Fleury et al., 2014). Creating instructional approaches that combine the social, behavioural, and academic needs of students at the same time would also be beneficial for both educators and students.

## Conclusion

There is considerable research in the area of autism; however, research examining interventions that are most effective in developing skills for children with ASD tends to focus on one specific strategy in relation to each study. With reference to a number of studies, this literature review has compiled a variety of strategies to assist educators when planning for students with ASD. Even so, there is a need for further research to examine existing interventions and to determine additional strategies that may be useful in making educational settings more conducive to learning for children who have autism (Manti et al., 2013; Muchetti, 2013). Additional research has "the potential to make an important contribution to improving the quality of school experiences, engagement in inclusive education and employment, independent living, and social relationships of young people with ASD" (de Bruin et al., 2013, p. 542). Further research into this area will extend the benefits for individuals with autism in all areas of their life.

As teachers, it is our responsibility to educate our students so as to help them become contributing citizens of society. By providing educational environments that meet the needs of students with ASD, we can help them to succeed in learning social, behavioural, and academic skills that will positively influence their current and future lives. Incorporating strategies that are individualized to meet each student's needs translates to building opportunities for every student to excel academically. Although further research is needed, implementing the strategies

presented in this literature review is a positive start to improving student performance and creating positive educational experiences for individuals with autism.

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## About the Author

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# **Practising Culturally Relevant Pedagogy: A Literature Review of Classroom Implementation**

**Tiffany Cook Hunter**

## **Abstract**

*Students in Canadian schools are increasingly diverse in terms of cultural background, but they are being educated in a system that often does not nourish their cultural identity. This literature review involves a synthesis of research on classroom-based pedagogy from 11 qualitative and quantitative designed research studies from 2003 to 2015, all which address the experiences of educators with the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy. The findings revealed six themes relevant to culturally relevant pedagogy: teacher beliefs and knowledge, culturally inclusive classrooms, reshaping curriculum, instructional practices, professional training and support, and family and community involvement. The author concludes that incorporating culturally relevant pedagogy is a necessary teaching practice that will improve learning and social factors in Canadian schools.*

In recent years, research addressing culture and education has grown significantly because of the rapidly changing Canadian society. The demographic diversity in Canadian schools puts pressure on educators to implement culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom that will meet the academic and social needs of all students, regardless of cultural identity. This is not an easy task for teachers, but it is necessary if teachers wish to address society's need for equitable education. Culturally relevant teaching uses students' social, cultural, and language backgrounds, which empowers students to experience social and academic success in school. The results of the accessed studies illustrate the need to implement culturally relevant pedagogy in order to meet the needs of diverse students.

Several research studies have supported the need to integrate students' culture in their education. The success or failure of integrating culturally relevant pedagogy depends on the teacher, who plays the key role in the classroom and who determines the pedagogy used. In order for culturally relevant teaching to be successful, teachers must believe in the pedagogical focus and have the self-efficacy to feel confident in its implementation. Creating a culturally inclusive classroom means that teachers need to nourish a classroom wherein all students feel safe, respected, and comfortable. The prescribed curricula must be approached in a way that meets the needs of diverse students. Appropriate instructional practices must be implemented effectively to meet the needs of all students. Proper professional training and support are essential for both future teachers and current teachers in the profession, so that all educators will have the knowledge base vital for implementation. Building relationships with students' families and the community is also necessary for the success of this educational focus. This literature review examines the foundational themes for consideration by teachers who are committed to using culturally relevant pedagogy to improve the success of diverse students both academically and socially.

## **Teacher Beliefs and Knowledge**

The foundation of culturally relevant teaching is the teacher who respects cultural identity, determines the learning environment, and decides the pedagogy that is implemented in the classroom. Teacher beliefs play an important role in the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy. Many factors affect teacher beliefs and knowledge, including personal history and beliefs, self-efficacy, and knowledge of the subject area and students' cultures.

Teachers' personal histories and beliefs are key factors in how they incorporate culturally relevant pedagogy, because their previous experiences support their role as the teacher and

affect how they teach (Brighton, 2003). Teachers cannot easily or simply change their beliefs and practices, because these beliefs and practices constitute their socially constructed prior knowledge. It is also teachers' inherent, deeply held ideas that determine how they relate to students in the classroom, especially those students with a significantly different culture from their own. For teachers to implement culturally inclusive pedagogy, they must believe in building strong relationships with their students, using collaborative learning, and creating a safe and comfortable classroom environment (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011). Culturally relevant teachers must also believe in challenging all students in order to inspire students to be academically successful when the content is challenging (Morrison, Robbins, & Rose, 2008). For culturally relevant pedagogy to be successful, teachers must also feel a strong self-efficacy in their role as the teacher.

The teacher's sense of self-efficacy is an important aspect in promoting students academically and socially with culturally relevant teaching. In a study of middle school teachers, Brighton (2003) found that teachers who possessed a high level of self-efficacy were more willing and more successful in implementing new culturally relevant teaching strategies. The teachers who valued their own abilities believed that culturally relevant teaching already aligned with their current teaching methods; therefore, it was easier to implement the new strategies. Self-efficacy is also needed for teachers to feel that they are effective in their ability to support students socially and academically (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011). This is because teachers must develop students' social skills in order to promote their academic abilities. Teachers who feel competent in using social skills to build relationships that foster learning find useful ways to enable students to interact with each other, creating communities of learning that will help diverse students to be more successful. An important component of teachers' self-efficacy is their knowledge of the curricular content, and of the various cultural backgrounds of students in the classroom.

Culturally relevant teachers must have a high level of knowledge in the subject areas that they are teaching and their students' cultures, because both directly link to their effectiveness as teachers. Research illustrates that teachers who possess a high level of knowledge in their subject areas are also more successful in applying culturally relevant teaching strategies (Brighton, 2003). If teachers are teaching content that they do not fully understand, they will be less effective in imparting knowledge. Teachers who do not fully understand a concept may mislead students, be unable to answer questions, be inconsistent, and thus cause confusion. Culturally relevant teachers must thoroughly understand concepts and skills in order to effectively communicate them to diverse students in a variety of ways. This is especially important because culturally relevant teachers must redesign the required curricula to meet the needs of the students in their classrooms (Morrison et al., 2008). Effectively restructuring a curriculum means that the teacher must have a solid understanding of the outcomes that the students need to meet. Teachers who are not knowledgeable in the subject that they are teaching are more likely to fail to adapt the curriculum to meet the academic needs and interests of students (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011). In addition, if teachers do not have knowledge of the students' cultures, they cannot effectively ensure that learning is achieved (Johnson & Chang, 2012), because they will neglect the importance of integrating students' cultural perspectives in the curriculum (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011). Teachers with insufficient content and cultural knowledge may not be able to address the academic diversity of students, and thus may create lower academic and social expectations. Teachers must also believe in creating a culturally inclusive classroom environment.

### **Culturally Inclusive Classrooms**

Culturally inclusive classrooms are a key aspect of culturally relevant pedagogy. Culturally inclusive classrooms accept, value, and use the diversity among students and teacher to enhance the learning experience. A culturally inclusive classroom encourages all students by

embracing their ethnicity, race, religion, gender, age, socio-economic status, and/or sexual orientation as an integral part of the learning community. The factors that influence culturally inclusive classrooms involve creating a safe and comfortable environment, positively managing the classroom, and building relationships.

A classroom wherein students feel safe and comfortable is at the heart of culturally relevant pedagogy. Culturally inclusive classrooms begin with teachers. Teachers play a significant role in how children view, respect, and interact with other children. In response, students will put more effort into their academic work in a culturally inclusive classroom (Morrison et al., 2008). Creating a culturally inclusive classroom means establishing a sense of belonging for students by supporting students socially, emotionally, and intellectually (Johnson & Chang, 2012). A sense of belonging will help to create a classroom that is a safe place wherein all students are respected and feel cared about by their teacher and peers. To establish this environment, teachers must encourage collaborative learning, which will help students learn together, identify with other students, and encourage relationships (Morrison et al., 2008). Culturally inclusive classrooms encourage cultural identity and sharing information about oneself so that students succeed socially as well as academically. If an inclusive environment is established, students will feel motivated to learn and succeed. A culturally relevant classroom is an environment wherein all students feel safe and respected, which also helps to prevent classroom management issues.

A culturally inclusive classroom often does not have many classroom management issues, because all students in the classroom feel valued. Research shows that culturally relevant teachers have high behavioural expectations of students (Morrison et al., 2008). Culturally relevant teachers need to have clear and consistent academic and behavioural expectations (Griner & Stewart, 2013), and enforce consequences when an expectation is violated (Morrison et al., 2008). In a study conducted by Rozansky (2010), the teacher participant did not effectively create a culturally inclusive classroom and experienced frequent behaviour difficulties. The teacher did try to connect with students on a personal level, but failed to use this connection in a relevant manner to create a sense of belonging. This example demonstrates that if students do not have a sense of belonging, they are more likely to misbehave in the classroom. This misbehaviour can take the form of discrimination against diverse students. If teachers create culturally inclusive classrooms, many behaviour issues may be eliminated. To further help with classroom management issues, teachers need to focus on the relationships in the classroom.

Relationships among students and the teacher are a key factor in creating culturally inclusive classrooms. Meaningful student-teacher relationships will foster a culturally inclusive classroom (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011). On the other hand, a lack of positive student-teacher relations, exacerbated by cultural differences, “can lead to devastating learning experiences for students” (Griner & Stewart, 2012, p. 588). The connections that teachers make with students, and the rapport created from these connections, will help students to be successful. Students should feel that the teacher cares, values, and respects them as individuals, thus creating a positive sense of belonging and identity in the classroom. The earlier the relationship is built, the more valuable it becomes. Teachers can build relationships with students by respecting their prior experiences and cultural identity, offering encouragement, and having high academic and behavioural expectations (Rozansky, 2010). If teachers and students have a mutual respect, then teachers can use their knowledge of and connections to their students to empower them (Morrison et al., 2008). This empowerment can be accomplished by drawing upon students’ interests and creating opportunities in the classroom for students to use their culture. Teachers also need to nourish positive student-student relationships (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011). Research confirms that these peer relationships also support students academically and socially because students feel valued, safe, and comfortable in the classroom. These positive teacher-student and student-student relationships, along with reshaping the curricula, will help to improve academic achievement and social acceptance.

## **Reshaping Curricula**

Culturally relevant pedagogy requires teachers to reflect upon and reshape the curricula to meet the needs of the students in their classrooms. This student-centred pedagogical focus encourages academic improvement because all students acquire cultural knowledge; therefore, learning happens through cultural diversity. Even with a mandated curriculum, changes can be made to the resources used so as to meet the needs of the students while still achieving stated curricular outcomes. Adaptations to the curriculum can be integrated to improve opportunities for the academic achievement of culturally diverse students.

Integrating culture in curricula is an important component of culturally relevant teaching. Teachers can use diverse resources to redesign ways to achieve existing curricular outcomes, in order to have a positive, meaningful, and engaging influence on all students' learning. Research on culturally relevant teaching shows that students learn through building on their prior experiences and knowledge by connecting that background to current content and activities in the classroom (Morrison et al., 2008). Researchers have argued that learning is relevant to students only if it is connected to students' identities (Morrison et al., 2008). This connection is reinforced by the personal relationship that teachers build with each student (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011). When teachers learn about their students' culture, they can use this knowledge to integrate students' cultural views in the curricula. Integrating students' culture can be "done as a way to validate students who are culturally diverse, helping instil in them a positive sense of cultural identity" (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011, pp. 199-200). Culturally relevant teachers must use students' cultural knowledge to assist them in teaching the curricula. Using culturally relevant materials and instruction related to students' cultures, and activating prior knowledge, will support diverse student learning (Morrison et al., 2008). Integrating culture in the curricula will improve the academic achievement of students through meaningful instructional practices.

## **Instructional Practices**

Culturally relevant pedagogy involves transforming traditional teaching practices in order to accommodate different learning styles and to create a supportive classroom environment. Teachers need to change their teaching practices to suit the needs of diverse students. Research verifies that when culturally relevant pedagogy is implemented, it will improve academic achievement. Students whose teachers incorporate high levels of culturally relevant teaching strategies have a higher level of ethnic identity, a better connection to their culture, higher rates of community involvement, and higher rates of school engagement than those whose teachers implement very little culturally relevant teaching (Kana'iaupuni, Ledward, & Jensen, 2010). The results in the study by Kana'iaupuni et al. (2010) also show that culturally relevant teaching strategies positively affect student performance and enhance socio-emotional well-being. Several teaching practices can be used in culturally relevant pedagogy, differentiated instruction and storytelling being the most prominent.

Differentiated instruction is one way to implement culturally relevant pedagogy. This instructional practice makes student learning more appropriate and validating, and thus it supports academic achievement. Research shows that some teachers are reluctant to implement differentiated instruction to improve the academic success of all learners, largely because of teachers' preconceived notions of traditional classrooms and student learning. Brighton (2003) conducted a study on the implementation of differentiated instruction. The results of the study indicated that teachers felt they were there to entertain students. Most teachers in the study believed that engaging students was more important than challenging them, because it made learning more appealing for students. The second belief that Brighton (2003) found to be evident was that the role of the teacher was to talk and instruct, and the role of the students was to listen and learn. This traditional teaching strategy contradicts



differentiated instruction, which is a student-centred approach whereby students are responsible for their own learning. The third belief found was that students would resist and shut down when faced with an academic challenge. The consequence of this belief was that teachers did not offer challenging learning experiences for students. The fourth belief of the teachers was that all students must complete the same task to have fairness and equality in the classroom.

Differentiated instruction means that a range of tasks at different academic levels, and with diverse approaches to cultural knowledge and ways of learning, should be provided for students. In the end, teachers' prior beliefs made it difficult for them to implement culturally relevant pedagogy by using differentiated instruction, because their attitudes about traditional teaching strategies did not change. If teachers' prior beliefs and practices are difficult to change, they will not implement diverse instructional strategies; therefore, student learning will not improve. Differentiated instruction will make the learning experiences more appropriate and validating for students, and will support academic achievement through culturally relevant instruction. Storytelling is another practice in differentiation that will support students.

The teaching practice of storytelling is a way of implementing culturally relevant instruction. Storytelling means that students are invited to discuss their experiences, knowledge, and activities with their peers and teacher (Johnson & Chang, 2012). To implement this teaching strategy, teachers need to create inclusive classrooms wherein all students feel respected and safe to share their experiences. Storytelling circles create a culturally inclusive classroom wherein students feel comfortable and respected (Baskerville, 2011). Storytelling builds relationships among students by establishing a safe, trusting, and caring environment. Relationships are built as students learn more about their peers and teacher through the stories that they tell. Sharing students' personal stories creates acceptance among students and strengthens relationships. The stories bridge the cultural gap among students of different cultures, increase listening skills, enhance self-reflections, and improve interactions among students. Storytelling also improves connections and relationships so that students will stop segregating themselves in their own cultural groups. Storytelling facilitates student engagement, creates new ways of communicating, helps students to look at ideas in a different way, and changes their attitudes toward others. Storytelling develops an appreciation of culture as students learn and understand other cultures in the classroom. This teaching strategy has proven to be a successful culturally relevant teaching practice. Teachers need professional training and support to implement culturally relevant teaching strategies such as storytelling.

### **Professional Training and Support**

Research indicates that professional training and support are needed for teachers to implement culturally relevant pedagogy. Teachers who lack training and support are not able to address the academic achievement gap among culturally diverse students (Griner & Stewart, 2012). Professional training and support are required for pre-service, beginning, and experienced teachers.

Teacher education programs need to prepare pre-service teachers to enter the diverse classrooms that they will encounter; therefore, educating future teachers on culturally relevant teaching is necessary. Literature on culturally relevant pedagogy outlines that teacher educators must include new ways to prepare pre-service teachers for the classroom in the areas of cultural knowledge. Kang and Hyatt (2010) conducted a study in a teacher education program that had pre-service teachers learning about culture. Results of the study showed that pre-service teachers acquired a deeper understanding of cultural diversity and realized how much impact they can have on students by using culture in the classroom. The pre-service teachers found the teacher education training to be "an eye-opening experience" (Kang & Hyatt, p. 47) because of their limited personal experience with multi-culturalism. Another study conducted by Dharan (2015) illustrates that training on culture in an initial teacher-training program raises pre-service teachers' awareness of cultural diversity and provides them with an understanding of culture

and its importance in teaching practices. Pre-service teachers also need to have continued support once they begin teaching, so that their views about integrating culture in the curricula are nourished.

Continued support is needed for beginning teachers when they enter the profession, so that they continue to see the importance of implementing diverse cultural knowledge in their teaching. It was evident in a study conducted by Dharan (2015) that the previous perceptions of beginning teachers in the study changed once they entered the profession. This was due to their introduction to existing teaching practices in their schools that used more traditional teaching practices. The beginning teachers found these traditional teaching practices easier, and use of these practices increased their teaching confidence or self-efficacy. The study showed that the beginning teachers were aware of cultural diversity and the need to integrate culture into curricula, student learning, and teaching practices; however, they chose not to use that approach. Dharan (2015) concluded,

If beginning teachers are to have an [sic] heightened awareness of the fact that every learner is situated at the intersection of their life experiences, gender, race, ethnicity, abilities, religion, spirituality, and social class and effectively embed such understanding in their pedagogy, they must be guided and supported. (p. 70)

This support can be accomplished through mentoring programs in enlightened schools. Teachers who practise culturally relevant pedagogy in their teaching can mentor beginning teachers on how to integrate culturally relevant pedagogy in their classrooms. Beginning teachers, and indeed all teachers in the profession, need continued professional training and support.

Professional development and knowledge renewal for current teachers in the profession comprise a necessary step toward culturally relevant teaching implementation. Teachers are lifelong learners, and professional development is essential in the profession so that teachers can continually grow and analyse their teaching practices (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011). Research shows that some teachers may have feelings of discomfort and hesitancy when integrating culture in the classroom. Teachers may fear that their personal biases influence their teaching practice, as they often do. Culturally relevant pedagogy may require many teachers to teach outside their comfort zone, which brings about uneasiness when reflecting on their current teaching practice, and on their sense of self-efficacy as connected to the status quo. Coronel and Gomez-Hurtado (2015) conducted a study in Spanish secondary schools, and found that teacher participants had limited knowledge of culture because they had not received any training on cultural diversity. Participant teachers in another study conducted by Brighton (2003) found that professional training in culturally relevant teaching improved teachers' current teaching practices. Once teachers receive the initial training needed to implement culturally relevant teaching, they also require support with its application because of possible misunderstandings of the key practices of culturally relevant teaching. In another study, Rozansky (2010) found that with support in the area of culturally relevant teaching, the teacher was able to increase her expectations of her students, improve her ability to implement critical literacy, and create more purposeful units that connected to students' cultures. Griner and Stewart (2012) also found that teaching practices changed significantly for teachers who participated in professional development on culturally relevant teaching. Therefore, providing professional development is necessary. Training in culturally relevant pedagogy will support teachers in creating classrooms conducive to learning for diverse students, and will enable teachers to make more connections to their students' families and communities.

## **Community and Family Involvement**

Literature that focuses on culturally relevant pedagogy shows that family and community involvement is important to culturally relevant teachers. Culturally relevant pedagogy requires teachers to have the support of students' families and the community. Support from family and community members encourages academic improvement because students see that more people care about their academic achievement.

Teacher collaboration with students' families is a fundamental part of culturally relevant teaching. Parhar and Sensoy (2011) explained, "Interaction among teachers and family members allows students to feel increasingly a part of the school, and that the school becomes part of their family" (p. 203). Family plays an important role in culturally diverse students' success in school, and it is important for teachers to create a relationship with mutual respect. Parhar and Sensoy explained that many culturally diverse students come from a culture with strong family connections; therefore, school interaction with family is needed for the success of those students. Families can share primary source materials from their home country, such as artifacts, games, and healing herbs for use in instruction (Morrison et al., 2008). These materials can be used in a variety of ways in order to bring the visual imagery of other cultures into the classroom. Inviting families into the school is an effective way of showing students that where they come from is important. There are, however, challenges with interacting with families, including teachers having little time to include families in their students' education, different educational beliefs between the teacher and the parent because of cultural expectations, and language barriers (Parhar & Sensoy, 2011). Despite the difficulties with family interactions with the school, culturally relevant teachers believe that "family members who feel welcomed at the school are likely to be supportive of their children's education and supportive of the teachers" (p. 204). Family involvement and community involvement are closely connected.

Collaboration with the community is essential for increasing the academic and social achievement of culturally diverse students. Research confirms that involving the community with the school creates a school environment wherein the community and families are treated with respect and the school is a place where students want to be (Morrison et al., 2008). Educators can turn to community members for help in their search for tools, strategies, programs, and curricula to meet the needs of culturally diverse students (Griner & Stewart, 2012). Community members can be invited to interact with students and to take part in activities in the classroom (Morrison et al., 2008). For example, people in the community can come to the school to speak to students or to instruct students about aspects or practices from their home community. The school should empower the community to become involved in the school so that community members can play a role in meeting the needs of culturally diverse students (Griner & Stewart, 2012). This initiative will include mentoring community people into completing the paperwork required to serve as a school volunteer. The number of culturally diverse students in classrooms today is growing significantly; therefore, it is imperative that educators use culturally relevant teaching to benefit all students in the classroom.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The teaching practices embraced by a culturally relevant pedagogy are important for educators to consider implementing as they seek to find ways to increase the success of culturally diverse students. Research suggests that culturally relevant pedagogy is an effective approach to reach students with varying academic, social, and cultural backgrounds. The growing number of diverse students in Canadian schools makes the implementation of this differentiated pedagogical focus necessary.

The teacher has the central role in providing an equitable education for diverse students. Teachers choose the teaching practices that they will implement, and teaching practices are based on teacher beliefs and knowledge; therefore, teachers need to feel confident in their

abilities to teach content, to integrate their understanding of culture, and to develop students' social skills. Culturally relevant teachers encourage learning by creating culturally inclusive classrooms wherein students feel safe and comfortable, and have a sense of belonging and respect. Positive approaches to classroom management and relationship building are key factors in creating a culturally inclusive classroom wherein students feel more inspired to learn. Meeting the needs of diverse students requires teachers to approach achievement outcomes in the curricula in a different way by adapting the curricula to reinforce student learning, thus creating a positive and engaging experience for students in the classroom. Culturally relevant instructional practices, such as differentiated instruction and storytelling, will help to foster culturally diverse students' learning by creating a higher level of engagement and a better connection to their culture. Professional training and support will provide all teachers with the knowledge and encouragement that they need to develop culturally relevant pedagogy. Family and community interactions will provide teachers with support to create classrooms conducive to learning. Research attests that if culturally relevant pedagogy is implemented, it will benefit the changing student demographics, both academically and socially.

In conclusion, the reviewed studies illustrate that culturally relevant pedagogy will foster the learning environment and result in increased academic and social success of students. This research is imperative in the Canadian educational system because of the rapidly changing student demographics. Change is needed in our educational system, because traditional teacher-centered practices are not working with the shifting demographics and cultural backgrounds in contemporary classrooms. More and more students are culturally diverse, and teachers need to adapt their teaching practices to support these students. The learning environment must make students feel valued in order for all students to learn and feel safe. Students will benefit by becoming more comfortable with themselves, the teacher, and other students in the classroom. Culturally relevant pedagogy will help to support the learning needs of all students in the classroom, because it takes into consideration all aspects of culture, including ethnicity, race, religion, gender, age, socio-economic status, and sexual orientation. It is up to teachers to consider and then make needed changes to their teaching pedagogy, so as to make a difference in their students' lives and to enable them to be successful academically and socially. Culturally relevant pedagogy embraces a positive change in teaching practices that will influence all students toward higher academic and socio-emotional success.

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# **Successful Alternatives to Traditional School Structure: A Literature Review**

**Andrew (A.J.) Neufeld**

## **Abstract**

*In reaction to the recent release of the 2013 Pan Canadian Assessment Program results, in which Manitoba's grade 8 students achieved the lowest results in Canada in reading, numeracy, and science, the author conducted a literature review of alternative education programs, seeking to identify successful alternatives to traditional school structures. Four themes were identified. Students demonstrated improved academic achievement and motivation when learning took place in flexible learning environments, when students had opportunities to participate in individualized learning, and when an emphasis was placed on developing relationships. With reference to the fourth theme, while sometimes touted as a solution, alternative education programs were found to be often segregated from the traditional school system, leading to isolation and marginalization for both students and staff members. Administrators are advised, rather, to reduce class sizes within the traditional school system in order to provide teachers with opportunities to emphasize the first three themes in an environment that includes all learners.*

The Pan Canadian Assessment Program (PCAP) is a standardized test initiative developed by the provincial education ministries to assess student achievement in reading, numeracy, and science (O'Grady & Houme, 2014). In 2013, the PCAP was administered to a randomly selected sample of grade 8 students in all ten Canadian provinces. The report that Manitoban students achieved the lowest scores in all three components of the assessment generated concern and debate regarding the processes of teaching and learning across the province. Even as these processes are being evaluated, the structures of education itself should also be evaluated, using current research as the critical lens to determine the effectiveness of commonly accepted practices in the traditional school system. With the goal of improving student learning, those alternative approaches that have demonstrated positive effects on student learning should be identified and implemented when appropriate. A literature review of successful alternative educational programs (AEPs) revealed four common themes. Increased student achievement and motivation have been associated with flexible school environments, individualized learning programs, and an emphasis on relationships. At the same time, the literature has identified the marginalization of students and staff members associated with participation in AEPs as being a significant risk, due to the frequent segregation of these programs away from the traditional school system. Despite the limitations of the research on the subject of AEPs, school administrators are advised to consider how flexible learning environments, individualized learning, and intentionally developed student-teacher relationships can be integrated in the traditional school system.

## **Findings of the Literature Search**

A common definition for AEPs was not identified in the reviewed literature, nor was a commonly accepted term used to describe the group of programs that fall under the umbrella of AEPs. For example, International Baccalaureate and Advanced Placement programs are considered to be "pathway programs' for post secondary-bound students" (Park, Caine, & Wimmer, 2014, p. 129), whereas experimental schools in Israel are defined as "schools that conduct innovative methods, and have a potential for dissemination of these methods to specific other schools or to the entire system" (Tubin, Likritz, & Chen, 2004, p. 152). In their study of a Norwegian program described as an "alternative course involving increased workplace

practice,” Bruin and Ohna (2013) defined the program as an “academic and vocational experience combined, for students requiring more adaptations to their education than provided by the standard curriculum” (pp. 1090-1091), while Phillips’ (2011) alternative school was loosely defined as having “small class sizes and more student accountability” (p. 681). Because the definition of AEPs varied uniquely among all articles included in this review, it is appropriate to develop a definition that encompasses the many different formats of AEP that are currently implemented.

For the purposes of this literature review, “alternative education programs” are defined as any educational programs (including elementary, middle, or secondary school) that provide education to students by changing one or more of the structures within the traditional school system; these programs can include, but are not limited to, students identified as being at risk of dropping out of school. Given this definition, AEPs are better understood by comparing their structures to those of the traditional school system. The “traditional school system” is defined in this review as the commonly accepted school model, possessing all of the following characteristics: a defined starting and ending time, clearly articulated and rigid class scheduling, a school staff who are the possessors of knowledge and authority, and generally heterogeneous ability groupings of students; this is the dominant form of schooling that is responsible for educating the majority of students.

Though the themes identified in this review are each developed individually, the reader should be aware that none of the themes identified occurred in isolation in the literature and were generally implemented in combination with other interventions. As such, it should be considered how flexible learning environments, individualized learning, and strong teacher-student relationships can work together in a symbiotic and synergistic approach to improve student learning, while keeping in mind how the application of these concepts within AEPs risks the segregation of certain populations and perpetuates the “stratification” of student abilities (Bruin & Ohna, 2013, p. 1103).

## **Flexible Learning Environments**

Flexible learning environments have been shown to have a positive effect on both student motivation and academic achievement. In a study comparing middle class grade 7 students who attended an Israeli AEP to those attending a traditional public school in the same area, Tubin et al. (2004) found that AEP students scored higher on academic achievement tests, demonstrated more proficiency in academic skills (such as computer literacy), and possessed higher levels of academic motivation than their traditional public school counterparts. The AEP facilitated an open learning schedule in which a bell system was not used, and wherein the learning environment was divided into three distinct areas: a computer lab, lecture area, and open working area. Fenzel and Monteith (2008) demonstrated the benefits of an extended school day and school year in an analysis of the effectiveness of Catholic Nativity middle schools designed “to provide at-risk urban youth with the kind of educational program . . . that typically is available only to the children of economic privilege” (p. 383). These schools normally had a 9-hour school day, rather than the traditional 6.75-hour day, and required students to participate in a summer school program ranging from two to six weeks in length, depending on the individual school. Significantly higher percentages of students who participated in this AEP gained one or more grade equivalencies per year in math and reading, in comparison to students of a similar demographic who participated in the traditional school system.

In contrast to the earlier start time and longer school day advocated by Fenzel and Monteith (2008), however, Wolfson, Spaulding, Dandrow, and Baroni (2007) found that academic achievement and school attendance improved for grade 8 students whose school times started later in the morning when compared to students who had earlier start times. This latter research was grounded in the idea that the sleep needs of adolescents change as they reach puberty and they “experience a biological delay in the timing of sleep onset and awakening that is

associated with pubertal status and not chronological age” (p. 195). The application of Wolfson et al.’s (2007) finding should be considered with reference to the school start times identified in the study (7:15 a.m. versus 8:37 a.m.). In Hanover School Division in Manitoba, for example, Clearspring Middle School begins classes at 9:08 a.m., suggesting that research related to adolescent sleep needs has already influenced school starting times in that school division.

Flexible learning environments were effective in improving student motivation. Students considered the traditional school system to be “impersonal and unnecessarily stressful” (Watson, 2011, p. 1506), whereas creating a non-linear school schedule with flexible start and end times reduced deadline anxieties for many of the studies’ participants, giving students the feeling that they had the time to learn the content required of them (Bruin & Ohna, 2013). Students who participated in flexible learning environments also expressed appreciation for a non-linear curriculum, whereby they had the opportunity to review material in advance and come back to it later in the school year (Phillips, 2011). Flexibility in scheduling created opportunities for students to extend their learning through vocational experiences while still completing their academic courses. In a qualitative study of a successful AEP, Watson (2011) documented students working on assignments at their own pace. In the flexible environment observed in this study, students had the ability to make meals, when desired, in an onsite kitchen, and had the opportunity to move around in the space and socialize with peers and staff members. In these examples, flexible learning environments sought to “overcome the culture of schools that hold time constant, which therefore forces student learning to vary” (p. 1518). It has been the demonstrated tendency of schools to require student learning to occur within a discrete timeline; in doing so, student learning is observed to vary when all students are unable to demonstrate the required learning within the defined amount of time given to do so. Students who participated in flexible environments demonstrated appreciation for the flexibility that they experienced in the AEP, and showed improvement in academic achievement when they received additional flexibility in time and environment. The flexibility experienced by these students was not limited to their learning environment only, however. Participants in AEPs frequently also experienced flexibility in their learning experiences, in the form of individualized learning.

## **Individualized Learning**

The second theme that emerged in consideration of successful AEPs was the understanding that students will both appreciate and benefit from an individualized approach to learning. In one study, Tubin et al. (2004) found that when grade 7 students had opportunities to participate in individually based learning in combination with other factors, they performed better on academic achievement and skill-based tests, and also showed better long-term retention of knowledge and skills. Tubin et al. suggested that permitting students to “confront difficulties and manage their own tasks” individually in this AEP had a positive effect on student motivation and feelings of self-efficacy (p. 161); however, this assertion appeared to be based on the researchers’ own opinions, because a direct connection between individualized learning and student motivation was beyond the scope of the study.

In a qualitative study involving interviews of an AEP’s students, Phillips (2011) found that a certain level of student autonomy during learning appeared to be connected to achieving academic goals. Phillips opined that when students were given the opportunity “to decide where they were heading within certain academic boundaries, and were given the time and space to reach those goals on their own, they felt as if their learning experience was more successful” (p. 690). As well, Watson (2011) documented students’ opportunities to choose the academic outcomes they were working on, with collaboration from a staff member. The students expressed appreciation for the flexibility that was offered within their individualized plans, and the individual attention that they received from staff members in developing and assessing their learning. In their interviews, staff members noted that the students who participated in



individualized learning of this nature were motivated to work, in contrast to a lack of motivation and learning in the more regimented and linear learning environment of the traditional classroom. The idea of staff responsiveness to individualized student needs was also supported by Caroleo (2014), in her synthesis of research on the benefits and risks of participating in AEPs. Caroleo reported that staff members in AEPs had the ability to respond individually to students due to smaller class sizes. In their well-designed quantitative study, Blatchford, Bassett, and Brown (2011) supported a higher likelihood of individualized student learning experiences when class sizes were smaller in both elementary and high school settings. Student academic achievement appeared to be enhanced when students were given opportunities to participate in individualized learning experiences, and received individualized attention from their teachers. Student attitudes toward their own learning also appeared to improve under these conditions. It should not come as a surprise that AEP participants who experienced smaller class sizes and more frequent interactions with teachers also experienced unique relationships with each other and with their teacher; these relationships also had a positive influence on student learning.

### **Positive Relationships**

The importance of positive relationships was also identified consistently in the literature, and constitutes a third theme of interest in the area of alternative methodologies to traditional school structures. Middle years students in Catholic “Nativity” schools participated in a school structure that emphasized small class sizes, small group activities, and small group advisories, all which led them to describe their school experiences in terms of a “family” wherein their teachers cared for them (Fenzel & Monteith, 2008, pp. 393-394). In the same study, students in the school described staff members as “caring,” supportive of students, and “respectful” (Fenzel & Monteith, 2008, p. 393). In a different study, students who described higher levels of perceived academic success in AEPs also described positive relationships with their teachers in their areas of success, whereas they connected negative academic experiences with concurrently negative teacher-student relationships (Phillips, 2011). A similar association was seen by Watson (2011): when AEP teachers intentionally took the time to form meaningful relationships with their students and advocate for their best interests, their students were more engaged in their learning and demonstrated more willingness to do their school work. In Watson’s study, the teacher-student relationships were maintained after the students left the school; graduates were observed returning to the AEP to reconnect with staff members, demonstrating the strength of the relationships that had been established. The connection between student engagement and student-teacher relationship was especially significant in light of the students’ previous inability to function productively in a school setting, having previously failed or been expelled. Similar teacher-student relationships were a characteristic of the “‘community-like’ environments” identified by Caroleo (2014) in her synthesis of AEP research (p. 44); feelings of community were considered to be beneficial for students participating in AEPs, when considered in light of the educational experiences of the same students in traditional schools.

Positive teacher-student relationships were not unique to AEPs designed to support at-risk students, however. Participants in International Baccalaureate (IB) and Advanced Placement (AP) programs also described better relationships and “more adult-like” interactions with their teachers than with their teachers in traditional subject areas (Park et al., 2014, p. 130). Interestingly, the at-risk students in AEPs designed as “last chance” programs (Caroleo, 2014, p. 37) and the IB and AP students both described instances of disengagement from learning when they experienced teacher interactions and relationships that were perceived to be negative (Park et al., 2014; Phillips, 2011), suggesting that the concept of developing strong teacher-student relationships is important as it relates to student perceptions of learning, regardless of student ability level. The literature suggests, then, that developing positive

relationships with students is an important component of student learning. However, while the participants found meaningful relationships and identities within AEP communities, they were simultaneously separated from the mainstream school community, creating (or in some cases, reinforcing) a sense of isolation from society.

### **Risk of Segregation and Stratification**

While the development of flexible learning environments, individualized learning programs, and intentional student-teacher relationships all appear to be correlated with improved student learning and improved student attitudes toward learning, it is important to acknowledge the risk of segregation apart from the traditional school system inherent in the facilitation of the AEPs that were studied in the literature included in this review. This risk of isolation due to segregation is connected largely, but not exclusively, to Last Chance AEPs (Caroleo, 2014). It is appropriate to identify the characteristics of students considered to be at risk of dropping out or failing to graduate, and receiving a final opportunity to participate in formal education through an AEP. An appreciation of these characteristics is important for the reader to understand the context for the identification of the risks of segregation.

While AEPs have been developed for a variety of purposes, including to “make school more challenging and fulfilling” for high achieving students, rehabilitating students who are struggling academically, and providing last chances for students “as an alternative to suspension” (Caroleo, 2014, p. 37), the majority of the AEPs included in this review provided programming for at-risk students. These students were considered to be at risk for a variety of reasons, including low family support, teenage pregnancy, drug addiction, “extreme behavioural problems,” criminal records, and having been expelled from the traditional school system (Watson, 2011, p. 1503). In addition to these characteristics, at-risk students may also come from low socio-economic backgrounds, belong to urban minorities (Fenzel & Monteith, 2008), and/or have significant difficulty attending school regularly for a number of reasons (Bruin & Ohna, 2013). Last Chance AEPs have been developed to provide students at risk of dropping out of school, or not graduating, with a final opportunity to succeed in their formal education.

Despite the positive intent of AEPs to provide educational access to all students regardless of their life situations or previous academic experiences, researchers are concerned about the tendency of administrators to segregate AEPs from the traditional school system. Bruin and Ohna (2013) expressed concern that, in an effort to be inclusive by providing at-risk students with separate programming uniquely designed for the needs of at-risk learners, the AEP actually promoted the marginalization of the students who participated. The authors felt that the students found an educational identity within a community of students who shared similar at-risk characteristics and school experiences; in doing so, it was possible for the students to become more isolated from society, contributing to what Bruin and Ohna termed as the “stratification” of the educational system, whereby an AEP would actually reinforce and perpetuate the at-risk characteristics of participants (p. 1103), rather than equip students to participate in and contribute to society. In particular, concern was expressed regarding the quality of education received by AEP participants (Bruin & Ohna; Caroleo, 2014). Bruin and Ohna indicated that students participating in AEPs may receive substandard academic education compared to their peers in the traditional school system, resulting in less job readiness or a false sense of capability, further promoting the at-risk characteristics and isolation of AEP participants. The likelihood of this isolation was evident in consideration of student interviewees’ contrasting opinions of the two systems, wherein the traditional school system was described in terms such as “fear,” “loneliness,” “overwhelmed,” and “betrayed” (Bruin & Ohna, pp. 1095-1096). The AEP was described in a more positive light, as participants spoke about themes including “turning points,” “increased quality of life,” and “hopes for the future” (Bruin & Ohna, pp. 1096-1097).

Watson (2011) echoed the concerns of Bruin and Ohna (2013), though interestingly the implications of isolation due to segregation were extended to include staff members of the AEP.

In Watson's study of an off-campus high school AEP, students expressed feelings of marginalization due to the segregated nature of their AEP; in this case, all students attending the AEP were prohibited from accessing the traditional school property and would be arrested if found there. As a result of this prohibition, the AEP students were also prevented from taking part in social and cultural functions with the larger school-aged population, including school dances and athletics. The staff members reported feelings of relational isolation from their colleagues in the traditional school system, where the staff members of the AEP felt they were "looked down on [by traditional school system staff members] for teaching the 'problem kids'" (Watson, p. 1517). Both staff and students of the AEP felt labelled by the traditional school system: the students felt they had been labelled as "problems," whereas the staff felt they had been labelled as giving students "credit for doing nothing" in the AEP (Watson, p. 1517). The staff members described the AEP as the "ugly stepchild of the high school, the black sheep of the family" (Watson, p. 1517).

Observations of isolation and segregation were not limited only to Last Chance AEPs, however. Park et al. (2014) noted a trend of isolation in IB and AP programs as well. In their review of student experiences in IB and AP programs, student success was linked to conforming to group ideals regarding participation, rather than ability; student disengagement and isolation within the group were reported when students did not conform. In addition to isolation within the IB and AP programs, Park et al. also identified "strained relationships" between students who participated in IB and AP programs, and their peers in the traditional school system (p. 135), because the participants considered themselves to be members of a "prestigious" group, separate from other parts of the school community (p. 147). An example was seen in Park et al.'s findings of the stratification of student ability levels addressed by Bruin and Ohna (2013).

In her synthesis of 53 articles and reports on AEPs, Caroleo (2014) indicated the tendency of AEP programs to be segregated from the traditional school system. The separation from the traditional school system was considered to perpetuate the negative labeling of students who attend an AEP, as well as the stratification of student ability (Bruin & Ohna, 2014), whereby participants were "conceptualized as second class citizens compared to those attending [traditional] schooling (Caroleo, p. 43). It seems evident that, despite the academic benefits that AEP participants experience while in the program, the likelihood of stratification and perpetuation of at-risk characteristics and identities, due to the segregation of students from the larger community of the traditional school system, is a significant negative counterpoint that requires administrative consideration.

## **Discussion**

The preceding literature review found that students in AEPs experienced improved academic achievement and attitudes toward education when they participated in programming with flexible learning environments and individualized learning, and when significant relationships were formed with both fellow students and staff members. Simultaneously, both staff and students in many of the AEPs documented in the review reported feelings of isolation and segregation from the greater educational community. Consideration of the last finding, in particular, raises some troubling questions regarding the nature of alternative education programming. Before interpreting these findings, it is important to consider the many limitations associated with the current research on the topic of AEPs. These limitations are discussed, followed by some possible implications that should be considered by school administrators as AEPs are implemented or assessed.

## Limitations

Significant limitations are associated with the applicability of this literature review. AEPs do not have a commonly accepted definition, or a common purpose; in fact, programs may exist for at least one of five different reasons: making school more challenging in preparation for post-secondary schooling (Park et al., 2014), modifying the behaviours of students “considered to be chronically disruptive” (Caroleo, 2014, p. 37), remediating emotional or academic concerns (Caroleo, 2014), “offer[ing] better answers to the diversity of learning styles and subjects of interest within the student population” (Tubin et al., 2004, p. 152), and “provid[ing] at-risk urban youth with the kind of educational program, free or nearly free of charge, that typically is available only to the children of economic privilege” (Fenzel & Monteith, 2008, p. 383). The lack of a commonly accepted definition of AEP creates difficulties in determining what forms of program should be considered an AEP for the purposes of analysis (Caroleo, 2014).

The studies that investigated specific AEPs each had considerable concerns regarding sample size and makeup, transferability, and author bias. These studies were typically qualitative in nature and relied on small sample sizes in focus groups (sometimes as few as two participants; Phillips, 2011). Applying the results of these studies beyond their original context is difficult, given the high degree of variation in participant characteristics. The reviewed studies included a range of student ages and demographics, from grade 6 boys attending a gender-specific urban Catholic Nativity school (Fenzel & Monteith, 2008) to teen-age mothers attending an off-campus AEP (Watson, 2011). In the case of comparative studies, there were large differences in size between groups under study and control groups, calling into question the validity of conclusions made in comparison of the two groups. Given the substantial range in age, gender, and life experiences of students participating in the AEPs, trying to create connections among student experiences within and across the programs should be done only in the broadest possible terms, because comparisons among AEPs without similarities in population, demographics, or purpose are inappropriate. The bias of the authors in the majority of the included studies also challenges the validity of their conclusions. Many of the included studies promoted the success of the AEP being studied, or used the results of the research to make conclusions that were not directly embraced within the scope of the research purpose. Despite these limitations, some conclusions can be made with regard to the implementation of AEPs.

## Implications

The 2013 PCAP results, in which Manitoban grade 8 students had the lowest achievement scores in reading, numeracy, and science (O’Grady & Houme, 2014), have refocused attention on teaching and learning in Manitoba. This literature review was conducted to identify successful alternative methodologies to traditional school structures that could be submitted for consideration in light of Manitoba’s PCAP results. The themes of providing flexible learning environments, individualized learning, and emphasizing both teacher-student relationships and student-student relationships emerged as strategies that could be used to improve student achievement and motivation, particularly in at-risk students. However, the application of these strategies in the current AEP model of segregated programs has resulted in a negative counterbalance whereby participating students and staff members were marginalized and isolated from the community of the traditional school system.

In their study investigating the effect of smaller class sizes on classroom processes in the traditional school system, Blatchford et al. (2011) indicated that students received two to three times as much individual teacher attention and that teacher-to-whole group lecturing decreased when students participated in class sizes of 15 students, compared to class sizes of 30 students, leading them to conclude that smaller class sizes lead to more individualized instruction. Blatchford et al. also determined that student engagement increased in smaller class

sizes, including the engagement of low-achieving high school students. Small class size was an identified characteristic of AEPs in the majority of studies included in this review (Caroleo, 2014; Fenzel & Monteith, 2008; Phillips, 2011). Given the apparent positive effect of reducing class sizes, rather than segregating low-achieving students school administrators are advised to decrease class sizes in the traditional school system in order to promote the development of meaningful relationships in existing classrooms among students and between students and teachers. Decreasing the pupil-to-teacher ratio may also provide teachers with more opportunities to design individualized learning opportunities for students. In light of the findings related to providing students with flexible learning environments, students may benefit from a classroom environment that includes frequent opportunities for movement during lessons, and that permits students to eat and socialize during class time, because students expressed appreciation for more relaxed learning environments and demonstrated higher levels of engagement when in less formal environments (Tubin et al., 2004; Watson, 2011).

In summary, despite the limited research on the effectiveness of AEPs, school and divisional administrators are advised to decrease class sizes within the mainstream educational system. In doing so, at-risk students are likely to experience more individual teacher-student interactions and improved school engagement, while teachers are likely to have more opportunities to provide responsive and individualized learning experiences for all students. These effects will be experienced in an inclusive environment wherein all learners feel a sense of belonging and community, regardless of their life experiences or previous academic success.

## **Conclusion**

The recently released 2013 PCAP results, in which Manitoba's grade 8 students achieved the lowest reading, numeracy, and science scores in Canada, have generated considerable debate regarding the processes of teaching and learning in Manitoba. In addition to investigating how to teach more effectively and learn more deeply, it is important to review the structures of education in Manitoba, and to identify successful alternatives to those structures deemed to be inefficient. This literature review attempted to identify successful alternative methodologies to traditional school structures. Four themes emerged from the included articles, which looked at these alternatives within the context of AEPs. Students demonstrated improved academic achievement when learning took place in flexible learning environments that included varied lengths in the school day and opportunities to move around, and that were developed with the needs of students in mind. Students showed greater levels of engagement and academic achievement when they had opportunities to participate in individualized and non-linear learning. An emphasis on developing strong relationships in the learning environment also showed positive results for participants. However, the students and staff members within the AEPs were frequently marginalized and isolated from the greater school community, due to the common practice of locating AEPs separately from the main school campus. Despite the limitations of the research in the area of AEPs, an emphasis on developing smaller class sizes and lowering the pupil-to-teacher ratio in the traditional school system is advised for school administrators to develop a school community within the traditional school system that is inclusive of all student abilities, and that is responsive to the needs of all students regardless of ability or life situation.

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## About the Author

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# Supporting Struggling Readers: A Literature Review

Jennifer Kreitz

## Abstract

*Manitoba's reading scores continue to be under scrutiny. A national report, the PCAP, indicated that Manitoba ranked last in the country in reading (O'Grady & Houme, 2014). This literature review records the author's investigation into ways to support struggling readers in the early years classroom. Research articles were reviewed and books were consulted for proven intervention programs and effective classroom teaching practices that would benefit a range of struggling readers in kindergarten to grade 2. Results from the research articles indicate that a one-to-one or small-group direct instruction model that focuses on phonics, reading, and writing is highly effective in supporting struggling readers. The research articles also indicate that student engagement plays a pivotal role in student achievement. Providing students with book choice can increase student engagement. Reading programs, although effective, often do not permit book choice, because the program writers select the themes and book titles in the programs. Many of these books may have little appeal, or social and cultural relevance, to struggling readers. More research is needed to determine whether culturally relevant books can positively affect reading achievement.*

This paper summarizes research regarding my professional focus on ways to support struggling readers. My purpose is to provide classroom teachers and resource teachers with a reference guide for supporting struggling readers in the early years classroom. Several themes emerged in the articles that I read. Those themes are discussed, along with the research articles from which the themes emerged.

The importance of early literacy development cannot be overstated (Slavin, Lake, Davis, & Madden, 2010). Children with poor early reading skills often continue to struggle in later grades and are more likely to drop out of school (Ransford-Kaldon, Flynt, & Ross, 2011). While one-to-one or small group reading interventions may be costly, the long-term benefits of the intervention may outweigh the initial expense (Slavin, et al., 2010). Teaching a child to read, igniting an interest in books, and keeping an at-risk student in school are worth the financial cost of initiatives that work.

## Rationale for Article Selection

My purpose for this research inquiry was to find proven ways, as elaborated by good research, to teach all students how to read, regardless of their individual circumstances. Several factors impede children's abilities to learn to read. These factors may include, but are not limited to, challenges with social development, emotional and behavioural issues, cognitive delays, and English language learning. My goal was to find research that would assist me in supporting each child's learning needs. I purposefully chose not to focus on one specific type of learning challenge; rather, I chose to maintain a broader scope on strategies that could benefit all children regardless of their specific circumstances.

In the 15 years that I have been a teacher, my roles in the schools in which I have worked have included teaching grades 4-6 basic French, teaching across kindergarten to grade 5, and serving as a Reading Recovery teacher. I have also been the school literacy leader and have had a small part of assigned resource time. My passion through these varying assignments has always been literacy. Whether teaching the alphabet or through a novel study, helping students to acquire a love of words and books has been my focus. What continually challenges me as a teacher is how to help the struggling readers. It is simple enough to engage eager young students in a book when they have the skills to read, understand, and enjoy the text. What

motivates my own teaching and learning is how to support the students who do not fit the mold of “average” achieving students. Discovering ways of reaching and teaching the hardest-to-teach children is my professional focus.

I would like, one day, to work as a literacy support teacher. The position would entail providing direct support to struggling readers and providing support to classroom teachers. When working with students, I would apply the strategies that have been proven to be effective for students who require more intensive instruction than the classroom teacher typically may provide. When working with teachers, I would provide them with instructional strategies that support an effective, classroom-based literacy program.

Researching effective reading intervention programs is important. The Manitoba school division that I work for, Pembina Trails School Division, supports Reading Recovery and Leveled Literacy Intervention as early literacy intervention programs. It was my goal to confirm, through research, that these intervention programs are truly effective and worth maintaining as a resource. Both intervention programs are costly in terms of time, money, and staff professional development. I wanted to discover for myself whether these programs were truly worthy of the merit that my administration claimed they deserved.

Another guideline that I set for myself in searching for research articles was to locate studies of teaching strategies that teachers could implement in the classroom. I work at a small school with declining enrolment. As enrolment declines, so does the resource and educational assistant (EA) time granted to schools by the school division. The current resource allotment translates to roughly four days per week for my K-6 school, with a population of approximately 145 students. Between meetings and dealing with volatile students, the resource teacher finds it incredibly challenging to devote a consistent, uninterrupted time to support struggling readers in the early years classes. Since none of my students have qualified for provincial funding, I also have no EA support. It was essential for me to find effective teaching methods that could be implemented with a range of struggling readers, and without requiring the support of another adult to manage the students who are not in the intervention group.

### **Emergent Themes from Articles**

Several themes emerged from the articles selected for this literature review: direct instruction, phonics, writing, engagement, and good classroom teaching practices. Each theme, along with the implications for teaching and learning, are discussed in greater detail in the following sections of this paper.

### **Supporting Students Outside the Classroom with Direct Instruction**

The teaching methods and professional development that I received in Reading Recovery have been invaluable to me as I teach young children to read. I apply those skills on a daily basis. Since I have that training ingrained in my approach, I tend to compare all reading programs to the highly regarded and research-proven effective Reading Recovery program, as was the case when reading articles about one-to-one or small-group reading interventions. Although there are many positive elements to the Reading Recovery program – one-to-one teaching with a highly trained adult, individualized instruction, quality materials, and a consistent routine – there are also several negative aspects to the program. The student selection process states that the weakest grade 1 student enters the lesson series even if the child is perhaps not the best candidate due to cognitive delays, behavioural issues, or lack of English language fluency. I agree that every child deserves the opportunity to learn; however, the Reading Recovery spots are so rare that it would sometimes be more beneficial to assign the spot at the teacher’s discretion, and have that weakest student follow an alternative intervention that is more suited to the individual’s needs. Another possible fault in the program is that there is no room for book choice by the child. The teacher selects the books from a Reading Recovery



approved series. These books often lack appeal to students, and thus the students who most need to be engaged in their learning disengage and continue to struggle.

The main theme that emerged from several research articles is direct instruction of literacy skills (Ransford-Kaldon, Flynt, & Ross, 2011; Slavin, Lake, Davis, & Madden, 2010; Spencer, 2011; Vernon-Feagans, Kainz, Hedrick, Ginsberg, & Amendum, 2010). Whether in a one-to-one or small-group setting, daily structured lessons delivered outside the classroom are reported by the research as essential in supporting struggling readers.

Prior to beginning the search for articles, I was well aware of the proven teaching methods that the Reading Recovery program provides. What I was not aware of was how many studies have based their work on the direct instruction tenets of the Reading Recovery model and the work of Marie Clay, founder of Reading Recovery. Of the 9 articles that I found and reviewed, 5 cited Clay. Several other articles that I skimmed, but did not review, also referred to Clay. In a research synthesis report, Slavin et al. (2010) stated,

Reading Recovery is by far the most widely researched and widely used tutoring program in the world. Originally developed in 1985 in New Zealand by Marie Clay, Reading Recovery provides extensive training, observation, and feedback to qualified teachers, who provide daily 30-minute lessons to the lowest 20%-30% of children in their first years of elementary school until they are reading at the expected level for their age. (p. 6)

Reading Recovery appears to be the benchmark to which other reading intervention programs are compared.

Targeted Reading Intervention (Vernon-Feagans et al., 2010) borrows heavily from Reading Recovery. Targeted Reading Intervention (TRI) lessons and assessment practices are structured in the same manner as Reading Recovery lessons and assessment procedures. A standardized assessment package is used to evaluate the student's strengths and areas of weakness before and after the intervention. A highly structured and consistent daily, 15-minute, one-to-one lesson series then follows. The format of the TRI lessons is quite similar to Reading Recovery in that both begin with a re-read of a known book for fluency, then word work is used to teach phonics, followed by a new book taught to the student with support provided as needed.

Another program that follows a similar direct instruction structure to Reading Recovery is Leveled Literacy Intervention. Ransford-Kaldon et al. (2011) detailed a study on the effectiveness of the Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI). LLI is a small group literacy intervention program for struggling kindergarten to grade two students. Two former Reading Recovery teachers, Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell, created the program. In the study by Ransford-Kaldon et al., students were assessed using a series of standardized tests prior to beginning the program and post intervention. LLI is a highly structured program that follows a specific sequence of activities during each daily, scripted 30-minute lesson. Like Reading Recovery and Targeted Reading Intervention, LLI emphasizes direct instruction of phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and expansion of vocabulary.

The Voyager program, a scientifically based commercial reading program, similar to LLI, was used in the Spencer (2011) study. Voyager is a daily 40-minute, small-group intervention program. The program also follows a scripted direct instruction model that emphasizes phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension instruction. Spencer's article introduced me to the reason for the rise of commercially produced, scripted, and sequenced direct instruction models: the American Reading First policy of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The multi-billion dollar Reading First policy states that every child should read at or above state requirements by the end of grade 3 (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). American schools received funding to provide scientifically based literacy programming to students in order to help reach the goal of grade level achievement. The policy indicates that

five pillars of literacy – phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension – are required to provide an effective reading instruction program. According to Spencer, the United States government conducted its own studies and found that the five pillars are essential components that have spurred a surge in the direct instruction model of literacy programming.

Results of the Spencer (2011), Ransford-Kaldon et al. (2011), and Vernon-Feagans et al. (2010) studies indicated that a one-to-one or small-group, direct instruction intervention has a positive effect on all aspects of literacy development for struggling readers. Basic word reading and comprehension skills increased (Vernon-Feagans et al.); letter naming and fluency improved (Ransford-Kaldon et al.); and vocabulary understanding and usage improved (Spencer). Implementing a direct instruction intervention program such Reading Recovery, TRI, LLI, or Voyager would support many struggling readers. Given the results provided by the studies, I will continue to use skills and strategies taught in Reading Recovery and LLI. I will also recommend that other schools invest in LLI as an intervention alternative to Reading Recovery.

### **Supporting Students Inside the Classroom**

As an early years teacher, I see the effect on students who struggle to read. These students typically begin to identify themselves as inferior to their classmates when they realize that their performance does not match the performance of their peers (Ciampa, 2012). Even without me distinguishing who is reading at which level, the weaker readers see the differences for themselves in the physical appearance of the books that they read as compared to the other students' books. If their book has six or eight words on a page, while their friend's book has multiple sentences, the lower achieving students soon realize that they are falling behind.

Efficient and purposeful classroom teaching practices are essential in helping struggling readers. Four main themes emerged from the literature regarding needed classroom focus areas: phonics, writing, engagement, and sound teaching methods.

**Sensory-based phonics.** Both phonics instruction and phonemic awareness are crucial in supporting struggling readers, as noted in the articles detailing highly structured direct instruction programs (Clay, 1993; Ransford-Kaldon et al., 2011; Slavin et al, 2010; Spencer, 2011; Vernon-Feagans et al., 2010). Phonemes are the smallest unit of sound that carry meaning in language. Phonics instruction and phonemic awareness are often more simply referred to as alphabet skills or letter-sound knowledge. Letter recognition in young learners is frequently the best predictor of future reading success (Massengill Shaw & Sundberg, 2008). Many students in grade 1 begin the year not having mastered alphabet skills. Letter knowledge and letter formation, as well as phonics, are all essential pre-reading skills.

Without alphabet knowledge, children are not able to begin reading (Zascavage, McKenzie, Buot, Woods, & Orton-Gillingham, 2012). Learning the significance of the abstract formations that we call letters can be somewhat challenging for young learners. Struggling learners, in particular, could benefit from a sensory approach to phonics instruction. An integrated sensory approach is recommended for teaching phonics, like the one used in the Massengill Shaw and Sundberg (2008) research with at-risk first graders. Such an approach could help to support students who have not benefited from traditional alphabet lessons.

The method used to teach alphabet skills in the Massengill Shaw and Sundberg (2008) study was based on the neurodevelopment of children's brains. The integrated alphabet approach includes four sequential phases: imagery, auditory, integration and sound blending, and a motor plan. In the first phase, through imagery, students are introduced to a symbol that represents a letter and its corresponding sound. The shape and beginning sound of an object match the shape and sound of the letter. For example, if "o" is for octopus, the round shape of a toy octopus is shown to match the round shape of the letter "o." In the second, auditory phase, students learn the applicable phoneme, or sound, for each object or picture. During the third

phase, integration of letters and sounds is used to make sound-symbol relationships, and is then followed by blending sounds into words. The final phase is the motor plan whereby students learn proper letter formation to print the letter. Although this could be a lengthy process for a classroom teacher, the value in providing all students with a solid phonemic foundation will help to close the gap between struggling readers and more successful students. This approach could possibly teach the struggling students, prepare them for reading, and narrow the achievement gap.

Another method to assist in letter and sound learning is visual discrimination. In their research report, Zascavage et al. (2012) described the use of a three-dimensional appearing font as opposed to traditional flat font for emergent readers. The background section of the article detailed a number of studies that applied information from brain research to seek effective ways to activate more areas of the brain in people with dyslexia. Several studies found that using a visual-spatial approach is most effective in brain activation for many people with dyslexia. The researchers decided to investigate the effect of font on emergent readers. The results of the major study indicated that the three-dimensional font is most effective for the lowest achieving students. This simple change could support those emergent readers who require the most help.

I currently have a struggling reader in grade 2 who exhibits certain traits of dyslexia. I have begun to use a three-dimensional font with this student. He likes the appearance of the big, dark letters. He says the font “is easier for my eyes to see.” This student now uses the font himself when learning to read and write new words. He writes new words on a small whiteboard, as I have modelled, in dark bubble letters, and then swipes from left to right under the word with his finger to read the word slowly until he has solved it himself.

**Writing.** Marie Clay (2001) believed firmly in the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing. Clay emphasized that “when children are clearly getting left behind by their faster-learning classmates, it is very important to work with reading and writing together” (p. 11). Since writing requires students to apply literacy skills, not simply to understand them, the writing process is where gains in reading can also be made. “As teachers explore this reciprocal relationship in the classroom, they will be surprised at how children learn more quickly as they begin to make connections” (Anderson & Briggs, 2011, p. 549).

Waiser and Whiteley (2001) studied the effects of adding writing to the daily routine in four kindergarten classes over a two-year period. Journal writing and word walls were used to teach high-frequency words. The study found that the June reading achievement scores increased from 75% of students meeting provincial expectations in the first year of the study to 82% in the second year. The gains from one year to the next were attributed to the teachers’ increased familiarity and comfort in teaching high-frequency words and in using the word wall and writing journals. Perhaps more significantly, summer learning loss was decreased. The same students were assessed upon entry to grade 1. Waiser and Whiteley (2001) found that 47% of students maintained their reading level through the summer in the first year of the study, while in the second year 74% maintained their reading level through the summer. Waiser and Whiteley attributed the reduction of summer learning loss to the change in the kindergarten literacy program. The addition of writing provided the students with more opportunities to apply letter and sound knowledge in a manner that enabled them to gain a better understanding of how words work. “The fact that significantly more children were able to maintain their reading level over the summer months suggests that greater word knowledge can help secure reading levels over the summer between kindergarten and grade one” (Waiser & Whiteley, p. 8).

The results of the Waiser and Whiteley (2001) study indicated to me that direct instruction of high-frequency words and, more importantly, their application in writing journals can directly and positively impact lasting reading achievement. This teaching method reinforces the reciprocal relationship between reading and writing. By applying the phonics skills learned in

reading lessons, students then internalize and apply phonics skills to their writing, thereby reinforcing their learning.

**Engagement.** The current trend in literacy instruction is a highly structured, teacher-directed model. Although the research suggests that this type of teaching program is effective (Ransford-Kaldon et al., 2011; Slavin et al., 2010; Spencer, 2011; Vernon-Feagans et al., 2010), it does not permit personal choice by the teacher or the student. The lessons in these programs are scripted, the books are pre-selected, and the program writers determine the topics of discussion. Little regard is given to the personal interests of students, their cultural backgrounds, or current societal issues. All of these factors contribute to the engagement of students. Struggling readers, in particular, need more encouragement, motivation, personal connections, and engagement in order to persevere (Ciampa, 2011).

Spencer (2011) identified the flaws in the current literacy instruction trend. If current practice is to implement scripted, sequential, direct instruction programs, there is very little freedom to incorporate student-initiated activities that support their literacy learning. The social and cultural aspect of literacy learning is missing from these programs. Although some of these programs attempt to include children of diverse cultural backgrounds, the inclusion of a Latino, Aboriginal, Indian, or Chinese child, for example, in one of a series of books does not truly give value to the child's own experiences and cultural background. Spencer concluded that the divergent practices, or seemingly off-task behaviours of students in a small reading intervention group, were actually a way for children to work through literacy issues and develop an understanding through social interactions. The students in Spencer's study discussed English vocabulary taught in the lessons in both English and Spanish, the participating students' first language, in order to create meaning for each other, and used play and personal stories to provide context for certain concepts beyond their personal experience. Spencer concluded that deviating from the script provided rich literacy experiences for the three students participating in the research study, because "they made use of their collective social and linguistic resources, approached text reading with a sense of purpose, and physically re-imagined the space to suit their experiences and intellectual endeavors" (p. 48). Not only is Spencer's perspective applicable to young learners, it also has implications for English language learners as a whole. Play removes some of the pressure that the children feel, and frees them to take linguistic risks and possibly to make mistakes that can be corrected in a relaxed manner. Incorporating children's own experiences and language yields richer literacy practices. These participating students found a way to engage themselves in their learning. They used play to stay connected to the lesson and to develop an understanding of the literacy skills being taught each day.

Costello (2011) also indicated the importance of direct instruction to teach specific skills. However, he also noted that an element missing from direct instruction is giving students opportunities to choose their own reading materials. The direct instruction approach does not permit student interests to guide book choice, which Costello found limiting to his students, since some struggling readers in his class performed much better with self-selected books that appealed to the students' interests or experiences. The data collected by Costello indicated a positive relationship between increased engagement with a book and increased reading skill level.

In his article, Costello (2011) raised an important point: it is the teacher who makes the difference and not the program. A teacher knows his/her students and what will engage and motivate these students. Regardless of whether a teacher uses a whole language or a direct instruction approach, teaching and reaching students with that approach is what is essential. Discovering an effective means of teaching is what is important in teaching early literacy skills, which may mean following a specific approach and/or changing it for one's own context.

The children whom we welcome into the classroom are influenced by the Internet and electronics (Ciampa, 2012). In my daily classroom experience, my students are constantly making reference to online happenings. A logical method of engagement, especially for

struggling readers whose focus tends to wane, is electronic books. Ciampa (2012) found that during the 25-minute eBook sessions in her study, all students remained on-task and exhibited behaviours indicating that they were highly engaged. Ciampa attributed this change in behaviours, as compared to previous classroom behaviours, to “the motivational qualities of self-determination, choice, and stimulation” (p. 18) provided by the online program. All participants enjoyed the opportunity to choose the books read on the computer. Ciampa’s results indicated that using eBooks was an effective method of increasing on-task reading behaviours. Implemented along with traditional reading instruction, online storybook reading may have positive motivational effects.

**Good classroom practices.** The debate over the best pedagogical methods for teaching children to read has been ongoing for many decades and in many countries (Reid & Green, 2004). The current trend is to rely on the commercially packaged, scientifically based methods. As Reid and Green (2004) found, however, a look to the past may broaden teachers’ views of the scripted approach. Past methods have included teaching reading through spelling, using hand signals for each phoneme, and a whole language approach, all which lead to more critique and exploration of other approaches. With each of these methods, most children learned to read while others struggled to read. Regardless of the method, the teacher was charged with finding a way to teach the child to read. One determining factor of effective reading instruction is having teachers with the skill, knowledge, understanding, and timing to support individual students, regardless of the method or approach to teaching. The needs of the students may require the teacher to draw upon several methods to teach the students in the class. An openness to various methods and knowledge of skill development are more effective in teaching struggling readers than any one specific reading method.

Many commercial programs are available to teachers. Some programs are highly scripted, which may benefit teachers who are new to teaching reading and may increase consistency of instruction from classroom to classroom within a school or school division. Scripted programs are often accompanied by scientifically proven data that endorse their teaching methods. Other programs are less scripted. The less scripted programs permit teachers to use their professional discretion and a variety of materials and resources when delivering lessons. There appears to be little difference in whether the program structure has an impact on student performance (McIntyre, Rightmyer, & Petrosko, 2008). This finding suggests that it is the ability and skill of the teacher to adapt lessons to meet the needs of the students that has the greatest effect on student achievement. It is the teacher who identifies individual needs in the moment, and who modifies the lesson, who has the greatest impact on student learning. The reason that the claimed scientifically proven methods do not work for all learners is because they do not address the specific needs of the individual. Commercial programs are designed to teach children who acquire literacy skills in a typical fashion, rather than to address the needs of struggling readers who have gaps in learning.

Sound classroom practice from year to year is necessary to support struggling readers (Slavin et al., 2011). If a teacher were to design a literacy program that incorporates all of the elements that the research says are effective, it would involve a small-group, direct instruction model that uses books of high interest to students with an emphasis on phonics and writing. Sensory aspects would also be woven into the reading and writing process. As effective as a particular reading program might be, it is only as good as the teacher who teaches the lessons. Literacy instruction needs to take into consideration the personal strengths and interests of the students and the teacher. Good classroom teaching would also accommodate the cultural, behavioural, and social dynamics of the students. As found in the Spencer study (2011), sometimes deviating from the script reaps the most benefits.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Because I hope to work as a literacy support teacher within the Pembina Trails School Division, I strove to find research articles that would help me in that role. The articles that I reviewed outline ways to support struggling readers, particularly for teachers who do not have extensive reading instruction backgrounds, that is, teachers who are regular classroom teachers rather than reading specialists. I hope to use what I have learned from the articles to support teachers and children in early years classrooms and so to close the learning gap for struggling readers. Something as small as encouraging a teacher to use a different font or to write certain challenging words in bubble letters for specific students may work to promote development in a struggling reader. Adding an additional phonics or writing lesson to a classroom routine may signify the difference in reading achievement, and thereby future success, in some students. These articles have provided me with more tools to add to my repertoire as I support struggling readers.

Becoming a research consumer has helped me to find ways to support struggling readers both in and out of the classroom. All students benefit from an engaging, quality literacy program that consistently uses phonics, writing, and reading components. For those who require further support, a small-group, direct instruction program provides sequential lessons that build literacy skills. After reading the research, I have determined that the programs supported by my school division are truly worthy of the merit that my administration claims they deserve. With the implementation of the teaching methods discussed in this literature review, perhaps the next PCAP assessment will show more encouraging statistics regarding young readers from Manitoba.

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### **About the Author**

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# Supporting Students with Social and Emotional Issues

Melinda Roy

## Abstract

*This paper reviews literature relating to social and emotional (SE) issues that affect students within the school context. The three themes that emerged from the reviews include the particular SE issues affecting school performance, interventions and strategies assisting students who experience SE issues, and supportive people and environments. The purpose of this paper is to synthesize previous research conducted with the intention of enhancing my knowledge in relation to my current professional position, which involves working with students who experience SE issues in an alternative educational setting. The results of this synthesis are discussed in the context of the emergent themes. Discussion is centred not only on how these research findings relate to my professional position, but also on how implementation will be incorporated into school programming as a result of research discoveries.*

In my current professional position, I work with students who experience many social and emotional (SE) difficulties. Some of these challenges include mental health issues such as depression and anxiety, and personal trauma. Other issues that my students are dealing with include cutting, substance abuse, abuse, poverty, challenges with sexuality, and various home life challenges. Because of their life circumstances, many of these students have not been successful in school to this point, and they experience many gaps in their learning. My program helps to address the issues they are facing and then offer alternative ways for course delivery and appropriate programming. This approach to education looks different from individual to individual. Some students attend regular class and then have the option to work on their assignments in the alternative education (Alt. Ed.) room, where they receive support and guidance. Others may require a more individualized approach to coursework, whereby I provide the programming and they do not attend the regular classroom.

My literature research focused on strategies and programs that support students with SE challenges in high school. I wanted to find creative ways to support students who have difficulty managing the “traditional” school system because of personal challenges, not because of cognitive ability. I believe that we as educators can adapt our pedagogy and support these students so that they can experience success while addressing and guiding them through their personally challenging situations. I began to research articles on the following SE issues: depression, sleep difficulties, sexual orientation, risk-taking behaviours, and psychological needs satisfaction. I then explored articles that discussed interventions and strategies that assist students with SE issues in having positive school experiences.

Teachers and school systems are increasingly dealing with students with SE health challenges. Teachers and support personnel are not always prepared to cope with some of these issues, because they fall outside the formal training of academics and classroom management. Additional training is needed at the classroom level for teachers who are the first responders to students who present with emotional distress. Although I did not research this area specifically, the articles that I review in this paper have indicators of student emotional distress for teachers and offer strategies that may be helpful for all school personnel as they work to support their students through emotional anxiety and distress.

## Review of Literature Related to Students’ Social and Emotional Issues

Literature examining SE difficulties for students in high school provides a basis for appropriate programming that fosters school success and supportive environments. The following sections present research findings that address SE issues affecting school



performance, interventions and strategies assisting students with SE issues, and supportive people and environments.

## **Social and Emotional Issues Affecting School Performance**

SE issues present many academic and daily functioning challenges for students who experience symptoms in this area. Coping with mental health issues often prevents individuals from reaching their full potential at school and in all areas of life. SE concerns develop for several different reasons, including the environment at home and school, genetics, and specific circumstances such as loss, poverty, and lack of positive relationships, to name a few. This section reviews literature that discusses the following SE concerns: depression and particularly sleep disturbances related to depression, sexual orientation, risk-taking behaviour, and psychological needs satisfaction. These issues affect school performance and decrease overall school experiences for students who possess SE symptoms.

**Depression, and sleep disturbances related to depression.** Delva, Granillo, Grogan-Kaylor, and Maurizi (2013) reported the negative effects that symptoms of depression have on academic and overall achievement outcomes for students. This mental health issue is linked to many disruptions in daily living that directly relate to lack of success at school in all aspects. For example, school belonging is a major contributing factor to positive school experiences. “Research shows that school belonging contributes both to increased academic achievement and to lower levels of internalizing behaviours, depressive symptoms, and feelings of loneliness” (Delva et al., p. 619). Without a sense of belonging and meaningful social relationships, students are at risk for depressive symptoms that lead to lower academic achievement.

Boe, Haugland, Hysing, Sivertsen, and Stormark (2015) also investigated SE challenges for students in school. Their study’s main focus was to examine the association between school absences and “sleep duration, insomnia, sleep deficiency, tiredness, and sleepiness” (Boe et al., p. 3). Boe et al.’s second aim was to investigate “to what extent depression may explain some of these associations” (p. 3). At the developmental stage of adolescence, sleep becomes a health-related issue that affects many students, as growth and hormone changes are heightened. This age group also experiences a wide range of social changes that often affect the amount of sleep they get. Lack of sleep for adolescents is an issue that may influence school attendance and performance.

Boe et al. (2015) used a web-based questionnaire to conduct a survey that covered a broad range of mental health-related issues and daily life functioning questions, including questions on insomnia. Depression was measured by means of the Short Moods and Feelings Questionnaire (SMFQ). Official register-based data were collected from schools to measure attendance. The study yielded some interesting results. It revealed that there were increased absences among older students as compared to their younger peers. It also showed that there was decreased attendance among lower-income families. Sleep duration was significantly associated with school absence. Boe et al. also found that “mental health and depression account for some of the relationship between sleep and school attendance” (p. 7). Depression was only partially confirmed as having a direct association with amount of sleep and school attendance. This could be due to the nature of these disorders. Depression and insomnia are two separate disorders, but they often co-exist within individuals who experience either one.

The common theme between the studies by Delva et al. (2013) and Boe et al. (2015) is how depression and amount of sleep have a significant impact on school performance. Sleep disturbances appear to co-exist with depression, both which then ultimately influence school attendance. In my experience of working with students who live with depression, I have found that school expectations often exacerbate their symptoms. Students with depression comment that it is a struggle to get out of bed in the morning. They have also stated that they “feel like a

failure,” and when they are not able to attend school because of their disorder, they continue the cycle of failing. They fear that they have become that which they fear.

**Sexual orientation.** Challenges with sexual orientation and sexual minority affiliation also have potential to affect positive school experiences. Students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, two-spirited, queer, and questioning (LGBTQQ) are at risk for SE distresses. Konishi and Saewyc (2013) examined the link between victimization and sexual orientation, and how this link contributes to challenges with SE health, extending to school-related outcomes among adolescents. Several studies have been conducted on the effects of bullying on students who identify as LGBTQQ. This particular study by Konishi and Saewyc examined how victimization has contributed to negative SE health.

Konishi and Saewyc (2013) collected their data from a survey that was done in collaboration with the provincial government in British Columbia. The British Columbia Adolescent Health Survey (BCAHS) surveyed random classrooms of grades 7-12 students across the province and in selected school districts across western Canada. The survey included self-labelling measures to determine sexual orientation, and measures of bullying and sexual harassment. It incorporated questions on SE variables and school-related variables, including skipping school, liking school, educational aspiration, and activity engagement. Results of the study indicated that the “prevalence of all forms of victimization among LGBTQQ students was higher than those for their heterosexual peers,” and that “LGBTQQ students who had been victimized were at greater risk for all school-related and social-emotional challenges than their non-victimized heterosexual peers” (Konishi & Saewyc, p. 509).

The results of Konishi and Saewyc’s (2013) study reflect what I have witnessed while working with LGBTQQ students. Depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation have been the most common SE issues that I have seen LGBTQQ students present. School environments wherein the cultural milieu is hetero-dominant can lead to LGBTQQ students feeling disconnected, and this feeling can often lead to further isolation. SE disorders such as depression result from these students not feeling safe to be who they are, a very real fear that plays out in their being bullied or marginalized because of their sexual identification. Even though many of these students are very capable of achieving academic success, they may not experience it because SE issues become too overwhelming.

**Risk-taking behaviour.** SE struggles often lead to risk-taking behaviour as a result of not feeling connections in school. Buckley, Chapman, Sheehan, and Shochet (2014) examined this concept in their research. They conducted semi-structured interviews that asked open-ended questions of 14 teachers. It was interesting to read teachers’ perspectives of students’ SE issues, because they are often the “first responders” when noticing changes in student behaviour within their classrooms. “Teachers who participated in this study believed that disengaged or high-risk students are often those who have low sense of self-worth” (Buckley et al., p. 423). When teachers become aware of the signs of disengagement in students, they can work to help build connections for them and encourage them to feel valued.

Engagement is an issue that teachers continually encounter in their classrooms. When students are engaged in their learning, they feel a connection to both their accomplishments and the environment. Disengaged students often look for other sources of engagement, which may lead to risk-taking behaviour. Learning and implementing ways to engage all students by building relationships wherein teachers get to know personal interests of students in order to promote positive engagement is a strategy that fosters connectedness.

**Psychological needs satisfaction.** Students perform better at school when their basic needs are met. The many unmet needs of students who cope with SE difficulties can be overwhelming, because they often struggle to attend school, have difficulty completing assignments, and spend a great deal of time managing stress. Duchesne and Ratelle (2014)

discussed how students perceive that their psychological needs satisfaction (PNS) is being addressed at school. As students move along through high school, the nature of their PNS changes due to different periods of demands and related stressors. Duchesne and Ratelle also looked at how well students adjust throughout this period of adolescence and how PNS is perceived at the end of high school. Through surveying a sample of 609 students from grades 7 to 12 at the end of every school year, Duchesne and Ratelle found that there is a subset of students who are at risk for experiencing declining PNS and who, consequently, may experience poorer adjustment. The results of this study suggest there is a need for PNS intervention during high school years for students at risk for SE concerns. I have witnessed how some students decline in their psychological satisfaction if their needs are not being met in various aspects of this area. If students' mental health issues go untreated, they are at risk for lower overall school achievement.

All of the SE issues discussed contribute to poor school performance and to lowered daily coping skills for students. When looking at factors that contribute to lack of success at school, mental health must be explored in order to plan for interventions. When the causes of SE issues are identified, programs and other supports can then be arranged for students in building a plan that will increase positive outcomes in their academic studies. Interventions and strategies can be built into their programs according to their individual needs.

### **Interventions and Strategies Assisting Students Who Experience SE Issues**

Students who experience SE issues benefit from interventions and strategies that help them to gain positive school experiences both academically and socially. Many interventions are appropriate even if a student does not have a formal diagnosis, but still presents with SE symptoms. Even minor interventions can adjust the school experience so that a student's strengths outweigh the learning and/or SE challenges. This section looks at various interventions that assist students dealing with SE issues so they can experience positive outcomes at school. These interventions include goal setting, mental health curricula, alternative education settings, and universal school-based programs.

**The importance of goals.** Goal setting is an excellent strategy to guide students' visions of where they want to go in school and what they want to achieve. For students who experience SE issues, goal setting can be an effective planning tool that focuses on their strengths and leads to improved self-confidence as they work, step by step, to reach their goals. Carroll, Gordon, Haynes and Houghton (2013) investigated the characteristics and relationships between goal setting and self-efficacy. They hypothesized that the types of goals adolescents set for themselves will determine the kinds of reputation they seek. By understanding what motivates students in their decision-making, interventions can assist by making more positive short-term goals seem accessible for students who are at risk.

Determining how at-risk youth interpret goals as they relate to self-efficacy helps me as an educator to guide them in more positive directions. In their study, Carroll et al. (2013) divided the participants into three groups in order to determine what influence social goals have on delinquent, at-risk, and not-at-risk behaviours. There are some hopeful conclusions concerning the at-risk category. In the study, the at-risk group had some motivation toward career goals and sport-related goals. As an advocate and educator, I can focus on these goals that my students may have while helping them transition from high school to adult life, whether that be post-secondary education or employment. Another helpful finding with reference to the delinquent group in this study is that they reported a greater number of family goals. If educators can nurture positive relationships and social support through building a supportive network for students, it may help to reduce delinquent behaviour. Goal setting is an important process for adolescents because it serves to give them control over their decision-making. Whenever youth

are included in the process, they are more inclined to work toward achieving the goals that they develop themselves.

Setting goals can assist students in building positive school outcomes. By knowing what they want to achieve, they are more likely to recognize what they have to concentrate on and improve. Goal setting gives students long-term vision and short-term motivation. By setting goals and measuring their achievements, students are more able to see what they have done and what they are capable of doing. Seeing their results gives students the confidence that they need to believe they can achieve even higher goals.

**Mental health curricula.** When working with students with SE issues, it is important to look at the school environment, because this is where they spend a significant part of their day. There continues to be a stigma surrounding mental illness, because it is difficult to understand and therefore difficult to accept. Education is the best strategy for reducing attitudes that create stereotypes and biased behaviour. Teaching students about mental health within the school curriculum is a proactive approach not only for students who experience SE problems, but also for informing all students about SE issues.

Kutcher, Mcluckie, Weaver, and Wei (2014) examined students' knowledge and attitudes related to mental health changes following participation in a mental health literacy curriculum called *The Guide*. The results of this study showed improvement in the general knowledge of mental health after exposure to *The Guide*. A major reason for improvement was the method of delivery. Because it is taught in a regular classroom setting, the program is seen as a "normal" area of study. This normalcy helps to de-escalate the stigma often associated with mental health challenges.

**Alternative school settings and student engagement.** Fostering student engagement is another intervention strategy that can contribute to positive outcomes for students with SE difficulties. When students are engaged in their learning, their level of motivation to learn and to progress in their education increases. For students who suffer with SE concerns, engagement in school can be a struggle because classrooms are often places that cause stress. Managing stress is frequently at the forefront for SE students, which leads to less engagement. In short, the issues become reciprocal in their symbiotic challenges. An environment that includes strategies that assist with stress management, along with meaningful educational experiences, is optimal for students who experience SE issues.

Jones (2011) conducted qualitative research that examined student engagement through the perspective of students in an alternative high school that provided extra support to students who experienced SE issues. Jones reported that the main reasons for students being referred to alternative programs were behavioural issues, academic remediation, poor social skills, family or life events, and chronic absenteeism. These programs provided a supportive environment that addressed SE and individual needs. Student engagement is more likely to transpire when personal needs are met.

Jones' (2011) study used a model called participation identification, which measures "feeling of belonging and a sense of value for school related goals" (p. 221). Jones used this model to interpret students' accounts of how they perceived that they were connected to school and how those connections led them to increased overall success at school. Comments regarding engagement were positive, and students noted that they felt they were more engaged in school life as compared to their previous school.

Jones' (2011) study resonates with my current professional position, because I have recently started an off-site alternative program in the afternoons, where I take six students to work on cross-curricular projects. These students match the same characteristics that Jones outlined in his study (i.e., behavioural issues, academic remediation, poor social skills, family or life events, and chronic absenteeism). I have put together projects that incorporate English language arts, history, physical education, and career development curricula. We also have

group relationship-building activities wherein all students work on positive SE skill building. I can already see an improvement regarding student engagement. After reading Jones' report, I will use some of the recommendations that he discussed, such as creating connections within a close and supportive community, promoting student identification with the school community, and assisting students in resolving conflict or personal issues.

**Universal school-based programs.** In today's schools, there are increasing demands in teaching and in promoting the well-being of children and adolescents. Holistic approaches to teaching and learning that include social, emotional and behavioural skills, as well as academic and cognitive skills, are becoming common practice. In order to achieve these outcomes, schools have implemented several approaches that include SE programs delivered both in the curricula and outside the classroom environment.

Ben, De Ritter, Diekstra, and Sklad (2012) conducted a meta-analytical review of 75 published studies that report the effects of universal, school-based social, emotional, and behavioural (SEB) programs. In the meta-analysis, Ben et al. reviewed only those studies that took a "positive youth developmental perspective" (p. 894). They reported that 76% of students who participated in social skill programs increased their skills of positive self-image and pro-social behaviour, increased their academic achievement, and decreased their antisocial behaviour (p. 903). The study results revealed that programs that were shorter in duration had a better effect on social skills than programs that carried on longer.

Ben et al.'s (2012) study sparked great interest for me in universal-based SE programs. I read an article from the study's reference list, by Dadds, Harnett, Holland, Osgarby, Shochet, and Whitefield (2001). Dadds et al. discussed an intervention initiative called the Resourceful Adolescent Program, which attempts to integrate both cognitive-behavioural and interpersonal approaches to improving coping skills and to building resilience, so as to promote positive development. The program is delivered through classroom curriculum so that students do not face the risk of stigmatization by being singled out for intervention. The results of Dadds et al.'s study are very impressive: they showed a "significant greater decrease in depressive symptoms at post-intervention and at follow-up ten months later" (p. 312). I will use the results of these two studies by Ben et al. and Dadds et al. to advocate for universal mental health prevention programs in our school. Programs that are shorter in duration seem to have greater positive effect. Therefore creating short-term programs with short-term goals for students, created by the students themselves, would be worthwhile, because goals for students with SE challenges are much more attainable in the short term. As the process is mentored, and as success is experienced, then the goal setting may incorporate medium-term and long-term goals.

## **Supportive People and Environments**

A very important and effective practice for assisting students who are affected by SE issues is to nurture positive social relationships. All of the studies that I have read in this literature review found that positive relationships are a protective factor for those experiencing mental health issues. The results of the study by Delva, Granillo, Grogan-Kaylor, and Maurizi (2013) revealed that positive relationships "do indeed play a moderating role in the association between depressive symptoms and academic achievement" (p. 623). It has been my experience that students who build positive relationships, whether with peers or adults, have fewer depressive symptoms in general. The relationships must be meaningful and genuine, however, rather than artificially put together in an attempt to provide an intervention for depression.

Having a caring adult in the lives of students with SE concerns is a protective factor that supports more positive school experiences. Konishi and Saewyc (2013) reported that having a caring adult supporting an individual who identifies as LGBTTTQQ lessens the development of distress and increases positive life experiences. In today's educational system, teachers often become that caring adult for these and other at-risk students. The conclusion that a caring adult

can have a positive influence on combating victimization for students who are LGBTTTQQ is a very hopeful statement for us as educators that we are making a difference.

Student relationships with other students and teachers in the school community have a significant impact on positive school outcomes. Many of the students interviewed in Jones' (2011) study gave a strong message about how making a connection with a caring teacher helped them feel more attached to their school. In an alternative high school setting, the student-teacher ratio is lower and SE supports have a greater focus. "Alternative learning environments strive to create a supportive environment that allows deep relationships to form and provides individualized instruction that meets students' unique academic and social-emotional needs to address pressing personal issues" (Jones, p. 221). Providing students who are affected by SE difficulties with an environment that promotes relationship-building with everyone helps to meet SE needs, which enables greater academic learning to take place.

Teachers play a very important role in fostering school connections for students. When teachers make positive connections and build valuable relationships with students who experience SE difficulties, they add to positive protective factors that promote better student success. Buckley et al. (2014) discussed how teachers play important roles in school connectedness for students, because teachers navigate the structure of the classroom and they have the opportunity to make positive bonds with students who may not have another supportive adult in their lives. Teachers spend a lot of time with students and therefore have the opportunity to develop and model positive relationships.

I have found that one of the benefits of having an alternative classroom setting is the opportunity to build relationships with students, and having students in my area build relationships with each other. We create a "family" atmosphere wherein students are free to discuss personal issues with the group, and we can support them with their issues. I work at providing the connectedness within our classroom that addresses the need to belong. I have witnessed students improve in their decision-making as a result of their sense of belonging that is fostered in our class.

Supportive people and environments have positive influences on students who experience SE issues. Schools can create these environments through programming, as in alternative education settings, group settings, teacher and student relationship-building, and other means by which individual students' needs can be met. When supporting students with SE challenges, building a supportive relationship can alleviate symptoms of anxiety, and create a sense of belonging that will promote an optimistic future for all students.

## **Discussion**

Connecting the articles that I researched for this paper has given me a better understanding of the difficulties facing students with SE issues, and of the various opportunities schools have to intervene and foster positive experiences for these students. Prior to exploring the research-based literature, I made assumptions about programming for students with SE concerns that were not always backed up by research. I tended to draw primarily on my experiences of working with students with SE issues in developing programming. Although many of the strategies and interventions that I have used have had positive results, I now know the value of using research-based methods to program appropriately.

Working in an alternative setting both in school and in an off-site program, I realize that my professional position is unique. The research discussed in this paper has given me a better perspective on programming for students who experience SE concerns. One topic that surfaced several times is how important supportive environments and supportive relationships are when working with students with SE issues. Alternative settings are excellent environments to develop positive relationships, because there is more flexibility to incorporate group discussion and teacher-student connections. Moving forward, I will be mindful to nurture relationships within the

alternative setting and use strategies suggested from research studies, such as goal-setting and incorporating mental health curriculum into our daily check-ins.

I recently started a “mindfulness” practice with my students. I am confident that this program has many benefits, but the way that I was delivering it was not producing the results I wanted. After studying Jones’ (2011) article on student engagement, I will take a different approach to this valuable program. Instead of treating it like a “stand-alone” program, I will incorporate sections of it throughout the day so that students are able to practise the applications within a meaningful context.

The research studied on the topic of SE issues for students has valuable implications for providing school programming. Continuing research in the area of building supportive environments would be beneficial for those working in an alternative setting.

### Conclusion

This paper examined a variety of social and emotional issues that affect students both academically and personally. The issues discussed in this literature review – depression and particularly sleep disturbances related to depression, sexual orientation, risk-taking behaviour, and psychological needs satisfaction – are only some of the many distresses that affect students. The common element among these issues is that, if not addressed, they all have a strong potential for negative school outcomes and experiences for students who present symptoms of SE concerns. Exploring some of these issues led to finding interventions that will assist students who experience SE difficulties. Many of the interventions and strategies that I reviewed stressed the importance of supportive and positive relationships, whether with a peer, a teacher, or another caring adult. Finding proactive ways to educate students on mental health issues through classroom curriculum or alternative settings produces constructive results in building positive school experiences. Researching studies that bring about positive change in education and treatment of social emotional issues is a valuable undertaking for all educators.

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### **About the Author**

*Melinda Roy acquired her Graduate Diploma in special education from Brandon University in 2010, and continues to work toward her Master of Education degree. Having focused her career on working with students in modified and alternative settings, including her current high school role in both onsite and off-site alternative settings, Melinda has come to realize that this type of setting meets many of the needs of students who experience social and emotional challenges.*



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