

Developing Emotional Regulation in the Classroom

Using Play is the Way®

By

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**Dedication**

This work is dedicated to

my Mom, who was so proud I became a teacher

and

Josh, who lost his mom too soon

### **Abstract**

This study explores the effectiveness of the Play is the Way® Program in the development of emotional regulation in Grade 1 students. I present a review of the literature explaining what emotional regulation is, the development of emotions, and the problems children can experience when they are not able to regulate their emotions. I explore the significance of quality caregivers, effortful control, and language in developing emotional regulation. I present the characteristics of resilient children and explain its importance in emotional regulation. I examine the role of teacher-student relationships, teacher wellness, learning through play, and reflective dialogue in the teaching of social and emotional learning.

Play is the Way® is a “practical methodology for teaching social and emotional learning using guided play, classroom activities, and an empowering language” (McCaskill, 2011, p. 1). This qualitative study was conducted to see what effects this program had on the participants’ ability to develop perseverance and resilience and which emotional competencies they were able to display. Two students were observed while playing the games and interviewed after each play session.

The findings and support from the review of the literature show that Play is the Way® helps children learn emotional competencies through play, reflective dialogue, and guidance from educators.

*Keywords:* emotional regulation, emotional development, resilience, perseverance, play, language, reflective dialogue, Play is the Way®

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	ii
DEDICATION.....	iv
ABSTRACT.....	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
LIST OF TABLES.....	viii
CHAPTER ONE: NATURE OF THE PROBLEM.....	1
Background.....	2
Rationale.....	4
Purpose.....	7
Research Questions.....	8
Definitions.....	9
Summary.....	9
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	11
Emotional Regulation.....	11
Emotional Development.....	13
Problems Regulating Emotions.....	14
Caregivers.....	16
Effortful Control.....	18
Language.....	19
Regulating Emotions.....	20
Resilience.....	20
Broaden-and-Build Theory.....	22
Teaching Social and Emotional Learning.....	23
Teacher-Student Relationship.....	24
Teacher Wellness.....	25
Learning Through Play.....	27
Reflective Dialogue.....	29
SEL Programs in the Kamloops/Thompson School District #73.....	30
Play is the Way®.....	31
Summary.....	32
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY .....	33
Setting.....	33
Participants.....	37
Design.....	38
Data Collection.....	38
Observations.....	39
Written Responses.....	39
Informal Interviews.....	39
Data Analysis.....	40
Data Analysis Matrix.....	40
Validity and Reliability.....	41
Researcher Biases.....	41
Anticipated Limitations.....	41
Ethical Considerations.....	42

Entry to Field.....	42
Summary.....	43
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS.....	44
Research Question #1.....	45
Item Analysis.....	47
Research Question #2.....	48
Item Analysis.....	49
Research Question #3.....	50
Item Analysis.....	53
Unintended Findings.....	54
Summary.....	54
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION.....	56
Limitations.....	56
Discussion.....	57
Teaching SEL.....	58
Language.....	58
Learning Through Play.....	59
Reflective Dialogue.....	60
Recommendations.....	61
Reflections .....	62
Professional Action Plan.....	63
Conclusion.....	64
REFERENCES.....	65
APPENDIX A: School Connectedness Rubric.....	73
APPENDIX B: Teacher Observation Sheet.....	74
APPENDIX C: Student Response Sheet.....	75
APPENDIX D: Informal Interview Sheet.....	76
APPENDIX E: Letter of Permission from Administrator.....	77
APPENDIX F: Letter of Permission from Superintendent.....	78
APPENDIX G: Letter of Permission to Parents.....	79
APPENDIX H: NIH Certificate.....	80
APPENDIX I: Tri-Council Certificate.....	81
APPENDIX J: Consent from Gonzaga University IRB.....	82

**LIST OF TABLES**

Table 1, Observations of Perseverance (Riley).....45

Table 2, Observations of Perseverance (Logan).....46

Table 3, Informal Interviews Showing Perseverance (Riley).....46

Table 4, Informal Interviews Showing Perseverance (Logan).....47

Table 5, Observations of Resilience (Riley).....48

Table 6, Observations of Resilience (Logan).....48

Table 7, Informal Interviews Showing Resilience (Riley).....48

Table 8, Informal Interviews Showing Resilience (Logan).....49

Table 9, Observations of Emotional Competencies (Riley).....50

Table 10, Observations of Emotional Competencies (Logan).....51

Table 11, Informal Interviews Showing Emotional Competencies (Riley).....52

Table 12, Informal Interviews Showing Emotional Competencies (Logan).....53



## CHAPTER ONE

### NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

The main goals of the B.C. Public School System are to enable all learners to become literate, to develop their individual potential, to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy, democratic, pluralistic society, and a prosperous and sustainable economy (British Columbia School Act, 2013). These are all important and noble directives for young children entering the school system, for older students proceeding through it, and for young adults starting their careers. Throughout my teaching career in the primary grades, I have always believed that my main goal was to make sure my students had fun at school and wanted to come each day. The goals of B.C. Public Schools cannot be attained if students do not want to be in the classroom. School can be difficult for many children for a variety of social, intellectual, emotional, and physical reasons. When discussing our general student population, my colleagues and I often lament over how children have changed. We want all our students to do well. Parents are also worried when their children are not succeeding.

Over the last year, I have been introduced to the term “self-regulation” at workshops, in articles, and in books. Last fall, I had the great pleasure to attend a local workshop with Dr. Stuart Shanker of York University. He is a leading Canadian expert in self-regulation and has helped me realize the importance of self-regulation for all students, especially those who struggle. There are many reasons why children might have attentional, behaviour or emotional difficulties. Some of these reasons are sensitivities to the food they eat, in particular junk food and fast food; sensitivity to noise and light; overuse of technology, such as TV, video games, cell phones,

tablets, computers; sleep deprivation; and problems with the adult-child connection. Self-regulation can help students become calm and focused and therefore more able to succeed.

### **Background**

To be successful in school, students need a variety of skills and knowledge. They need to be able to focus their attention, ignore distractions, control their emotions, engage in positive social interactions, show empathy towards others, persevere through adversity, and build resilience. However, many students find difficulty in one or more of these areas. The Canadian Mental Health Association reports that 10 – 20% of Canadian youth are affected by a mental illness and that “surpassed only by injuries, mental disorders in youth are ranked as the second highest hospital care expenditure in Canada,” (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2014). Poor self-regulation and poor self-control are closely associated with mental health and behaviour problems including difficulty delaying gratification, ignoring distractions, inability to control intense negative emotions, and a higher than average number of negative emotions (Zumbrunn, Tadlock, & Roberts, 2011). Studies have shown that if young children learn to express emotions constructively and are involved in caring and nurturing relationships, they are more likely to avoid serious mental health issues such as depression and violence (Lantieri, 2008a).

In his workshop, Dr. Shanker talked at great length about the need for a healthy connection between an adult and child to help a child self-regulate (2013a). This relationship starts at birth and helps children learn to self-regulate under the guidance of healthy adults, usually one’s parents. Children need stable, nurturing environments. Unfortunately, this is not always the reality in today’s busy and stressful lifestyle or because of trauma a child may have experienced. Parents and children are under a great deal of stress (Graziano, McNamara, Geffken, & Reid, 2011). There are increasing numbers of children entering school with stress

related symptoms that are misinterpreted as intentional misbehaviour (Lantieri, 2008a). Adults, including teachers, need to focus on the reasons driving the “bad” behaviour rather than on the behaviour itself (Bath, 2008). Regardless of the causes, it is necessary to rethink problems relating to the regulation of emotions as developmental delays rather than as bad behaviours (Greene & Ablon, 2006).

As a teacher, I want all my students to succeed and be happy. It is frustrating when I see students having difficulty with their schoolwork, friendships, and self-concept. When I talk with parents about their child’s difficulties, I have found that most parents do not want to medicate their child unless absolutely necessary. Although it is my job and desire to give each child the best educational experience they rightly deserve, it is difficult to do so alone with little or no support and a full classroom. This is why I am so interested in the concept and practice of “self-regulation.” It has me thinking in a whole new light about my students who have emotional and social difficulties. Children need to experience success in school so they can persevere through the grades and on into adulthood. This is the power of self-regulation. It helps all children learn about themselves and gives them the knowledge and power to be successful. When people feel successful and empowered, they usually want to continue the positive behaviours that have helped them feel that way. Our emotions and how we feel about others and ourselves are powerful. They can help or hinder our academic engagement, work ethic, commitment, and ultimate success at school and in life (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

Schools, along with parents, play an important role in raising healthy children. We need to help not only cognitive development, but also social and emotional development (Durlak et al., 2011). Dr. Shanker emphasized that teachers spend at least 1000 hours with a child each year.

He said appointments with doctors, who make diagnoses, average just seven minutes. That is an amazing and powerful observation. Teachers can, and do, make a difference.

It is extremely important to me to see all my students be successful. I am constantly searching for and learning about best teaching practices. I believe learning more about and experimenting with various areas of self-regulation will help me on my journey to improve as a classroom teacher and as an informal leader in my school.

### **Rationale**

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the role of our public education system is to enable learners to become literate, to develop their individual potential, to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy, democratic, and pluralistic society, and a prosperous, sustainable economy. My interest is in the attitudes that will contribute to a healthy person and therefore to a healthy society. Without happy, healthy children who are able to focus on their schoolwork, acquire and maintain friendships, and feel successful, the other two goals cannot be fully met. Durlak et al. (2011) state that “extensive developmental research indicates that effective mastery of social-emotional competences is associated with greater well-being and better school performance whereas the failure to achieve competence in these areas can lead to a variety of personal, social, and academic difficulties” (p. 406). Dr. Shanker also emphasized that our ultimate goal for children is to “give them tools to be happy, have friendships, and enjoy being alive” (2013a). A person’s Emotional Quotient (EQ), rather than Intelligence Quotient (IQ), has more impact on whether or not they will have a successful and happy life.

Over my 20-year teaching career, I have noticed a change in society, technology, and children. Our lives are busier, technology allows us to be “plugged in” 24/7, and there are more stressors placed upon adults and upon our children. Dr. Shanker reported that child anxiety has

been on the rise since 1988. He also shared the array of stressors that children currently have to deal with. He defines a stressor as “anything that causes the system to get out of balance” (Shanker, 2013a). The main stressors are food, in particular junk food and fast food; noise and light; technology, such as TV, video games, cell phones, tablets, computers; sleep deprivation; and problems with the adult-child connection. Furthermore, these problems in self-regulation have nothing to do with self-control. They are affecting the ancient parts of our brains and nervous systems that control things our bodies do automatically. When under great stress, children burn up so much energy they cannot pay attention or control their emotions (Shanker, 2013a).

Goleman (1995) explains that connections between the amygdala (part of the limbic system and the specialist for emotional matters) and neocortex (the thinking brain) are the center of head, heart, thought, and feeling. When under extreme anxiety, anger, or stress, the circuits from the limbic brain to the prefrontal lobes (neocortex) can create “neural static, sabotaging the ability of the prefrontal lobe to maintain working memory” (Goleman, 1995, p.27). “That is why when we are emotionally upset we say we ‘just can’t think straight’ - and why continual emotional distress can create deficits in a child’s intellectual abilities, crippling the capacity to learn” (Goleman, 1995, p. 27). The amygdala takes over what we do while the neocortex is still coming to a decision (Goleman, 1995). Goleman states that “the working of the amygdala and its interplay with the neocortex are at the heart of emotional intelligence” (1995, p. 16).

Self-regulation helps bring our bodies back to a stable state. If we can somehow remove or lessen the stressors that create this need for excessive movement and teach children how to self-regulate, we can help them develop skills necessary to deal with the challenges in school and in life. The more we educators understand self-regulation, the more we can foster it in

classrooms and schools. As well, we can reach out to parents who are feeling a great deal of stress when their children are not successful in school.

I have been at my present school for four years. Before that, I taught in lower socio-economic areas. There were many students who had problems with attention, perseverance, expressing emotions, and attitudes towards school. Many of these students came from families under a great deal of stress, both financially and emotionally. I now work in a higher socio-economic area and although there are fewer incidences of these types of problems in my class, I do notice the numbers on the rise. Our staff, principal, and Learning Resource teacher would also agree. Though we may not have the financial worries of my former schools, families are still under a great deal of stress. Everyone is “busy.” Students are in several extra-curricular activities, both parents may be working, or there may only be one parent at home. There seems to be less time for families to be together to enjoy a meal, conversation, or recreation. With such busy and affluent lifestyles, it is easy to see the stressors mentioned earlier coming into play. Our students are coming to school with less sleep, eating more processed foods, engaging in more “screen time,” and experiencing less positive and nurturing parent-child time.

After attending Dr. Shanker’s presentation and reading his book, I am confident that understanding and helping students engage in self-regulation is a big part of solving the educational puzzle. Knowing that many of these challenging behaviours are not a matter of self-control helps me stop blaming the child and start looking for answers. Dr. Shanker told us to keep asking, “Why?” Why is a child not able to attend, sit still, or control his/her emotions? Has this child experienced trauma? Does this child lack empathy? Why? This seems like an exhaustive list and a lot of questions to ask in classes of 24 or 30 students. However, I need to begin somewhere.

In February 2014, I attended a Play is the Way® workshop. It is a “practical methodology for teaching social and emotional learning using guided play, classroom activities, and an empowering language” (McCaskill, 2011, p. 1). Wilson McCaskill created Play is the Way® to help teach children perseverance and resilience through a variety of games. I was deeply moved after taking this workshop. Not only is it a way to develop perseverance and resilience in children but it does so in a fun, active, and respectful setting. The program gives children “meaningful, consistent, and honest guidance” while teaching them to master their emotions (McCaskill, 2011, p. 3). Part of my job is to help students develop their human and social development. I believe Play is the Way® is a “best practice” that will help me to just that.

Society and technology are changing at rapid speeds. Families are changing. We as educators need to change. We need to stop expecting all children to arrive well fed, well rested, alert, emotionally stable, and ready to sit quietly at their desks for six hours. We need to learn about the latest developments in brain research, the rising complexities of family life, and best practices in the classroom. It is my goal to become more knowledgeable in the self-regulation of emotions and explore how I can effectively develop it in my own classroom with my students. I am excited to share my findings and my own classroom experiences with my colleagues. I truly believe that helping children develop their ability to regulate emotions, develop perseverance, and build resilience will make a huge and profound difference in their lives now and into adulthood.

### **Purpose**

In my teaching career, I’ve always strived to learn about and use the best teaching practices that will help my students succeed. As an educational leader, I need to promote the success of every student by advocating and nurturing a class culture and instructional program

that will benefit my students' learning. I believe that focusing on and learning about emotional regulation will help me achieve just that. Helping children develop perseverance and resilience will undoubtedly make a huge difference now and in the future. Not only will it help the most emotionally vulnerable child, it will benefit all students.

Kordon, Kahl, and Wahl (2006) state, "the school environment increases demands for the child to regulate behaviour and cognition" (p. 50). Being frequently off task, showing inappropriate behaviours, and disrupting the class hinders learning in both the child exhibiting these behaviours and in his classmates (Riley, McKeivitt, Shriver, & Allen, 2011). Research tells us that these students need our help, starting at a young age. I am fortunate to be working with young children so I can get the process started before the problems get larger. At the end of each school year, I can also pass along a great deal of information to the receiving teacher.

I have always believed that my job as a primary teacher is to make sure my students enjoy coming to school. If we learn a few academic things along the way, that would be wonderful. Building relationships is at the heart of my job. I want to get to know my students so I can provide the best possible school experience for them. This seems like a lofty and perhaps unattainable goal. I know I cannot be everything and know everything about all my students. I need to start small and try a few things in my classroom that will promote emotional regulation.

I believe that learning how to persevere and be resilient will help my students feel safe, happy, and successful in school and in their lives. Therefore, the purpose of my study is to examine the effectiveness of Play is the Way® on emotional regulation in Grade 1 students.

### **Research Questions**

My study will be guided by the following questions:

1. What does the current research-based literature say about emotional regulation?



2. What does the current research-based literature say about the importance of resilience in regulating emotions?
3. What does the current research-based literature say about teaching social and emotional skills?
4. What effect will Play is the Way® have on my students' ability to persevere at difficult tasks?
5. What effect will Play is the Way® have on my students' ability to show resilience?
6. What emotional regulation competencies do I see in my students after using Play is the Way® for three months?

### **Definitions**

**Effortful Control:** the ability to voluntarily modify one's own attention and behaviour (Graziano, Keane, & Calkins, 2010).

**Emotional regulation:** the processes used to manage and change if, when, and how one experiences emotions and how emotions are expressed behaviourally (Eisenberg, Sadovsky, & Spinrad, 2005).

**Resilience:** the ability to recover from disappointment, challenging situations, embarrassment, and other difficulties, and move forward confidently and positively (Shanker, 2013b).

### **Summary**

Our students are experiencing higher levels of stress and anxiety than ever before. Society, technology, and relationships are changing at rapid speeds, while students' coping skills and emotional regulation are not. Durlak et al. state that "extensive developmental research indicates that effective mastery of social-emotional competences is associated with greater well-being and better school performance whereas the failure to achieve competence in these areas can lead to a variety of personal, social, and academic difficulties" (2011, p. 406). By teaching

resilience and perseverance, students will develop emotional regulation, a skill that will last them a happy and successful lifetime.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this study is to use the behaviour education program, Play is the Way®, to help my students improve their emotional regulation. I begin by describing emotional regulation and its importance to mental health. I describe the development of emotions and the mental health problems that can arise if children do not have positive emotional experiences in the early years. I examine the effects of emotional problems on children's ability to self-regulate and the importance of competent and sensitive caregivers. I explore how effortful control and language skills play important roles in emotional development. I describe the positive outcomes of emotional regulation and explore aspects of resilience. I review literature that addresses the efficacy of social and emotional learning interventions and the importance of teacher-student relationships. Finally, I present the Play is the Way® program and examine its components of guided play, classroom activities, and empowering language that contribute to emotional regulation.

#### Emotional Regulation

Emotional regulation is viewed as a critical and essential element in the social and cognitive development and functioning of healthy, competent children (Cole, 2014; Eisenberg et al., 2005). Wyman, Cross, Brown, Yu, Tu, and Eberly (2010) note that emotional self-regulation has been studied from “fields of neuroscience to developmental psychology” (p. 708). Interest and research exploded in the 1990s and many articles were written about emotions and emotional regulation (Eisenberg & Sulik, 2012). In his best-selling book, *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman brought the concept of emotional intelligence (EQ) into the spotlight. (Shanker, 2013b). Intrigued by original work from Peter Salovey and John Mayer, Goleman created a model of

emotional intelligence. He contends that a person's intelligence quotient (IQ) "contributes about 20% to the factors that determine life success, which leaves 80% to other forces" such as EQ (Goleman, 1995, p. 34). Goleman further notes that we need to rethink how we educate the whole child. It is essential that educators focus on bringing EQ and IQ together (Goleman, 1995). Shanker (2013b) also agrees that the development of cognitive abilities depends mainly on well developed emotional functioning.

Emotional regulation involves attention, cognitive evaluations, and inhibition (Spinrad, Eisenberg, & Gaernter, 2007). People who can regulate have a repertoire of responses that are socially acceptable and adaptive to the current situation (Spinrad et al., 2007). With this ability, people are able to redirect their focus on negative emotions and increase their feelings of well-being (Eisenberg & Sulik, 2012). Shanker (2013b) states the key attributes of the emotional domain are:

- the ability to modulate strong emotions
- emotional resiliency – the ability to recover from disappointment, challenging situations, embarrassment, and other difficulties, and move forward confidently and positively
- willingness and interest to experiment and to learn, on their own and in collaboration with others
- a desire to create and innovate, and while doing so to use a wide range of strategies and techniques
- a healthy self-esteem that is based on awareness of personal efforts and achievements- as well as those of others. (p. 22)

Being able to control emotional reactions by evaluating, redirecting, or inhibiting them is “critical to children’s socioemotional competence and mental health” (Roben, Cole, & Armstrong 2013, p. 891). Goleman (1995) explains that the root word of emotion means ‘to move.’ He notes that resisting impulse is a difficult but essential skill since all emotions lead us into action. In the past, developmental psychologists thought young children were not capable of self-regulation (Eisenberg & Sulik, 2012). However, research is beginning to show signs of regulation and effortful control in the early years (Eisenberg & Sulik, 2012).

### **Emotional Development**

The first five years of life is a time of rapid change and growth in emotional development (Cole, Luby, & Sullivan, 2008; Eisenberg & Sulik, 2012; Gartstein, Putnam, & Rothbart, 2012; Graziano et al., 2010). By the end of their first year, infants have acquired a core set of emotions including anger, sadness, enjoyment, fear, interest, and surprise along with simple strategies for regulating emotions such as self-soothing (Cole et al., 2008). Typically developing three to four year olds can refocus attention and turn away from a forbidden items by distracting themselves, showing better ability to “persist, wait, and resist temptation” (Dennis, Cole, Wiggins, Cohen, & Zalewski, 2009, p. 522). Cole et al. (2008) also note that these young children are also able to calm themselves down and problem solve after low-intensity anger (Cole et al., 2008). As well, even though these children can show impulsivity, anger, and aggression, they can regulate anger, frustration, and disappointment enough to redirect these emotions before getting out of control (Cole et al., 2008). By age five, most children have developed the ability to regulate their emotions enough that they are able to “learn, form and maintain friendships, and obey classroom rules,” by the time they enter school (Cole et al., 2008, p. 142). There is increased growth in effortful control and executive functioning in these early years (Eisenberg & Sulik 2012).

Mayr and Ulich (2009) developed the Positive development and resilience in kindergarten scale (PERIK, Positive Entwicklung und Resilienz im Kindergartenalltag) that showed six socio-emotional competencies in preschoolers. They are “‘making contact/social performance’, ‘self-control/thoughtfulness’; ‘self-assertiveness’, ‘emotional stability/coping with stress’, ‘Task Orientation’, ‘Pleasure in exploring’ (Mayr & Ulich, 2009, pp.51-53). These six dimensions are needed for positive social competencies in school and are the basis for future learning and performance. Mayr and Ulrich (2009) note that impulse control or effortful control is needed to help children with these competencies which are linked closely to research on mental health, resilience, self-regulation, and the development of empathy. Deficits in these areas are “‘linked to greater levels of behavior problems, social functioning difficulties, and later psychopathology” (Graziano et al., 2010, p. 337). Abilities in these areas, particularly emotional regulation, help children’s social skills and adjustment (Eisenberg et al., 2005).

### **Problems Regulating Emotions**

Shanker (2013a) notes that emotional problems in children have been increasing over the last 25 years and worrying those who work with young children and adolescents. These children lack positive emotions, curiosity, and motivation. They experience more sadness than joy (Shanker, 2013b). Young children are emotionally sensitive and have little experience or know how to regulate strong emotions (Cole et al., 2008). Negative experiences in the early years of development can have disastrous “‘effects on children’s physiological and behavioral functioning, including debilitating effects on the neural, cardiovascular, and endocrine processes that support emotional functioning (Cole et al., 2008, p. 143). The mental health of children is at risk and leaves them vulnerable to depression, anxiety, and other mood disorders (Shanker, 2013b; Wyman et al., 2010). As well, children who show more negative emotions are less socially

competent (Dennis et al., 2009). Furthermore, an increase in impulsivity puts children in greater risk for participating in dangerous activities in adolescence and adulthood (Graziano et al., 2010).

Spinrad et al. (2007) state that many researchers agree that emotion is adaptive and useful unless it is unregulated internally or externally. These inappropriate displays of emotions, such as anger, frustration, hopelessness, and sadness have a negative effect on children's social and emotional development (Cole et al., 2008; Spinrad et al., 2007). If children are experiencing any of these, they will not be able to concentrate on the task at hand and their ability to learn will be affected (Shanker, 2013b). Shanker believes that the speed of change in our society and the pressures of urbanization are creating physical and psychological pressures for children and their families. Now more than ever children are experiencing more visual, auditory, and social stimuli in urban areas (Shanker, 2013b). These stimuli along with "the lack of nature-based experiences; the decline of exercise and organized and impromptu sports; changing family patterns and leisure pursuits; and exposure to troubling emotional themes in the news media" affect the emotional development of children (Shanker, 2013b, p.23). Gunter, Caldarella, Korth, and Young (2012) agree that "changes in families and society are leaving children at great risk for developing social and emotional problems" (p. 151).

Approximately one in eight children are affected by "significant mental health difficulties such as depressive-hyperactive- and conduct-disordered" problems (Miller-Lewis, Sawyer, Baghurst, & Hedley, 2013, p.1). If left untreated, the problems will continue on into adolescence and adulthood. Early childhood is the best time for implementing interventions to help ease the effects of many disorders (Miller-Lewis et al., 2013, Wyman et al., 2010). Cole et al. state "negative emotion, whether viewed as responses to challenging situations or as a stable temperamental characteristic, to the presence of or risk for psychological problems in children"

(2008, p. 142). They explain that “childhood depression results from dysfunctional patterns of normally adaptive emotional processes” (Cole et al., 2008, p. 142). Experiencing negative emotions, or negative emotionality, has been associated to neuroticism later in life (Gartstein et al., 2012). Children need to learn how to access their positive feelings to deal with their negative emotions (Shanker, 2013b). Weare and Nind (2011) also believe that childhood and adolescence is the perfect time to develop strong mental health in order to prevent future mental health problems. When young children have “frequent angry reactions that are quick, intense, or sustained, they are viewed as emotionally dysregulated or as having behavior problems” (Roben et al., 2013, p. 891). Studies of emotional regulation often highlight the role of caregivers in a child’s ability to regulate emotions (Cole, 2014).

### **Caregivers**

Goleman (1995) explains that emotional learning “begins in life’s earliest moments, and continues throughout childhood” (p. 195). Repeated interactions, however small, between parent and child form the basis of a child’s emotional outlook and development (Goleman, 1995). Goleman notes that children who have emotionally adept parents have “a surprising- almost astounding-range of advantages across, and beyond, the spectrum of emotional intelligence” (1995, p. 192). Having competent and sensitive caregivers is critical for children’s psychosocial functioning, self-perceptions, social relations, and emotional regulation (Cole et al., 2008; Kim, Teti, & Cole, 2012).

In the early years, “caregivers help infants to regulate their emotions by modulating their exposure to stimulating events and by acting to alleviate infants’ distress, frustration, or fear with techniques such as soothing or distraction” (Eisenberg & Sulik, 2012, p. 79). Positive child-parent relationships have been found to consistently predict mental health resilience in children



(Miller-Lewis et al., 2013). When caregivers can read toddlers' emotional signals and minimize distress in positive ways, the toddlers can integrate the experiences into their self-regulatory repertoire (Graziano et al., 2010). Without supportive caregivers, development of appropriate self-regulation skills needed for future challenges and crises will be greatly hindered.

Family adversity and faulty parenting are frequently linked to the development of children's mental health issues (Miller-Lewis et al., 2013; Teti & Cole, 2011). As well, conditions such as parental depression, single parenthood, teenage motherhood, parental substance and alcohol abuse, and maltreating parents can lead to a variety of socio-emotional, behavioural, and academic problems (Teti & Cole, 2011). In particular, children can be at risk for "psychiatrically diagnosed depression, oppositional defiant disorder, and conduct disorder" (Teti & Cole, 2011, p. 626). Teti and Cole note, however, that not all depressed adults parent poorly. Though their "development is at risk, many children with depressed parents do not manifest poor outcomes" (Teti & Cole, 2011, p. 626). Kim et al. found that "aspects of affect dysregulation that interfere with self capacities are more disruptive of parenting quality than are depressive symptoms (2012, p. 474).

Parents with emotional regulation difficulties such as emotional instability and unhealthy strategies for reducing tension cannot be sensitive to their children's emotional needs (Kim et al., 2012). Anger in parents, either directed at their children or not, "predict reductions in the amount and quality of children's play and exploration; avoidance of the parent; increases in infants' and children's negative emotions such as sadness, anger, and fear; and exacerbation of behavior problems" (Teti & Cole, 2011, p.627). However, if parents are able to help their infants' emotional responses in times of distress, the infants will be able "to regulate various emotional states and maintain emotional security" (Kim et al., 2012, pp. 474-475).

**Effortful Control**

Research shows that effortful control plays an important role in developing emotional regulation throughout childhood (Graziano et al., 2010). Effortful control involves the ability to consciously shift attention and focus as needed and voluntarily changing one's own attention and behaviour as necessary (Eisenberg & Sulik, 2012; Gartstein et al., 2012; Graziano et al., 2010, Roben et al., 2013). It "involves executive attention and other skills that are extremely limited in infancy," however, it develops quickly within the first four years of life and continues from there into adulthood (Spinrad et al., 2007, p.611). Effortful control plays a role in the development of externalizing and internalizing behaviours (Gartstein et al., 2012).

Gartstein et al. found that externalizing behaviours "were related to all aspects of effortful control during toddlerhood, with inhibitory and attentional control playing particularly strong roles (2012, p. 206). Externalizing problems usually show up in the preschool years and often include aggression and noncompliant behaviour (Gartstein et al., 2012). Internalizing problems usually appear later in childhood and most often in adolescence. However, early signs of internalizing problems can show up in preschool and have been connected to later mental health difficulties such as depression and social anxiety (Gartstein et al., 2012). It can be easy to overlook children with internalizing problems because they typically are not disruptive (Wyman et al., 2010). However, if ignored, "these children can develop emotional and behavioral disorders with negative long-term outcomes" (Wyman et al., 2010, p. 151).

High levels of effortful control contribute to a child's ability to regulate emotions (Roben et al., 2013). Research also suggests that "child use of emotional language predicts their socioemotional competence" (Roben et al., 2013, p. 892).

## **Language**

Language skills help children “express needs with words rather than with emotion, to think before acting in a frustrating situation, and to generate and sustain ideas that serve attention control” (Roben et al., 2013, p. 891). Research suggests that children’s use of language and interventions that teach children to use words that deal with emotions will predict their ability to regulate emotions (Eisenberg et al., 2005; Roben et al., 2013). Eisenberg et al. (2005) believe that focusing on children’s understanding of emotional regulation and their language skills will have a significantly enhance their social and academic abilities. Children who have a large vocabulary and the skills to communicate well may be able to regulate emotions better because they can verbalize their needs easily without getting frustrated (Roben et al., 2013). Emotional regulation improves with better language skills and emotional understanding (Eisenberg et al., 2005). Children increase their emotional understanding when they can avoid emotional outbursts or overarousal. “Overaroused children are likely to attend to their own emotional experience and avoid an aversive situation, both of which are expected to reduce learning about others’ emotions” (Eisenberg et al., 2005, p. 111). Children who can understand their emotions are able to choose appropriate regulation strategies in times of distress. (Eisenberg et al., 2005). In his work with Stanley Greenspan, Shanker found that emotional regulation starts at an early age “with the differentiation between, and the communication of, emotions” (2013b, p. 27). It is the ability to be emotionally aware and self-reflective that increases emotional regulation (Shanker, 2013b). Most children, by age five, “can identify emotions that are elicited by challenging circumstances” (Cole et al., 2008, p. 325).

### **Regulating Emotions**

Children who can regulate their emotions have better social competence, academic outcomes, and are typically more popular (Eisenberg et al., 2005; Spinrad et al., 2007). As well, children who are able to “access a number of strategies that may modify emotion” should be able to self-regulate in times of anxiety, stress, or adversity (Cole et al., 2008, p. 325). Shanker notes that regulating emotions “is as much about up-regulating positive emotions as it is about down-regulating negative ones” (2013b, p.27). Moving attention away from a distressing or tempting situation, focusing on the positive, and using good coping strategies can all decrease negative emotional arousal (Eisenberg & Sulik, 2012). When children have several strategies that can help them stay calm, they become confident that they will be able to handle disruptive emotions that could drain their energy during times of distress (Shanker, 2013b). Researchers identify two types of regulation strategies, active and passive (Graziano, Calkins, & Keane, 2011). Active emotional regulation strategies such as distraction or seeking help have been found to be more effective in regulating distress than passive strategies such as self-comforting (Graziano et al., 2011a).

### **Resilience**

Longitudinal studies of high-risk children who show positive developmental outcomes despite growing up in difficult situations are described as resilient (Mayr & Ulrich, 2009). Miller-Lewis et al. (2013) agree that “many children exposed to adversity escape relatively unscathed and instead function adequately” (p. 2). Resilience is the “process of positive adaptation despite exposure to significant adversity” (Miller-Lewis et al., 2013, p. 2). Mayr and Ulrich (2009) describe the developmental factors of these children:

- easy temperament and friendliness

- ability to elicit positive attention from family members and strangers
- positive self concept, self-esteem
- autonomy and independence
- proactive approach to problem-solving
- persistence and concentration
- pleasure in novel experience, curiosity and exploratory drive, alertness
- empathy and prosocial orientation
- positive social relationships
- ability to delay gratification
- positive processing (and restructuring) of negative experiences
- control of affect
- adequate expression of feelings and demands
- optimism, vitality and energy
- having hobbies and interests
- ability to recover after distressful experiences
- being calm and relaxed. (p. 47)

Miller-Lewis et al. (2013) describe a core set of resources research has identified and linked to resilience. They are “a) children’s internal characteristics and strengths, e.g. self-esteem, self-efficacy, self-control; b) family characteristics and relationship, e.g. child-parent closeness, parenting styles; and c) characteristics of children’s social (particularly school) environment, e.g. student-teacher relationships, school quality” (Miller-Lewis et al., 2013, p. 2). Schools are places that can “promote positive mental health and create resilience, providing the

child or young person with resources to thrive and, in adverse conditions, to cope by buffering negative stressors (Weare & Nind, 2011, p.i29).

**Broaden-and-Build Theory.** In 1998, Fredrickson formulated the broaden-and-build theory, which postulates that positive emotions increases one's thought-action repertoire while negative emotions narrow it (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004). It is this perspective that may "help explain why those who experience positive emotions in the midst of stress are able to benefit from their broadened mine-sets and successfully regulate their negative emotional experiences" (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004, p. 321). Results from their three studies show "that high-resilient individuals tend to experience positive emotions even amidst stress" (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004, p. 331). Participants experienced high levels of anxiety and frustration in stressful situations, yet were able to experience positive emotions amidst negative ones. Tugade and Fredrickson (2004) also found that positive emotionality contributes to resilience and the ability to bounce back psychologically from negative emotional events. They go on to note that their findings contribute to research that shows people who use humour to cope and who have daily positive outlooks have stronger immune systems.

Prior to these studies, Fredrickson and Joiner (2002) conducted research to see if positive emotions in the present would increase the likelihood of positive emotions in the future. Using the broaden-and-build theory, they predicted that positive emotions broaden and increase attention and cognition. Their findings show "that positive emotions, through incremental processes associated with broadened thinking, initiate upwards spirals toward emotional well-being" (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002, p.175).

### **Teaching Social and Emotional Learning**

Goleman (1995) believes that children can be taught emotional intelligence competencies including self-control, enthusiasm, persistence, and motivation. Gunter et al. (2012) define social and emotional learning as “the process whereby children are able to acknowledge and manage their emotions, recognize the emotions of others, develop empathy, make good decisions, establish positive friendships, and handle challenges and situations effectively” (p. 151). Shanker (2013b) believes that teaching students emotional regulating skills should be a priority for every teacher.

SEL programs are effective in that they reach a wide audience, including those students who have mental health problems. SEL programs explicitly teach children how to interact positively with others, develop friendships, and adjust to social situations (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2010). Weare and Nind (2011) note that there has been great growth in mental health research and interventions and the school plays a major role in these interventions. Hromek and Roffey (2009) believe that “social and emotional understanding and skills underpin both personal resilience and healthy relationships” (p. 627).

SEL provides children with a safe environment where they can learn and practice appropriate actions and responses (Gunter et al., 2012). Though SEL is beneficial to students at any age, it is important to start as early as possible in the preschool years. Young children learn best when they are active participants in hands on learning (Gunter et al., 2012). Wyman et al. (2010) believe that “repeated practice is a primary means by which individuals learn aspects of how a task is performed (p.709). They also note that using both visual and auditory ways of learning may help reach different learning styles (Wyman et al., 2010). Hromek and Roffey state that “children’s social competence develops in the context of interacting with their peers is

especially important as children of primary school age have fewer opportunities out of school for interacting freely with peers and thus developing social competence” (2009, p. 629).

### **Teacher-Student Relationship**

School can create much stress for emotional dysregulated students. Kesner believes that teachers play a significant role in a child’s life and that students “may look to their teacher for the same sort of emotional security that they rely on in a secure attachment relationship with their parents” (2005, p. 219). Caring teachers may be able to compensate for insecure attachment issues between students and their parents (Kesner, 2005). Shanker (2013b) describes effective teachers as having the ability to recognize and understand their students’ emotional needs. He believes that all teachers can learn this skill. Teachers, who take the well-being of their students seriously, know that learning can only place when children are happy and healthy (Mayr & Ulich, 2009).

Sabol and Pianta (2012) also believe that a sensitive teacher can help children develop positive behaviour and relationships. Researchers have found that good quality relationships with teachers appear to reduce risk related behaviours and encourage healthy development for children with externalizing and internalizing problems (Sabol & Pianta, 2012). They state that “children who were exposed to closer relationships had lower rates of school avoidance, anxiety, and social withdrawal, whereas children who had more dependent relationships had higher rates of negative social outcomes” (Sabol & Pianta, 2012, p. 219).

Buyse, Verschueren, and Doumen (2011) based their study of the protective role of close teacher-child relationships in the prediction of aggressive behaviours on attachment theory. They found that “with high closeness between teachers and individual children, children with lower quality of attachment to their mothers are no longer at a significantly higher risk for aggressive



behaviour than children with higher quality of attachment to their mothers” (Buyse et al., 2011, p. 44). In other words, the quality of the teacher-student relationship can make a difference for children with less secure attachments to their caregivers. Buyse et al. (2011) also found that teacher sensitivity is an important factor in the quality of the relationship from the teacher’s side. They note that studies have shown other teacher traits that are as equally important in the quality of teacher-student relationships. These traits include teacher mental health, self-efficacy, and other aspects of teacher behaviour toward children. Practical implications of this study show that problem behaviour needs to be addressed from a relational perspective and teachers’ understanding of children’s behaviour (Buyse et al., 2011).

### **Teacher Wellness**

McCallum and Price (2010) contend that taking care of “one’s own wellbeing is central to productivity, wellness and a sustained teaching career” (p. 20). Teachers are educational leaders and must be well themselves if they are to have a positive impact on the wellbeing of their students (McCallum & Price, 2010). “Fatigue, illness, mental problems, anxiety, anger, intolerance and loneliness have been identified as contributing factors to teacher stress. These can sometimes make teachers susceptible to illness and others related health risks; and cause physical and mental exhaustion” (McCallum & Price, 2010, p. 25).

Jennings and Greenberg (2009) believe that teachers have a large impact on the learning environment of their students. If teachers become overly emotional or stressed in the classroom, they cannot just leave and then return once they are calm (Roeser, Skinner, Beers, & Jennings, 2012). They must be able to self-regulate in front of the class.

Socially and emotionally competent (SEC) teachers create an optimal classroom environment. SEC teachers have high self-awareness, recognize their emotional strengths and

weaknesses, have high social awareness, recognize and understand the emotions of others, build strong and supportive relationships, are culturally sensitive, exhibit prosocial values, respect others, take responsibility for their decisions and actions, know how to manage their emotions and behaviour even when emotionally aroused, and are comfortable with letting students figure things out for themselves (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). When teachers feel they can effectively deal with socially and emotional challenges, teaching becomes more enjoyable and they feel more effective.

Shanker (2013b) agrees that children need to be around optimally regulated adults as “arousal levels are contagious” (p. 10). Educators need to attend to their own mental health and use a high degree of SEC to successfully deal with the stresses of their job such as workload, lack of collaboration time with colleagues, lack of administrative support, difficult student behaviour, (Jennings, Frank, Snowberg, Coccia, & Greenberg, 2013; Roeser, Schonert-Reichl, Jha, Cullen, Wilensky, Oberle, Thompson, Taylor, & Harrison, 2013; Shanker, 2013b). High levels of emotional stress may affect job performance and eventually teacher burnout, which “threatens teacher-student relationships, classroom management, and classroom climate” (Jennings and Greenberg, 2009, p. 496). Jennings et al. (2013) found that using professional developments programs such as Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE for teachers) can “support teachers’ social and emotional competence and well-being as means of promoting resilience and improving their performance and their students’ performance” (p. 387).

Roeser et al. (2013) found that Mindfulness Training (MT) can help teachers “more effectively manage stress on the job and, by inference, better attend to the interpersonal and instructional complexities of teaching and learning” (p. 799). Teachers who took the MT reported greater mindfulness after the study (Roeser et al., 2013). “Similar effects of mindfulness training

on the reduction of teachers' stress, anxiety, and depression were found" in other studies (Roeser et al., 2013, p. 800).

### **Learning Through Play**

Fiorelli and Russ (2012) believe that play has a significant impact on the cognitive and emotional development of children. Through play, children learn to solve problems, think creatively, manage risk, and improve their abilities to cope and adjust to life's situations (Fiorelli & Russ, 2012; Patte & Brown, 2011). Howard and McInnes (2012) agree that play and children's emotional well-being are connected, but empirical evidence is limited. Their study showed that children engaged in activities they perceived as "like play" were more focused and active than children who used the same materials in an activity that was designed to be 'not like play' (e.g. adult directly present, activity occurred at a table, child was asked to take part). Their analysis also found that the children in the "like play" sessions smiled more and moved freely as compared to the 'not like play' children who were "easily distracted, made more negative vocalizations and although they were able to move their body position they tended to stay very still in their chair" (Howard & McInnes, 2012, p. 740). From their findings, Howard and McInnes suggest teachers could use play to increase feelings of well-being and improve development across domains by creating learning experiences that children understand to be play.

Shoval and Shulruf (2011) found "that movement in cooperative learning is effective in improving student academic achievements" (p.67). They note that children who chose more individual activities and lead others in the group benefited the most even if they were low achievers (Shoval & Shulruf, 2011). This movement based learning, which includes body movement, working with objects in order to solve a problem, and environmental changes based on the participants' actions, provides opportunities to think creatively and find solutions. Shoval

and Shulruf note that “when moving, every active participant is also an initiator, whether his/her movement relates to the movement of the learner that precedes him or is disassociated from it” (2011, p. 68). Every child, therefore, whether a low achiever or not, is a vital participant. Shoval and Shulruf (2011) showed that as long as the child is active, learning takes place. Furthermore, the study found that cooperative learning with movement is an effective teaching strategy. As well, the authors note that to be effective, the tasks need to challenge students to find a range of solutions and the ability to suggest ideas to the group. In order for the success of SEL through play, it is essential for the teacher or facilitator to model appropriate skills and make learning connections for students (Hromek & Roffey, 2009).

McCaskill (2011) believes that “we must encourage children to play, we must make the time for them to do so, by themselves, with each other and with us. Play is the universal pastime of children. A childhood with too little play ill prepares children for the requirements of adulthood” (McCaskill, 2011, p. 2, Introduction). Hromek and Roffey (2009) argue that “games are a powerful way of developing social and emotional learning in young people” (p. 626). They state that the social and emotional skills used in playing and getting along with others are the same ones needed to succeed in work and in adult life. “The natural affiliation between children, play, and the desire to have fun with others makes games an ideal vehicle for teaching SEL” (Hromek & Roffey, 2009, p. 626). Having fun while playing games is highly motivating to children. Hromek and Roffey explain that “fun and humor stimulate creativity as the brain moves from a cognitive, rule-bound state to a more fluid, relaxed state where the whole body is engaged in problem solving” (2009, p. 630). Cooperative games force children to be face-to-face and use self-regulation to play successfully. It is this interactive nature of games that makes them the perfect vehicle to deliver SEL (Hromek & Roffey, 2009). “Players balance personal goals

with those of others while managing emotional reactions to frustration and delaying gratification in order to play collaboratively and cooperatively” (Hromek & Roffey, 2009, p. 632). McCaskill (2011) agrees that games “engage children’s emotions and call for the regulation of those emotions to achieve success” (p. 5, Introduction).

### **Reflective Dialogue**

Lantieri (2008b) believes that children need guides to help construct their own knowledge, not just an all-knowing authority. Educators just need “to be willing to learn alongside young people and to help create a fertile ground for that learning” (Lantieri, 2008b, p. 34). Teachers help young students connect current activities to past experiences with summaries or recaps (Mercer, 2002). Teachers can remind the students of past dialogues “as a way of clarifying what has been said for the benefit of others” (Mercer, 2002, p. 5). Mercer believes that children learn the skills of thinking collaboratively by talking with each other and watching the examples of adults.

Määttä and Järvelä (2013) note the importance of teacher feedback as children “lack skills and strategies for evaluating their performance and learning” (p. 320). Because teachers know their students so well, “their evaluative messages carry added significance for young children” (p. 320). Määttä and Järvelä found young children to be “active informants of their experiences in different classroom-learning situations” (2013, p. 321). Therefore, the authors suggest that teachers encourage children to reflect on their own performances through discussions that “may come to improve their academic skills and their self-regulatory practices” (Määttä & Järvelä, 2013, p. 322). Mercer (2008) explains that “research has shown that the quality of classroom dialogue can make an important contribution to the development of children’s communication skills and their thinking skills” (p. 60). Language helps students understand problems and think

rationally and creatively while finding possible solutions (Mercer, 2008). Groups seem “to achieve more than the sum of the individual contributions, and the opportunities for participants to learn and to practice effective ways of communicating are quite apparent” (Mercer, 2008, p. 62). McCaskill (2011) believes educators must help children understand their behaviour and the behaviour of others. “We must equip them with a language by which to describe behaviour and the means by which to manage it” (McCaskill, 2011, p. 2, Introduction).

### **SEL Programs in the Kamloops/Thompson School District #73**

After attending workshops, hearing teacher reports, and seeing the effectiveness of these SEL programs in district classrooms, the district coordinators and district librarian promote the use of these specific programs: Zones of Regulation® by Leah Kuypers, The Incredible Flexible you: A Social Thinking® Curriculum for the Preschool and Early Elementary Years (4-7) by Michelle Garcia Winner, and Building Character with Kelso by Diane Hipp and Barbara Clark. Stade, the district’s Health Promoting Coordinator, promotes Play is the Way® as it combines self-regulation with active play (Stade, personal communication, June 2, 2014). Stade explains that Play is the Way® includes Zones of Regulation® with active play combined into one methodology. As well, the program supports inquiry of self by giving students the opportunity to build their own understanding of important personal and social competencies such as respectful relationships, positive self-identity, resilience, and perseverance. Stade also suggests that if teachers also work with this methodology, they too might take a look inward at how they relate to others. “We need more civility in this world for both children and adults,” (Stade, personal communication, June 2, 2014).

**Play is the Way®**

Play is the Way is a “practical methodology for teaching social and emotional learning using guided play, classroom activities, and an empowering language” (McCaskill, 2011, p. 1). McCaskill created Play is the Way® to help teach children perseverance and resilience through a variety of games. The program gives children “meaningful, consistent, and honest guidance” while teaching them to master their emotions (McCaskill, 2011, pp. 2-3, Introduction). The language used in the program is designed to “take the student from the ‘feeling state’ to the ‘thinking state’ (McCaskill, 2011, p. 5, The Language).

The program consists of cooperative physical games, five key life concepts, specific language, and rhythm activities designed to help children better understand and control their own behaviours and emotions in social situations (McCaskill, 2011; Street, Hoppe, Kingsbury, & Ma, 2004). The program is delivered with a whole class rather than in a special needs setting because “social skills are best learnt in social situations” (Street et al., 2004, p. 98). The games are structured in a way that makes group cooperation critical to the class’ success and helps develop positive social skills (Street et al., 2004). The five key concepts, Treat Others as You Would Like Them to Treat You, Be Brave - Participate to Progress, Pursue Your Personal Best No Matter Who You Work With, Have Reasons for the Things You Say and Do, and It Takes Great Strength to Be Sensible, are taught through classroom discussions and activities then reinforced by the physical games and the rhythm activities.

In the program’s first evaluation, Street et al. (2004) found that Play is Way® increased prosocial behaviour in primary school children and reduced increases in negative behaviour at school. Looking closely at the assessment items, Street et al. (2004) suggest that “children who have participated in regular [Play is the Way®] sessions are more willing to share games and

toys. They are more likely to invite children outside of their close friends to join in a game and to be considerate of their feelings. They are more sympathetic and more compassionate in their dealings with others” (p. 108). McInnes, Diamond, and Whitington (2013) found that Play is the Way® “provided effective tools to promoting improved social relationships and a wider vocabulary of feelings words which children used to relate to their own and other’s experiences” (p. 17). Carter (2013) found the program “to be effective, particularly due to the real-life challenges it presented and the opportunities it permitted for empowering language to be used between students” (p. 44).

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study is to see if the Play is the Way® program can help Grade Two students develop the emotional regulation skills of resilience and perseverance. I have defined emotional regulation and listed its key attributes. I have explained the importance of its development from birth and the deficits that can occur from negative experiences. I have reviewed literature that highlights the mental health issues associated with emotional regulations, the role of competent caregivers, the importance of effortful control and language skills in developing emotional regulation. I have examined ways children can develop emotional regulation, the aspects of resilience, and the concept of the Broaden-and-Build Theory. I have explained the role of student-teacher relationships and teacher well-ness to the effectiveness of SEL programs. I have presented the benefits of play and self-reflection as two key aspects of developing emotional regulation. Finally, I have presented the key components of the Play is the Way® program that promote emotional regulation in children.



## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

#### Setting

Kamloops is located where the North and South Thompson Rivers meet in south central British Columbia. The local Shuswap First Nation aptly named the city Tk'emlúps meaning “where the rivers meet” (Tk'emlúps Indian Band, 2014). Its suburbs stretch for more than a dozen kilometres along both north and south branches of the rivers, as well as to the steep hillsides along the south portion of the city and lower northeast hillsides. Kamloops offers a relaxed lifestyle in a spectacular, natural setting of desert plateaus, lush river valleys, pine forests, lakes, and snow-capped mountains. Strategically located at the intersection of Western Canada's four major highways, the Coquihalla, the TransCanada, the Yellowhead, and Highway 97, and both national railways, Kamloops is considered an economic and transportation hub (Venture Kamloops, 2013b).

Kamloops is home to Canada's most comprehensive university, Thompson Rivers University, offering 197 programs, from trades to traditional academics, certificates to bachelor's and master's degrees. Known as Canada's Tournament Capital, Kamloops boasts a unique lifestyle by providing unlimited opportunities for outdoor recreation with 82 parks, over 200 lakes within an hour's drive, and close access to two ski hills (Venture Kamloops, 2013b).

Kamloops has a semi-arid climate and four distinct seasons; residents enjoy more than 2,000 hours of sunshine annually. Summers are hot and dry, while winters offer the best of both worlds, with mild temperatures in low-lying areas and snow at higher elevations (Venture Kamloops, 2013b).

Kamloops has a population of 87,705 (Venture Kamloops, 2013a). The main industries are mining, services, health, and education. The three largest employers are Interior Health Authority, School District #73, and Highland Valley Cooper Mine (Venture Kamloops, 2013c). Other major employers include, Thompson Rivers University, the City of Kamloops, Horizon North (manufacturing), New Gold Inc. (mining), and Domtar (pulp and paper), and BC Lottery Corporation (Venture Kamloops, 2013c).

The community of Juniper Ridge is situated at the east end of the city on a hillside south of the South Thompson River and has a population of 3459 (City of Kamloops, 2011). This number is slowly rising with many new single-family houses and townhomes currently under construction. It is accessed by only one road, Highland Drive, that went through a complete six million dollar reconstruction in the summer and fall of 2013. The original development to the east of Highland Drive has smaller, medium priced homes while the newer developments further east and to the west include larger, higher-priced homes. There is a convenience store at the entrance to the community and a new commercial building that presently remains empty. A downhill bike park, a BMX track, and a park with a baseball diamond, outdoor rink, tennis courts, and a playground with washroom facilities are located at the center of the community.

The Juniper Ridge Community Association was established in 1983 (Juniper Ridge Community Association, 2007). It publishes an electronic newsletter, maintains a Facebook page, and collects a 10-dollar annual fee from residents that support events such as fireworks at Halloween, coordination of the famous annual community garage sale, and the maintenance of an ice rink each winter.

Juniper Ridge Elementary first opened in September 1991 with 240 students in Kindergarten to Grade 5. The staff that year included a principal, 13 teachers, a teacher-librarian,

a learning assistance teacher, and seven non-teaching staff members. The school originally featured eight classrooms, a gymnasium, a library, a multi-purpose room, and a large community room. In 1996, with rapid growth of the community, the school underwent the addition of eight more classrooms to house 425 students in Kindergarten to Grade 7. During this time, to accommodate the influx of students, the school implemented a shift schedule, then added portables and used the community room before the new addition was complete. The student population increased this year from 380 to 420. The computer lab was dismantled to accommodate a new classroom. As well, the Learning Assistance Resource Room was moved from the portable to a smaller room inside the school. The portable is now a classroom.

Juniper Ridge Elementary has had four administrators since its opening 23 years ago. It has a stable staff history of supportive, collegial, and professional relationships. In the last four years, many long-time staff members have retired creating significant staffing changes. Though the student population has always been stable, the school is starting to experience a small increase in transiency due to the influx of rental properties in the older parts of the community. However, despite this fact, most students who enter the school in Kindergarten typically will stay and complete Grade 7.

Juniper Ridge Elementary has many academic, artistic, and athletic pursuits for all students. They can participate in extra-curricular activities including Heritage and Science Fairs, Math Expo, the District Math contest, cross country running, volleyball, basketball, track and field, and golf programs, district choirs, Kamloops Performing Arts Festival, Young Artists, Talent Showcase, Battle of the Books, Young Authors, and Rotary Speech Contest. The Grade 6 and 7 students participate in the Student Leadership Program that encompasses community service, peer helpers, office helpers, supervision, and school spirit. The students also have the

benefit of a music specialist teacher who instructs most of the classes and puts on performances throughout the year.

About 5% of the school population has special needs. All of these students have a Ministry designation and are provided with Individualized Education Plans that help support their individual needs. There is one Learning Assistance and Resource Teacher (LART) and four Certified Education Assistants (CEAs) that support these students and their teachers. The Vice-Principal also helps students with behaviour problems. The LART works directly with approximately 18% of the student population providing academic support in Literacy, Numeracy, and Writing as well as support in emotional and social development. Students needing extra help in reading also benefit from the One to One Reading and Big Buddies programs provide by older students. First Nation students make up 6% of the population and a part-time First Nations Worker helps with special programming for these students.

Juniper Ridge Elementary has always enjoyed actively involved parents since it opened in 1991. Many of these parents serve on the Parent Advisory Council (PAC) that meets monthly and represents over 230 families. They help look after hot lunch days, lunchtime supervision, One to One Reading, coaching, and various fundraising initiatives throughout the year to help with the purchase of technology, field trip costs, and playground equipment.

Juniper Ridge has a reputation for high quality academic, artistic, and physical educational experiences. It is known for its high-achieving students, excellent family support, and a friendly, hard working, professional staff.

My study took place in my Grade 1 classroom at Juniper Ridge Elementary. I have 20 students, eleven boys and nine girls. I have one student with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and one student with significant cognitive delays who is in the process of genetic testing. Two

students are new to our school. Many of the students know each other from previous classes, their neighbourhood, sports teams, or daycare.

### **Participants**

After two weeks with my new class, I used the first three sections of the School Connectedness Rubric (Appendix A) to choose my two participants in this study. The participants were two six year old male students who showed some difficulty in emotional regulation. Neither student had been exposed to the Play is the Way® program. I will use the pseudonyms Riley and Logan when referring to each participant.

Riley was five years old at the start of the study. This is his second year at Juniper Ridge School. The first week of school was difficult for Riley as the whole school was organized into multi-aged teams. For two days, these teams rotated through classrooms to learn the school's expected behaviours. Riley did not adjust well to these rotations. He felt anxious and ran home three times during the first two days. His mother brought him back each time, worried and concerned about his anxiety. After Riley was assigned to my class, he ran home once more. His mother and I talked to him about our concerns for his safety. I watched Riley closely and helped him with our daily transitions. After observing him for two weeks, I rated Riley on the School Connectedness Rubric.

Logan was six years old at the start of the study. He was new to Kamloops and to our school. His Kindergarten report card made no mention of any atypical behaviour or neurotypical problems. Though he was new to our school, I chose him because of the way he presented himself socially and emotionally compared to the other children in the classroom. He seemed nervous and anxious when having difficulties with other children and would often go and sit in

the corner of the room. After two weeks of observing Logan in class, I rated him on the School Connectedness Rubric.

### **Design**

The purpose of my study was to examine the effectiveness of Play is the Way® on emotional regulation in Grade 1 students. I employed a mixed-methods approach to carry out this study. I gathered data that were qualitative in nature. I explored the following three questions:

1. What effect will Play is the Way® have on my students' ability to persevere at difficult tasks?
2. What effect will Play is the Way® have on my students' ability to show resilience?
3. What emotional regulation competencies do I see in my students after using Play is the Way® for three months?

### **Data Collection**

In order to answer my research questions, I conducted a case study with two participants. I used observations, written responses, and informal interviews as the means to collect data. Play is the Way® teaches perseverance and resilience. As well, the program explicitly teaches these five concepts:

- 1) Treat Others as You Would Like Them to Treat You;
- 2) Be Brave - Participate to Progress;
- 3) Pursue Your Personal Best No Matter Who You Work With;
- 4) Have Reasons for the Things You Say and Do;
- 5) It Takes Great Strength to Be Sensible.

These connect well to the emotional competencies Shanker (2013b) outlines:

- the ability to modulate strong emotions
- emotional resiliency – the ability to recover from disappointment, challenging situations, embarrassment, and other difficulties, and move forward confidently and positively
- willingness and interest to experiment and to learn, on their own and in collaboration with others
- a desire to create and innovate, and while doing so to use a wide range of strategies and techniques
- a healthy self-esteem that is based on awareness of personal efforts and achievements- as well as those of others. (p. 22)

### **Observations**

I took field notes during our Play is the Way® sessions. As I was leading the class in the games, I alternated observation days for each participant to in order to help focus my attention. I divided my observation page (Appendix B) into two columns using the left column for recording actual observations and the right column for interpretations or my comments on the observations.

### **Written Responses**

I gave all students a special reflections page to draw and write their feelings, thoughts, and ideas about the games we will use (Appendix C). However, for the purpose of this study, I am only reporting on the two students I have selected as participants.

### **Informal Interviews**

As students responded on their reflection pages, I asked the specific participants to tell me more about or expand on their pictures and writing. I recorded their answers on an interview form (Appendix D).

## Data Analysis

The purpose of my study is to examine the effectiveness of Play is the Way® on emotional regulation in Grade 1 and two students.

1. What effect will Play is the Way® have on my students' ability to persevere at difficult tasks?
2. What effect will Play is the Way® have on my students' ability to show resilience?
3. What emotional regulation competencies do I see in my students after using Play is the Way® for three months.

## Data Analysis Matrix

Research Questions	Data Sources	Types of Data	Methods of Analysis	Presentations of Findings
Research Question #1 What effect will Play is the Way® have on my students' ability to persevere at difficult tasks	Observations  Written responses  Informal interviews	Qualitative (nominal)  Qualitative (nominal)  Qualitative (nominal)	Item analysis	Table  Narrative
Research Question #2 What effect will Play is the Way® have on my students' ability to show resilience?	Observations  Written responses  Informal interviews	Qualitative (nominal)  Qualitative (nominal) Qualitative (nominal)	Item analysis	Table  Narrative
Research Question #3 What emotional regulation competencies do I see in my students after using Play is the Way® for three months?	Observations  Written responses  Informal interviews	Qualitative (nominal)  Qualitative (nominal)  Qualitative (nominal)	Description  Item analysis	Table  Narrative



**Validity and Reliability**

As outlined in the Data Analysis Matrix, I used the three data sources of observations, written responses, and informal interviews in order to gather data for my study. This use of triangulation in my research helped ensure credibility and dependability of data. As well, I conducted this study for eight weeks in order to gather as many observations as I could.

**Researcher Biases**

While participating in my first Play is the Way® workshop, I quickly connected to its philosophy of helping children develop the emotional competences of perseverance and resilience. I believed this program would help my students develop emotional regulation so this may have affected my observations and findings. I needed to be as impartial and objective as possible as I collected and analyzed my data.

**Anticipated Limitations**

I anticipated the following limitations in this study. First, I was teaching at the same time as I conducted this study, therefore I was only able to gather observations on two students. This is a very small number and did not reflect the general population. Second, the study started at the beginning of October while I was still getting to know my new class and each student individually. It takes time to build relationships and get to know what needs and abilities each student has. Finally, this study took place in a limited time frame, starting in October and ending in December. A longer time period may have shown more growth and understanding of the emotional competencies I observed. Other limitations were simply the day-to-day interruptions of a busy school such as field trips, Christmas concert practices, and hot dog day, which made our Community Room unavailable.

**Ethical Considerations**

I recognize that the age of my participants placed them in a vulnerable population within the context of conducting research. Prior to proceeding with this study, and in keeping with ethical research practices, I obtained parental permission for each of my students. I explained my action research study and conveyed that at any point and for any reason they had the right to withdraw their child from the study.

During this study, I made every effort to protect the anonymity of my participants. I refer to them with pseudonyms at all times. I kept all data obtained during this study confidential. I have hard copies of printed data in a locked safe in my home and the digital data are stored on a flash drive reserved solely for information pertaining to this study.

**Entry to Field**

In preparation for conducting this action research study, I participated in two Play is the Way® workshops, learning the philosophy, games, and language that helped introduce the program to my students this fall. As well, I obtained the permission of my administrator (Appendix E) and superintendent (Appendix F) to conduct the research within the context of my classroom responsibilities and asked for parental permission of each of my students (Appendix G). I completed the National Institutes of Health web-based training course, “Protecting Human Research Participants” (Appendix H) and the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans Course on Research Ethics (Appendix I). Finally, I obtained approval of my research proposal from Gonzaga University’s Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects Research (Appendix J).

**Summary**

In this chapter, I have described the setting in which my study will take place and the characteristics of the two participants. I have explained that I collected data by observing my participants, collected student responses, and conducted informal interviews. I have presented the methods for analyzing and presenting the data I collected and stated how I tried to keep my data valid and reliable. I have explained my own researcher's biases and several limitations to my study. I have presented my ethical considerations in working with a vulnerable population in action research and described how I prepared for conducting this study by participating in Play is the Way® workshops. Finally, I have included copies of letters that I used to obtain permission from my administrator, superintendent, and my participants' parents.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### FINDINGS

The purpose of my study was to examine the effectiveness of Play is the Way® on emotional regulation in grade one students. I employed a mixed-methods approach to carry out this study, gathering data that were qualitative in nature. I will present my findings in order of the three guiding research questions I set out to answer. I will present interview findings in the context of my research questions. Finally, I will share an unintended finding from the mother of one of my participants.

1. What effect will Play is the Way® have on my students' ability to persevere at difficult tasks?
2. What effect will Play is the Way® have on my students' ability to show resilience?
3. What emotional regulation competencies do I see in my students after using Play is the Way® for three months?

Shanker (2013b) states that the key attributes of the emotional domain are:

- the ability to modulate strong emotions
- emotional resiliency – the ability to recover from disappointment, challenging situations, embarrassment, and other difficulties, and move forward confidently and positively
- willingness and interest to experiment and to learn, on their own and in collaboration with others
- a desire to create and innovate, and while doing so to use a wide range of strategies and techniques

- a healthy self-esteem that is based on awareness of personal efforts and achievements- as well as those of others. (p. 22)

Some of the data showing perseverance and resilience overlap with the data showing emotional competencies and were recorded under the findings for both research questions.

As stated in my methodology, student written responses were going to be a source of data. Although the participants did draw and write about what happened during the games, their responses were not useful in determining perseverance, resilience, or emotional competencies. However, the informal interviews that occurred at the same time as their written responses were helpful and used in the following tables.

**Research Question #1:** What effect will Play is the Way® have on my students' ability to persevere at difficult tasks?

**Table 1**

**Observations of Perseverance (Riley)**

Date	Observations
October 8/14	Riley joined a group in a hoop and held onto Nyla so he would not fall out.
November 18/14	Riley played well, followed the rules, and did not give up during the games.

**Table 2****Observations of Perseverance (Logan)**

Date	Observations
October 27/14	Logan played fair when he got the wrong ball.
November 24/14	Logan said, "We can do it," with enthusiasm.  Another student moved his feet so the class had to start a new game. Logan was okay with that and didn't get upset.
November 26/14	Logan said, "We can do it!" with enthusiasm and "Pass to Jackson."
December 2/14	Logan showed a positive attitude by repeating, "We can do it!"

**Table 3****Informal Interviews Showing Perseverance (Riley)**

Date	Informal Interview
October 10/14	Tell me about the weak moment: "jumping around."  How did you feel? "Not good."  What will you do next time? "Don't do it. Listen to your heart or thinking part of your brain."

**Table 4****Informal Interviews Showing Perseverance (Logan)**

Date	Informal Interview
October 23/14	<p>Tell me about the strong moment. "Running speed fast. I look like a glitch. I run really fast. I was keeping playing."</p> <p>Tell me about the weak moment. "When I fell."</p> <p>What did you do or say? "I can keep running."</p>
November 6/14	<p>Tell me about the strong moment. "Me running like lightening."</p> <p>What did you do or say? "I can do it!"</p>
November 21/14	<p>Tell me about the weak moment: "Adam."</p> <p>How did you feel? "Not the strong moment."</p> <p>What will you do next time? "Do the strong moment. Trust to play the right way."</p>

**Item Analysis**

Tables 1 through 4 present the participants' responses specific to their ability to persevere at difficult tasks. The two students' responses indicate they did not feel good during their weak moments and were determined to try a different way the next time they played the game, instead of feeling frustrated and giving up. As well, Logan demonstrated perseverance by creating the mantra, "We can do it!"

**Research Question #2:** What effect will Play is the Way® have on my students' ability to show resilience?

**Table 5**

**Observations of Resilience (Riley)**

Date	Observations
October 17/14	Riley tried to receive a ball, but was ok (did not get frustrated) when he did not get it.
November 25/14	Riley was disappointed when Tommy missed the ball but did not get upset.
December 1/14	Riley dropped the ball and said, "I wasn't ready" He did not get upset.

**Table 6**

**Observations of Resilience (Logan)**

Date	Observations
October 23/14	Logan fell during the game. I encouraged him to play on and he did.

**Table 7**

**Informal Interviews Showing Resilience (Riley)**

Date	Informal Interview
	No response specific to resilience.



**Table 8****Informal Interviews Showing Resilience (Logan)**

Date	Informal Interview
October 6/14	Tell me about the weak moment: "I didn't know what to do." What did you do/say? "I sat on the mats." How did you feel? "Frustrated." What will you do next time? "I ask anybody."

**Item Analysis**

Tables 5 through 8 present the participants' responses specific to their ability to show resilience. Both participants were able to recover from a disappointment or fall and play on for the rest of the session. Though Logan experienced a weak moment during one session, he was able to move forward positively with a plan for next time.

**Research Question #3:** What emotional regulation competencies do I see in my students after using Play is the Way® for three months?

**Table 9**

**Observations of Emotional Competencies (Riley)**

Date	Observations
October 8/14	Riley asked for what he needed and followed directions at end of session.
October 17/14	Riley asked for what he needed. "I need pink."
October 22/14	Riley got tagged and followed the rules by sitting out.
October 28/14	He played "Islands" well by following the rules.
November 3/14	Riley played well and asked for the colour of ball he needed. "I need blue."
November 4/14	Riley asked for what he needed. "I need blue." He made good passes to any student, not just his friends. He let others know which ball he needed by stating the colour or just pointing to the ball.
November 5/14	Riley asked for what he needed and used an "X" signal for not needing a certain coloured ball.
November 6/14	Riley called out for what he needed. Then he grabbed the green ball and walked very slowly, wasting time. When I asked him why he was going so slow, he did not know why. He ran the next round.
November 12/14	Riley looked to see who needed which ball and stayed calm throughout the whole game.
November 25/14	Riley was explaining the strategy needed with the class at the beginning of the game. He offered help to others by saying, "Give it to Shelley." Riley was disappointed when Tommy missed the ball but did not get upset.
December 1/14	Riley was ready to play by looking at thrower. He was careful to keep his feet together. Riley asked Gary "Are you ready?" Riley was engaged and watched the ball throughout the game. He dropped ball and said, "I wasn't ready," but did not get upset.
December 8/14	Riley was coaching others where to throw the ball and made sure his feet were together (one of the rules of the game).
December 10/14	He helped Nina with the rules.

**Table 10****Observations of Emotional Competencies (Logan)**

Date	Observations
October 27/14	Logan called for the ball he needed. He said, "We can do it!"
November 5/14	Logan used a signal (hand up) when he did not need a certain ball. He asked others what they needed. "Anyone else need the ball?"
November 24/14	Logan said, "We can do it!" He clapped hands and cheered during game.
November 26/14	Logan moved to make a bridge between Holden and Kirby. He asked Kirby, "Are you ready?" Logan said, "We can do it!" "Pass to Josh."
December 2/14	Logan kept saying, "We can do it!" He said, "Avery, are you ready?"
December 10/14	Logan jumped into a hoop right away when "Islands" was called. He was smiling during the session.

**Table 11****Informal Interviews Showing Emotional Competencies (Riley)**

Date	Informal Interview
October 10/14	Tell me about the strong moment. "Nina was looking for a spot with two people. Me and Avery were trying to call Nina over." How did you feel? "Good, I was helping someone." Tell me about the weak moment. "When Joshua joined our group, Allie got frustrated because Joshua joined in. She wanted four [people] not five. I was fine with it. I said, 'Allie, it's fine because you're short.' "
October 17/14	How did you feel? "Good, because I helped my friend."
October 23/14	How did you feel? "Good." [doing the right thing]
November 6/14	Tell me about the weak moment. "I was laughing at Joshua." How did you feel? "I don't know, I was doing it by accident." What will you do next time? "Not laugh. I'll ignore it by not looking at him."
November 21/14	Tell me about the strong moment. "I kept my feet together." How did you feel? "Good because I was listening."
November 28/14	Tell me about the strong moment. "Walked away when Joshua was lying down." How did you feel? "Good because I walked away. It was a good decision."
December 10/14	Tell me about the strong moment. "Avery helped me and Nina when we were in a hoop by ourselves." How did you feel? "Good."

**Table 12****Informal Interviews Showing Emotional Competencies (Logan)**

Date	Informal Interview
October 6/14	How did you feel? "Frustrated." What will you do next time? "I ask anybody."
October 17/14	What did you say? "I was passing the ball. I sat beside Oliver. We're nice, sitting crisscross applesauce. At recess he'll meet me at the yellow slide." How did you feel? "Really happy."
November 6/14	Tell me about the weak moment. "Jumping around. I had a good reason, to make the circle bigger." What will you do next time? "I'll put my hands together."
November 21/14	Tell me about your strong moment. "I passed the ball to Sara. I was eye to eye. She knew because I was looking at her." How did you feel? "Strong."
November 21/14	How did you feel? "Not the strong moment." What will you do next time? "Do the strong moment. Trust to play the right way."
November 28/14	Tell me about the strong moment. "I passed it really quick to Jillian." What did you do/say? "Are you ready, Jillian?" How did you feel? "Really good 'cause Jillian trusted me to play fair."
December 10/14	Tell me about the strong moment. "I was walking and dodging the hoola hoops because I didn't want to touch them." What did you do/say? "I don't want to step on them." How did you feel? "Good because I was dodging them."

**Item Analysis**

Tables 9 through 12 present the participants' responses specific to the emotional regulation competencies I see in my students after using Play is the Way® for three months. The two students' responses indicate that they were able to modulate strong emotions, show emotional resilience, create new strategies in the games to help improve results, and display a healthy self-esteem based on personal efforts.

## Unintended Findings

I received this email from Riley's mom on the last day before winter break.

“Thank you Maureen, I feel so grateful that Riley is in your class, he adores you! I was just reflecting today on how far he's come since that first week of school - Rolynda had to restrain while he was screaming he didn't want to stay at school, he ran home twice, I attended school with him for 2 days, he quit swimming and gymnastics after causing big scenes there, and so on and so forth. His confidence has grown so much and being in your class has played a huge part in that. Tonight he was asking why Christmas break has to be so long and how many days until he gets to go back. We've even been able to convince him to do an extracurricular activity (karate) once a week again, which he's also doing very well at after a few weeks of him being unsure he could do it. So you have our extreme appreciation and gratitude.

Have a wonderful Christmas holiday, I hope you deserve a much needed break!”

## Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to present the results of the mixed-methods approach of observations and informal interviews to answer my three research questions:

1. What effect will Play is the Way® have on my students' ability to persevere at difficult tasks?
2. What effect will Play is the Way® have on my students' ability to show resilience?
3. What emotional regulation competencies do I see in my students after using Play is the Way® for three months?

I analyzed the results from the observations and informal interviews with two participants.

The basic findings support that the two participants demonstrated perseverance, resilience, and emotional competencies while participating in Play is the Way®. Both participants were able to recover from disappointments and move forward positively with a plan for next time. They did not feel good about their weak moments and were determined to try a different way the next time they played a game, instead of feeling frustrated and giving up. The two participants

demonstrated emotional competencies by modulating strong emotions, showing emotional resilience, creating new strategies in the games to help improve results, and displaying a healthy self-esteem based on personal efforts. I also included an email from a participant's mom who shared the emotional and social changes she sees in her son and her gratitude for his progress.

In the next chapter I will discuss these results and link them to the review of the literature. I will also present the limitations, recommendations, and implications for future study, as well as my action plan regarding this study. I will then present the conclusion to this study.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of my study was to examine the effectiveness of Play is the Way® on emotional regulation in Grade 1 students. I employed a mixed-methods approach to carry out this study, gathering data that was qualitative in nature. I analyzed data from informal interviews and observations and presented the findings in order of the three guiding research questions I set out to answer. I included a letter from the mother of one of my participants regarding the emotional and social changes she sees in her son.

In this chapter, I will present the limitations of the study. I will connect the outcomes of this action research to the major findings described in the literature review. I will present recommendations for teachers, administrators, the school district, and future studies regarding the need for effective SEL programs in our schools. I will reflect on this two-year journey and how it has affected me personally and professionally. Finally, I will present my professional action plan and how I intend to share the findings of my study.

#### **Limitations**

This qualitative action research study based on written responses, informal interviews, and observations had several limitations that influenced the findings. First, I was the facilitator during the games as well as the teacher researcher. I had to lead the class and maintain class behaviour while taking observations. The informal interviews were conducted during class time so they were brief. It would have been beneficial to have another adult supervise the rest of the class while I conducted the interviews. This would have given me time to ask the students to expand on their brief answers.



Second, there were only two participants. Such a small sample does not reflect the general population. A third limitation was the late start to our school year. The study was shortened by three weeks due to the local teacher strike. The fourth limitation was the age of the participants. I was planning on teaching Grade 2 this year, but my assignment changed to Grade 1. Because I had younger students, the written responses were not useful as my students were beginner writers and unable to express themselves in written form. Finally, the school's community room was used for most of the study. The Parent Advisory Council (PAC) also used this space for their hot lunch program and a times our schedules overlapped, causing us to miss some game sessions.

Before the study started, I thought not knowing my class well would be a limitation. When the study started, the students and I had not built a strong relationship yet. However, I believe this emotional distance helped me make unbiased observations. I had no background knowledge or personal attachment to the participants when choosing them at the beginning of the study.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of my study is to examine the effectiveness of Play is the Way® on emotional regulation in Grade 1 students. I explored three questions:

1. What effect will Play is the Way® have on my students' ability to persevere at difficult tasks?
2. What effect will Play is the Way® have on my students' ability to show resilience?
3. What emotional regulation competencies do I see in my students after using Play is the Way® for three months?

The results of this action research study show that Play is the Way® had a positive effect on the participants' ability to show perseverance, resilience, and other emotional regulation competencies. This study and the research presented in the literature review support each other in showing the importance of teaching SEL, using language, learning through play, and encouraging reflective dialogue.

### **Teaching SEL**

Goleman (1995) believes that children can be taught emotional intelligence competencies including self-control, enthusiasm, persistence, and motivation. Shanker (2013b) believes that teaching students emotional regulating skills should be a priority for every teacher. Weare and Nind (2011) note that there has been great growth in mental health research and interventions and the school plays a major role in these interventions. Hromek and Roffey (2009) believe that “social and emotional understanding and skills underpin both personal resilience and healthy relationships” (p. 627). SEL provides children with a safe environment where they can learn and practice appropriate actions and responses (Gunter et al., 2012). Wyman et al. (2010) believe that “repeated practice is a primary means by which individuals learn aspects of how a task is performed (p.709).

Play is the Way® provided the participants repeated opportunities to play the same games while improving strategy and therefore the outcome of each successive game. This structure gives students the opportunity to build perseverance and resilience as well as show other emotional competencies.

### **Language**

Language skills help children “express needs with words rather than with emotion, to think before acting in a frustrating situation, and to generate and sustain ideas that serve attention

control” (Roben et al., 2013, p. 891). Research suggests that children’s use of language and interventions that teach children to use words that deal with emotions will predict their ability to regulate emotions (Eisenberg et al., 2005; Roben et al., 2013). Eisenberg et al. (2005) believe that focusing on children’s understanding of emotional regulation and their language skills will have a significantly enhance their social and academic abilities.

Play is the Way® teaches specific language to help child vocalize their thoughts and emotions. The findings show that the students were able to vocalize their efforts in encouraging others and themselves during each round of a particular game. Logan created the “We can do it” mantra at the beginning of the study and continued to use it throughout the term. He used it to persevere when games did not go well and to encourage his classmates when they seemed discouraged after a game ended abruptly from mistakes.

During interviews, both participants admitted they did not feel good during their weak moments and were determined to try a different way the next time they played the game. After a weak moment, Riley promised that the next time he would “[have a] strong moment. Listen to your heart or thinking part of your brain.”

### **Learning Through Play**

Play is the universal pastime of children. A childhood with too little play ill prepares children for the requirements of adulthood” (McCaskill, 2011, p. 2, Introduction). Young children learn best when they are active participants in hands on learning (Gunter et al., 2012). Fiorelli and Russ (2012) believe that play has a significant impact on the cognitive and emotional development of children. Through play, children learn to solve problems, think creatively, manage risk, and improve their abilities to cope and adjust to life’s situations (Fiorelli & Russ, 2012; Patte & Brown, 2011). Shoval and Shulruf (2011) state that movement based learning,

working with objects in order to solve a problem, and environmental changes based on the participants' actions, provides opportunities to think creatively and find solutions. Their study showed that as long as the child is active, learning takes place (Shoval & Shulruf, 2011).

Hromek and Roffey (2009) argue that “games are a powerful way of developing social and emotional learning in young people” (p. 626). “The natural affiliation between children, play, and the desire to have fun with others makes games an ideal vehicle for teaching SEL” (Hromek & Roffey, 2009, p. 626).

Throughout this study, the students participated in Play is the Way® games for 20 minutes four times a week. They were enthusiastic and loved playing the games. During each session, the participants had the chance to practice their ability to persevere, be resilient, and show emotional competencies. The games put the participants into situations where they experienced various levels of failure so they had to persevere, individually and in a group, if they wanted to succeed. As well, it gave them the chance to figure out what to do better next time when things did not go their way.

### **Reflective Dialogue**

Lantieri (2008b) believes that children need guides to help construct their own knowledge, not just an all-knowing authority. Educators just need “to be willing to learn alongside young people and to help create a fertile ground for that learning” (Lantieri, 2008b, p. 34). Teachers help young students connect current activities to past experiences with summaries or recaps (Mercer, 2002). Teachers can remind the students of past dialogues “as a way of clarifying what has been said for the benefit of others” (Mercer, 2002, p. 5). Mercer believes that children learn the skills of thinking collaboratively by talking with each other and watching the

examples of adults. Määttä and Järvelä (2013) note the importance of teacher feedback as children “lack skills and strategies for evaluating their performance and learning” (p. 320).

Language helps students understand problems and think rationally and creatively while finding possible solutions (Mercer, 2008). Groups seem “to achieve more than the sum of the individual contributions, and the opportunities for participants to learn and to practice effective ways of communicating are quite apparent” (Mercer, 2008, p. 62). McCaskill (2011) believes educators must help children understand their behaviour and the behaviour of others. “We must equip them with a language by which to describe behaviour and the means by which to manage it” (McCaskill, 2011, p. 2, Introduction).

Play is the Way® supports the use of reflective language. There is a large section in the manual about what language to use during the games and recommendations on how not to overuse or misuse the language.

Finally, the letter from Riley’s mom was an unexpected and valuable finding. She clearly saw a change in her son from the beginning of the year and had to share it with me. If I had any doubts on the effectiveness of this study, her letter surely shows that it did indeed have a positive effect.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings and discussion presented above I would recommend using Play is the Way® to teach SEL to children. I would highly recommend this program to teachers who want a comprehensive, well-structured program that promotes learning through play and reflective dialogue. I would also recommend this program to principals who can help teachers with the costs of the program materials. Our school district already recommends this program,

but I would continue to promote its use to senior district staff so that they continue to see the need for ongoing Play is the Way® workshops.

Finally, I would also recommend that more studies be conducted using Play is the Way® in order to gather more evidence of its effectiveness. There have been a few small studies done, but I would like to see one be conducted on a larger scale.

### **Reflections**

The past two years of this Masters program have been an incredible journey both personally and professionally. I have gone from insisting I would never do my Masters to promoting it wholeheartedly. With the encouragement of colleagues and the inspiration of my son's graduation, I knew I had to take the leap. I had to leave all the self-doubts of going back to school, writing papers, and learning new technology behind me. Having completed this program, I feel confident that I can take on new challenges, whatever they may turn out to be.

In the fall of 2013, I had the honour of meeting Dr. Stuart Shanker, who opened my eyes to the problems we now see in our classrooms but also empowered me to be part of the solution. That same fall, I presented my metaphor of leadership at the end of the first semester. I chose "leadership is an open heart." Soon after this, I experienced the Play is the Way® workshop and philosophy and fell in love. After that first session, I knew my capstone focus had to be on emotional regulation.

The following spring, I had an inspirational meeting with Linda Lantieri. I believe it was no coincidence that I noticed the ad for her workshop in the local paper. I recognized her name from my reference list. She affirmed that I was on the right track with emotional regulation and advised me to look into teacher wellness. During an interactive exercise she did with the audience, I picked this quote by Daphne Rose Kingma, "In the end, nothing we do or say in this

lifetime will matter as much as the way we have loved one another.” I have always been aware of small but significant signs in my life and meeting these people on my journey just kept confirming that I was on the right track. I will always lead with an open heart.

This program has also affirmed my belief that the relationship building at work is the most important aspect of our jobs. It is easy to get too busy and forget what really matters, my relationships with my students, their parents, and my colleagues. Small changes in how we connect and relate to each other can make such big differences. I see it every day in my classroom.

### **Professional Action Plan**

This research has provided me with a wealth of knowledge surrounding emotional regulation, as well as with the practical knowledge of the effectiveness of Play is the Way®. As an informal leader in my school and district, I plan on sharing my passion and knowledge of Play is the Way® with my colleagues at my school and during any future professional development workshops. I also plan on sending the study to the author of Play is the Way®, Wilson McCaskill, and the Canadian facilitator, Sean Smith, to help promote its use in schools.

I believe the knowledge and confidence I have gained through this program has helped me connect more with my colleagues. I have initiated and encouraged professional dialogues in the lunchroom, the photocopy room, the hallway, and at staff meetings. I look forward to continuing these educational conversations, not just on emotional regulation, but on any topic that is relevant to best practices.

Researching this topic through studies, articles, and books has led me to mindfulness. It is an old concept becoming more popular and I am excited to continue learning how to develop this in myself as well as in my students. In the last few years before starting this program, I had

been lacking passion and drive in my job. Now, I feel that a flame as been relit and I am ready to explore so many more ways to become a better teacher.

### **Conclusion**

The focus of this action research study was to see if Play is the Way® helped students develop perseverance, resilience, and other emotional competencies. The review of the literature clearly shows the importance of emotional regulation starting from a young age and continuing on through one's life. Teachers can greatly affect the social and emotional development of students by teaching them language by which to describe behaviour and the means by which to manage it. Students learn best when they are actively involved in hands on learning or through play. This study shows that Play is the Way® helps children develop perseverance and resilience and show emotional competencies such as modulating strong emotions, showing emotional resiliency, creating new strategies, and displaying a healthy self-esteem based on personal efforts.

My goal at the beginning of this paper was to become more knowledgeable about emotional regulation so that I could help my students develop their ability to regulate emotions, develop perseverance, and build resilience. After reviewing the literature and conducting this study, I believe that Play is the Way® is an effective program that teaches students emotional regulation, a skill that will last them a happy and successful lifetime.



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**Appendix A: School Connectedness Rubric**

Date	Community	Child's First Name	Staff's First Name
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**Participation**

The child....	1	2	3	4	Rating
...Tries activities on own	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always	
...Tries activities when supported	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always	
...Completes activities independently	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always	
...Risks trying new things	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always	
...Needs support to try new things	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always	

Notes:

**Self Control**

The child....	1	2	3	4	Rating
...Listens to directions	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always	
...Follows directions	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always	
...Is flexible	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always	
...Distracts the group	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	
...Loses self control (e.g., cries, yells, hits)	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	
...Loses self-control for	> 30 min.	10-30 min.	5-10 min.	< 5 min.	

Notes:

**Rapport with Other Kids**

The child....	1	2	3	4	Rating
...Plays well with other kids	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always	
...Needs support of staff to play with other kids	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always	
... Hangs out with other kids in the group	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always	
...Is liked by other kids in the group	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Always	
...Gets into conflicts with other kids	Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	

Notes:

**Appendix B: Teacher Observation Sheet**

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

page: \_\_\_\_\_

Date	Observations	Comments



**Appendix D: Informal Interview Sheet**

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Question	Response
<p>Tell me about the strong moment.</p> <p>What did you do/say?</p> <p>How did you feel?</p>	
<p>Tell me about the weak moment.</p> <p>What did you do/say?</p> <p>How did you feel?</p> <p>What will you do next time?</p>	

## Appendix E: Letter of Permission from Administrator



School District #73  
Juniper Ridge Elementary School  
2540 Qu'Appelle Blvd  
Kamloops, BC  
V2E 2E9  
<http://juniper-ridge.sd73.bc.ca>  
ph. 250 374-2305  
fax. 250 377-2235

*Reach High \* Serve Well \* Learn Together*

June 23, 2014

Re: Request for Approval for Master's Action Research Study

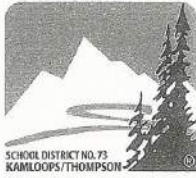
To Whom It May Concern:

I wholeheartedly support Ms. Maureen Plut in implementing her study re: Play is the Way in support of her action research project for her Master of Arts program at Gonzaga University. I look forward to observing the impact her study will have on our students and the implications it will have for our school as we look to support our students with their learning. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at Juniper Ridge Elementary School.

Sincerely,

Don Poelzer  
Principal, Juniper Ridge Elem.  
[dpoelzer@sd73.bc.ca](mailto:dpoelzer@sd73.bc.ca)  
250 374-2305

**Appendix F: Letter of Permission from Superintendent**



**SCHOOL DISTRICT NO. 73 (KAMLOOPS/THOMPSON)**  
1383-9th Avenue, Kamloops, B.C. V2C 3X7 • Telephone: (250) 374-0679 • Fax: (250) 372-1183

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June 30, 2014

VIA Email: [mplut@sd73.bc.ca](mailto:mplut@sd73.bc.ca)

Maureen Plut  
c/o Juniper Ridge Elementary School

Dear Maureen;

I am writing to indicate approval to conduct an Action Research Study using the "Play is the Way" program involving students and parents in your classroom beginning in the fall of 2014.

---

Please note that any participation in your study by staff or students will be strictly voluntary.

Also, I have attached a copy of Board Policy #809.1 for your reference. Please review this policy before conducting your research.

Good luck with your project.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Terrence S. Sullivan".

Terrence S Sullivan, Ph.D  
Superintendent

TSS:dh  
Attach.

cc: K. deBruijn, Assistant Superintendent

---

**Appendix G: Letter of Permission for Parents**

September 26, 2014

Dear Parents/Guardians:

I am currently enrolled in the Master of Education in Leadership and Administration Degree Program at Gonzaga University. As part of the requirements for earning this degree, I will be completing an action research study on developing emotional regulation using the Play is the Way® program. Play is the Way® is a practical methodology for teaching social and emotional learning using guided play, classroom activities, and an empowering language. The author, Wilson McCaskill, created Play is the Way® to help teach children perseverance and resilience through a variety of games. The program is recommended by our District Health Promoting Schools coordinator and is used in several schools in our district and throughout BC.

From October to December 2014, I would like to implement Play is the Way® for the purpose of helping students develop emotional regulation. I am requesting permission to include your child in this action research study, to make observations (recorded as field notes), use your child's written responses about Play is the Way®, and interview your child about the written responses. These data sources will be used to help determine the effectiveness of Play is the Way®. Data will be kept confidential and your child's identity will be protected by the use of a pseudonym in all printed, digital, and oral communication. I do not anticipate any risks or discomforts due to participation in this study. You have the right to withdraw your child from this action research study at any time and for any reason.

The findings of this action research study will be shared with a small group of students from my cohort and with my Gonzaga University Advisor in July 2015. I would be happy to share the results with you, too, if you are interested.

I request your signature to allow your child to participate in my action research study using Play is the Way®.

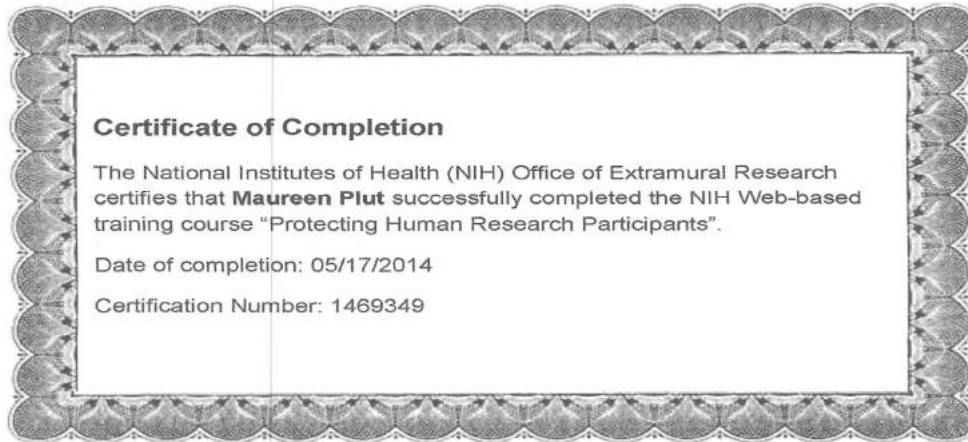
Sincerely,

Maureen Plut  
Grade 1 Teacher  
Juniper Ridge Elementary School  
Kamloops/Thompson School District #73

I give permission for my child to participate in Ms. Plut's action research study with the stipulations and assurances stated above.

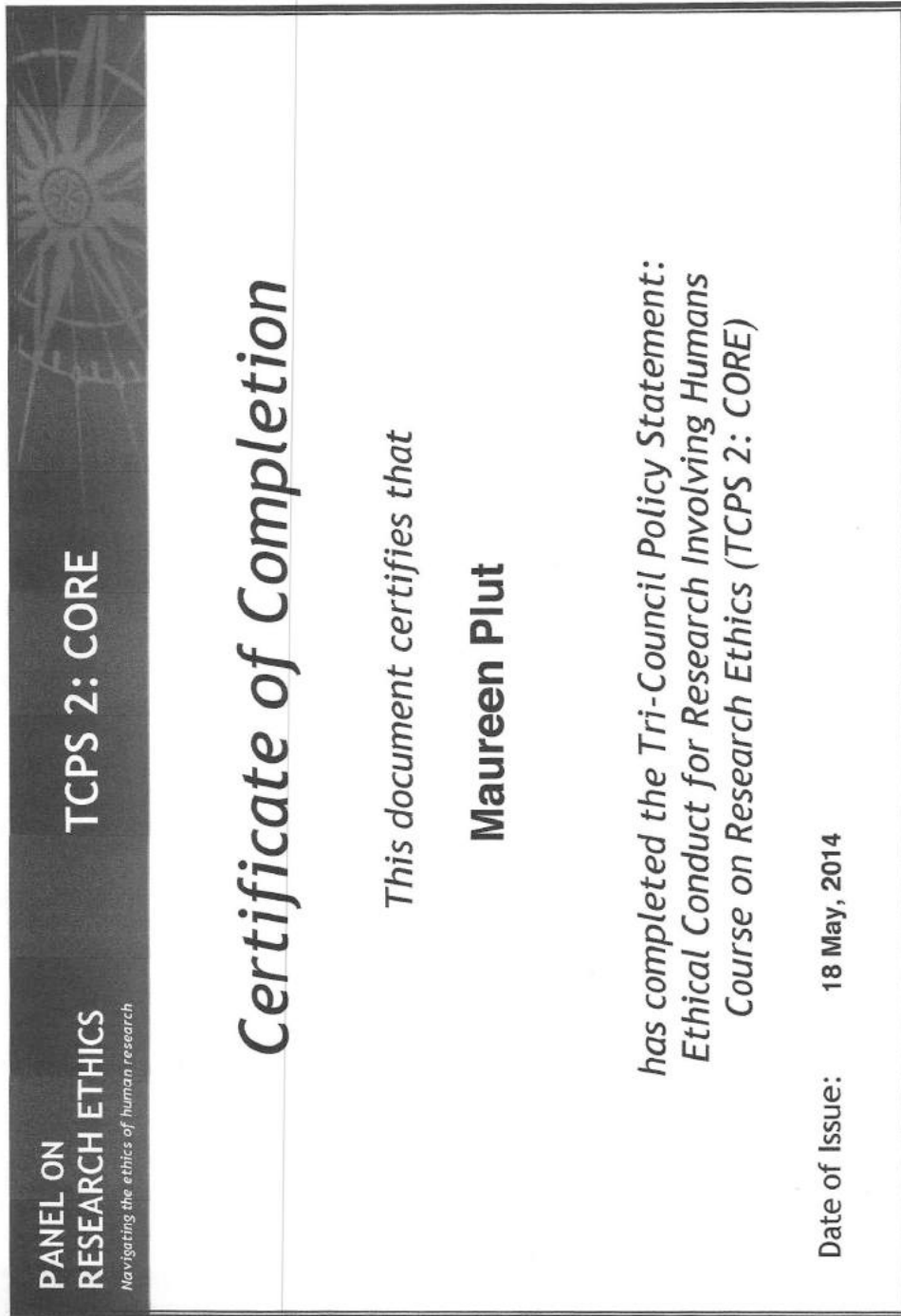
Parent's signature \_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix H: NIH Certificate**





**Appendix I: Tri-Council Certificate**



The certificate is enclosed in a rectangular border. The top-left corner features a dark grey header with a faint compass rose graphic. The header contains the text 'PANEL ON RESEARCH ETHICS' and 'TCPS 2: CORE' in white. Below the header, the main text is centered and reads: 'Certificate of Completion', 'This document certifies that', 'Maureen Plut', and 'has completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE)'. At the bottom right, it states 'Date of Issue: 18 May, 2014'.

**PANEL ON RESEARCH ETHICS**  
*Navigating the ethics of human research*

**TCPS 2: CORE**

***Certificate of Completion***

*This document certifies that*

**Maureen Plut**

*has completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement:  
Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans  
Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE)*

Date of Issue: 18 May, 2014

**Appendix J: Consent from Gonzaga University IRB**

Insert IRB application