



2015-2016 NOII Case Study

School: McGirr Elementary

District: #68 Nanaimo Ladysmith

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Our focus for this year: Student skills/strategies to develop emotional resilience and self-regulation (of thoughts, actions, and words) through metacognition of emotions and thought processes. Assessment for learning will guide the process.

Inquiry Question: Are children able to accurately assess their emotional state and self-regulate by choosing an appropriate strategy to move themselves towards an engaged state of learning?

Scanning: A variety of background information was used in formulating the focus of this study. Background documentation (e.g. previous report cards, SIPs, and IEPs), staff and parent conversations, classroom observations and School Base Team recommendations for specific students. Several students in the class were anxious while others periodically displayed disruptive behaviour. Various self-regulation tools including fidgets, swing desks, wiggle cushions, and alternate seating were already part of the class routines. For this reason, the team felt that students exhibiting anxiety and disruptive behaviour may benefit from a deeper understanding of the connections between their feelings, thoughts and actions. Learning a variety of calming strategies was an important aspect of this unit.

The following four key questions were initially proposed as part of the scanning process. Given the short time frame, only the first three were addressed this year.

1. How does learning to recognize your feelings help you as a learner in our class community?
2. When you are feeling upset, anxious, or unfocused can you name two adults in this school who you feel comfortable talking to?
3. What would you like to tell others about your understanding and awareness of your feelings?
4. What would help you to better learn how to identify and control your feelings?

The written pre-assessment (question 3) revealed that most students were able to identify emotions associated with the four situations, but were unable to identify body clues or strategies for regulating their emotions.

OECD Seven Principles of Learning: These principles were incorporated throughout our unit as the students were central to the process. Numerous activities and lessons required the students to stretch their thinking beyond their comfort zone. This was made possible by a strong sense of community in which students were celebrated for their uniqueness and felt safe within the class setting to express their thoughts.

Aboriginal Understandings: Three Guiding Ideas (NLPS) – Our class meetings were conducted in a circle in order that all members were seen as equal. A talking stick/feather was used in order that the speaker was heard by all. Through AB partnership and small group activity students were presented with the opportunities to express themselves and reflect over their accomplishments and understandings.

Focus: “Self-regulation is the cornerstone skill for all development. It refers to both the conscious and unconscious processes that allow us to regulate our thoughts, feelings and actions towards a goal.”¹² Emotional self-regulation is a multi-faceted life long journey. Recognizing emotions and body clues, as well as strategies to moderate intense emotions, at school and elsewhere are important skills for children to learn so they can take an active role in their learning and to maintain healthy relationships. This focus matches the BC Ministry of Education Physical and Health Education big idea and curricular competency related to managing emotions and describing factors that influence mental well-being.

As mentioned above, most students were able to identify emotions related to specific situations, but were not able to reliably identify body clues or self-regulation strategies. This assessment indicated that students came with similar background knowledge. For this reason, the Team decided to undertake class, rather than small group, instruction. This approach would further develop common language and understanding within the community of learners.

The broad learning intentions follow.

Each student will

- learn the brain’s role in the emotion-thinking-action connection
- celebrate and share their personal uniqueness and the activities that bring them happiness
- grow in his/her knowledge and understanding of his/her emotional state(s) by recognizing body clues, triggers and context
- practice a variety of calming strategies and choose a few strategies to include in his/her personal toolbox, and
- identify five support people.

Hunch: Students learn about emotions during the early primary grades. The preliminary assessment suggests that by grades 2 and 3 there is a need for students to go deeper in their understanding of their own emotions (e.g., triggers, self-talk) and to explore a variety of personalized strategies to calm intense emotions. In a safe environment, students will be able to support each other using a common language to actively refocus on attending academic learning and fostering healthy relationships.

Currently, neither Seaview nor McGirr Elementary has a school-wide program or common language focusing on emotional self-regulation. The team wondered whether deeper conversations related to emotional self-regulation occur more on a one-on-one basis in response to unexpected behaviour. Common language and reinforcement of emotional self-regulation concepts across the grades will increase student awareness, knowledge, and confidence to apply personal strategies.

New professional learning:

- The team reviewed three social-emotional-learning (SEL) programs that are recommended in SD68. While each program has a specific emphasis, they all focus on

aspects related to metacognition of feelings, thoughts and behaviours: MindUp, FRIENDS (K/1, 4/5), and ZONES of Regulation. The absence of a FRIENDS program for grades 2/3 made the process more challenging. As there is insufficient time to implement more than one program during a school year, the team reviewed and selected/adapted specific key concepts from each resource.

- The team met periodically to discuss different approaches in the two grades (2 and 3), develop similar assessments, and to share information.
- The team developed a UNIT Plan based on this year's experiences.
- Discussions occurred with SSTs and Counsellors and this led to various additional resources being incorporated into the UNIT plan.
- Various online resources were explored.

Taking action: The following briefly outlines the main components of the unit and student/teacher learning. The project started in January and continued to early June. Step 6 was not undertaken due to time constraints, but is considered an important part of the unit. Considerable time was spent frontloading students with broad concepts and vocabulary.

The purpose of this primary grade unit was to support students as they grow in their emotional self-awareness and develop skills that influence their mental well-being. This year long unit is divided in six parts.

1. You are unique and special – Students share their interests and accomplishments and recognize their positive character traits. Students notice similarities and differences as one aspect of developing a community of learners. (Main resource: picture books)

In Grade 3, students created a collage to visually represent accomplishments, interests, and character traits. This visual was used throughout the project as a reminder of things that make them happy. It also was the cover to their feelings booklet. In Grade 2, students completed an About Me Unit early in the year which included a jigsaw piece showcasing what made each student unique and special, a sparkling star that shares favourite activity they do well, and a promise to the classroom community to feel safe to be themselves and always try their best.

2. My amazing brain – Students learn many facts about the brain, as well as the functions of the prefrontal cortex, hippocampus and amygdala in regulating emotions. Students learn what a calm body looks and feels like. The social/emotional/health benefits are explored. Students learn and practice how to be mindful and are introduced to the practice of *MindUp* as a calming strategy. (Main resource: MindUp)

Incorporating this topic into the unit allowed students (i). to learn about something they were excited about and (ii). to understand the role of their brain in how they are feeling. Subsequent lessons developed a deeper understanding of mindfulness through experiential lessons on hearing, seeing, smelling and tasting. The above concepts and vocabulary, new to most students, were referred to throughout the unit. Lastly, students were also introduced to the core practice of MindUp. The class practiced this strategy twice daily throughout the unit. Interestingly, students would ask to do “MindUp” if it was felt the class needed to refocus.

3. Recognizing my emotions – Students practice recognizing facial features and body clues associated with a broad range of emotions. Students then personalize the emotion by documenting a situation that triggered the emotion, associated body clues, and emotional self-regulation strategies they might try in a similar situation in the future. (Resources: FRIENDS, ZONES of Regulation)

A number of lessons were used to develop vocabulary and awareness around emotions. Students acted out emotions, worked in partners to draw a character with facial and body clues associated with a given emotion. Students reported out and classmates added to the list of body clues that became the anchor chart. In order to tie into Zones of Regulation, the team decided to focus student reflection on the following emotions: 1. Happy, 2. Sad, 3. Worry, and 4. Angry/Yelling. Picture books were used as the springboard for students to personalize their reflection of each of these emotions by recalling a situation that triggered the emotion, and then reflect on related body clues, and two strategies that they may use to calm themselves. Anger and sadness were difficult emotions for student reflection. A few students said they did not feel angry or sad and needed support to reflect on these feelings in a safe way. Several discussions occurred to clarify the difference between strategies that revved a person up when they were angry (e.g., hitting and kicking) versus those that are calming.

4. Other calming strategies – Students discuss a variety of calming strategies.

Strategies included MindUp breathing, muscle relaxation, 5-finger breathing, deep breathing, visualize a calm place, talk to someone, strategies at home e.g., hugging a pet or stuffy, going for a walk in nature, doing something enjoyable, reading. Most students were able to identify at least one person at the school who they felt comfortable talking about situations causing intense emotions. Those students who were unable to identify support people were supported as peers shared ideas. This information was included in their feeling booklet. (Resources: MindUp, FRIENDS)

5. Thinking of emotions within the framework of the four Zones – Students classify different expressions representing a broad range of emotions under the four Zone colours. Using four coloured cards on a ring, or cars on a four coloured pocket chart, students self-assessed their feelings in the morning. This activity provided the framework for students to be mindful of their emotions and be metacognitive about strategies to move them into the focused learning zone. After considerable practice, students reflect on this practice and develop a “toolbox” of self-regulating strategies they can use in each zone.

Students were able to classify the expressions under one of the four Zone colours and were willing to self-assess their emotions in the morning. This was only recently introduced so additional comments cannot be made. (Resource: Zones of Regulation)

6. Ongoing learning to self-regulate and make smart choices – 1. connect self-talk to actions (thoughts-feelings-actions; green/red thoughts), 2. assess problems as big or little, 3. choose solutions, make a plan, and follow through.

There was insufficient time to begin this section.

Checking: Assessment of learning was ongoing through daily work and participation in group work and class discussions. These observations and the comparison of the pre and post assessment sheet demonstrated student growth in ability to correctly identifying (i). emotions related to situations, (ii). at least two body clues and (iii). at least one appropriate strategy for self-regulating the specific emotion. As the unit progressed students continued to demonstrate their growing understanding of concepts through active use of vocabulary during discussions and written reflections.

A comparison of the pre/post written assessments demonstrated growth in awareness of the emotional clues and personalized self-regulation strategies. Further, students were able to

reflect on what it means to be mindful and how learning about self-regulation strategies supported their learning and relationships. Perhaps most surprising was that students would frequently suggest that the class stop and do GoNoodle/MindUp to refocus the class.

Reflections: Throughout this unit, both students and teachers grew in their understanding of emotional cues and confidence using self-regulating strategies. Talking and writing about personal emotions, beyond happy, is a challenging endeavour for anyone. Our students were so brave in their efforts and sharing. When asked to make personal connections to feelings of anger and sadness, they took on the challenge. Students connected to those situations and reflected on their body clues and reactions. They then thought about calming strategies they could try in the future. (Sensitivity to individual situations is critical to ensure all students feel cared for and safe). Our students were also brave when they were asked to practice calming strategies. At first it felt awkward, but they persevered each time until there was a level of comfort with at least one strategy. On several occasions students' self-regulation thinking and learning were revealed more in their actions than in any written assessment. Students reminded the teacher when GoNoodle/MindUp was not on the daily schedule. Students asked for MindUp when the class was struggling to be focused. Individual students adapted the MindUp breathing sequence to better meet their needs by using 5-finger breathing.

Children's social emotional development is an important consideration in when and how topics are introduced. Differences between Grade 2 and 3: (i). Students in grade 2 continue to require reminders and recommendations to self-regulate, although they do request GoNoodle daily now and are beginning to ask for MindUp. (ii). Students in grade 2 struggled to express body clues as they did not have the vocabulary words. They were able to use a pre-existing anchor chart (created by grade 3) to identify the body clues they experienced when expressing different emotions.

A school wide program allows for common language to be used across all school settings. It also provides opportunity for students to go deeper in their understanding as they move through each grade. The team believes any school wide program must include the full range of emotions including those of sad and bored, as these are not uncommon in the school setting.

After reflecting over the unit at the conclusion of this first year, the team is committed to using this unit next year. There are many connections that can be made to other curricular areas. One slight change is to focus on a different feeling each month. Our plan is to connect the month's feeling with thoughts and actions that develop healthy relationships.