Shifting the Focus: Responding to Students' Social and Emotional Well-Being through Holistic Pedagogy

By

Sania Abdolah-Salimi

A research paper submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Teaching
Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto

@ Copyright by Sania Abdolah-Salimi, April 2015
# Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................. v

Abstract .................................................................................................................................. vi

Key Words ................................................................................................................................. vi

Chapter 1 ................................................................................................................................. 1

1.1 Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 1

1.2 Research Background ......................................................................................................... 2

1.3 Research Purpose and Questions ....................................................................................... 4

1.4 Background of the Researcher ........................................................................................... 5

1.5 Overview ............................................................................................................................. 6

Chapter 2 .................................................................................................................................. 8

2.0 Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 8

2.1 Children’s Mental Health and Well-Being ......................................................................... 8

2.2 Impediments to Emotional Well-Being in Schools ............................................................. 10

2.3 The Value of Holistic Education ......................................................................................... 12

2.4 Mind-Body Relationship .................................................................................................... 16

2.5 Social and Emotional Skills ............................................................................................... 17

2.6 Conclusion ........................................................................................................................ 20
# Table of Contents

Chapter 3................................................................................................................................. 22  
3.1 Procedure .............................................................................................................................. 22  
3.2 Instruments of Data Collection ............................................................................................ 23  
3.3 Participants ............................................................................................................................. 24  
3.4 Ethical Review Procedures ................................................................................................. 26  
3.5 Strengths and Limitations .................................................................................................... 26  

Chapter 4........................................................................................................................................ 28  
4.0 Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 28  
4.1 Teachers’ conceptualization of holistic education prioritized making connections and building relationships ................................................................................................................................. 29  
4.1.1 Making Connections to Self, Others, and the Earth ......................................................... 29  
4.1.2 Making Connections to Parents, Colleagues, and Community ......................................... 31  
4.2 Teachers’ conceptualization of holistic education prioritized experiential and kinesthetic learning ............................................................................................................................................................................. 32  
4.3 Teachers’ conceptualization of holistic education prioritized attitudes and skills for global and environmental citizenship ................................................................................................................................. 33  
4.4 Teachers enacted inquiry-based and problem-posing practices that engaged real-world phenomenon ............................................................................................................................................................................. 34  
4.5 Teachers integrated the arts into their teaching .................................................................... 37
4.6 Teachers looked for visual cues as indicators of students’ mental health and well-being, and they placed significant emphasis on cues demonstrating engagement and [un]happiness, specifically ........................................................................................................................................ 38

4.7 Factors that supported these teachers’ practices include their school community, colleagues, and access to resources and professional development. ................................. 41

4.8 Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................................................ 42

Chapter 5 .................................................................................................................................................................................. 43

5.0 Introduction ........................................................................................................................................................................ 43

5.1 Discussion ........................................................................................................................................................................... 43

5.2 Recommendation for policy and practice .......................................................................................................................... 47

5.3 Implications for me as a beginning teacher and educator ................................................................................................. 48

5.4 Areas for future research ......................................................................................................................................................... 49

5.5 Conclusion ........................................................................................................................................................................... 50

References .................................................................................................................................................................................. 51

Appendices .................................................................................................................................................................................. 57

Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview ........................................................................................................................ 57

Appendix B: Interview Questions ............................................................................................................................................... 59
Acknowledgements

I would like to take the time to acknowledge and thank several important people whose love and support have made this research journey possible.

First and foremost, I would like to give thanks to my family.

To my mother, Sholeh, for her unconditional love and unlimited amount of support throughout my entire education. Mom, you have always been, and continue to be, the rock that I lean on each and every day.

To my dad, Khosrow, for all of his love, for believing in me over the years, and for being my biggest source of inspiration to achieve greatness.

My fiancé, Basilios, for becoming such a big part of my life not only as my partner, but my best friend. Basilios, you have supported me through one of the most important times of my life. Thank you for loving me and believing in me every step of the way.

To my brother, Sam, for all his love and support.

Without all of you, I wouldn’t be where I am today. I dedicate this paper to you all.

I would like also like to thank my research supervisor, Dr. Angela MacDonald, for dedicating her time to support me with this paper, and in that process, guiding me in the right direction.

Last, but not least, I would like to send a special thanks to Melissa, for all of her time, support, and patience in editing this paper.
Abstract

This study explores how teachers enact holistic pedagogy as a means of responding to the emotional well being of their students in their everyday teaching practice. Through semi-structured interviews with two teachers, this qualitative research study uses the paradigms of holistic education to explore everyday classroom practices. Scholarly analyses from multiple perspectives related to this area of research are also presented. My findings from these interviews suggest that teachers working within the framework of holistic pedagogy are responsive to students’ emotional well being by making deep, meaningful connections to nature, community, and earth, as well as through spiritual, kinesthetic, experiential, problem-posing, and art-based teachings. These findings elucidate exemplary practices that can inform teacher education and development in the current context of educational policies dedicated to supporting students’ mental health.

Key Words
Emotional well-being, social and emotional skills, holistic pedagogy, Transformational learning, building relationships, making connections, mental health
Chapter 1

1.1 Introduction

In January 2014, Canada’s largest school board, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB), announced it would soon be launching its new mental health strategy. This strategy will involve providing training for all TDSB teaching staff and will focus on issues relating to student mental health. Although the school board has not yet released specific details outlining professional development in this area, the announcement is an indicator of their support and commitment to responding to students’ mental health needs.

The TDSB’s new strategic plan, titled the Children and Youth Mental Health and Well-Being 2013-2017, was motivated by their updated statistics. These statistics indicate that one in five children, roughly 40,000 students in the TDSB alone, will experience “mental well-being issues,” such as anxiety and depression (CBC News, 2014). The statistics also show that these issues impact academic achievement, as 97% of the respondents from the collected data reported that students’ emotional well-being is very important to their academic achievement (TDSB, 2013b).

Over the years, there have been a number of studies in the educational psychology field and other relevant disciplines that illustrate similar findings in regards to the relationship between students’ mental well-being and their academic achievement (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Garner, 2010; McLaughlin, 2008; Shanker, 2010; Zimmerman, 2002). Moreover, the TDSB Student Census data illustrated in the Children and Youth Mental Health and Well-Being Strategy corresponds directly with these studies, as it further validates the need for immediate
help and support in the area of mental health and well-being. The data touches upon issues such as students experiencing anxiety, stress, and feeling down, and correlates emotional well-being with academic achievement. Quite noteworthy is that this data includes the viewpoint of teachers, which largely affirms that academic success is vitally dependent on students’ emotional well-being (TDSB, 2013b). This data has prompted the TDSB to acknowledge the direct links between students’ social, emotional, and psychological well-being and their academic achievement, and has also been the catalyst in spearheading this new strategy.

1.2 Research Background

Studies show that students’ academic achievement is related to their emotional well-being as well as their understanding of their emotions (Estrada, Young, & Isen, 1994; Isen & Shalker, 1982; Eysenck, Derakshan, Santos, & Calvo, 2007), and in turn education systems are acknowledging the urgent need to focus more attention on teaching and learning social and emotional skills (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Garner, 2010; McLaughlin, 2008; Shanker, 2010; Zimmerman, 2002). In this context, it is crucial that teachers be prepared to respond to students’ emotional needs.

It is my understanding that, in the existing literature in this area, researchers tend to have different definitions in mind when referring to emotional needs and social and emotional skills. At times, these definitions focus on controlling disruptive and unwanted behaviour (i.e., behaviours that fail to conform to societal ideals), while at other times, they focus on developing the ability to understand people’s behaviour in different environments (Garner, 2010; Cole, Martin, & Dennis, 2004; Eisenberg & Spinrad, 2004). With regards to my research
study, I will use “social skills” and “emotional skills” interchangeably, to refer to someone’s ability “to make meaning” of their own emotions and feelings in different contexts. These skills contribute to social or emotional “wellness” or “well-being,” which I also use interchangeably. This meaning-making process is distinct from the act of controlling behaviour, as it is a means to acknowledge and understand rather than limit one’s own reactions and feelings towards different stimuli and life situations (Estrada, Young, & Isen, 1994; Shanker, 2010). This process can help to develop skills to allow students to become active participants in personally understanding their own feelings and emotions, ultimately enhancing their mental well-being and possibly influencing their academic success (Garner, 2010).

The previous TDSB policy (called “Caring in Safe Schools,” in place prior to this new initiative) claimed that individual needs and qualities must be included in lessons and programming: “The Board is committed to fostering positive school climates through purposeful, thoughtful and inclusive practices that support healthy student, staff and school community relationships. This pertains to all aspects of policy, programming, professional learning, resources, supports, reporting and data collection and community partnerships” (TDSB, 2013a; p. 2). In contrast to the new initiative, this stated policy comes across as quite vague. The Board’s mental health strategy 2013-2017, however, is more specific in articulating its intention to initiate a more holistic approach to education. The Children and Youth Mental Health and Well-Being Strategy contains four components crucial to holistic teaching: high-quality services and programs, a caring school culture and healthy physical environment, supportive social environments and parenting, and community partnerships.
Holistic education is a physiological, social, and emotional framework for teaching and learning that is responsive to the needs of the whole child (Miller, 2007). Research to date has found a positive relationship between holistic education (i.e., learner-centred approaches that are responsive to students’ physical, mental, emotional, and social needs) and a higher achievement in learning (Brush, 1997; Christenson, Rounds, & Gorney, 1992; Kush & Watkins, 1996). More specifically, studies have found that teaching through a holistic education framework means focusing on the specifics of each learner’s interests, accounting for students’ social identities and needs, and integrating cooperative learning strategies to enhance the academic achievement of students while being responsive to students’ diverse needs and interests (Brush, 1997; Christenson, Rounds, & Gorney, 1992; Kush & Watkins, 1996).

The philosophy of holistic education is reflected in the Children and Youth Mental Health and Well-Being Strategy. While this commitment is obvious at the policy level, specific instructional strategies for integrating it are less evident.

1.3 Research Purpose and Questions

Reviewing previous relevant qualitative research on the range of instructional strategies responsive to students’ emotions may assist in putting the Children and Youth Mental Health and Well-Being Strategy into practice in the education system. In view of this, the purpose of my research was to learn how a small sample of teachers enact instructional strategies to respond to students’ emotional skills as a holistic pedagogy into their classroom teaching in Ontario. I was also interested in learning what outcomes these teachers observed from students in terms of their emotional and social well-being. Ultimately, the central question driving this research is the following: How are a small group of elementary school teachers...
instructionally responding to students’ emotional well-being through holistic teaching practices?

I carried out this research through a cross-disciplinary lens, by approaching this research question through political, historical, psychological, and educational perspectives. I believe a multiple-disciplinary approach to the topic has enhanced my knowledge in the area, since viewing the issue from multiple viewpoints has added depth and complexity to my understanding of it. This will help me to achieve the ultimate goal of this study: to inform the process of integrating policy into practice when it comes to the implementation of the Mental Health and Well-Being Strategy in Ontario.

I have employed a multi-method approach, including semi-structured interviews. This multi-method, qualitative-inquiry research design was aimed at answering the following sub-questions:

1) What does emotional wellness mean to participating teachers?
2) What indicators of emotional wellness and/or distress do these teachers look for and see in their classroom teaching?
3) What are teachers’ perceptions of how students respond to these instructional practices?
4) What range of factors and resources support and/or challenge teachers in this work?

1.4 Background of the Researcher

As someone who has had the benefit of being emotionally and psychologically well throughout life, and who has been educated in an environment that was supportive of
emotional and psychological well-being, I believe this topic to be crucial for the short- and long-term social and emotional wellness of students. Although I am privileged to have been emotionally and psychologically well growing up, I have witnessed first-hand the effects of the lack of such emotional and psychological wellness. My brother is the exemplar of a true genius, cognitively and intellectually. However, growing up, he significantly lacked the emotional and social skills required to be entirely successful in life. Although he was gifted in a wide range of subjects, he lacked the emotional wellness to be able to socialize effectively with his peers and reach his full potential. My own experiences growing up, along with those of my brother, led me to develop a strong interest in this area.

These experiences, along with my love for teaching and my background in psychology, make me particularly well-suited to research this issue. I intend to use my strong interest in this area as a means of acquiring more knowledge to better support my future students’ emotional skills, and thus their emotional well-being, through appropriate practices. Furthermore, I hope that the findings from this small study can inform and support Ontario teachers’ instructional practices to better align with their philosophical commitments to holistic education. Most importantly, I hope that these findings can contribute to supporting teachers in their pedagogical efforts at being responsive to students’ emotional well-being as they navigate through complex social and family lives.

1.5 Overview

In chapter 2, I review the relevant literature pertaining to psychology, education, holistic education, and mental health. In chapter 3, I elaborate on the research design. In chapter 4, I
report my research findings. Finally, in chapter 5, I analyse and discuss my research findings and their relations to the Ontario policy curriculum and previous literature in the area. It is my hope that this research will better both my own practices as a beginning teacher and the practices of other educators with future students, as it will allow for a deeper understanding of such a crucial area.
Chapter 2

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter I review research in the areas of children’s mental health and well-being, holistic pedagogy, the relationship between mind and body and the different studies in relation to developing social and emotional skills necessarily to success in life. More specifically I look closely at the new data by TDSB in regards to students’ emotional well-being and academic performance. Next, I explain why holistic approach to education is beneficial to students’ mental well-being.

2.1 Children’s Mental Health and Well-Being

The new TDSB initiative regarding students’ mental health and well-being uncovers valuable data that is compelling and thought-provoking. In particular, this data shows that a significant portion of students (97%) indicated that mental well-being is very important to their academic achievements. This clearly highlights the need for teachers to focus on students’ emotional well-being, and the importance of providing teachers with the necessary training to recognize, identify, and deal with signs and symptoms of mental health issues.

For example, the data on grade 9–12 students reveals that 38% are “under a lot of stress” often or all the time, 34% are “nervous/anxious” often or all the time, and 17% are “down” often or all the time (TDSB, 2013b). These figures are both shocking and disappointing, as they reveal a side to students about which educators have been largely ignorant. The
familiarity of concepts such as stress, nervousness, and anxiety amongst students of this age group is unacceptable.

Moreover, the data illustrates that students with “low” emotional well-being are much less likely to enjoy school (up to 44%), and generally have fewer close friends (up to 63%). In fact, up to 69% are less likely to get along well with other students, and up to 55% are less likely to feel accepted by other students (TDSB, 2013b). Other compelling data showed that while 24% of students who identified as heterosexual are at a “low” level of emotional well-being, this figure is almost double (41%) for self-identified LGBTQ students. The data shows that the respondents indicate anxiety (44%) was one of their primary concerns (TDSB, 2013b). Also troubling is that only a small percentage of students (29%) feel comfortable discussing these problems with teachers. The data shows that up to 46% of grade 7–12 students do not have a trusted adult in their school that they feel comfortable going to for personal support and advice. It is important that students have the opportunity to express, rather than suppress, their feelings by discussing their problems and questions with teachers. According to Ontario’s Policy Framework for Child and Youth Mental Health, “having at least one significant, caring relationship with an adult is one of the positive, protective factors for child and youth mental health” (TDSB, 2013b, p. 10).

It is no wonder that such statistics have prompted the TDSB to acknowledge the direct link between social, emotional, and psychological well-being on one hand, and students’ academic achievement on the other. It is crucial that the school curriculum dedicate sufficient time and allocate proper resources to deal with students’ well-being. The TDSB’s director of education, Donna Quan, thus promises that this “four-year strategic plan for creating Healthy
Schools. Healthy Relationships. will help to create a culture where mental health and well-being is integrated into every aspect of our students’ school experience” (TDSB, 2013b, p. 1). According to the TDSB, “in a world where we cannot keep our students immune from all sorts of challenges, making sure we pay attention when they are struggling is a must for educators” (CBC News, 2014, para. 5).

2.2 Impediments to Emotional Well-Being in Schools

Despite the many policy-making initiatives surrounding the topic of emotions in schools worldwide (TDSB, 2013b; Department of Education and Skills [DfES], 2003, 2005, 2007; DfES/Department of Health, 2004; Health Education Authority, 1997; UNICEF, 2007), emotions and emotional well-being have long been overlooked in western schools. It is often presumed that the main objective of our schools is to provide students with the necessary skills in a vast array of subjects (e.g., mathematics, literacy, etc.) in order to help them prepare for their academic or professional futures. Yet other crucial life skills, specifically emotional and social skills, are commonly neglected. Additionally, throughout Western culture’s history, communicating emotions and feelings has been discouraged (Boler, 1997; Lynch, 1985; Miller, 2007) or else has been encouraged only for purposes of maintaining social control (Boler, 1997; McLaughlin, 2008). Although many other academic disciplines make passing mentions to emotional well-being, according to Boler (1997), psychology and philosophy are in fact the only two disciplines that tend to explicitly incorporate emotions and feelings into their theoretical frameworks. Despite this, students are often conditioned to accept this neglect, as they endorse (either consciously or tacitly) the institution that promises them a better life through
education. Nevertheless, the Ontario curriculum has been claiming to nurture students’ social and emotional skills through individualized learning and student-centred techniques, which are said to be incorporated into students’ daily experiences (TDSB, 2013a).

Moreover, the programs and techniques that are explicitly specified in the Ontario curriculum (such as “individualized learning” and “student-centred techniques”) fail to achieve their stated goals, due to their being rooted in theories that either have conflicting definitions of “emotion,” or else disregard emotions altogether (Boler, 1997). For example, the emotional literacy curriculum, which has been one popular way of responding to students’ emotional well-being in Ontario public school systems, has roots within the pathological mental health disciplines, and focuses mainly on modifying behaviour and maintaining social control, rather than providing students with social and emotional skills (Boler, 1997; McLaughlin, 2008). Furthermore, although Theory of Mind, which is foundational in such fields, is intimately connected with research into emotional intelligence (i.e., social and emotional skills), the relevant studies tend to focus on children with special difficulties (e.g., autistic children), rather than incorporating all types of children and their emotions (Goleman, 1998). Consequently, the emotional needs of a vast number of children are neglected.

As noted above, embedded within the Ontario curriculum is an element of social control, as they emphasize the managing and regulating of students’ emotions. Daniel Goleman (1998) emphasizes the importance of focusing instead on emotional intelligence (rather than social control), arguing that possessing such intelligence is more important in today’s society than having a high IQ. The ultimate goals of such curricula, then, must be carefully scrutinized so as to ensure that certain societal ideals (such as social control) are not prioritized over
students’ emotional well-being. As some researchers argue, research into emotions should not be skewed by an underlying ambition for such societal ideals (Boler, 1997; McLaughlin, 2008).

The expression of feelings or emotions is generally associated with certain biases and stereotypes that have already been deeply ingrained in both students and teachers (Miller, 2007). For this reason, strong displays of emotion (such as crying, anger, sadness), might be considered inappropriate without being given proper consideration. Similar to the way that words come with built-in associations or meanings within a social context, emotions in Western culture often come with social “definitions.” As noted above, certain programs in our schools (such as emotional literacy, character education, and moral education) treat emotional education only as a means of social control, rather than a means of teaching students what their emotions really mean. It is crucial that students acquire the skills that help them to explore and understand their emotions, rather than control or suppress them. More important than these specific programs, then, are the daily experiences of students: “It is the daily experience of children and young people in schools that seems to matter the most, not the construction of special programs” (McLaughlin, 2008, p. 364).

2.3 The Value of Holistic Education

Jean Piaget (1959), a renowned developmental psychologist, proposed that in order for children to acquire a better education and a higher level of understanding, they should be left alone. According to Piaget, children’s thoughts will develop and mature on their own, and accordingly, children will educate and train themselves like “little scientists” (Piaget, 1959). Essentially, he viewed children as innately solitary explorers, discovering the world in an
independent manner. Lev Vygotsky (1978) had a different point of view, emphasizing the broader socio-historical context of children’s development. Vygotsky proposed that the best way to educate oneself is through extensive instruction and a great deal of interaction with mentors. Through such experiences, children will acquire not only a set of general academic skills, but also what Vygotsky called the “outcome of play.” During play, according to Vygotsky, children generally behave beyond their age. These interactions therefore result in greater self-development (Vygotsky, 1978). As a middle-ground between these two viewpoints, Rudolf Steiner (as cited in Miller, 2007) proposes a model that focuses not only on children’s cognition (as does Piaget) or environmental influences (as does Vygotsky), but on “holistic development.” This model aims at enhancing students’ intellectual, physical, emotional, and spiritual growth (Miller, 2007).

The holistic model is perhaps best understood by considering the word “whole.” In particular, this model suggests that the whole is more than simply the sum of its parts. A holistic approach to education thus focuses on educating students about life as a whole; it is a learner-centred approach that allows an individual’s skills and talents to unfold at his or her own pace in all aspects of development: physical, mental, emotional, and social (Gamlin, Luther, & Wagner, 2001).

Another means of understanding this educational model is by reviewing the most common ways people think about education in general (i.e., as Transmission, Transaction, or Transformation) (Miller, 2007). The Transmission model of education is top-down in that the teacher is thought to communicate knowledge that is to be gained by the pupils. In this model, the students are seen as passive objects in a formal institution (i.e., the school). Each student
must progress through the same program, while being continually assessed and judged on their level of understanding of the materials. In this model, societal power is exerted via the institution in order to discipline students as one might program a machine. On the Transaction model of education, however, students are seen as cognitively active participants in their learning. A two-way relationship is thought to exist between the educator and the pupils, and knowledge is passed along through a dialogue with rational students (Miller, 2007). This relationship, however, is purely intellectual in nature, and there is no room for teacher and pupil to discuss emotions and feelings; the idea here is that students are rational thinkers who can focus on problem-solving rationally, rather than discussing feelings and emotions (Dewey, 1938; Miller, 2007). It is only according to the Transformation model that the intention is to educate the whole body, both emotionally and intellectually. In this model, the student is no longer seen as the passive learner, nor only as an intellectually active participant; rather, learning occurs within each and every one of the students, as it advances their understanding of the material, increases their interpretive competencies, enhances their practical repertoires, allows them to view issues from multiple perspectives, and enriches the students’ visions (Luther, 2007; Miller, 2007; Drake et al., 1992). In this sense, education “transforms” the entire student, and is not simply a transmission or transaction of knowledge.

In relation to these findings, Medaglia-Miller (as cited in Luther, 2007) and Drake et al. (1992) illustrate the importance of storytelling in educating students. According to their studies, hearing other people’s stories and being able to relate to them on different levels (personal, historical, cultural, and global) is invaluable for students, because these individual voices (i.e., the storytellers) allow for Transformational learning insofar as they include the individuals
within the curriculum. As Transformational learning occurs, it allows for an interaction between students and the curriculum, affecting all aspects of human development (such as aesthetic, moral, physical, and spiritual needs) (Miller, 2007). Engaging these real stories makes for an authentic teaching and learning environment, where students respond genuinely, rather than out of obligation (Luther, 2007; Drake et al., 1992). However, many of these “real” stories have been hidden in our school curriculum, buried beneath the Ontario curriculum, which some people value more, and there is no time allotted or dedicated for students to explore and share their own stories.

There has thus been a great deal of research supporting the positive relationship between the holistic approach to education, and higher academic achievement in general. The overarching conclusion of this literature suggests that a more holistic approach to education, if adopted by Ontario teachers, would not only enhance students’ academic achievement, but also provide them with the ability to make personally and socially meaningful connections and decisions (Brush, 1997; Christenson, Rounds, & Gorney, 1992; Kush & Watkins, 1996; Miller, 2007). According to this approach, a group of students is not merely expected to reach standard societal ideals, but rather each individual student is taught with consideration of his or her unique interests and personal aims. This inclusion factor (i.e., taking into consideration each student as an individual) is one of the main benefits of holistic education (Miller, 2007). Holistic education takes into account the inter-relatedness of different domains of personal development, such as relationships between self and knowledge, self and community, self and earth, self and self, and mind and body (Miller, 2007).
2.4 Mind-Body Relationship

Even with the recent dramatic increase in emphasizing positive psychology, expressions of emotions and mental health issues are still seen as deviations from normal behaviour, and so are often treated inadequately in many school systems (Boler, 1997; McLaughlin, 2008). Emotions are too often seen as an unbridled force that must be controlled and maintained, rather than explored and analyzed. Research has shown that, although there are programs in the Ontario public school system that aim to address emotions and feelings, they deal only with pathological issues, with a primary goal of modifying such behaviour. Thus these alternative programs (e.g., emotional literacy, moral education, etc.) too often only purport to educate students on important life skills, without actually doing so (Boler, 1997; Miller, 2007). Furthermore, these programs are missing certain crucial elements that are essential to holistic education, including the maintenance of the relationship between mind and body (Miller, 2007).

Within the traditional Ontario school system, there has been little emphasis on this mind-body relationship. Ontario students have therefore not traditionally been educated in a cohesive, holistic manner. Numerous studies highlight this problem, such as that by Masters and Houston (1978), who conclude that the schools studied in their research fail to lead pupils in fully developing their physical bodies (as cited in Miller, 2007). This failure is due to the common assumption in the education system that the mind is detached from the body. Even physical education programs, which focus on students’ bodies, have failed in this respect, as they have not adequately emphasized the importance of the body’s connection with the mind (Miller, 2007).
Alexander and Maisel (1986) and Feldenkrais (1990) have also made important contributions to this literature. Their work is motivated by the desire to develop students’ mind-body connections. In the case of educating students’ minds, these researchers suggest the use of programs that work with the body; in the case of developing their bodies, they note that psychophysical re-education has been proven to be effective (Feldenkrais, 1990; Miller, 2007). These methods, then, may be effective in enhancing both students’ physical and mental well-being.

2.5 Social and Emotional Skills

Goleman (1998) in his popular book, Working with Emotional Intelligence, argues that, today, having a high level of emotional intelligence is more important than having a high IQ. He argues further, along with other academics, that there has been a recent drastic decrease in people’s emotional intelligence, due to many societal and environmental factors (e.g., childhood depression, crime, aggression, behavioral problems, family break-ups, etc.) (Goleman, 1998; Seligman, 1991). Existing educational programs and techniques, however, are mainly concerned with behavioural modification and control, and moulding students in accordance with certain social ideals. Few programs or techniques (if any) exist to help students understand the root cause of their feelings. The maintaining and controlling of feelings and emotions through these programs is thus unsatisfactory, as there is a clear need for preventative strategies which address mental health issues early on, rather than control or suppress them after they have developed.
Many studies, along with the data indicated in the new TDSB initiative on mental health, illustrate the importance of acquiring social and emotional skills as a means to obtaining academic achievement and mental well-being (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; TDSB, 2013b; Garner, 2010; McLaughlin, 2008; Shanker, 2010; Zimmerman, 2002). Some of these studies emphasize the importance of regulating students’ emotions through mindfulness (Shanker, 2010), while others demonstrate the benefits of incorporating other educational techniques within the students’ everyday experiences in school (e.g., art therapy, or the You Can Do It! [YCDI!] program) (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; Hautala, 2011). What these studies have in common, however, is their astonishing results: these studies consistently find that incorporating the learning of social and emotional skills into curricula (implicitly or explicitly) leads to improvements in students’ emotional well-being as well as academic achievement (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012; TDSB, 2013b; Garner, 2010; Hautala, 2011; McLaughlin, 2008; Shanker, 2010; Zimmerman, 2002).

As noted above, one way of enhancing students’ well-being is through art therapy. Päivi-Maria Hautala (2011) describes art therapy as a practice which promotes learner-centred education, emphasizes individuality and creativity, and enhances students’ well-being when incorporated into the curriculum. Through this program, the learner becomes active in acquiring knowledge with respect to themselves through art-making, since the therapist, or facilitator, allows the student enough freedom to construct his or her own individual artwork. Students may further reflect on their artwork with the assistance of the facilitator. Teaching, learning, and therapy all tend to possess the same common goal, which is to aid individuals in accepting responsibility for their own life and becoming independent through a balance of
freedom and responsibility (Hautala, 2011). What is unique about art therapy, however, is that the students are able to communicate their emotions and feelings through their artwork, rather than through verbal interactions with the facilitator or teacher.

Another way of teaching social and emotional skills is through the use of the You Can Do It! (YCDI!) early childhood education program (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012). In their study, Daniela Maree Ashdown and Michael E. Bernard examine this program, which is entirely explicit in its aims to enhance young students’ social and emotional skills. The program makes use of lessons on five social-emotional competencies: confidence, persistence, organization, getting along, and emotional resilience (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012). According to the study, this program results in a significant increase not only in the students’ emotional well-being, but in academic achievement as well. The results of this study, then, further support the conclusion that enhancing students’ social and emotional skills leads to higher academic achievement.

Another potential means of integrating students’ emotions and feelings in schools, as well as teaching them valuable emotional and social skills, is through non-instructional strategies (i.e., self-regulatory techniques, such as having students make and revise their own plans). Other studies have shown that teachers, through precise and effective interactions within high-quality relationships, can help children acquire essential skills such as goal-setting, time-management, learning strategies, self-evaluation, and self-attribution, which helps regulate their emotions and feelings. Self-regulation, then, is another means of applying theory to practice (Shanker, 2010; Zimmerman, 2002).

As noted earlier, this conclusion is also supported by the famous Austrian philosopher, and founder of the Waldorf education program, Rudolf Steiner (1968). Steiner’s philosophy of
elementary education places great emphasis on the act of movement; this might involve, for instance, activities that stimulate children’s imagination and are hands-on, such as fairy tales, knitting, direct experience with nature, music, drawing, and drama (Steiner, 1968; Miller, 2007). This philosophy is similar to that of art therapy, in that it often incorporates the use of fairy tales, myths, students’ imaginations, music, drama, drawings, and storytelling into students’ education (Whittington & Floyd, 2009; Hyson, 2004; Cohen, 2001).

2.6 Conclusion

Students in the Ontario public school system, for the most part, have not had the benefit of a holistic education, and so they may not have had the opportunity to attain certain skills crucial to their academic success. These students have largely been denied learning opportunities related to the development of the mind-body relationship and social and emotional skills, which may be fundamental to academic achievement. Barry Zimmerman (2002) finds that, in the face of overwhelming stimuli, even children who are otherwise able to self-regulate their emotions tend to exhibit difficulties co-regulating in social interactions (e.g., understanding the feelings and emotions of teachers and peers). Learning skills such as goal-setting, time-management, learning strategies, self-evaluation, self-attributions, seeking help or information, and important self-motivational beliefs (e.g., self-efficacy and intrinsic task interest) helps students to both self-regulate and co-regulate (Zimmerman, 2002).

Instead of suppressing students’ feelings and emotions, educators must rather uncover them, and aim at helping students to develop a capacity to express these feelings and emotions. For example, in a traditional classroom, a teacher may respond to a student’s
outburst of anger by halting the disruptive behaviour, perhaps saying, “Such behavior will not be tolerated.” In this case, the response is often inadequate (Shanker, 2010, p. 6). On the other hand, in the holistic classroom, when faced with an outburst of anger, the teacher uses a different approach. Instead of dismissing or suppressing the students’ emotional distress, the teacher investigates the problem, seeking its origin. Having learned self-regulation skills, the student of the holistic classroom has a greater sense of motivation. Accordingly, holistically-educated students are driven to succeed in school, and are more optimistic about their futures (Shanker, 2010; Zimmerman, 2002).
Chapter 3

3.1 Procedure

This study is a qualitative research study looking at the ways in which a small sample of elementary school teachers is instructionally responsive to students’ social and emotional needs and well-being. The study identifies the perceived impact which these teachers observe as a result of implementing these pedagogies within their practice, and includes an in-depth review on previous literature studies from various related disciplines. To broaden my knowledge in the area, I engage previous research studies with my own life experiences as a student and educator.

In particular, I conducted this qualitative research by using semi-structured interviews with two teachers in the Toronto area. This research draws on the characteristics of Phenomenological and Case Study approaches to qualitative research. Phenomenological and Case Study approaches are highly personalized, as they account for the life experiences of the author and the participants, both of which could contribute greatly to this study because of their pivotal role in psychology, education, and the social sciences (Creswell, 2013; Giorgio, 2009). The Phenomenological approach allows for the experiences individuals to unfold and contribute to a single concept, as the participants each explain their unique lived experiences regarding one phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Such an approach allows for both the subjectivity and objectivity of a phenomenon: “This turns on the lived experiences of individuals and how
they have both subjective experience of the phenomenon and objective experiences of something in common with other people" (Creswell, 2013, p. 78).

The Case Study approach, on the other hand, starts by identifying a single case, or multiple cases which could be compared and contrasted (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2009). The Case Study approach analyzes in-depth the specific case at hand, and it includes an extensive description of the case (Creswell, 2013). This was helpful in illustrating two teachers in a holistic school and the types of practices they have implemented in their everyday teachings.

Such qualitative research has proven valuable because it "involves an interpretive naturalistic approach to the world" (Creswell, 2013, p. 44). Qualitative researchers aim to study the phenomena that are already in the world, in their natural environments, without having to manipulate them in any way. They then try to make sense and interpret them “in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Creswell, 2013, p. 44).

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

For a complete list of the questions posed in these interviews, see appendix B. Examples of my interview questions are as follows:

1) What does holistic education mean to you? What are learning goals that you associate with holistic education? What are some instructional strategies that you associate with holistic education?

2) Are you familiar with the new TDSB initiative (Mental Health and Well-Being Strategy)? What are your thoughts and expectations of this new initiative? What do you think this new initiative will achieve?
3) How do you conceptualize emotional wellness? What does that mean and look like to you?

To increase the validity of my data, I audio-recorded the interviews. To collect this data, I developed a semi-structured interview protocol developed by thoughtful analysis of the previous literature (see appendix B). During the interview, I had a copy of the protocol, which outlined the open-ended questions to be asked and on which I recorded my observations. To better refine and develop my research questions, I made use of a pilot test before conducting the actual interviews. The pilot cases were selected through convenience sampling.

Following transcription of the interviews, I conducted data analysis to identify themes that informed my research questions. In reporting these findings, I hope that they may inform the alignment of policy and practice, specifically pertaining to teachers’ implementation of Ontario’s Children and Youth Mental Health and Well-Being Strategy.

3.3 Participants

For this study, I required two participants, each of which met the following criteria:

1) teachers with demonstrated commitment to instructionally responding to students’ emotions through their everyday classroom teaching practices,

2) teachers whose philosophies of education value holistic education,

3) teachers working in the public school system at the elementary level, and

4) teachers who have participated in and/or led professional development programs in a related area (e.g., holistic education, mental health issues in education, etc.).
To recruit such participants, I contacted professional associations such as the Ontario Art therapy Association and Griffin Centre. I also contacted suitable individuals in leadership roles with regard to the writing and implementation of the Children and Youth Mental Health and Well-Being Strategy. Another means I used to find potential participants was through purposeful sampling. For instance, I surveyed my fellow teacher candidates about their experiences at different practicum settings, with the goal of selecting appropriate subjects for my study.

I found my two participants through my fellow teacher candidates. The two participants are teachers currently working at an alternative holistic school in Toronto, Ontario. The interviews were held at the school, after school hours. The participants were both interviewed individually, and each interview took about 30 to 45 minutes. The interviews were recorded by two different recording devices and then transcribed.

My first participant Melissa (pseudonym) has been teaching for 16 years. She has been with this school since it was launched. Melissa has extensive teaching background with the First Nations community and identifies herself as an artist and musician. She has always been interested in alternative approaches to teaching.

Brandon (pseudonym), my second participant has been teaching for 8 years. He started working at this school three years ago. Brandon was previously a supply teacher in various schools within the TDSB, and before that, he was an actor. He therefore brings with him many qualities that are appreciated in an alternative holistic environment.
3.4 Ethical Review Procedures

Throughout this research, I followed all ethical review approval procedures for the Master of Teaching program at the University of Toronto. Prior to conducting the interviews, I took full responsibility to explain to my subjects what is stated in the consent letter; it was important that my participants were comfortable with the study, and understood its motives and goals. Furthermore, they were informed of their roles, tasks, rights, and responsibilities with respect to the study, as well as the overall procedure. They were given an opportunity to ask questions, and I strived to provide satisfactory responses. Finally, the participants were asked to voluntarily give their informed consent to be included as potential subjects in the study. The participants were assured that their information would remain confidential, and that they could withdraw at any point in time from the study. The participants were assured that their actual names would appear nowhere in the study, and that pseudonyms would be used to refer to them throughout.

3.5 Strengths and Limitations

There are several strengths to this research design. A major strength is that I can be reflexive about the phenomenon throughout the study. In a qualitative research design, you reflect on how you as a researcher might have influenced and affected your results. It is about being attentive to the context of knowledge-construction in all aspects of the research, especially the effect of the researcher at every step of the process (Creswell, 2013).

Another strength is that the data is collected primarily through interviews (Creswell, 2013). There are countless benefits with face-to-face interviews, such as the opportunity to
observe the participants’ body language, facial expressions, hesitations, and so on (Creswell, 2013). Although I hoped to interview all participants face-to-face, I was very flexible by offering various types of communication tools to better accommodate my subjects’ availability (offering, for example, to conduct the interviews via telephone, email, or skype). I tried my best to engage my participants at a place and time at which they felt safe and comfortable, so that they could better share their experiences.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of my study that could affect the quality of my research. One limitation to the Case Study approach, for example, is that the collected data may not be generalizable (Creswell, 2013). The scope of this research limited me to implement a case study approach in which I would have to interview with more teaching staff including the principal, more teachers and students, as well as participating in observation in the school. Another is the researcher’s presence when gathering the data, as it could affect the participants’ responses (Creswell, 2013). Other limitations to consider include the short timeframe available for interviewing these teachers, which could be inadequate. As well, by selecting only elementary school teachers as participants, the study disregards a vast population of teachers with valuable data.

Any research study has certain limitations; however, with regards to my study, I believe the strengths far outweigh the limitations. Importantly, the goal of this study was not to generalize its findings, nor to achieve particular “results.” Rather, I was looking to learn and make meaning through these interviews, and have this knowledge lead to new developments in education.
Chapter 4

4.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I report the research findings from interviewing two elementary teachers at an alternative holistic school in Toronto. In what follows, I refer to these two teachers using the pseudonyms “Brandon” and “Melissa.”

These findings are organized into seven themes, each related to the individual experiences of each participant in their role as a holistic teacher. The seven themes in this study are as follows:

2) Teachers’ conceptualization of holistic education prioritized making connections and building relationships.

3) Teachers’ conceptualization of holistic education prioritized experiential and kinesthetic learning.

4) Teachers’ conceptualization of holistic education prioritized attitudes and skills for global and environmental citizenship.

5) Teachers enacted inquiry-based and problem-posing practices that engaged real world phenomena.

6) Teachers integrated the arts as a component of their holistic pedagogy.

7) Teachers looked for visual cues as indicators of students’ mental health and well-being, and they placed significant emphasis on cues demonstrating engagement and [un]happiness, specifically.
8) Factors that supported these teachers’ practices included their school community, colleagues, and access to resources and professional development.

Within these themes I have also included a list of corresponding sub-themes, which help to narrow the focus of these findings by illustrating relevant examples. I report on such sub-themes where relevant. For each, I report what I learned and draw on the participants’ own voices to further elucidate these findings.

4.1 Teachers’ conceptualization of holistic education prioritized making connections and building relationships

For both of the participants, holistic teaching meant making connections with oneself, with others, and with the earth. Making these sorts of connections was crucial to their overall teaching philosophies. To them, emotional wellness was possible only when students were aware of their connections with themselves, the people around them, and nature. Within this theme, participant responses are further categorized into the sub-themes of “making connections to self, others, and the earth,” and “making connections to parents, colleagues, and community.”

4.1.1 Making Connections to Self, Others, and the Earth

This theme pertains to how the participants both emphasized that holistic education and fostering emotional wellness is about making connections and building quality relationships with oneself. Brandon, for example, emphasized the relationship between head, heart, and
hands. In this way, he conceptualized holistic education as pedagogy that enables students to focus their attention inward, and stay mindful of the relationship between their thoughts, feelings, and actions.

Melissa, too, focused on students’ internal relationship with their selves. She said, for example, “We meditate three times a day, just for maybe two minutes each time... It’s all part of what we do. They know it’s like a way of life and I don’t know if they’re going home and doing it, but maybe when they are older, maybe they are going to remember. How to breathe, how to connect themselves ... I do know that I’m trying to equip them with the very things I found to help me.” Melissa went on to state how she runs many clubs, including a yoga club, because she believes that its “part of mental..., spiritual, and physical well-being.” To her, how the students felt inside and outside was equally important, and she strived to implement into her practices things to better help students with their inner spirits and feelings.

Melissa also emphasized the notion of preparing students to be in the “right relationship,” or what she also referred to as a “deep relationship,” not only with their selves but also with other students and with the planet. Wellness, according to Melissa, came from the right deep relationships with the world around us, “understanding the life systems in the world. I feel like that’s where the confidence and wellness lies because our ancestors not that long ago were in right relationship ... connecting to things beyond the school” and with one another.

Brandon also underscored these relationships as a component of how he conceptualized holistic education, speaking about the importance of facilitating students’ capacity to “develop deep, meaningful relationships with peers.” He also stressed the role of “making connections to
nature, to the world itself, to other communities, and other parts of the world.” In his words, “I think it’s all about relationships and building relationships. Learning life-long skills to become active, positive citizens in the world ... taking stewardship for nature and leaning about how to protect nature...the way we relate to other people and the words we are choosing to use.” Both teachers also emphasized the significance of making cross-curricular connections as a component of their holistic pedagogy. Throughout the interviews, the theme of building relationships with one another and with nature was evident.

4.1.2 Making Connections to Parents, Colleagues, and Community

In their conceptualization of holistic education, the teachers not only emphasized relationship and connection in terms of the self, peers, and the environment, but also in terms of the relationships they built in their roles as teachers. These included attention to their relationships with parents, with colleagues, with students, and with the communities they worked in.

For Melissa, it was important to build one-on-one relationships with students. As a teacher, she herself builds these relationships by trying to “honor each one of [the students],” emphasizing how important this is to the wellness of the students. In her own words, this wellness “comes from being in deep relationships.” Melissa, however, also emphasized particular relationships with one’s surroundings and one’s community. For example, Melissa mentioned the importance of parents, and spoke about how she made use of one parent who was a midwife, who she invited into the class to teach the students about childbirth and puberty.
Brandon talked about the family of his students, and how making connections with them is also important. He talked about some of his students who have had difficulties in school, and noted that having a relationship with their parents makes it easier for him to help those students. In his words, “I see their parents and their families every day.” Brandon also discussed the importance of parent councils: “We try to do initiative with the parent councils for fundraising and we come together.” Having such a supportive and strong administration was something that both participants made note of, along with drawing on the expertise of their colleagues. Melissa noted, for example, that “the kindergarten teacher, Mandy [pseudonym] and I, we basically boiled down this program [TLLP, a teacher-led professional project] into some common things and elements so that we could pass it on to new teachers, get this program going.” In this way, Melissa was working with colleagues to implement new programs within the school community to better help future teachers of that school.

4.2 Teachers’ conceptualization of holistic education prioritized experiential and kinesthetic learning

Both teacher participants emphasized the importance of experiential and kinesthetic learning, noting that movement is important to holistic education. Brandon, for example, emphasized the role of movement in holistic education, which for him was connected to music and physical education, moving the body and hands and feet. It was evident that he tried to employ practices that stimulate students’ physical body as well as their imaginative minds. In his words, he explained holistic education as that which allows students to “move and experience with their bodies.” Brandon also used a musical instrument called “Orth” to teach
his students. He states, “because Orth is all about head, heart, and hands ... it fits, ties very nicely into the holistic curriculum.” During these lessons, students use their bodies to learn all about this instrument.

For Melissa, what it meant to be mentally and spiritually well was directly linked to what it meant to be physically well. For Melissa, experiential and kinesthetic learning was a way to emphasize mental and spiritual well-being. For this reason, holistic education meant opportunities to move and interact directly with the world. She found it crucial to include these opportunities within her practices in a holistic pedagogy. Speaking about her outdoor morning circles, she said, “I consciously have designed it [so that it] just really flows where there is a lot of movement, there is a lot of connectedness ... You know, not everybody is the greatest yogini but we are all trying ...” To Melissa, it was important, in terms of her holistic pedagogy practices, that there was a lot that is happening – a lot of movement and kinesthetic learning and experiential leaning, where the students were leading themselves and Melissa was making sure that everything goes smoothly by guiding the students.

4.3 Teachers’ conceptualization of holistic education prioritized attitudes and skills for global and environmental citizenship

Teacher participants conceptualized holistic education by prioritizing students’ attitudes and skills for global education, environmental education, and citizenship. Brandon, for example, talked about the importance of his students’ acquiring life-long skills and being positive citizens in society. He emphasized that students need to learn “life-long skills to become active, positive citizens in our world. So taking stewardship for nature and learning about how to protect
nature and live in harmony with it ... helps lesson our impact on the planet and being aware of
the choices we make.” This also relates to how important it is to make connections not only
within ourselves and with our peers but also with the world in order to teach students to how
to be effective, active citizens in our society.

Melissa also emphasized educating her students to become good global and
environmental citizens. She focused on creating a certain culture in her classroom and
empowering the students through this culture. A culture in which students would be connected
together to their surroundings and the environment, a culture in which students would know
how to get connected to earth and what are the ways they could impact their environment.

4.4 Teachers enacted inquiry-based and problem-posing practices that
engaged real-world phenomenon

Both of the participants commented on the level of involvement exhibited by students
in their classrooms. They both reasoned that such behavior is highly correlated with the type of
classroom teaching the students are exposed to. Although the participants had different
examples because of the different students within their classrooms, they both emphasized the
significance of students being highly engaged in a classroom setting, mainly through problem-
posing inquiry-based education.

To this end, both participants strived to include the voices of each of their students
within the teaching curriculum, having them be heard in the classroom and appreciating who
they are as individuals. They did this by creating opportunities for inquiry-based teaching and
finding time and space for the teachers to include what is important to each student. This was
done by having students pose problems and questions, and using these to drive learning and learn how to solve problems as a class. Instead of simply transmitting information to their students, these teachers allowed students to come up with information on their own.

In Brandon’s case, this was achieved through a strategy called “Talking Bird,” where each student would hold an object (in this case, a carved bird) and become the voice of that object. After hearing everyone’s facts, as a class they would come to a solution. Throughout this process, they learned many useful skills. Brandon made a point to emphasize that his strategy is not meant to put students on the spot but to teach them how to problem-solve by simply stating the facts. As Brandon stated, “One voice speaks at a time, and we discuss what the problem is, what people saw, what they heard, if someone is directly related to it ... We teach the kids to speak in a respectful manner, so we don’t use names the first time we go around, so it’s not blaming, but it’s just stating the facts of what happened. We work to try to find a solution. Rather than telling the kids, ‘This is what’s going to happen,’ we are trying to get them to ask questions and think critically – ‘Okay, what do we do about this?’ – or have them learn about the situation.” By using this strategy, Brandon attempted to teach students how to problem-solve. Instead of giving them the solution to that one specific problem at hand, he let his students decide for themselves which solution was best. Ultimately, this teacher strived to teach them how to problem-solve in the future within their own lives, which he saw as crucial to their emotional well being.

When talking about their conceptualization of holistic education, the teacher participants also mentioned the importance of students having curious minds, which is crucial to inquiry-based learning. Modelling how to be curious was one way of achieving this for
Brandon: “Modeling that curiosity for them and showing that I’m a life-long learner, and I don’t have all the answers, that we make mistakes ... How do you find answers to your questions?” Brandon also emphasized that it is important to exhibit a sense of openness to one’s students, showing them that it is okay not to know all the answers. In this way, Brandon tried to nourish his students’ sense of creativity, wonder, and imagination.

When discussing the type of classroom community he aimed to develop, Brandon stressed the importance of “creating a safe place at school where you feel free to take risks and make mistakes, where you feel welcomed, and respected ... and that you’re building deep meaningful relationships with other peers ... learning to ask questions and be curious about the world.”

Inquiry-based learning prepares students for the future. “Rather than transmitting information into their heads,” Brandon recommends “guiding them and learning with them and seeing what they’re interested in what they’re curious about, and kind of facilitating that and learning with them, and providing opportunities for them to ask questions, and teaching them how to search for answers.”

Melissa prioritized having students share their individuality and interests with others. Melissa stated that she wanted “there to be a liveliness like an enlivened group of kids who are knowledgeable who are connecting to things beyond the school all the time ,” and desired to “make space for them to still be individuals and to share.” Melissa also prioritized inquiry-based learning, and one specific example she shared was how she had students participate in bee-keeping to generate questions and inquiries about biodiversity.
Both teachers also found it important for students to learn about what’s important in life, and talk about real-life experiences. Dedicating time and space to such learning experiences is crucial to holistic teaching. Melissa, for example, focused heavily on the connections her students made with their surroundings and community by bringing outside real-world experiences into the classroom. She also strived to have her students “writing about real-world experiences.” Brandon also discussed bringing in other peoples’ experiences within their teachings through making connections. In his own words, “people that have had different experiences or lived in different experiences, so connection to self, connection to others [is important].”

4.5 Teachers integrated the arts into their teaching

Art education was a crucial element that was embedded within the holistic pedagogy of these teacher’s practices. Since movement is something that was important in their philosophy of teaching, embedding arts and music seemed appropriate. Both teachers stated how implementing such lessons would better nourish their students’ engagement and inclusivity. In the case of Brandon, having an empty room with no musical instrument was difficult, but he found ways to get students the right instruments, and by using “Orth,” was able to make his lesson more interactive, engaging, and inclusive. He explained that this strategy allowed him to be responsive to students’ multiple intelligences. Melissa, too, took a leadership role when it came to teaching the arts as a component of her holistic pedagogy, and she did this by organizing and advising art and music clubs. In her words, “I had yoga club, I had art club, I had music, like singing, clubs ...” and “I love when there are bridges built between disciplines.”
According to Melissa, integrating arts into her teaching was essential to her holistic pedagogy framework.

4.6 Teachers looked for visual cues as indicators of students’ mental health and well-being, and they placed significant emphasis on cues demonstrating engagement and [un]happiness, specifically

Both participants emphasized looking for visual cues from students in terms of assessing their mental and emotional well-being, and having had the opportunity to develop relationships with students over an extended period of time, while also getting to know students better through their prioritization of inquiry-based and student-centred learning, made them feel confident in making these assessments.

The teacher participants emphasized their observation notes to be their most important tool in determining if a student needed extra help and support in all aspects of their education, including emotional well-being. For example, Brandon stated, “I’ve become very good at observation and reading kids ... I look for their responses.” He elaborated by saying, “I just observe them a lot and I listen to them, and I watch who is engaged and who is not.”

Engagement was consistently emphasized by both teachers in terms of understanding their students’ states of mind. As Brandon mentioned, “if something else is bigger and on the forefront of your brain ... it’s very hard to focus and do your school work because its not really what your brain ... and your heart is pre-occupied with.” One of Brandon’s main strategies was to look for facial expressions; knowing his students and recognizing their facial expressions allowed him to figure out what was going on with their minds and hearts. He mentioned that, “I
look at facial expressions and I’ve taught them already for two years, [so] I notice anxiety. Some of my kids have separation anxiety with their parents.”

Brandon had his own way of dealing with such anxiety: “I’ll pull them aside and say, ‘What’s going on with you today?’ Or if they are acting out, I’ll ask them [questions] rather than being punitive with them. I check in with them ... giving them an opportunity, giving them a place to be heard.”

Melissa, on the other hand, explained that, based on her observations and reading of her students, she observed little indication that students experienced emotional distress or mental health issues. She stated, “I can’t really see ... It’s hard for me to tell, really, because the kids all have very strong background with families, [and are] healthy like the people that are already doing pretty healthy things.” Because she felt the school community prioritized wellness, she may have been less astute at observing invisible cues that students may be projecting, since not all emotional distress can be observed so easily.-Melissa did comment that she noticed when students were “on edge,” or not acting like themselves, again relying on visual cues to make these assessments.

Melissa also expressed how students need to feel comfortable to participate and be involved in the classroom. She noted that once they are involved, then they are mostly happy. She also emphasized developing their confidence because she observed the extent this could increase the students’ involvement within her classroom: “They understand things, and it’s an easier flow ... They are not puzzled with what is the right thing to say.”
Both Brandon and Melissa spoke at length about student disengagement as indicators of mental and emotional distress, and again they assessed this primarily through visual cues such as students’ laying low in social settings, or students’ expressions of unhappiness. Brandon, for example, noticed that some students liked to fall into the background and not follow along with the rest of the classroom. In his words, “there are a lot of kids that are trying to melt into the background and not be seen ... perhaps they don’t feel comfortable in front of the whole group.” Because he prioritized relationship building with students and parents as component of holistic pedagogy, Brandon would respond by conferencing with students individually, or connecting with their parents. He explained, “I know when they are not themselves and when they are off.” Brandon also relayed a specific example: “I’ve seen a huge growth with one of them, who used to not engage with the other children at all and was very negative, would throw tantrums and was not happy to come to school. And now his social and emotional well-being has totally changed ... Often he shut down, so I used non-verbal cues and signals with him, to see if I could get him to respond and that actually works.” Brandon felt that while students sometimes responded defensively to his queries to conference with them, they often opened up and enabled him to get through to them.

Melissa also observed how students engaged with their peers to help her make assessments concerning their emotional and mental well-being. She would pay attention, for example, to whether or not students worked alone or with the rest of the classroom. In assessing engagement, Melissa also looked at the extent that students would “just open up and participate” as well as the extent that students were unwilling to participate. Melissa also she
explained that she assessed students’ mental and emotional well-being by asking herself, “How miserable does she look vs. how happy does she look? Does she look interested?”

Brandon also mentioned that he specifically paid attention to students’ demonstrations of happiness. According to Brandon, students have positive emotions and emotional well-being when “they enjoy coming to school and [are] happy to be a part of class community.” Melissa expressed a similar sentiment, noting, “we have kids mostly almost happy every day coming here.”

4.7 Factors that supported these teachers’ practices include their school community, colleagues, and access to resources and professional development.

Both participants appreciated the school community in which they were working and stressed the important role played by their “supportive administration” and community of teachers. The teacher participants also talked about the rich community of parents in their schools, who were a great source of support.

At times, they mentioned difficulties with respect to getting the resources they needed. For example, Melissa felt as though she lacked time. Melissa lamented that because it was important to her to include every student’s interest and passion within her teaching, she often felt there was not enough time for everything. For Brandon, finding funding for his resources (e.g., musical instruments) at times felt challenging. In his words, “I guess because we are newish school, we are lacking a lot of resources. We are like, ‘Okay we don’t have that, how are
we going to teach that?” Nonetheless, both teachers tried to do the best to work with what they had.

Both teachers’ holistic pedagogy was also informed and supported by professional development (including the scholarly contribution of Jack Miller), and collaboration with colleagues. For example, as mentioned earlier, Melissa worked along with the kindergarten teacher to come together to create a program that they could pass down to the new teachers. Most significantly, both teachers emphasized the importance of working within a school culture that intentionally and meaningfully supported holistic pedagogy.

4.8 Conclusion

In this chapter, I reported my research findings using supporting quotes from the research participants interviewed. The themes included were surrounding teachers’ conceptualization of holistic education, the types of techniques and strategies that they had enacted, the different visual cues that they looked for when it came to students’ mental health and well-being as well as the factors and resources that supported their practices.

Next, in chapter 5, I discuss the significance of these findings in the context of the literature I reviewed in chapter 2. I elucidate how these findings contribute to the existing body of research. I also discuss the significance of the findings for me as a beginning teacher and novice educational research scholar. I articulate recommendations for various stakeholders of the education system, and I identify areas for further research.
Chapter 5

5.0 Introduction

Throughout this study, I looked at the impact of holistic pedagogy on students’ emotional well-being. In particular, I investigated how holistic teachers working for an alternative holistic public school have implemented these strategies within their everyday classroom, and what perceived impact they observed in relation to their students’ emotional well-being and academic performance. I conducted face-to-face interviews with two teachers working at a Toronto based Alternative Holistic School. These interviews were transcribed, and I have reported my findings in chapter 4. In this chapter, I discuss the significance of these findings and what I have learned in relation to previous analyzed research studies. I also elaborate on how this experience informs my teaching as a beginning teacher and as an educational researcher, as well as explore its implications and provide some recommendations for future research.

5.1 Discussion

In accordance with many previous research studies, the data from this study illustrates teachers’ uncertainty in regards to the definition of “emotional wellness” (Boler, 1997; McLaughlin, 2008). In this study, the participants struggled to clearly articulate what emotions meant to them; however, when asked to give any precise indicators of “emotional wellness,” both participants talked about the visible indicators and cues that they have been observing in
their classrooms. Distinct from the traditional model of education in Western society whereby the communication of emotions and feelings is often discouraged (Boler, 1997; Miller, 2007), holistic education, in its transformational model of teaching, emphasizes the significance of intellect and emotion, as well as their relationship (Miller, 2007). These teachers described ways in which they had dealt with students’ emotions within their classroom, in a holistic education environment. For example, they emphasized inquiry-based learning, global and environmental citizenship education, arts-based pedagogy, as well as experiential and kinesthetic learning.

Consistent with the previously analyzed literature on “holistic education,” these teachers emphasized making connections and building relationships. Both teachers also referenced many points that were illustrated in the 2007 book by John Miller (The Holistic Curriculum), as well as the book itself (i.e., transformational learning, making connections to self, spirits, earth). Furthermore, the findings contribute to understanding what kinds of outcomes these emphases and practices can have for students. The teachers had observed outcomes including engagement in learning, participation, happiness. The participants discussed the ways in which they had observed student involvement, particularly when students seemed happy and were socializing with other students in the classroom. The participants observed the students to be less involved when something seemed to be on “the forefront” of their brain; when the students were in “crisis,” they seemed to not be learning and participating in class. This data is consistent with the statistics from the TDSB Healthy Schools. Healthy Relationships. (2013b) suggest that students with low emotional well-being are much less likely to enjoy school and have close friends. 97% of the student respondents
reported that low emotional wellbeing is very important to their academic achievement (TDSB, 2013b).

Furthermore, building a safe classroom community where students feel included was important according to the participants. In particular, they stressed that the ability to be comfortable to talk about anything was an important aspect of a safe environment. The TDSB data, too, indicates the importance of having quality relationships with adults, with whom students can discuss their problems (TDSB, 2013b).

As the data from this study reveals, talking about the students’ own experiences is also important. Having students’ voices be heard is crucial to their learning life-long skills, (such as their ability to problem solve, having confidence) as well as their emotional well-being. Allocating appropriate time for students’ voices to be heard was something one of the participants had effectively done within his classroom. As mentioned in chapter 4, “Talking Bird” was one of the effective strategies Brandon used to have student voices heard in his classroom. For him, this was meant to allow students to learn for themselves how to solve problems. This problem-solving strategy did not focus on placing blame on one person over another, but on developing life-long skills for students to help them in the future. This ties into storytelling, which in the reviewed literature is thought of as an authentic way of teaching students. It is often called “transformational learning” (Miller, 2007; Luther, 2007). In Transformational learning, students are active participants within their own learning experiences. Not only are they intellectually active participants, but such learning helps to advance their understanding by increasing their interpretive competencies and enhancing their
emotional intelligence, allowing them to view issues from multiple perspectives (Luther, 2007; Miller, 2007; Drake et al., 1992).

Additionally, the teacher participants spoke of what holistic education looked like in their classrooms. They illustrated this through various examples, as noted in chapter 4. For example, one participant spoke of including the community through a variety of activities that resonate with students’ lives. In one instance, this was done by inviting parents within the community to visit and share their expertise and knowledge, which is relevant to all students (e.g., a midwife talking about childbirth and puberty). One of the main elements of holistic education, as Miller, 2007) states, is the inter-relatedness of different domains of a student’s life: a relationship with self and knowledge, the surrounding community, earth, mind, and body. It is a student-centred approach that focuses not just on intellectual needs but on all aspects of a student’s life. Recognizing that the community and surroundings in which students study has an impact on those students’ development is crucial. Lev Vygotsky (1978), one of the well-known psychologists for example, has also emphasized the importance of the socio-historical context in which children grow up.

Making connections, building relationships, kinesthetic experiential learning experiences, problem-posing and inquiry-based education and increasing students’ confidence and their ability to be resilient are some of the most important themes of the collected data. The participants in this study emphasized the importance of students learning life-long skills through making and building deep quality relationships with their selves, peers, community, and earth, all of which ultimately increase students’ levels of confidence, which is where wellness comes from. Such life-long skills are crucial to students’ mental well-being now and in
the future, along with their academic success in school. These could be done though problem-posing education and through including students’ voices within your classroom. The data outlined in chapter 4 is thus highly aligned with the very core of the YCDI! program (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012). Participants in this study emphasized three out of the five main domains of the YCDI program: confidence, persistence, organization, getting along (i.e., building relationships), and emotional resiliency (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012).

5.2 Recommendation for policy and practice

In many ways this study is a response to some of the concerns that were raised in the TDSB Healthy Schools. Healthy Relationships. data (2013b). I used various multiple perspectives in analyzing the previous literature that was done in relation to this topic. It is my hope that this paper will invigorate further research on this topic to better accommodate our students’ needs within mainstream classrooms. The following are some recommendations that follow from the research findings:

- It is important that teachers and educators create opportunities for building “deep, meaningful relationships” and making connections with “self, earth, and the community” because according to these teachers, that is where the wellness lies, within these deep meaningful relationships.
- It is important that teachers dedicate time and attention to bringing their students’ voices within their teaching practices (for example, through storytelling, problem-posing education, etc.)
It is important that teacher education and development attend to the importance of preparing teachers to recognize invisible indicators of emotional distress, as well as prepare teachers how to respond to these.

5.3 Implications for me as a beginning teacher and educator

When I first began to develop ideas and questions for this study, I struggled to envision what the findings of this study would reveal, and how they would help me as a beginning teacher and educational researcher. I hoped that my study would lead me to discover practices that are helpful to me as a teacher in my future classrooms, to understand what it is to teach my students holistically, and to learn how could I make sure that I am aware of my students’ emotional well-being. I can now conclude that, on both a practical and personal level, this study does have benefits for beginning teachers, such as myself, who are motivated to make a difference to their students' lives. As this study focuses on answering some of the questions, that was addressed in relations to respond to the TDSB’s mental health and well-being initiative.

Through this study, I have learned a lot of strategies that may help me as a beginning teacher, in terms of nurturing students’ development as a whole, rather than only their intellectual development. I learned the significance of hearing students’ own stories (Luther, 2007). The personal stories of the students, shared in the classroom and related to the world, as well as the people and the things around them, are where learning takes place. As teachers, we should strive to allocate adequate time and emphasis on such narratives. In my interviews, the teachers consistently brought up the importance of building relationships within a community of students and its effects on students’ mental well-being. I learned that there must
be quality relationships between myself and my students in order for them to feel safe and comfortable enough to share their problems with me. My experiences in the Master of Teaching program, along with conducting my own Master’s level thesis, have had a huge impact on my philosophy of education. I have learned how to be responsive to students with respect to all aspects of their development, both from the expertise of my participants, Melissa and Brandon, and through my own research. I now see myself as a passionate educator and educational researcher who promotes holistic approaches to all aspects of teaching and learning.

5.4 Areas for future research

In order for students’ emotional well-being to become a priority within Ontario classrooms, it is important for researchers and teachers to continue the exploration of how holistic education practices can be implemented into everyday mainstream teaching. I also believe that there needs to be a consistent definition of “emotions and feelings” across disciplines, to establish what it is to teach students about emotional wellness and well-being, and to come up with explicit strategies and lesson plans that take into account such crucial aspects to students’ development.

The fact that there is only one holistic school in the Toronto region poses a problem. I had the opportunity to interview only two of its teachers because of their busy workload and schedule. I believe that future studies on this topic would benefit from a greater number of research participants from a wider range of school communities. It is beneficial to look into conducting a case study research, where the researcher could engage a lot more with the
participants through daily observations and interactions with more staff and students. The new research could focus on the different types of practices these teachers enact to make connections with the spirits.

5.5 Conclusion

This study reinforces the need for understanding and acknowledging emotions in Ontario schools. The participants in my study, being holistic educators, recognized and emphasized the need for and importance of teaching students holistically, and teaching them life-long skills that are beneficial to the quality of their life and future success. The participants also noted some limitations within their field, the most crucial of which was a lack of access to resources and time. What is important, however, is that the participants recognized the importance of building a community and building “deep meaningful relationships” with their students, as a way of supporting their students’ emotional well-being. Some other crucial components, as recognized by the participants, are having students’ voices be heard in the classroom, through problem-posing, inquiry-based teachings.

The findings of this study are beneficial to the lives of many students in Ontario, as it is a way to respond to the TDSB mental health and well-being initiative. It is crucial to support students’ mental well-being and its significance has been highly emphasized within the new TDSB strategy. It is important that all teachers are informed on the ways of which they could recognize and help students with their emotional well-being.
References


Christenson, S. L., Rounds, T., & Gorney, D. (1992). Family factors and student achievement:


Appendices

Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: ___________________

Dear ________________,

My name is Sania Abdolah-Salimi and I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. For the purposes of investigating an educational topic as the thesis for our program, I am interested to learn about how teachers are instructionally responsive to students’ emotional well-being in everyday class. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide great insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at OISE. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr. ________________. My research supervisor is ________________. The study has undergone a rigorous review process and has met the ethical standards of the University of Toronto. My data collection consists of a 40 minute interview that will be tape-recorded and then transcribed for further analysis. I would be grateful if you would allow me to conduct the interview at a time and place convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.

Once I have finished transcribing the interview, I will send you a copy for your feedback, at which point you’ll have the opportunity to make any changes. Your insights, interpretations, and suggestions regarding the transcript and my preliminary re-telling of your story are welcome.

The contents of this interview will be used for my Master’s thesis, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything that may identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. You could even modify your own pseudonym, until you are satisfied with the degree of your anonymity in the data. This information will at all times remain confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment will be my research supervisor and my course instructor.

You are free to change your mind at any time, and to even withdraw after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific question. I will destroy the tape recording
after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share a copy of my notes with you, to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Researcher name: Sania Abdolah-Salimi

Phone number, email: (416) 500-9972, sania.abdolah.salimi@mail.utoronto.ca

Instructor’s Name: _____________________________  Phone number: ________________  Email: ________________

Research Supervisor’s Name: _____________________________  Phone #: ________________  Email: ________________

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Sania Abdolah-Salimi and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described to me.

Signature: _____________________________

Name (printed): _____________________________

Date: _____________________________
Appendix B: Interview Questions

Research Questions:

- Main: How do a sample of teachers instructionally respond to students’ emotional wellness through holistic teaching practices?

  o Sub 1 - What does emotional wellness mean to participating teachers?

  o Sub 2 - What indicators of emotional wellness and/or distress do these teachers look for and see in their classroom teaching?

  o Sub 3 - What are these teachers’ perceptions of how students respond to these instructional practices?

  o Sub 4 – What range of factors and resources support and/or challenge teachers in this work?

Background Information of Interviewee

1) To begin, can you tell me about your current position? What grade/subjects do you teach and where?

2) How long have you been a teacher?

3) Have you always worked in the public school system?
4) Currently, you are working at the [name of school]. How did you come to find yourself working there?

5) Before working at this school, did you have an interest in holistic education? If yes, how did you develop that interest? What kinds of experiences have informed your interest in holistic education?

6) If no, what were you early impressions of holistic education, as it is conceptualized at Equinox?

7) What does holistic education mean to you? What are learning goals that you associate with holistic education? What are instructional strategies that you associate with holistic education?

8) Can you tell me more about how holistic education fits within your philosophy of education and teaching? (probe: How would you describe your role as teacher? What are your pedagogical priorities? How do you define success?)

9) Are you familiar with the new TDSB initiative (Mental Health and Well-Being Strategy)? What are your thoughts and expectations of this new initiative? What do you think this new initiative will achieve?

10) Where do you see opportunities for addressing mental health and emotional wellness in and through the curriculum?

11) How do you conceptualize students’ mental health? What kinds of considerations do you account for?

12) How do you conceptualize emotional wellness? What does that mean and look like to you?
13) What kinds of indicators do you notice/look for in assessing students’ mental health and emotional needs?

14) To what extent do you observe students struggling in the area of emotional wellness? What do you believe to be some of the reasons behind this?

15) Can you tell me more about how you instructionally respond to these struggles? Can you give me an example and describe for me in detail what occurred?

16) In the case of your example, how did your student respond? In general, how do your students respond to instruction aimed at being responsive to their mental health and emotional wellness? What indicators do you pay attention to in assessing their response?

17) Based on your teaching experience, how important do you believe students' mental well-being is for their academic achievements and successes?

**Supports and Challenges**

18) What kinds of resources and factors support your work in this area?

19) What challenges do you encounter doing this work? Can you give me an example of a time when you struggled? How did you respond to these challenges?

20) If you could make further recommendations to the education system on how best to support students’ emotional wellness in and through schools, what would you recommend?