**Lessons that Reach All Learners**

**EDUC 451 – 110**

**U.B.C.**

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**Introduction**

Have you heard the saying don’t judge a book by it’s cover? Well as I entered my practicum classroom on my first day my school advisor’s (SA) actions suggested just that. She gave me a list of the students’ names but purposely omitted giving me any individual details about the students, explaining that she wanted me to observe and come to my own conclusions about the students in this Grade 1 class. I appreciated her approach, as I did not want to be influenced by her opinions or biases before I had a chance to observe and get to know the students myself. By recess I was able to see which students were struggling and which students were resisting the classroom management strategies of this extremely experienced teacher. Over the next few weeks, my SA often mentioned that this class was really challenging her professionally and if I had any suggestions she was open to them. However, despite their poor behaviour she was proud to say that they were one of her brightest classes. Many of our conversations were of our concerns about the quiet, high achieving students and how the lessons were not able to reach them because the focus was being pulled towards the students who struggled or misbehaved.

These concerns led me to my inquiry question, “What can educators do to support the diverse needs of the learners in their classrooms?” This question is significant to me because I am concerned about ways I will be able to manage my practicum class when these outbursts occur and at the same time ensure that all the students are being taught and able to succeed at their level. I want to find positive ways to manage these situations as well as strategies to ensure that all students are getting the teaching and learning opportunities they deserve. This is also significant to other teachers as it is a common concern among many who feel that they are not able to reach each student with the attention they require. As Gale & Densmore state (2000), many teachers believe that students are entitled to equal servicing although it is often difficult to include all students [in their lessons due to students’ diverse learning needs].

In this paper I will examine research that focuses on the broad topics of balancing student needs, behaviour of teacher and students, and classroom environment in the hope of finding some suggestions, instructional strategies, and answers to my inquiry question. More specifically I will focus on social emotional learning (SEL), classroom management, and differentiated-instruction (DI). By considering these topics I hope to also address more specifically, how do educators address the students who struggle academically, and the students who need to be challenged academically? How does meeting or not meeting the needs of all learners impact the dynamics in the classroom (i.e. classroom management)? And what types of lessons or differentiated instruction can be incorporated to reach these students? Furthermore, how can teachers be proactive and provide strategies to support children with behavioural challenges? In this paper I will discuss my question through a summary of research findings, include my perspective and reflection on these findings, include the implications I foresee on my teaching practice and others, and conclude with further research suggestions.

**Background Research**

 In a 2012 winter publication, the B.C. Primary Teachers Association writes specifically about self-regulation. The article discusses how children today need strategies for dealing with the stress in their lives and how the Canadian Self-regulation Initiative (CSRI), using recent research and in collaboration with teachers, are able to create resources on how to help their students be able to better understand and recognize emotions and learn to self-regulate and control their reactions (BCAPT, 2012). While reading this I connected to my experience observing my practicum class and I wondered if student stress or their inability to self-regulate could be a cause for the types of behaviour I am seeing. For example, one student does not transition well and gets easily frustrated if a particular task is too challenging. Instead of calmly dealing with the problem or asking for help, he reacts aggressively and inappropriately disrupting the entire class. However, if he was taught appropriate skills on how to handle his emotions and knew how to deal proactively when feeling this way, his inappropriate behaviour would likely diminish.

Students today are dealing with unparalleled levels of stress that is affecting their mood, behaviour, and attention (BCPTA, 2012). According to Ableser (2008) children experience and respond to stress differently and are at risk for developing aggression, desensitization, and learning difficulties. Children with learning and behavioural difficulties experience a multitude of social and emotional difficulties, such as low self-esteem, poor self-concept, inadequate social skills, egocentricity, few friendships, and low empathy (Schonert-Reichl & Hymel, 1995). Classmates and teachers tend to not accept these students with special needs, which undeniably impact these students’ attitudes in the classroom (Schonert-Reichel et al., 1995). I have seen classmates question and comment on other students’ behaviour or about their removal from class. From my observations I have noticed that classmates tend to be wary of these students and often view them as different or as the “bad kid”. I have also noticed that these students who are segregated become embarrassed when they are separated, excluded, or singled-out from the rest of the class.

Therefore, I believe that by creating an emotionally safe, inclusive classroom environment is key to building better relationships among all the students. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) supports this claim, by suggesting that teachers need to teach conflict resolution, cooperative learning, respect for diversity, and violence prevention (Ableser, 2008). Schools also need to provide children with a balance in the curriculum, intellectual independence, formulations of problems, cultivation of sensibilities, affection for subject matter, critical thinking, and excellence in teaching in order for students to learn social skills, reach their potential, and be actively engaged in their knowledge acquisition (Eisner, 1983). By creating a school and classroom environment where student-directed learning and problem solving can take place, learning experiences, behaviours, and the needs of all students will be greatly enhanced.

**Supportive Strategies**

Through my inquiry research I realized that there are some key strategies that would assist teachers in being able to meet the diverse needs of their students. An understanding in each of these strategy areas will greatly benefit a teacher who is struggling to recognize various abilities and support the students in their class. These strategies include social emotional learning, classroom management, and differentiated instruction.

**Social Emotional Learning (SEL)**

Social Emotional Learning is a process of learning life skills such as emotions, relationships, and ways to manage situations effectively and fairly when with others or on one’s own (Schonert-Reichl & Hymel, 1995). Although academic learning is an important aspect of schools, SEL is another important avenue of learning that teaches children how to handle their emotions constructively. Such skills that can be taught are setting positive and realistic goals, recognizing emotions in oneself and others, and cooperating in groups.

Programs such as Providing Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS), Weissberg’s six-step framework for solving social problems, and Drew’s six-step set of “Win/win” guidelines are a good starting point in developing pro-social behaviour (Schonert-Reichl et al, 1995). Providing students and teachers with leadership opportunities to develop empathy and mindfulness, develop cultural awareness, incorporate parents more often, and make time to connect with students in and out of class are important steps teachers can take to promote social and emotional learning (McCready & Soloway, 2010).

Creating a positive student-teacher relationship is another important adaptive skill that relies on the teacher making connections and getting to know their students. These relationships are a key component of being able to teach all students as the teacher can learn so much about each individual student through these relationships. Teachers will also be able to understand on a much deeper level what their students’ needs are. McCready and Soloway (2010) define teacher mindfulness as being culturally aware and having an open frame of mind when interacting with students, stating that by employing mindfulness during a challenging classroom circumstance helps the teacher pause and perceive the class in the present moment. This skill will help the teacher be able to better identify the social and cultural contexts that are contributing to the situation and reflect on all contributing factors causing the student(s) to react in a particular way (McCready & Soloway, 2010). Through this technique the teacher will be able to manage certain situations more pro-actively and with better judgment.

MindUp is another program that focuses on self-regulatory strategies to improve behaviour and learning for children (The Hawn Foundation, 2011). The program provides cognitive and emotional tools so children can manage their emotions and behaviours in a productive and successful way. SEL guides the structure of this program as well as classroom pedagogy and principles of positive psychology (The Hawn Foundation, 2011). This program, similar to McCready and Soloway’s (2010) idea of mindfulness, teaches students how to think before they act and how to develop mindful attention and learning strategies. It is a program used by individual teachers in their classrooms and consists of fifteen lessons broken up into three developmentally appropriate age levels with four units (The Hawn Foundation, 2011). The age range is from pre-kindergarten up to Grade 8. The cognitive and emotional tools are taught by teaching students to be self-aware and aware of their environment by paying attention to their senses and feelings through listening, seeing, smelling, tasting and movement activities (The Hawn Foundation, 2011). Students begin by learning how the brain works, how to focus and understand what mindful attention is, and how to be self-aware. Then they move on to perspective taking and how their actions affect themselves and others (The Hawn Foundation, 2011). More specifically in a colleagues’ Grade 1 class, the teacher has been trained in the MindUp program to teach these cognitive and emotional tools through the use of the resources in the kit. A chime is used to help focus breathing and they get the students ready for learning. They do this three times a day with a specific block set aside each day to learn the MindUp principles.

Music is also another wonderful tool for social emotional development and behaviour modification in schools (Scripp, 2002). It has been shown that listening to music and engaging in music-making enhances student motivation, optimizes classroom management, improves self-efficacy, stimulates creative work, and produces effective coping strategies in students (Scripp, 2002).

**Classroom Management**

Classroom management is the way a teacher organizes and runs their classroom in order to promote student learning and growth in the best way they believe possible. The physical environment, classroom rules, and/or discipline can be the teacher’s main focus for classroom management. However there are many other frameworks that can guide a teacher’s management style such as physical activity breaks, silent periods, free exploration, class supplies versus individual supplies, and student collaboration that supports class ownership. I believe that the physical context of the room plays a vital role in the reactions and behaviours of some students in a class, which ultimately affects classroom management. It has been my experience that classrooms that are cluttered can be overwhelming. They are often text-rich but sometimes it is hard to focus and find the anchor charts within the rooms. Due to the over-stimulation of the classroom, some students may be reacting negatively to the environment. Perhaps integrating a more natural classroom tone that is less colourful and distracting, may allow some students to find calm within the class environment. The Reggio Emilia Approach for Early Primary is one such school system that uses the light, texture, and space of a room as well as student artwork and the natural environment (i.e. plants), to create a calming and engaging student environment that is focused on exploration and discovery (Reggio, 2006). Often changing the physical environment of the classroom and including student suggestions can drastically alter how effective and successful your classroom management strategies are.

 Teachers who accommodate students with learning difficulties understand the diverse needs of their students and know how to manage their time and resources well (Gale & Densmore, 2000). A particular teacher’s view that her classroom is organized to accommodate independent learners would see students who fail this form of independence as a struggling student (Gale & Densmore, 2000). However, given a different pedagogical viewpoint where more collective group work was incorporated, this student may not be seen as a problem (Gale & Densmore, 2000). Therefore, the teacher’s beliefs, biases, and cultural values play a critical role in how students are viewed and dealt with in certain circumstances. A great piece of advice is to “get rid of the labels and see the child as a child” (Adams, 2006). In order to understand social differentiation in educational settings, we must understand how teachers classify student behaviours (Barakett & Cleghorn, 2008). For example, the symbolic interaction model links social structures and status to patterns of interaction (Barakett & Cleghorn, 2008). Teacher-student interactions should be devoid of biases and hierarchy and rather be about negotiation, bargaining, exchange, and discussion of feelings. Another wonderful strategy from a U.B.C. professor is to spend two minutes for ten consecutive days with a student talking about general, non-school related topics. This, along with the interaction attributes mentioned above, are often enough to form the beginning of a successful teacher-student relationship.

Inclusion of students with behavioural challenges in the mainstream classroom works best with the right support structures. These include a “school-wide emphasis on positive discipline, proper training, adequate funding, support in the classroom, and strong communication” (Adams, 2006). Most importantly, shaping the behavior of all students rather than only disciplining misdeeds can set the groundwork for successful inclusion (Adams, 2006). Having all students in the class understand and respect diversity, display empathy, and learn to self-regulate, will allow for a positive classroom environment to surface. Through implementing a positive behavior model that emphasizes routines, clear expectations, and proper supervision, most students can be successful (Adams, 2006). Communication with the previous year's teachers and a strong special education team can also significantly help the teacher manage students' varying needs in the class such as behavior disorders, learning disabilities, and physical impairments (Adams, 2006).

In a discussion with a faculty advisor about ways to manage disruptions, her suggestions were similar to Adams’. She believes that for primary students it is important to keep the pace fairly rapid and have a short time span for each activity, as well as to provide a balance of learning time and play or free exploration time. She also suggested that proximity could work well for the more disruptive and wiggly students, placing them right next to you as you teach. Also using a quiet hand signal for children who call out, such as 1-2-3 Magic, can help without disrupting the rest of the class. Another wonderful strategy that a teacher from Nebraska uses for students who do not stay on task well, is she will give them five tickets at the beginning of the day and when they are not on task, she asks for a ticket (Adams, 2006). By the end of the day, if the child has no tickets left there is some sort of consequence. Being proactive with discipline policies and consistent with repercussions is something students will learn to respect.

Some suggestions for creating a safe and successful environment for all students are as follows:

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| **Teacher Strategy** | **Description** |
| 1. Modeling expectations | - display behaviours and appropriate  actions that you expect from your students |
| 2. Set clear policies | - consistent discipline and promote good  behaviour |
| 3. Adopt the right attitude | - get rid of stereotypes |
| 4. Have information at hand | - communicate with previous educator |
| 5. Keep everyone informed | - decisions are made with everyone  involved with child |
| 6. Have a plan and review it | - monthly progress reports |
| 7. Ask for help | - get support personnel involved |
| 8. Seek training | - learn how to control body posture, choice of words, and how to de-escalate a  potentially volatile situation |
| 9. Work in partnership with parents | - parents will have a wealth of strategies to share with you |

(taken and adapted from Adams, 2006).

**Differentiated Instruction**

Lastly, an educator needs to carefully consider how they plan and design their lessons to meet all students’ needs. When tasks are too easy, students may become disengaged which could result in off-task and challenging behavior. Similarly, if an assignment is too difficult, frustration can set in for learners, ultimately causing them to turn away from the task. One potential way to mitigate this is through differentiated instruction. Differentiated instruction (DI) is based on Vygotsky’s model of the zone of proximal development. The zone of proximal development is the zone between which a learner can do a task without help and the zone where the learner needs help. The differentiated instruction model states that teachers need to create instructional lessons that are individualized to the developmental level of their students (Tomlinson & Allan, 2000). DI is specialized instruction that incorporates balancing student needs where planning and assessment for individual learning is taken into account. DI is a valuable instructional method that is designed for the learning preferences, interests, and readiness of individual learners (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).

Differentiated Instruction focuses on how we teach, where we teach, and whom we teach and the various patterns of instruction that can serve multiple needs (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). This framework allows students to acquire content in multiple ways because the teacher modifies the lessons to enhance student learning and success by understanding student abilities, interests, learning preferences, and providing helpful strategies when needed (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). A DI lesson plan typically has whole class, small group, and individual instructional lessons. It teaches to the high end of student ability in order to extend learning but also keeps in mind student readiness. DI’s lesson plan characteristics are proactive, qualitative, student centered, dynamic, planned from assessment, diverse, open, and flexible whereas a ‘typical’ lesson plan tends to lack these characteristics (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). The Differentiated Instruction Scrapbook is a wonderful resource that provides teachers with lesson plan templates, checklists, surveys, and strategy cards that I highly recommend one looks at if trying to develop leveled instruction (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).

I have witnessed what I thought was Differentiated Instruction in my practicum class where a group of four students receive additional language support (LST) and two students receive behavioural management sessions with a school social worker. However, after delving deeper into the topic I have come to realize that DI is much more than specialized programs outside the classroom. What I do want to point out is that some of these students are the youngest in the class, some are dealing with family stressors and split-parent homes, and others are dealing with additional languages at home. These points also bring into consideration the importance of understanding child developmental stages in cognitive processes and social experiences (Schonert-Reichl et al., 1995). If you understand the developmental level students are at, your teaching instruction can be adapted to suit their needs. Adaptations, modifications, and extensions are items that teachers have to consider in their planning process for the diverse student levels in their class.

If your school does not have the funding or specialized programs for these struggling students, teachers can do the following on their own to include differentiated instructional lessons for all students. Teachers can use pre-assessment and ongoing assessment to guide their instructional decisions. The design and planning of differentiated instruction should identify clear learning goals and use acceptable and fair methods of assessment for determining student learning. Teachers should regard learning differences as important and valuable in their profession, and respond actively to learner needs by providing adaptations in their instruction (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006). Lastly, teachers should be flexible with their classroom routines and planning using space, time, materials, and groupings that encourage students to challenge themselves but to also always be available to scaffold and support their students (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006).

Classroom teachers with students who have emotional/behavioural disorders (EBD) might also want to focus on academic performance and share the results with their students (Tyler-Wood, Cereijo, & Pemberton, 2004). It has been proven that emphasis on academic growth can support appropriate behaviour, as students are less likely to engage in inappropriate personal and social behaviours when academic achievement is occurring (Tyler-Wood et al., 2004). This formative evaluation can also help guide the teachers’ instructional planning so that their lessons are not above or below the students’ instructional levels. Environmental changes were also found to minimize problem behaviours (Tyler-Wood et al., 2004).

Other key features of differentiated instruction include flexible learning groups, choice, respectful tasks, and shared responsibility for learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Overall DI has shown to provide students with ways to process, construct, and make sense of ideas so that success can be reached for everyone in the class despite the differences in ability. Teachers provide an individualized lesson that remains complex, engaging, and organized to enhance student motivation and to allow them to take control of their learning (Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006).

**Conclusion**

Given my new understandings from the research, I now understand why these are all ‘hot topics’ in current educational pedagogy. I believe teachers need to become knowledgeable in SEL, classroom management strategies, and DI in order to better understand the students they teach. These three components are related when meeting the diverse needs of learners because they focus on the whole picture of the classroom and on the what, where, and how learning takes place. They focus on the physical environment and class rules, the students’ emotional awareness and ability to self-regulate, and the teacher’s ability to adjust instructional strategies to meet the needs of their students.

The incorporation of SEL programs such as MindUp, PATHS, and the inclusion of background music in the classroom can be easily incorporated into any curriculum subject and will result in positive behaviours and emotional self-regulation. Classroom management strategies such as those described by Adams and Reggio can significantly help to improve teachers’ abilities to manage disruptions, discipline strategies, and classroom layout. I believe that by incorporating positive discipline, communication, an inclusive and safe environment, consistent expectations and rules, and using the resources available to you, any teacher will find success in managing their classroom and the diverse students within it. Understanding the developmental levels of your students and their zone of proximal development can greatly facilitate your lesson planning and differentiated instructional strategies.

My perspective in how these findings will fit into my teaching practice are to make lessons that reach all learners through activities that are adapted, modified, and provide extensions to the different student levels as well as to manage behavioural issues in a constructive and developmentally appropriate way with a clear focus on social emotional learning and self-regulatory strategies. I agree with Ableser (2008) who believes that in order to teach these skills as well as the required curriculum, teachers should incorporate all subject areas in ways that can address these issues in authentic activities that are meaningful, purposeful, and relevant so the students can learn to express themselves, their feelings, and their knowledge constructively in a safe environment. My advice to educators who worry about being able to support the diverse needs of all their students is to remember to keep learning and teaching fun, create a relationship with your students in order to better understand their needs, be flexible in planning, and use classroom management strategies that can also act as teachable moments for all students in the class.

 Some suggestions for future research questions that can be explored are how might technology help with classroom management and SEL strategies? How can teachers ensure that the whole class is on-task when the teacher is working one-on-one or in small groups with some students? At what age should free play and exploration be diminished, or should it remain a vital part of the curriculum throughout students’ schooling careers? I hope I will be able to look into these questions more deeply during my upcoming long-term practicum as well as continue my inquiry about diverse learners throughout my teaching career.

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