Teaching Emotion Regulation to Kindergarten Students: Teachers’ Perspectives and Practices

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative research project was to learn what perspectives a small sample of kindergarten teachers in Ontario hold in regards to teaching emotion regulation, a skill that is proven to be vital for students’ social-emotional development, and how these perspectives inform their practice. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with two kindergarten teachers who work in publicly funded schools in Ontario. Interview transcripts were analysed and the emerged themes were organized into four main themes: the strategies used by the participants to teach their students to regulate their emotions; the outcomes they observed; the resources that helped to inform their practice; and the barriers and challenges they were facing in the area of teaching emotion regulation. Findings suggest that although teachers’ training programs were not identified as a main resource in this area, participants sought support from their colleagues to improve their practices and learn effective strategies to teach emotion regulation. Implications for the education community and personal practice are discussed, and recommendations are made for the Ontario College of Teachers and the faculties of education across Ontario to increase the emphasis being put on the social-emotional development of children in teachers’ preparation programs.

Key Words: Emotion regulation; social-emotional development; teaching strategies.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Introduction

Every day, children experience a variety of different emotions. These emotions, positive or negative, vary in their intensity and in the way they are being expressed. The processes of emotional regulation entail monitoring, evaluating, and modifying our emotional experiences (Thompson, 1994). These processes are critical in children’s development, learning, and relationship building, especially in the early childhood (Kostelnik, Gregory, Soderman, & Whiren, 2012). Therefore, the study of emotion and its regulation has become popular throughout the last two decades, and developmental psychologists have been exhaustively investigating people’s emotion regulation and the behaviour related to emotion (Eisenberg & Sulik, 2012) – what Eisenberg and Spinrad (2004) labeled as emotion-related self-regulation.

Children start to develop the ability to regulate their own behaviour early in their toddler years, and it continues to develop rapidly throughout the preschool years (Kopp, 1982; Rothbart & Bates, 2006). While early in life, infants require the caregiver’s help in order to regulate their emotions using soothing or distraction techniques, pre-school age children are able to acquire such strategies on their own (Eisenberg & Sulik, 2012; Kostelnik et al., 2012). These abilities continue to develop in the late preschool and early school years, as young children rely less on adults to help them regulate their emotions, and emerges throughout middle childhood and adolescence (Eisenberg & Morris, 2002; Eisenberg & Sulik, 2012).

As the typical development is affected by a variety of factors such as the child’s temperament (Ahadi & Rothbart, 1994; Rothbart & Bates, 2006), parent-child attachment, and brain development (Eisenberg & Morris, 2002), we can expect different levels of development,
especially at a younger age, when the emotional competency is still emerging (Eisenberg & Morris, 2002). Nevertheless, the research indicates that impairments in the development of these competencies, have some critical implications on children’s social competencies, behavior problems, and academic achievements as early as preschool years (Gallingane and Han 2015). These implications are discussed in detail in chapter 2.

One of the most powerful impacts of emotion related self-regulation has been found to be related to various aspects of social competencies (Eisenberg & Sulik, 2012; Hessler & Katz, 2007). Moreover, the ability to adaptively regulate one’s own emotions is linked to closer relationships with the teacher, and to a better adjustment in the classroom environment (Shields, Dickstein, Seifer, Giusti, Magee & Spritz, 2001). Since learning is embedded within a social context (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, and Walberg, 2007) the linkage between children’s social competencies and their academic success is only natural. That way, when children interact successfully with their peers and teachers, many classroom learning tasks become easier, as more personal resources are available to focus on learning (Denham & Brown, 2010).

1.1 Research Problem

Due to the critical implications mentioned here, it is becoming ever clearer that emotion related regulation must be given the required attention, and that students must be able to utilize their emotions (Denham & Brown, 2010; Eisenberg & Sulik, 2012). During the preschool and kindergarten years, children’s nascent abilities to manage their emotional arousal are being constantly challenged by everyday tasks typical of this context such as to follow directions, approach group play, and complete pre-academic skills in an organized fashion (Denham & Brown, 2010). The early year’s experiences are crucial as they can set the stage for more generalized school problems (McLoyd, 1998). In order to facilitate the development of emotion
related regulation, children should be provided with guidance in forms of examples on how to adjust their emotions, and safe environment in which they can discuss their emotions and practice their regulation (Gallingane and Han, 2015), with the purpose of teaching them how to eventually regulate their emotions on their own (Eisenberg & Morris, 2002).

According to the latest revision of the kindergarten curriculum - The Kindergarten Program (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016), policy makers are well informed of the important role emotion regulation competency has in the early childhood years. The growing emphasis that the Ontario Ministry of Education has been giving to the development of emotion related self-regulation during these years is demonstrated in The Kindergarten program, and its significance is evident throughout different parts in the policy document (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016).

However, the research indicates some barriers related to the implication of this policy, suggesting that some educators’ views do not seem to align with those of the policy makers. Opponents of emotional intelligence literacy programs are doubting its relevance, and claim that due to time limitations, schools should be concentrating on academic achievements solely (Zeidner, Roberts & Matthews, 2002; Zins, Elias, Greenberg & Weissberg, 2000). In addition to this barrier, teachers’ training does not normally include courses on social and emotional development in childhood, nor does it commonly require them to take such courses, leaving the teacher without the necessary tools needed in order to understand the relations between emotion, cognition and behaviour (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). These tools have been found to have critical impact on the successful implementation of prevention programs which usually do not include trainings or instructions for the teacher as if assuming that they are prepared to act as an effective emotional coach and role model (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). As a result, emotional
competence deficiencies are only seldom addressed explicitly and efficiently in schools (Denham, Blair, Schmidt, & DeMulder, 2002).

1.2 Purpose of the Study

In light of this problem, the purpose of this qualitative study is to learn what perspectives a small sample of kindergarten teachers in Ontario hold in regards to teaching emotion regulation, a skill that is proven to be vital for their students’ social and academic development, and how these perspectives affect their practice. I aim to understand which strategies they use and what the benefits of using these strategies are, as well as some of the barriers they have. I intend to share these findings primarily with policy makers and teachers training institutions, in order to inform them about the necessary steps to facilitate the implementation of this policy, and improve the status quo. Furthermore, I intend to share these findings with teachers, parents and other educators who are looking for practical ways to facilitate the development of children’s emotion related self-regulation skills and help those who have difficulties with their development.

1.3 Research Questions

With the intention of fulfilling the research purpose, the overarching research question guiding this study is: What are kindergarten teachers’ perspectives on teaching students to self-regulate their emotions in early years learning, and how do their perspectives inform their practice?

The following subsidiary questions are also investigated:

- What are some of the strategies they use in order to help their students to self-regulate their emotions?
• What outcomes do they observe in their students ability to regulate their emotions?
• What are some of the barriers and challenges they are facing with in this area?
• What resources do they use to learn how to better help their students, and how are these resources improve their professional practice in emotional education?

1.4 Background of the Researcher

As someone who worked as a kindergarten teacher for a short time, I was able to observe some noticeable difficulties a few of my students had regulating their emotions when they were experiencing strong emotions. One of the students I was especially connected to, was experiencing social difficulties, which seem to be a result of his emotion regulation deficit. Conversations with his caregiver confirmed my suspicions, as she shared with me the concerns parents had when she tried to initiate “play-dates” with some of his classroom peers. They admitted to be concerned from his unexpected emotional outbreaks, which sometimes resulted in aggression. As his teacher, I learned over time to recognise the cues that preceded the outbursts of his anger when he, for example, did not get the toy he wanted, and each time it happened I helped him calm down. What I did not know is how to teach him to calm himself down and regulate his emotion independently. I started to develop a strong interest in what causes these difficulties, and especially what I can do in order to help students self-regulate their emotions. I felt that this stage in their emotional development is crucial for the proper development of other social and cognitive skills.

Being a student teacher, I know that teachers’ education programs are not able to prepare teachers to these challenges, due to the mass of knowledge it needs to deliver. Knowing that many students are having difficulties in emotion related self-regulation, I am interested in learning how teachers are dealing with these issues, and learn strategies that will help me
develop my students’ emotion regulation skills. As a future teacher, I believe that knowing how to support my students through their emotional development is as important as supporting their intellectual development.

1.5 Preview of the Whole

To respond to the research questions conducted a qualitative research study using a purposeful sampling to interview 3 kindergarten teachers about their perspectives regarding teaching students how to self-regulate their emotions. In Chapter 2 I review the literature in the following areas: factors related to emotion regulation; implications for deficits in emotion regulation; strategies the research find to be beneficial in teaching students emotion related self-regulation; the developmental stage of emotion regulation in kindergarten; and challenges teachers have in relation to teaching emotion regulation. Next, in Chapter 3 I elaborate on the research design. In Chapter 4 I report my research findings and discuss their significance in light of the existing research literature, and in Chapter 5 I identify the implications of the research findings for my own teacher identity and practice, and for the educational research community more broadly. I also articulate a series of questions raised by the research findings, and point to areas for future research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

In this chapter I review the relevant literature to my research topic. I start by the definition of the term emotion regulation and the different distinctions made in the literature between the types of emotion regulation. Next, I explain some of the most important factors found to be affecting the typical development of emotion related self-regulation, which are temperament and personality, and parent-child attachment, and I elaborate on the influence of each one of them. I continue by discussing the implications of impairments in the skill’s development, concentrating on possible behaviour problems, deficits in social competencies, and school readiness and academic achievement. In the following section I offer possible solutions and strategies that have been found to be affective in improving children’s ability to regulate their emotions. The developmental stage of kindergarten students in relation to emotion regulation is being discussed, followed by the barriers and challenges faced by teachers in this area including their preparation to teaching emotion related self-regulation and their perspectives and willingness to do so.

2.1 What is Emotion Regulation?

The term emotion related self-regulation has been defined by Thompson (1994) as the "extrinsic and intrinsic processes responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions, especially their intensive and temporal features, to achieve one's goals" (p. 27-28). One of the specific goals of emotion regulation is to be able to function in an adaptive and manageable way during emotionally arousing situation (Cicchetti, Ganiban, & Barnett, 1991). Eisenberg and Morris (2002), expended Thompson’s definition, and claimed that in addition to the behavioural aspect of emotional reaction, the outcome of the processes of emotion
regulation, includes the aspects of internal feeling states, physiological processes related to emotions, and emotion related goals. Their addition to Thompson’s definition is especially relevant in regards to learning processes, in which dysregulation of students emotional state can result in distraction that does not necessarily include a behavioural outcome, but can still affect their attention.

Although the processes of regulation of internal states and the processes of the regulation of overt behaviors associated with emotion are somewhat intertwined, Eisenberg and Morris (2002) differentiate between them: The regulation of internal states involves the abilities to shift and focus attention as needed (Derryberry & Rothbart, 1988), whereas emotion-related behavioural regulation includes control or modulation of facial and gestural reactions and other overt behaviors related to the emotional state (Eisenberg, Fabes, Guthrie, & Reiser, 2000). Another important distinction is between regulations that are goal oriented, though not necessarily conscious, versus unintentional regulation (Eisenberg & Spinard, 2004). This distinction is important as according to Eisenberg and Spinard (2004), not all the reactions in an emotional situation should be considered as types of emotion regulation.

In regards to children, emotion regulation is used to refer to the behaviours and strategies they use to cope with the experience of negative emotions. They may look for a solution to the situation, seek for adult’s support, react aggressively, or simply cry (Denham et al., 2002). When their strategies for regulating their emotions do not meet their goals or their social partners’ expectations, new strategies need to be taught.

Well-regulated individuals are likely to have optimal levels of control, and the capacity to initiate socially acceptable actions as needed. While under controlled children tend to be more impulsive, overly controlled children are timid, constrained, and lack flexibility in novel
situations (Eisenberg & Morris, 2002). Well-regulated individuals are also expected to be relatively high in controlling their attention and behaviour voluntarily in order to respond in an adaptive manner, thus including effort in controlling their reactions (Ahadi & Rothbart, 1994; Eisenberg & Morris, 2002). Emotion regulation processes can occur before the arousal of the emotion by prevention or avoidance, or during and after the arousal by creating circumstances that foster a different (Eisenberg & Spinard, 2004).

2.2 Factors Affecting Emotion Regulation Development

The development of children’s emotion-related self-regulation appears to be related to many aspects of children’s development. The research in this area has been very extensive and can be divided into three major areas: physiology, heredity, and environment. Due to the focus and the extant of this research I have decided to include in this literature review only the major factors that are related to heredity (temperament and personality) and environment (parent-child attachment). I chose these two since the physiological factors, although important to be familiar with, seem to belong to a discussion on children with special needs - a discussion that is separate from this research. Thus, as long as there are no issues related to the typical development of the brain, the physical aspect of the development is similar to all children. On the other hand, factors related to heredity and environment are related and affecting each other, and could be affecting any child. I start by discussing temperament and personality, and continue to discuss parent-child attachment as it could have a major effect on the child’s temperament. It is important to note that other facets of parental socialization of emotion regulation such as reactions to children’s emotions, expression of emotion in the family or toward the child, and discussion of emotion have been a topic of considerable research (Eisenberg, Spinrad, and Eggum, 2010). However, parent-child attachment seems to be one of the most researched topics in relation to children’s
emotion regulation and the first critical milestone in emotional learning (Denham & Burton, 1996).

2.2.1 Temperament and personality

Rothbart and Bates (2006) have defined child temperament as individual differences in reactivity and self-regulation, including motivation, affect, inhibitory control, and attention characteristics. The differences between children’s temperamental characteristics have been found to affect the skills related to emotion regulation and the strategies children develop to regulate their emotion (Cassidy, 1994; Eisenberg & Sulik, 2012; John & Gross, 2004; Kostelnik et al., 2012; Zalewski, Lengua, Wilson, Trancik, & Bazinet, 2011). These variances in emotional reactivity and regulation have strong genetic contributions and appear very early in life, making it easy or difficult for children to learn and develop special kinds of emotion regulation skills and strategies (John & Gross, 2004). For example, Zimmermann and Stansbury (2003) found that toddlers with inhibited and withdrawn temperamental style were using help-seeking behaviours and tend to hide their emotions. Moreover, a child’s emotional and behavioural response in an emotionally evocative situation is affected by his/her temperamental characteristics of reactivity and effortful control (Zalewski et al., 2011). When Zalewski et al. (2011) examined the relations of emotion regulation to preadolescents’ temperament and adjustment, they found that temperament is linked to adjustment problems through children’s emotion regulation during challenging or provocative situations.

With individual development, these early temperamental dispositions become the core of the personality traits that have been associated with specific ER strategies (John & Gross, 2004). John and Gross (2004) found that neurotic people are prone to experience extremely high levels of negative emotions and since overwhelmed by these feelings, it is harder for them to develop
and implement positive strategies to regulate their emotions. In contrast, people who were more extraverted tend to develop emotion regulation strategies that were more adaptive (John & Gross 2004). Although individual differences in self-regulatory capacities seem to have a substantial heritable component, Eisenberg, Spinrad, and Eggum (2010) suggested that environmental factors are likely to have an effect on these genes and may moderate them.

2.2.2 Parent-child attachment

The attachment theory has been frequently used by theorists to explore the role of the emotional relationship between young children and their caregivers in children’s emotional development, and has been found to be a mainly important factor to this developmental process (Eisenberg & Morris, 2002; Kopp, 1989). The way that affect is being expressed and used by the caregiver during interaction with the child builds their security of attachment and contributes to emotion understanding (Laible & Thompson, 1998). According to Kopp (1989), the caregiver’s help to express the child’s emotions, especially the negative ones, and their guidance towards developing socially acceptable strategies to reduce their distress is vital, as it gradually builds their capacity for a self-directed emotion regulation rather than relying on external assistance.

Throughout the first year of life, the child develops a “working model” – the child’s expectations of the caregiver’s behaviour based on their daily interactions with them. This working model, is argued to have a primary influence on the development of emotion regulation as it provides the basis for future social and emotional expectations and interactions (Cassidy, 1994). According to the theory, securely attached children develop an expectation that their caregivers will responsively and consistently respond to their emotional signals and needs. Therefore, they learn to express their emotions in an emotional supportive environment, which enhances the development of their emotion regulation (Cassidy, 1994). On the contrary, insecurely attached
children are likely to restrict their display of emotions, or display negative emotions to attract their caregiver’s attention, and will suffer from a delay in the development of emotion regulation as a result of the expectation that their emotional needs will not be responded to or will be responded in a selective and inconsistent manner (Thompson, Flood, & Lundquist, 1995). Moreover, insecure children are less likely to be willing and able to learn about emotions, due to their need to contain their own distress, and they are more likely to be flooded by aversive emotions (Laible & Thompson, 1998).

Further classifications in the attachment theory has differed between four attachment patterns: insecure-avoidant, insecure-resistant (also called insecure-ambivalent or insecure-anxious), secure, and, lastly, disorganized (Zimmer-Gembeck, Webb, Pepping, Swan, Merlo, Ellen, et al. 2015; Zimmermann & Iwanski 2015). In their review, Zimmer-Gembeck et al. (2015) showed that attachment have small to moderate associations with coping and emotion regulation in toddlerhood, childhood, and adolescence. However, their overall conclusion was that further research is needed in order to determine the antecedent power of any of the attachment patterns on adaptive coping and emotion regulation.

2.3 Impacts of Deficits in Emotion Regulation

The importance of the typical development of emotion regulation skills lies in the many negative implications of the deficits in the ability to self-regulate one’s emotions. Research shows that children who lack the ability to calm themselves down suffer from behaviour problems, they are less socially accepted, and are less successful in school when compared to students that have mastered the skill. In this section I elaborate on these effects and their different forms as presented in the current literature, and discuss the interconnectedness of these three areas.
2.3.1 Behaviour problems

Deficits in the ability to regulate emotions was found to be an important risk factor of aggressive behaviour in childhood age, as oppose to children who are better able to calm themselves when upset, who were found to exhibit fewer aggressive and anxious behaviours (Denham et al., 2002; Miller, Fine, Gouley, Seifer, Dickstein & Shields, 2006; Röll, Koglin & Petermann, 2012). Denham et al. (2002) found that, according to teachers’ reports, children who were experiencing more anger but were not able to appropriately regulate their emotions, had oppositional problems 2 years later. Externalizing problems were also associated to differences in self-regulation, while children's regulation predicted a decline in externalizing problems over time, even when controlling for early levels of these variables (Eisenberg & Morris, 2002; Rothbart & Bates, 2006). This link between externalizing problems and emotion regulation was significant primarily for children high in negative emotionality (Eisenberg & Morris, 2002).

A related skill which contributes to aggressive reactiveness is children’s ability to interpret cues in social interactions – children who behave aggressively when provoked had deficits in the ability to read social cues, and showed intense negative emotion (Dodge, Lochman, Harnish, Bates, & Pettit, 1997). This important aspect of emotion understanding in the social information processing, which was identified by Lemerise and Arsenio (2000), together with unregulated negative emotion during preschool, were related to kindergartners’ behavior problems (Denham et al., 2002).

2.3.2 Social competencies

In addition to the mediated relation between emotion regulation and social competencies by behaviour problems, research is indicating on a direct relation, possibly explained by the
children’s emotional state – well-regulated children are more available for social interaction and are less consumed by the intense emotions that often accompany early peer conflicts (Eisenberg & Sulik, 2012; Hessler & Katz, 2007; Miller, Fine, et al., 2006). Emotionally healthy children are better able to enter into positive relationships, and are more liked by others due to their sympathetic behavior, and their tendency to help others, and share with them (Shields et al., 2001). In contrast, children who are more angry, and less able to react calmly in social interactions, are at risk for peer difficulty, and experience less wellbeing (Denham et al., 2002).

In their longitudinal work, Eisenberg and Morris (2002) found that 4-6 years old children’s ability to control their attention (i.e., shifting and focusing attention) as reported by their teachers, predicted their socially appropriate behaviour, popularity, aggression, and disruptive behaviour at school 2, 4, and 6 years later. Attentional control was also successful in predicting their sociometric status and the use of appropriate language to manage anger and frustration during social interactions (Eisenberg & Morris, 2002). Additionally, emotionally intense preschoolers and elementary children who poorly regulate their emotions, show difficulties in maintaining positive social behavior and have more troubled relationships with peers (Denham et al., 2002; Eisenberg, Fabes, Bernzweig, Karbon, Poulin, & Hanish, 1993).

2.3.3 School readiness, classroom adjustment, and academic achievement

When students enter the school arena, they are required to collaborate with teachers and peers, as part of the learning process, and, thus, must be able to successfully regulate their emotions (Denham & Brown 2010). Since learning is embedded within a social context, children who demonstrate this ability show more school/classroom adjustment and academic achievement, specifically showing positive attitudes about and involvement with school; greater attachment to school; an aggregate evaluating pre-academic progress, cooperation and
engagement in the classroom; creation of relationships with staff, and ultimately greater academic success and enjoyment of school (Ladd, Birch & Buhs, 1999; Shields et al., 2001; Zins et al., 2007). Raver and Knitzer (2002) found that young children with emotional and social competencies participate more in the classroom, and are given more instruction and positive feedback by teachers, whereas without these competencies, they had greater likelihood to dislike school and perform poorly on academic tasks.

A possible explanation to these links has been suggested by Denham and Brown (2010), who proposed that as opposed to those who can maintain a positive emotional tone and remain positively engaged with classroom tasks, those who have difficulties dealing with negative emotions may not have the personal resources to focus on learning. This assumption was corroborated by researchers who observed preschoolers’ emotion regulation in the classroom and found that mild negative emotional expressiveness was negatively related to teachers’ ratings of the children’s persistence and learning attitudes, and that emotional dysregulation was negatively related to teachers’ ratings of children’s motivation to learn (Miller, Seifer, Stroud, Sheinkopf & Dickstein, 2006). Further support to Denham and Brown’s suggestion (2010), shows that dysregulated emotions can affect children’s focus and interfere with their cognitive functioning, while appropriately regulated emotions can support advanced cognitive functions, such as attending to details, setting goals, planning, problem solving, and decision making (Raver, Garner, & Smith-Donald, 2007).

In relation to kindergarten readiness, kindergarten teachers have reported that regulatory aspects of children’s behavior are essential for kindergarten readiness, and, in turn, kindergartners’ emotion regulation predicts their attentional regulation in first grade, which predicts their academic success (Bodrova & Leong, 2006; Trentacosta and Izard, 2007).
2.4 What Can Be Done?

The increased awareness for the importance of developing the social-emotional aspect in children has led many researchers to compose and examine different programs with the purpose of improving children’s social-emotional skills. The first strategy I included provides practical ways to teach emotions vocabulary, in order to facilitate an appropriate expression of emotions. The other two are school wide programs that emphasize the social-emotional aspect in children’s development, and although they do not focus on emotion regulation skills, they as well provide practical strategies for addressing this issue. These two programs require the teacher’s training prior to their implementation and the cooperation of the school community.

2.4.1 Teaching emotions vocabulary

Teaching emotion words to young children has been found to improve children’s understanding of their own emotions and the emotions of others as well as to help them manage their emotional state (Gallingane and Han, 2015). With the ability to understand emotions, Gallingane and Han (2015) anticipate the development of empathy, the ability to communicate their emotions including in situations that cause strong emotions, and the ability to regulate their emotions. According to Kostelnik et al. (2012), when children have the precise word to express their emotions, it can substitute a possible physical reaction. Reading storybooks aloud is one excellent strategy to teach emotions vocabulary to children as they contain many sophisticated words and expose them to a variety of situations that they have yet to experience which evoke emotions (Gallingane and Han 2015). By doing so, children are able to recall the emotion when they experience a similar situation, and are better able to communicate their emotions (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2013; Gallingane and Han 2015). Gallingane and Han (2015) continue and elaborate on the specific strategies to be used when using a storybook to teach emotion
vocabulary including the introduction of the book to activate prior knowledge, introducing the written word in context before reading the story, explaining the meaning of the word, and other strategies that teachers mostly use to teach vocabulary. They do, however, stress the importance of asking specific questions which require the students to use the new word when they answer, creating a discussion to connect the word to the students’ experiences, and provide visual demonstrations of the appropriate expression of the emotion.

2.4.2 Second Step: a school wide program

Second Step is a worldwide research based program designed for violence prevention and social-emotional learning (Frey, Hirschstein, & Guzzo, 2000). In a review of the research which examined the outcomes of this program, Frey, Hirschstein, and Guzzo (2000) concluded that Second Step can effectively decrease physical aggression, change attitudes that support aggression, and increase sociable interaction between students. Although the main focus of this program is not on teaching students to regulate their emotion, it consists of some very important components of emotion understanding and emotion regulation and shows it can be taught. Moreover, the outcomes of this program implementation support the research that links between emotion regulation deficit and behaviour problem as they demonstrate how the acquisition of social and emotional skills reduces aggressive behaviour (Frey, Hirschstein, & Guzzo, 2000).

This violence prevention program was first published in 1986 and has been widely used from preschool to middle school in the United States and Canada (Frey, Hirschstein, & Guzzo, 2000). Although classroom teachers or counselors deliver the program, training is provided to all school staff and parents to create school environment that support positive social behaviours (Frey, Hirschstein, & Guzzo, 2000).
The program’s curriculum consists of three units which teach competences in the area of
empathy, social problem solving and impulse control along with specific behavioural skills
(Frey, Hirschstein, & Guzzo, 2000). The first unit focuses on three components of empathy:
recognizing feelings in self and others, considering others’ perspectives, and responding
emotionally to others. Students practice communicating and accurately interpreting emotional
expressions, practice perspective-taking skills, participate in role playing scenes of common
social problems, and share personal experiences and reactions to hypothetical situations (Frey,
Hirschstein, & Guzzo, 2000). The second unit, social problem solving, teaches the students a
five-step problem solving strategy in which they identify the problem; brainstorm for solutions;
evaluate the possible solutions; try the selected solution; and evaluate the solution and the next
steps (Frey, Hirschstein, & Guzzo, 2000). One of the strategies the students are being taught that
can also be used to regulate their emotions is the use of verbal mediation or “self-talk” to remind
themselves to control impulses and think about the consequences of their actions (Frey,
Hirschstein, & Guzzo, 2000).

The third and the most relevant to emotion regulation unit is anger management. In this
unit students are taught to recognize anger cues in their bodies and use positive self-statement
and other stress-reduction techniques to calm themselves down. Once children learn what
triggers their emotions, through repeated modeling they practice strategies that will help them
inhibit impulsive and aggressive responses (Frey, Hirschstein, & Guzzo, 2000). The outcomes of
this program indicate that children who participated in this program showed significantly higher
social skills knowledge, such as knowing how to calm down when angry, than children who did
not participate in it (Frey, Hirschstein, & Guzzo, 2000).
**2.4.3 Multicomponent intervention**

In a study that presented the first field test to a multifaceted program to prevent negative long-term social-emotional outcome, Denham and Burton (1996) found that, when compared to children who did not experience the intervention, children showed a decrease in negative emotions and greater involvement and initiative in positive peer activity. The intervention included four components: Relationship building; understanding emotions; regulating emotions; and interpersonal cognitive problem solving (ICPS) (Denham & Burton, 1996). For each one of the research based components, the teachers received a one-day training session (Denham & Burton, 1996). In order to build positive relationships with the students, the teachers were encouraged to use “floor time” during play by observing the children, communicating with them, and promoting and expanding their play (Denham & Burton, 1996). The component of understanding and regulating emotions was accomplished by using activities that promote students’ understanding and labeling of emotions – exposure to emotion vocabulary, encouragement to use this vocabulary to label their own emotions as well as others’ emotions, and recognition that actions can cause emotions (Denham & Burton, 1996).

Once the students were able to recognise and label emotions, they were taught a technique called the Turtle Technique in which they imagine they are turtles, and forgather their body and relax their muscles when they feel angry or hurt (Denham & Burton, 1996). Using this technique helps to cope with emotional tension and provide time to regulate feelings, calm down, reflect on them, and eventually decide how to react. In the fourth component of the intervention, ICPS, the students were guided to generate multiple options, evaluate them, and use a step-by-step means to reach their goal (Denham & Burton, 1996). In addition to the four components, teachers were taught to investigate the history of the child in order to individualize the
intervention, and thus, increase its effectiveness. As expected by Denham and Burton (1996), the component of individualization had a positive effect on the intervention’s results. As in the Second Step program, although the teaching of emotion regulation was not the main purpose of the intervention, its components were targeting this area as a major factor in the development of social-emotional competencies.

2.5 Emotion Regulation in Kindergarten

Children’s ability to regulate their emotions, although completely unplanned, starts to evolve as early as their first three months of life and includes simple behaviours and reflexes (Kopp, 1989). Along with their cognitive development infants become more aware of different arousal states and realize they could be influenced by other people’s actions and their own actions; towards the first year of their life, they are able to further utilize their cognitive skills in order to shift their attention or distract themselves from a distressing stimuli (Eisenberg & Morris, 2002). The development of language around the age of two years is considered to be a valuable landmark in the ability of children to regulate their emotions as it allows them to communicate with others about their emotions and to obtain verbal feedback and instruction regarding the regulation of emotion and associated behavior (Kopp, 1989). As this trend continues to develop into the school years, children regulatory capacities increase and, therefore, the need to rely on adults to help them regulate their emotions decrease (Eisenberg & Morris, 2002; Eisenberg & Sulik, 2012). This increase, however, is suggested to be due not only to children’s cognitive and physical development, but also to adults’ raising expectations from them to manage their own emotions (Eisenberg & Morris, 2002).

In their extensive overview of some of the issues and findings related to emotion regulation development, Eisenberg & Morris (2002) concluded that in the first ten years of life,
especially the first four years, children's ability to regulate their own attention, emotion, and expression of emotion develops rapidly, thus allowing them to be better able to manage stress and emotion and to act in socially appropriate ways. For example, Cole (1986) found that during their preschool and school years children are better able to understand display rules and the strategic control of emotional expressions in social interactions. In addition, preschoolers begin to express a variety of vivid emotions, discern and talk about emotions, and cope with too intense, aversive, or distressing emotions (Denham, 1998). However, due to significant individual differences, many kindergarten children have yet to master the capacity to regulate their own emotions and the ability to understand basic emotions and to use complex behavioral and cognitive strategies to regulate emotions is still evolving (Denham, 1998; Trentacosta & Izard, 2007).

2.6 Challenges and Barriers

The main challenges faced by teachers when required to teach students how to regulate their emotions are their preparation in this area and their motivation to include this in their teaching practices. In fact, the training teachers receive in order to support their students’ social-emotional development is an important factor affecting their motivation to do so. Here, I examine these challenges and barriers as reflected from the literature.

2.6.1 Teachers’ preparation

Mayer and Salovey (1997) have recognized the important role teachers play in their students’ emotional development through modeling emotional behaviours and through explicit instruction. They argue that the school setting is probably one of the most important context for learning emotional skills (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). However, Zeidner, Roberts, and Matthews (2002) claim that the role of the teachers in this matter requires more attention and call social and
emotional education the “missing piece” from school’s mission. The preparation for teachers in
the area of social-emotional learning is rarely sufficient and include limited explanation that does
not support the development of the necessary skills and attitudes needed to successfully teach
emotion regulation skills (Elias, 2003; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Zins, Travis, Freppon,
1997).

When teachers lack the resources to effectively manage their students’ social and
emotional challenges, students show lower levels of on-task behaviour and performance, thus
might lead the teacher to use punishments as a response – a response which may contribute to
classroom disruptions and will not contribute to the development of their emotion regulation
skills (Marzano, Marzano, & Pickering, 2003; Osher, Sprague, Weissberg, Axelrod, Keenan,
Kendziora, et al., 2007). In contrast, when teachers are able to recognize the students’ emotions,
the cognition associated with them, and, thus, what motivates their behaviour, they can
effectively respond to the students’ individual needs and find ways to help the students regulate
their emotions (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

In order to be able to do so, teachers must understand how emotion regulation develops
and how to support its development. Therefore, social and emotional developmental issues,
should have a more prominent role in standardized teacher training curriculum (Jennings &
Greenberg, 2009; Poulou, 2005). Furthermore, Jennings and Greenberg (2009) have found that
although there are multiple programs aiming to teach emotion regulation among other social
emotional skills, these programs assume that teachers are prepared to teach these skills and act as
a role model. This is a concerning finding, especially because the quality of teacher
implementation has been proved to be an influencing factor on the outcomes of social-emotional
learning programs at the elementary level (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group,
Hence, high quality training is critical to ensuring the quality of implementation (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Zeidner, Roberts, & Matthews, 2002). To ensure the quality of the implementation of intervention programs teachers should participate in professional development training programs before and during the implementation that will include periodic on-site consultations (Zeidner, Roberts, & Matthews, 2002).

2.6.2 Teachers’ motivation

One of the consequences of teachers’ unpreparedness to teach emotion regulation is related to their willingness to teach emotional competencies and their perspectives on including them in the curriculum. Some educators doubt the necessity of teaching these competencies and prioritize academic achievements due to time limitations (Zeidner, Roberts, & Matthews, 2002; Zins et al., 2000). Part of their reluctance is related to the lack of confidence in regards to teaching a topic that was not part of their training and routines (Zeidner, Roberts, & Matthews, 2002). Frey, Hirschstein, and Guzzo (2000) noted that even in cases where there is sufficient training on how to implement a particular intervention program, it requires an adjustment period in which teachers are still learning important elements of the program and efficient ways to implement and integrate it with the academic curriculum. During this adjustment period intervention programs might be perceived as time consuming and as contributing to teachers’ stress without knowing the positive long term outcomes they could have on academic achievements (Frey, Hirschstein, & Guzzo, 2000).

An additional aspect that might contribute to the absence of teacher’s motivation to teach emotion regulation is related to the unnoticeable outcomes of intervention programs. For example, the decrease in aggression in the “Second Step” intervention program which was reviewed earlier was found to be modest, whereas students in the control group showed an
increase in aggression over the school year, suggesting a natural rise in students’ aggressive
behaviours over the course of the school year (Frey, Hirschstein, & Guzzo, 2000). Since teachers
do not commonly have access to comparative data on control groups and are unable to predict
what their students would be like without using the program, they might conclude that it is not
worthy of their time and effort (Frey, Hirschstein, & Guzzo, 2000).

2.7 Conclusion

In this literature review I looked at research on the definition of emotion related self-
regulation, the different factors affecting the typical development of emotion regulation skills,
the negative results of deficits of these skills, and the possible solutions and strategies suggested
by researchers. I also expanded on the developmental stage of these skills in the kindergarten age
in order to better understand the challenges and barriers discussed later. This review elucidates
the extent that attention has been paid to the impacts of impairments in the skill of emotion
regulation, emphasizing the importance of supporting and fostering the skill’s development as
early as possible. It also raises questions about the lack of research that examines simple
strategies that can help teachers in this matter without being part of a school wide program, and
points to the need for further research in this area. In light of this, the purpose of my research is
to learn about teachers’ perspectives on this issue and what helps them when teaching their
students emotion regulation. This will provide additional valuable information to the community
of educators on how to improve their practice. In the next chapter, I describe the research
methodology that I used for this research and justify my choices.
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.0 Introduction

In this chapter I describe the research methodology and identify the justifications for methodological decisions I have made given the research purpose and questions. I begin by reviewing of the research approach and procedures before describing the main instrument of data collection. I then elaborate more specifically on the participants’ sampling criteria and recruitment. I proceed by describing the data analysis procedures and review the ethical considerations pertinent to my study. Relatedly, I identify a range of methodological limitations, while also highlighting and acknowledging the strength of the methodology. Lastly, I conclude the chapter with a brief summary of key methodological decisions and my rational for these decisions given the research purpose and questions.

3.1 Research Approach and Procedures

This research study was conducted using a qualitative research approach involving a review of the literature pertinent to the research questions and the purpose of the study and semi-structured interviews with two to three teachers. As opposed to quantitative research methods, which seek to provide quantified answers to research questions, qualitative methods are being used for the purpose of developing an understanding of social phenomena in their natural setting through emphasizing the meanings, experiences, and views of the participants (Campbell, 2014; Pope & Mays, 1995). Moreover, qualitative research can reveal aspects of complex behaviours, attitudes, and interactions that cannot be revealed when using quantitative methods (Pope & Mays, 1995). According to Cooley (2013), for the means of attempting to understand the complexities of education and processes of schooling, this is the most robust and inclusive method that can be used. Given the nature of the questions that arise from educational
environments and the experiences that occur during school years, it is not surprising that the use of qualitative methods in education has shifted dramatically from being an isolated activity to now being used by countless educational researches as well as teachers through action research; As a result, the understanding of the complexities of everyday educational predicaments and social interactions has increased (Cooley, 2013).

In relation to the purpose of the study and its research question, the use of qualitative study is essential for understanding the teacher’s perspectives in regards to issues related to emotion regulation and teaching this skill. The meanings, experiences and views of the participants cannot be revealed using quantitative methods, for these would yield numerical, objective data. Since quantitative and qualitative studies can complement each other (Pope & Mays, 1995), understanding teachers’ perspectives could lead to finding causal relationship between their perspectives to the success or failure of new policies in this matter.

3.2 Instruments of Data Collection

In order to learn about teachers’ perspectives, the primary instrument for data collection used in this study is one-to-one semi-structured interview protocol. Semi-structured interviews consist of open-ended questions planned ahead of time and designed to move the interview from one topic to the next as well as prompts that the interviewer might use during the interview to stimulate the conversation or to show the interviewee he is listening (Olsen, 2012). The purpose of semi-structured interviews is to provide the researcher with insights into mechanisms, processes, views, experiences, beliefs, reasons for action, social structures and other phenomena; insights that cannot be achieved by using unstructured or structured interview (Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008; Olsen, 2012). While semi-structured interviews help to define the areas to be explored by consisting several key questions, they also allow the interview to be
diverged towards an idea or a topic that was not initially planned or to deepen the conversation in this matter (Gill et al., 2008). That way, the semi-structured interview allows for the discovery or elaboration of information that is important to the participant, but may not have previously been thought of as pertinent by the researcher and, therefore, provides a deeper understanding of the phenomena (Gill et al., 2008).

Due to the depth of information they provide, I chose to use semi-structured interviews to collect the information for this research. The semi-structured interview protocol in this research (located in Appendix B) is organized into 5 sections, beginning with the participant’s background information, followed by questions about their perspectives and beliefs regarding emotion regulation, then their experiences related to emotion regulation and the challenges they may have encountered, and concluding with questions regarding the next steps they think need to be taken to improve the status quo.

3.3 Participants

Here I review the sampling criteria I established for participant recruitment and justify these criteria in relation to the research purpose and questions. I also introduce the methods I used for participant recruitment and explain the rationale behind it. Lastly, I have included a section wherein I introduce each of the participants in this research and provide information on their professional background and experiences.

3.3.1 Sampling criteria

According to the literature I reviewed in regards to the developmental stage of emotion regulation, children in kindergarten age continue to develop this skill. In order to learn about kindergarten teachers’ perspectives, it is important for my research that the teachers I interview
are currently teaching in kindergarten. Since the experiences they had in relation to children’s emotion regulation are part of their everyday teaching, the memories of these experiences are vivid in their memory and not something they need to recall. I believe that even a short gap between different teaching experiences could make it harder for the interviewees to be able to describe a relevant incident. For example, a teacher who taught kindergarten in the past year, but who is currently teaching grade 3, would be prone to remember more of her grade 3 teaching experience rather than the kindergarten teaching experience.

The second sampling criteria relates to the new Full Day Kindergarten (FDK) curriculum in Ontario and its emphasize on social-emotional development (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016). Teachers in Ontario are expected to be knowledgeable in this area of development. It is, therefore, important for my research that the teachers I interview are teaching in Ontario and are familiar with the FDK curriculum. Moreover, they need to be teaching in public schools rather than in private schools or private daycares as these are not required to follow The Ontario Curriculum and might not be required to give emphasis to the students’ emotion regulation abilities. Although kindergarten teachers are expected to be knowledgeable in the area of social-emotional development, it is not part of teachers’ training program in Ontario. For this reason, I interviewed teachers that acquired their teacher certificate in Ontario as this could be affecting their perspectives on this issue.

3.3.2 Participant recruitment

Creswell (2007) differentiates between several forms of sampling strategies in qualitative study such as purposeful, opportunistic, homogenous, snowball, and convenience from which the recruitment strategies in this research are purposeful, snowball, and convenience. Using purposeful sampling means selecting participants that can provide information related to the
research problem and contribute to an understanding of the central topic of the research (Creswell, 2007), that is, emotion regulation. In addition to purposeful sampling, I also used convenience sampling, meaning that the participants are the ones that are accessible in terms of availability and geography (Marshall, 1996). This sampling strategy, although it helps to save time and other resources, could damage the credibility of the information – a limitation that is taken under consideration (Creswell, 2007; Marshall, 1996).

To recruit participants, I used my social network and contacted my peers, other preservice teachers, and working teachers. In order to maximize the potential of the recruitment, I used the snowball strategy, i.e. identified potential participants by using contacts offered by the existing participants, thus using the social network as a chain (Creswell, 2007; Olsen, 2012).

3.3.3 Participant biographies

Both participants of the present study work at publicly funded Ontario schools in the Greater Toronto Area, Canada. They are both kindergarten teachers, but each have different professional backgrounds and experiences in education. The participants remain anonymous through pseudonyms.

Allen

Allen has been working as a Full-Day Kindergarten teacher ever since he started his career as a teacher, 10 years ago. He worked in two different publicly funded schools, and is now starting his 6th year of teaching in his current school. He sees teaching as a way of self realization, especially because he started his career as a manager in the family business, and decided to abandon this way of life for the sake of working with children.
Arina

Arina has started her career as an Early Childhood Educator and has recently become an Ontario certified teacher and is now working as a Full-Day Kindergarten teacher. In both positions, she was teaching kindergarten students, and have been working at the same school from the beginning of her career in education, 4 years ago. Her school encourages cooperation between teachers, and provides a solid framework for teachers to learn from each other and improve each other’s practices, especially in the social-emotional aspect.

3.4 Data Analysis

In qualitative research, the process of data analysis consists of three stages: preparing and organizing the data, coding and creating themes, and representing the data in figures, tables or a discussion (Creswell, 2007). Following this procedure, I started by transcribing the interviews to organize the data. Next, I developed a coding system that helped me create categories, and continued by identifying the themes evolving from the categories. The coding procedure involves searching through the data for regularities, patterns and topics while particular research questions and concerns generate certain categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The procedure of coding was done first with each interview transcript individually, followed by synthesizing between the different themes from all the interviews where possible. The themes are represented by a discussion.

A later stage of the analysis is the meaning making process whereby I spoke to what matters about the themes generated from the data given what is already known in the field. I acknowledged the “null data” and spoke to their meaning. This part of the process in qualitative studies relies usually on an inductive reasoning process in order to interpret and structure the
meanings that can be derived from the data (Thorne, 2000). An inductive reasoning process, as oppose to a deductive process, means using the data to generate ideas and hypotheses while taking the position of an interpretive understanding by uncovering the meanings of the phenomenon and relating it to the literature and to broader concerns and concepts (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Thorne, 2000). Interpretation involves explaining and framing the ideas in relation to theory, other scholarship, and action, as well as showing why these findings are important and making them understandable (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003)

3.5 Ethical Review Procedures

During the process of data collection, analysis, and distribution in a qualitative study many ethical issues may surface (Creswell, 2007). These issues can be grouped into five categories: Informed consent procedures; deception or covert activities; confidentiality toward participants; benefits of research to participants over risks; and participant requests that go beyond social norms (Creswell, 2007). To ensure the participants’ consent they were asked to sign on a consent letter prior to the beginning of the interview (Appendix A) that provides and overview of the study, addresses ethical implications, and specifies the expectations from the participant. By signing this form they gave their consent to be interviewed as well as audio recorded. The letter also indicates their right to stop the interview at any point or decide not to answer on any of the questions if they feel uncomfortable to do so. To ensure the participants that they are not being deceived and that there are no covert activities they had the opportunity to review the transcripts and to clarify or retract any statements before I conduct data analysis. By doing so, it helped protect their confidentiality as well in case they prefer not to expose some of the information they shared during the interview.
Additional steps that were taken to protect the participants’ confidentiality and anonymity are assigning them a pseudonym and excluding any identifying markers related to their schools or students. This protected the information the participants shared in regards to their students and protected their confidentiality. Moreover, all the data that was collected including audio recording and transcripts was stored on my password protected laptop and will be destroyed after five years. The raw transcripts of the interviews was reviewed only by my instructor and myself. Other than the ethical issues reviewed here and the precautions taken to prevent and minimize these issues, there are no known risks to participation in this study.

3.6 Methodological Limitations and Strengths

The data in qualitative studies are often produced by the participants’ self-reports about their own experiences, thus depending on the participants’ ability to reflect upon these experiences and effectively communicate their thoughts (Polkinghorne, 2005). Given the approved ethical parameters of the MTRP, the data collection in this research is limited and can include interviews only. Although the use of interviews can produce valuable information about the participants’ experiences and allows for in depth insights, the use of an additional data collection method such as observations can broaden the researcher’s understanding on the issue in question and provide a different point of view. According to Polkinghorne (2005), people’s capacity to be aware of their experiences and to have a clear perspective of their inner life is limited, and even when they do have partial access to them, their translation into words might create a distance between the experiences and the evidence of them.

Another limitation that stems from the ethical parameters I have approval for in this MTRP is related to the participants I can include. Since I was limited to interviewing teachers only, I was not be able to learn about students’ and parents’ perspectives on emotion regulation –
information that could have a significant contribution to my research. Nevertheless, conducting interviews with teachers allowed me to learn in more depth about their experiences and provided them with the opportunity to reflect on their practice and to be heard.

Due to the non-random sampling method used in this study and to the number of participants, generalization of the findings was not be possible. This limitation, however, does not pertain to this research only, but is a feature of qualitative studies in general. While the focus of quantitative research is to make claims about a population, thus requires a random selection of participants, qualitative research focus on describing, understanding, and clarifying a human experience, thus requiring a purposeful selection of participants (Polkinghorne, 2005). When conducting a qualitative research, deciding on the number of participants involves thoughtful decision-making process that justifies the sample size on the ground of quality data (Cleary, Horsfall & Hayter, 2014). This can be observed by the representation of the majority of the participants in the presentation of data, that is, using most of the data that has been collected (Cleary, Horsfall & Hayter, 2014).

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter provided a review of the research methodology and the justification for my choices. I started by articulating the qualitative research as the approach in this study and its validity in providing an in depth understanding of emotion regulation in kindergarten, and continued to explaining the use of semi-structured interviews as my sole data collection instrument. I emphasized some of the advantages of the semi-structured interview protocol such as defining the areas to be explored while allowing the flexibility of the interview. Next, I identified the sampling criteria for the participants in my research, and justified why they need to be teachers that are currently teaching in a kindergarten classroom in an Ontario public school.
The methods I used to recruit the participants include purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling. I followed with a description of the data analysis procedure, which consists of transcribing the interviews, extracting important themes, and making meaning of them, and reviewed the procedures that were used to address the ethical issues concerning this research such as confidentiality and consent, right to withdraw, and data storage. Lastly, I mentioned the limitations and strengths that stem from the research methodology and brought them to awareness. In the next chapter, I report on research findings.
Chapter 4: Research Findings

4.0 Introduction

Through this chapter I introduce the findings that emerged from the analysis of the interviews conveyed in this research with the purpose of answering the research question: What are kindergarten teachers’ perspectives on teaching students to self-regulate their emotions in early years learning, and how do their perspectives inform their practice? The findings are grouped into four main themes:

4.1 Participants identified that the strategies they use to teach students to self-regulate their emotions include the development of regulatory techniques through positive relationships.

4.2 The participants recognised that the strategies they use to teach their students emotion related self-regulation affected positively on their school experience.

4.3 The resources used by the participants to inform their teaching in the area of emotion regulation stemmed from lived experiences and knowledge.

4.4 The barriers and challenges for teaching kindergarten students to self-regulate their emotions identified by the participants were related to the school’s educational and emotional environment.

Each theme includes an introductory description and divided into three sub-themes which further develop and explain the findings. In the sub-themes I report on the data, discuss its meaning, and draw connections to the existing literature. I conclude with a summary of the research findings and their contribution to research.
4.1 Participants Identified That the Strategies They Use to Teach Students to Self-Regulate Their Emotions Include the Development of Regulatory Techniques Through Positive Relationships

The methods the participants were using to deal with emotional outbursts and teach the students the skill of self-regulation were not meant to simply be applied on the students, but rather required some sort of interaction with their environment or with themselves. This means that the participants were able to see the child from a holistic point of view and as part of a community. The emergence of the strategies used by the participants in order to develop their students’ emotional self-regulation skills had a dependency on the relationships built between the students to the teachers, between the students to the school community and their environment, and even within themselves.

4.1.1 Participants identified that the strategies they use require the development of positive student-teacher relationships

Both participants recognised that formulating good relationships with their students is a critical starting point when helping them to regulate their emotions. Having a conversation with the student is an example of one strategy they used that requires mutual respect between the students and the teacher. As Arina mentioned, the purpose of the conversation could be to teach them some strategies to self-sooth, but it cannot be done if the relationship between the student and the teacher is not built on trust and understanding. The way Allen described it compliments Arina’s description and extends it: “I think as a broad stroke, ultimately, help the kids work through whatever they’re feeling. And there might be the labeling of it. Might be having conversations about what would be a better alternative.”
In relation to helping the students to “work through whatever they’re feeling”, Allen stresses on the need to validate the students’ emotions when they are upset:

So I think when they have an expression, validate their emotion, whatever it is, give them a word for that: however you feel, it’s fine, you can be mad at me. It happens all the time. If you feel mad, or upset, or annoyed, or aggravated, that’s fine because that’s how you feel.

He elaborates on the aspect of trust it adds to his relationships with the students, and explains that without being able to acknowledge what they feel, and assure them that their feelings are heard, the process of teaching them to self-regulate their emotions will not be as affective and might even fail. In addition, the validation of their emotions helps them recognize what they are feeling, and be able to label them when they experience a similar incident.

These findings align with Gallingane and Han’s (2015) claim that teaching emotion words to young children improves their understanding of their own emotions and the emotions of others and helps them manage their emotional state. The participants in this study were also acting according to the first component from Denham and Burton’s (1996) multicomponent intervention which emphasizes the importance of relationship building to reduce negative emotionality and increase the students’ involvement and initiative in positive peer activity.

4.1.2 Participants identified that the strategies they use require the students to develop self-soothing skills

While some of the students need the teacher’s individual attention when they are upset, Arina provided some examples of strategies that the students were taught to use when they feel the need to self-sooth rather than to have a conversation with an adult. These include some “alone time” activities in addition to simple actions to help them come down:
Well, for example, first of all taking a deep breath if the child feels really high, or sometimes the child can sit with self-regulation toys by himself, or by herself or just do some coloring, and when the child feels ready to come back to learning she or he will be welcome to come back.

For young children, using these kinds of self-soothing strategies require a high level of self-awareness and self-reflection. They need to be aware of their own emotional state in order to know to choose the strategy they think will help them come down, and eventually to decide whether they are ready to come back to the class’s activity.

For the same purpose, Allen provides his students with a designated space in the classroom where they can go when they feel they need some “alone time” to relax. He called them ‘chill out zones’ or ‘quiet places,’ related to his belief that noise is a stressor on its own and that sometimes all the child needs is a little bit of quite time in separation from the rest of the naturally noisy classroom. According to the research, the ability to acquire self-regulation strategies such as soothing or distraction starts to the develop around the preschool age and continue to develop as young children rely less on adults to help them regulate their emotions (Eisenberg & Morris, 2002; Eisenberg & Sulik, 2012; Kostelnik et al., 2012). Both teachers were able to provide their students with some age-appropriate tools that will help them to self-sooth as described in the literature related to the typical development on emotion related self-regulation.

4.1.3 Participants identified that the strategies they use require the collaboration of the school community and the child’s environment

Aside from having strategies that help students to come down when outbreaks occur, the participants reported on some strategies that involved the whole classroom, school community, and, when necessary, the students’ parents. One of the many examples for classroom-based or
school-wide activities Allen used is called “the fish bowl.” Whenever he felt it would benefit the rest of the class to learn from a certain incident, he would ask the students to role play the incident and provide everyone in the class with an opportunity to learn from it:

It might be an opportunity for learning, you know, what we call ‘the fish bowl’ where the whole class gets to learn: ‘We just saw students A and student B and this happened. What do you think?’ And then the kids generate that case.

When he feels it is appropriate, or when the students need more guidance with a specific case, he would also add role playing the wrong choice, and the better choice, to elaborate on the possible consequences of their choices.

Arina provided an example of a school wide program inspired by the book “The Zones of Regulation”, in which the students can identify their emotional state by the color they are at:

When they are calm and relaxed, they are in green light, and when they are aroused they are in red light. That is when they might need help from the teacher to go back to ‘green’. She said it gradually helps the students develop a sense of awareness to their emotional state, and that this is a good place to start. She also mentions the importance of communicating with the parents and collaborate with them to benefit the child: “Sometimes we communicate with parents and also try to figure out with them if they have the same issues at home, so we try to work together.” Allen agreed as well that in some cases, it is necessary to communicate with the parents, especially if the behavior repeats.

These reports are related to the claim that every learning experience is embedded within a social context (Zins et al., 2007). The participants in this research seem to agree with this claim and implement it in their practice.
4.2 The Participants Recognised that the Strategies They Use to Teach Their Students Emotion Related Self-Regulation Affected Positively on Their School Experience

From the participants’ observations, students who were able to internalize the skills they were trying to instil showed generally positive changes in their attitude toward school, and their experiences throughout the day were relatively less conflicting. The students’ reaction to the strategies used by their teachers provide feedback to their teachers, and helps them alter their strategies according to the students’ needs. Although the outcomes varied between the students depending on their starting point and developmental stage, the process resulted in an increased readiness for learning, an improved self of confidence and well being, and developed their communication skills.

4.2.1 The participants recognised that the strategies they use to teach their students emotion related self-regulation affected positively on their readiness to learn

Arina noticed that when the students were using the self-soothing techniques they were taught to use when they are upset, they were able to join the class’s activity with greater availability for learning. The teachers would welcome the students back when they felt they are ready to come back and rejoin the class: “Well, first of all the child will be calmer, so he would be ready to learn and get his attention, or to be attentive to learning.” Moreover, she mentioned that they try to pay more attention to the students that still need more adult support in regulating their emotion in order to help them learn better and be more focused in the class’s activities.

Likewise, the outcomes seen by Allen made him feel confident in his strategies: “I’m feeling comfortable that we have systems in place and things that we can do to be able to help the kids learn.” The participants’ observations support the extensive research on this aspect of emotion regulation which shows the relationship between students’ emotion regulation skills and
their readiness to learn. For example, Raver and Knitzer (2002) found that young children with emotional and social competencies participate more in the classroom.

4.2.2 The participants recognised that the strategies they use to teach their students emotion related self-regulation affected positively on their well being and self confidence

Arina reported that students who have learned to self-regulate their emotions or are in the process of learning how to do that, seem to be calmer when comparing them to themselves or to the rest of the students. This contributes not only to their readiness to learn, but it also affects on their well being and self confidence. Allen added to this and claimed that the students that already have the skill or some level of the skill are better able to “flow with things and go along, because with this comes a level of confidence.” He used an analogy to further explain himself, and compared it to driving:

Someone is going to cut you off if you are driving … when kids have difficulties they are expressing the emotions they need to express. And kids who are able to do it [to regulate their emotions], if someone cuts them off, they’ll keep on going in their way. Maybe they’ll honk, maybe they’ll laugh and say ‘I can’t believe this guy just did that’ – whatever their strategy is to cope - and then they move on.

Because they have acquired some good strategies to cope with their anger, it prevents them from feeling frustrated and escalate. Instead, they are able to stay calm and solve the problem, or not, with an appropriate expression of their feeling.

The positive outcomes described by the participants match Denham et al.’s (2002) definition of children’s emotion regulation which refers to the behaviours and strategies they use to cope with the experience of negative emotions. Moreover, well-regulated individuals are expected to be relatively successful in controlling their attention and
behaviour voluntarily in order to respond in an adaptive manner, thus including effort in controlling their reactions (Ahadi & Rothbart, 1994; Eisenberg & Morris, 2002).

**4.2.3 The participants recognised that the strategies they use to teach their students emotional self-regulation had a positive effect on their communication skills**

Since one of the strategies the participants use to teach their students emotional self-regulation is initiating a conversation with the students or only facilitating a conversation between the students involved in a conflict, they were able to notice improvements in the students’ communication skills. These skills benefitted them within the process of learning to self-regulate their emotion, but also outside of it when they, according to Arina, exhibited more patience and sensitivity toward their classmates.

Allen had the experience of initiating some conversations to try to understand what happened, but felt unneeded after a while:

More often than not they figure it out just through that, and I’m only there to facilitate the conversation. This is when they start getting that language: When you did that I felt (however I felt), and they say ‘I’m sorry’… Sometimes some kids solve it themselves. They don’t even acknowledge they did, they just talk, and that’s fine.

He also provided an example of a student who really seemed to internalize the communication skills for solving a conflict and appropriately expressing her feelings within the process. This student initiated conversations with her classmates when she needed, and solved it without the teacher’s help. She even facilitated a conversation between other students who had a conflict to solve. She showed a high level of internalization that even surprised him.

Learning the appropriate language to express their feelings and developing the appropriate communication skills are some of the most important steps children make towards
regulating their emotion on their own. Kopp (1989) indicated that the development of language to occur around the age of two years is a valuable landmark in the ability of children to regulate their emotions. The evolving language allows them to communicate with others about their emotions and to obtain verbal feedback and instruction regarding the regulation of emotion and associated behavior (Kopp, 1989). The participants seem to have recognized the continuity of the language development and promoted their students’ language skills to be able to express themselves better.

4.3 The Resources Used by the Participants to Inform Their Teaching in the Area of Emotion Regulation Stemmed from Lived Experiences and Knowledge

Although the resources shared by the participants varied and included many different kinds of resources, the majority of them relied on the knowledge of their colleagues, other professionals, and their own experience. This notion may make the knowledge of self-regulation more approachable to other teachers, but also highlights the understanding that in an area such as emotion regulation, a lot of the teachers’ knowledge on how to teach it is being learned from their experience and collaboration with others. This theme expands on the different resources the participants have reported to be using: Colleagues’ experience, experience of self, and formal education.

4.3.1 The resources used by the participants to inform their teaching in the area of emotion regulation stemmed from their formal education

When referring to the knowledge they have acquired in their formal education, and how it informed their practice in the area of teaching emotion regulation, there was a discrepancy between the participants’ reports in regards to their experience in teachers’ college. While Arina claimed that the courses in teacher’s college was insufficient, Allen thought it included some
informative courses along with the practicum experience. Arina compared between her two recent experiences of formal education:

At Ryerson at Early Childhood [Education program] we had a really good, strong foundation about self-regulation, so there were lots of courses related to social-emotional education such as arts and therapy for children with variety of abilities, but in teachers’ college no. So I think they can add this piece because I think that it’s so important.

In other words, her knowledge about teaching students to self-regulate their emotions was acquired while she was studying her Bachelor of ECE rather than in teachers’ college. So although she learned of it through formal education, it was not teachers’ formal education.

Allen, on the other hand, encounter the concept of self-regulation in teachers’ college. He specified three major areas in teachers’ college which dealt with emotional development: the explicit instruction related to exceptionalities and special needs with connection to the different practice areas; class discussions on different scenarios which sometimes addressed emotion regulation; and observation and practice during placements. He says that “those three areas gave at least some structure, some framework to things.” He thought that the theoretical preparation helped to inform his practice, but stresses more on the practicum experience as his most valuable knowledge on how to teach emotion regulation. One memorable experience he had was when he watched his associate teacher using Kelso and the Wheel of Choice, a manipulative used to help students solve problems or conflicts with peers, and actually had the chance to use it himself. These kinds of experiences, he said, were the most useful.

The way Allen views his formal education experience contradicts the claim that the preparation for teachers in the area of social-emotional learning is rarely sufficient and includes
limited explanation in the area of teaching emotion regulation skills (Elias, 2003; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Zins, Travis, & Freppon, 1997). However, according to Arina, the preparation in teachers’ college does not support the development of the necessary skills and attitudes needed to successfully teach, a finding which aligns with what is shown in the research. Since The Kindergarten Program (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016) acknowledges the importance of supporting students well-being and emotional development, the discrepancy between the reports calls for a closer look on teachers’ preparation programs in Ontario in order to find out if these issues are being addressed.

4.3.2 The resources used by the participants to inform their teaching in the area of emotion regulation included their colleagues’ experience

Both participants emphasized the importance of collaborating with their colleagues. This means not only working together to find new solutions and formulate new ideas, but also learning from each other’s experience in the area of emotion regulation, asking for help when needed, and asking for feedback on their own practices. Arina suggested that her school encourages the collaboration between the teachers: “I think it’s mostly from my school, because I think I come from a team work environment. I think I learned it from other teachers rather than my formal education.” She believes the school’s environment has a strong contribution to her knowledge on how to teach emotion regulation, and if it were a different school that disregards team work, she would not have learned as much from other teachers in her school. She also talked about the quality of the relationships with other teachers: “I will say have great partnership with other teachers who have experience in this area, who can give you some resources and some advice. Yes, so team work is really important.” In other words, she recommends to use the help of others.
Allen adds to Arina’s view, and stresses the value of having a good partnership with the rest of the teaching team in the classroom, specifically with the Early Childhood Educator (ECE). He appreciates her knowledge and feels very fortunate to have her because “She’s got her way with the kids.” Asking for other professional’s advice for help is common for him, especially if it is beneficial to the students:

When there’s a problem, sometimes we have to take a multidisciplinary approach. So I only know what I know … And so then it’s an opportunity for a professional dialogue with other teachers. We’ll have the parents and we’ll talk about it …, and we’d have the principal come in, maybe a psychologist, whatever is appropriate, or the SERT to come and say, you know, here’s some strategies to try, and then we can try something different.

He acknowledges the limitations of his own knowledge and experience, and values the progress he could be achieving when involving other human resources in order to solve problems with students.

Feedback from others was another way Allen provided himself with some valuable information about his practice, while using other’s knowledge and experience. However, he mentions some difficulties in getting honest responses, simply because “people are nice”, and avoid telling the bad things unless you are close enough, like he is with his teaching partner: “She’s able to tell me things in a way that I hear it and just accept it as what it is.” When relating to written feedback he once received from a student teacher, he shared how he uses it frequently to improve his practice: “I like to think that if I’m getting feedback it leads to a change, so I like to go back to the wishes to remind myself.” The resources used by the participants in these examples might suggest that they are highly motivated to teach emotion regulation skills even if they don’t feel totally confident about it. This contradicts the claim that teachers might be
reluctant to teach a topic if they do not feel confident enough about, such as emotion regulation (Zeidner, Roberts, & Matthews, 2002). These teachers seek for their colleagues’ support in order to improve their practice and increase their confidence in this area.

4.3.3 The resources used by the participants to inform their teaching in the area of emotion regulation stemmed from their own experience

When Allen discussed his formal education in teachers’ college, he emphasized how valuable the practicum experience was for him. For this reason, he argued that his best resource is his personal teaching experience:

What I think is needed to do more is more practice. A theory is nice, but until you get in there and do it, and experience it, and get hit in the head with the shovels because what we thought would work doesn’t, the child’s response is completely different than how it should be, and then we have to do something different, until that happens, it’s theory. It’s nice. It’s like me telling you ‘here’s a theory of exercise’, but until you actually go to the gym, and then you get on the machines, and try to figure out what’s happening, the learning is not the same.

Because there is a gap between theory and practice, a lot of the best strategies are learned by trial and error rather than using methods that are grounded in theories. Arina expressed the same opinion about her personal experience: “it all comes from the experience. So the more experience you have, the more strategies you will find that will help you deal with emotion regulation.” Although this statement might apply to every facet of the teaching profession, she highlighted the value of learning from her own practice in this specific area.

From Allen’s perspective, leaning from your own practice meant also to reflect on your experience and actions. He described how sometimes through a reflection he can think on what
can be done better or what can be changed in order to make things better. The way he uses the written feedback he once received to help himself reflect on his practice and check if he was able to improve what needed improvement is one additional form of self-reflection. Teachers’ personal experience can also include any form of knowledge that was acquired through their practice in the form of professional reading: “Go from the negative to the positive – now we saw the wrong way, we’ll do a better way. I actually learned that strategy for language pieces, from something called ‘The Daily Five’.” In this example, the resource he used was meant for teaching language, but when integrated with his teaching experience, he found it to be useful to use when teaching emotion regulation as well.

The teacher’s personal experience as one of the resources teachers use to inform their practice in the area of emotion regulation was not mentioned specifically in literature reviewed here. However, when relating to Zeidner, Roberts, and Matthews’s (2002) claim that teachers might be reluctant to teach a topic if they do not feel confident enough about, such as emotion regulation, it is possible that unexperienced teachers who lack the knowledge that stem from personal experience, might feel uncomfortable teaching emotion regulation.

4.4 The Barriers and Challenges for Teaching Kindergarten Students to Self-Regulate Their Emotions Identified by the Participants Were Related to the School’s Educational and Emotional Environment

Both participants admitted that although they feel confident in the area of teaching emotion regulation due their experience they have acquired from teaching kindergarten students, there are some challenging factors which make the task harder to accomplish. These challenges were unrelated to the students’ behaviour and were out of their control, which means that they are not inherent to their developmental stage or characters, but they are mostly solvable
problems. More specifically, the barriers were either systematic, related to the teacher’s own well-being, or to students’ difficulties adjusting to school.

4.4.1 The barriers and challenges for teaching kindergarten students to self-regulate their emotions identified by the participants were related to the time restraint at school

Time, or lack of it, was one of the challenges that was mentioned repeatedly in both interviews. It was mentioned by Arina to be even more noticeable when interrelated with the classroom size: “we have 30 children with only two staff…sometimes I’m busy with the rest of the class and I can’t focus my attention to one child.” The same issue was described by Allen, and to illustrate it he contrasted it to the gentle equilibrium in eco systems, saying that when something changes in an eco system, other changes has to follow in order to maintain the fragile balance. This is not the case when adding more students to a classroom – the number of staff stays the same, the resources do not increase, and the room’s size stays the same. The result is an increase in the number of students without any compensation to balance it, and this affects the amount of time teachers have to deal with emotion regulation deficits.

Another issue related to time, but is worth mentioning on its own, was Allen’s preference to teaching the academic subject due to lack of time and the challenge of quantifying emotional learning: “So that’s when it becomes problematic. So the pressure is often towards the quantifiable, and so where is the time to be able to do the other pieces?” Since the academics are easier to quantify and, thus, show results, and although he is well aware of the emphasis put in The Kindergarten Program (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016) on the social-emotional aspects, these are sometimes pushed aside when there is not enough time.

The barriers mentioned somewhat align with those mentioned in the research in which the resistance of some teachers is described to be due to lack of time. Researchers indicate that
teachers doubt the relevance of emotional intelligence literacy programs, and prefer to focus on the academics when time is an asset (Zeidner, Roberts & Matthews, 2002; Zins, Elias, Greenberg & Weissberg, 2000). As opposed to the educators mentioned in the literature, the participants in this research acknowledged the importance of teaching the skill of emotion regulation and demonstrated dedication to its implementation. However, they struggled with managing the limitation of time when considering the class size, and the challenge of quantifying emotional learning.

4.4.2 The barriers and challenges for teaching kindergarten students to self-regulate their emotions identified by the participants were related to the teacher’s emotional state

Arina related to her own emotional state and the need to self-regulate her emotions as a challenging position to be in when one of the students has an outbreak. She finds it hard “not to be overreacting in my response to the child”, and worries about her own mental health and well-being when she cannot keep herself calm. As a way to protect herself she uses the same strategies she uses to teach the students how to calm down and self-regulate: “regulate myself and also kind of calm down… self-regulate myself as well.”

Similarly, Allen described it as counterproductive to the students’ needs, especially when he is feeling stressed because of work overload, and the behaviour is one that was already addressed in the past: “What sometimes gets in the way is me. So my mindset and what I’m focused on when something happens sometimes is not the most productive way, or most beneficial for what the kids need.” He mentioned the noise level as stressor not only for the students, but also for the teachers, who despite all the challenges, do the best they can. He acknowledged his personal experience and disposition sometimes affect his practice and reflected on the limits of his ability to understand the emotional state of his students.
Both participants mentioned that their personal experience plays an important role in how they react to students’ emotional outbursts and feel that the more experience they have with these kind of behaviours, the more they are capable of dealing with them appropriately and successfully, regardless to their emotional state. These descriptions extend Jennings and Greenberg’s (2009) report on the insufficient training teachers receive on children’s social and emotional development that could help them become effective emotional coaches and role models. When teachers lack the tools needed to understand the relations between emotion, cognition and behaviour it can also affect the implementation of prevention programs, which usually do not include trainings or instructions for the teacher (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). In relation to the participants’ experiences, appropriate training can be beneficial in teaching teachers how to cope with their own emotional state when teaching students emotion regulation.

4.4.3 The barriers and challenges for teaching kindergarten students to self-regulate their emotions identified by the participants were related to students’ ability to adjust to school

According to the participants’ descriptions, although every classroom experiences the challenge of an adjustment period in the beginning of the school year as students transition from the summer vacation to a new grade, the adjustment period in the kindergarten classroom is much more challenging. Allen emphasized the unfamiliarity of the school environment to the Junior Kindergarten students, especially for those who have yet to experience a similar structure in daycare: “A lot of the students when they come to JK they have no concept. No concept. They don’t understand school, who’s this guy up there?” He elaborated on additional factors that could increase the adjustment difficulties:

And some of them haven’t been part of a similar setting of any kind. And some of them are the first born and only child. They come in and never been into a program.
Some don’t speak English because grandma or grandpa were looking after them. So they don’t understand the language; they don’t understand the routines; they don’t understand the interactions; socially, they never had to share… All of a sudden it’s like ‘share’, ‘take turns’. What? … From their perspective – I’ve never seen so many people. 30 kids all of a sudden. I can’t think of other times when 30 kids are together. So all of a sudden they are with 30 kids in one place at the same time. So adjustment in September-October looks very different with the same 30 kids in April, May, June.

For some of the students, as Allen explained, the adjustment period is not as hard because they are familiar with the organized structure from daycare. Moreover, he is able to recognise the students that have stronger language skills, assuming that their families taught them the appropriate ways to express their feeling, and reported that the teaching team spend far less time on teaching them emotion regulation skills.

These individual changes have been noticed by Arina as well, when focusing on the students’ immediate need for attention when they are emotionally aroused: “Some students I know that they need time to be by themselves while other students need my attention right away so I try to react according to the situation.” She noticed that the challenge of adjusting to the environment is bigger for students with special abilities, and that the process of learning to respond appropriately takes longer and requires more resources. Allen’s descriptions of the school adjustment period are similar to the Denham and Brown’s (2010) explanation of the challenges experienced by preschool and kindergarten children when they are required to follow directions, approach group play, and complete pre-academic skills in an organized fashion for the first time. The participants were able to recognize that, as Eisenberg and Morris (2002) mentioned, the increase in their students’ ability to self-regulate their emotions is due not only to
children’s cognitive and physical development, but also to adults’ raising expectations from them to manage their own emotions (Eisenberg & Morris, 2002).

4.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I presented the findings that emerged from interviews with two kindergarten teachers. I started by presenting the strategies they used, which all evolved within the relationships between the students and their environment and the students with themselves. The purpose of these strategies was to help the students become more aware of their emotional state and to develop the skills to self-regulate their emotions. Teaching them to do so through forming positive relationships with their environment as well as with themselves, enable the teachers to see the outcomes of their efforts. These outcomes were presented in the following theme and included improvements in the students’ readiness to learn, in their well-being and self-confidence, and in their communication skills. These outcomes were well established in the research, and point to the effectiveness of their strategies.

What is important to note is that when looking at the resources the teachers have reported to be using – colleagues experience and collaboration with them, personal experience, and formal education – it seems that they did not always acquire any additional qualification courses in order to be able to help their students. This finding shows that because the participant teachers believe in the necessity of teaching students emotion regulation, they use the resources available to educate themselves and improve their practice. This contradicts the claim maid by Zeidner, Roberts, and Matthews (2002) and reveals the importance of the teacher’s perspective on the topic and their belief in its relevance. While the research reported that teachers felt reluctant to teach emotion regulation due to lack of preparation in this area, the participants in this research displayed a deep understanding of the many benefits emotion regulation skills and knowledge
have for their students. As a result of their perspectives, and despite the deficiencies in the preparation provided by their formal education in the area of emotion regulation, they were looking for other resources that can assist them in this area. It is possible, however, that their perspectives in regards to teaching emotion regulation is affected by the curriculum guidelines (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016), which call for a bigger emphasis on the students’ social-emotional development. The gap between the curriculum expectations in the area of social-emotional development and the insufficient knowledge teachers receive in teachers’ college showed in this research is an issue that needs to be addressed through further preparation for teachers on emotion regulation.

Moreover, although the participants reported on some challenges such as time, class size, the teacher’s emotional state, and the students’ adjustment to school, they reported on some success in this area. These challenges highlight even more the resourcefulness of the participants that was due to their perspectives on the importance of teaching emotion regulation and its relevance in the curriculum. While the challenges mentioned in the literature indicated on either unwillingness to teach emotion regulation or unsuccessful results of implementation, the reports of the teachers in this research imply on the ability to overcome the challenges when the purpose is of value to the teacher. Nevertheless, these challenges should not be ignored, and should be further investigated. In Chapter Five I elaborate on the implications of these findings, and connect them to the importance of this area of research. Moreover, I provide some recommendations and suggestions for future research.
Chapter 5: Implications

5.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the overall implications and significance of this research study. I begin by reviewing the key findings on the perspectives a small sample of kindergarten teachers hold in regards to teaching emotion regulation and how these perspectives affect their practice in this area. Then, I discuss the implications of the findings for the educational community as well as for my own practice as a researcher and a beginning teacher. With this in mind, I offer some recommendations for the benefit of the educational community, especially teachers and policymakers. I conclude with some remaining questions that provide suggestions for further research in the area of emotion regulation.

5.1 Overview of Key Findings and Their Significance

The findings of this research were organized into four main themes, and each one of the themes discussed a different aspect related to teaching emotion regulation in kindergarten. The first theme presented the strategies the teachers used to help their students calm down when they were having an emotional outburst and the strategies they have taught their students to use in order to self-sooth. These strategies require the development of positive relationships between the teacher and the students, the students to themselves, and the students to the school community. The participants presented an array of strategies that align with what the research suggested would be appropriate to use with students in this age. These findings provide practical and simple strategies that can be used by other teachers and schools and do not require any additional qualifications or training.

The second theme examined the participants’ observations on the outcomes that the strategies they used had for their students. Different aspects of their students’ school experience
were found to be positively affected when the students were able to calm down with or without help. The students showed an increase in their readiness to learn, they were more confident and calm, and their communication skills seemed to improve. These findings not only corroborate the literature on the positive implications of emotion regulation competency, but can also show that even the simple strategies used by the participants are meaningful and can help students learn to self-regulate their emotions.

Through the third theme, the resources used by the participants were reviewed and found to be relying on their colleagues’ lived experiences, their own experience, and the knowledge gained through their formal education. The teachers in this research were constantly learning from their peers, collaborating with them, and reflecting on their own knowledge and teaching experience. The participants’ use of the available resources to help their students regulate their emotions provided an insightful notion on the importance of the teacher’s perspectives on teaching emotion regulation. These findings contradict the research that found that teachers were reluctant to teach emotion regulation due to lack of knowledge in the area (Zeidner, Roberts, & Matthews, 2002), and shows that when the participants believed the students’ ability to self-regulate their emotions is important for their development they sought for appropriate resources.

In the fourth theme I presented the challenges and barriers faced by the participants, which were all related to the school’s educational and emotional environment. Time constraints at school, the teacher’s emotional state, and the students’ ability to adjust to school all hindered the participants’ ability to help their students regulate their emotions and deal with emotion regulation problems. Some of these challenges, like the students’ adjustment to school, are part of the difficulties pertinent to a teacher’s position, but the teacher’s stress and limitations of time and classroom size are issues that can and should be addressed.
5.2 Implications

In this section, I outline the implications of my research findings. I begin by discussing the broad implications of my research findings for the educational community, and continue to the implications of my findings for myself as a researcher and a beginning teacher.

5.2.1 The educational research community.

The variety and simplicity of the strategies used by the participants imply their accessibility to other teachers and parents who encounter problems related to emotional self-regulation. It seems that a lot of the strategies used by the participants have been acquired through collaboration with their colleagues and self-reflection. This finding stresses on the importance of these two approaches as a means of improving practices probably in many other areas. In other words, there is no need to be an expert in the area of social-emotional development in order to be able to support a child through difficulties or typical development of these skills. This finding is highly significant as it provides some practical tools to teachers and parents who do not know how to deal with emotional outbursts.

On the other hand, the deficiencies in formal education pointed by the participants need to be brought to the awareness of all those involved in teachers’ education, training, and professional development. Although they had a disagreement on the extent to which the area of emotional development and self-regulation was addressed in teachers’ college, both participants agreed on the insufficiency of training in this area. The responsibility of making sure that teachers are informed on the best practices in the area of emotion regulation belongs to principals, schools, school boards and the faculties of education. While the emphasis on the students social-emotional development is constantly increasing from one revision to another in
the kindergarten curriculum, the level of preparation teachers receive in order to improve their practice in this matter stays the same.

One of the biggest challenges faced by the participants that needs to be raised to the awareness of school boards, policy makers, and the public is the time constraints in the classrooms. It stems from the classroom size and the rest of the curriculum expectations, and causes a lot of stress to the educational team as well as to the students. Increasing the amount of students in the classroom without increasing the number of teachers makes the mission of teaching students to self-regulate their emotions even harder than it already is. This issue needs to be noted as one that can reduce a lot of stress from everyone involved in the kindergarten classroom education.

5.2.2 My professional identity and practice.

My experience as a beginning kindergarten teacher has brought me to the realisation of the importance of developing emotion regulation skills and enabled me to become aware of the implications a deficiency of these skills can have on children’s social acceptance. Conducting this research helped me inform my own practice and provided me with some valuable insights on the strategies for teaching emotion regulation in kindergarten, along with the challenges I might encounter. As a teacher-researcher, I learned that the majority of the knowledge teachers acquire throughout their teaching career is gained through the application of the theoretical knowledge to the classroom. Therefore, the practical experience is of the most value. Although as a novice teacher I might feel discouraged by this notion, the findings of this research point on the transferability of this knowledge from experienced and expert teachers to new teachers. The lived experience of veteran teachers can be taught and used by new teachers not only in the area of emotion regulation, but in every other aspect of the teaching profession. I feel that the
importance of collaborating with other teachers is one of the most valuable insights I gained from this research.

Being aware of the challenges I might face as kindergarten teacher, especially in the beginning of the school year has also been an important insight. Considering all the emotional difficulties students might experience while adjusting to the new environment can help me prepare myself to these kinds of challenges, and inform myself on the different strategies that can ease the transition period for my students and myself. Collaborating with other teachers and preparing myself to the challenges I might encounter as a teacher are the pieces of information that I find to be most helpful in my journey to become a better teacher. These are the kind of approaches that might benefit my practice not only in the area of teaching emotion regulation, but in every other area as well.

5.3 Recommendations

Although The Kindergarten Program (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016) emphasises the importance of social-emotional development aspect in the kindergarten classroom, the formal education teachers receive has been reported by the participants to be insufficient. Therefore, the Ontario College of Teachers and the faculties of education across Ontario should increase the emphasis being put on the social-emotional development of children in teachers’ preparation programs. Alongside, developers of professional development courses need to develop workshops that will be dedicated to the promotion of kindergarten students’ emotion regulation skills. This can help in keeping teachers informed with the most current research in the area of emotion regulation, and acquire some research-based strategies. In addition, school boards and school principals should consider the application of a school-wide or a board-wide social-emotional program that can help promote students’ emotion regulation skills as well as other
aspects of their social-emotional development. Some of these programs have been proved to have a positive impact on the students’ social-emotional development, academic achievement, and behavioural problems (Denham & Burton, 1996; Frey, Hirschstein, & Guzzo, 2000).

Teachers should seek for available resources that can inform them on some of the strategies that are known to be working. These could include professional development courses and workshops, but can also include professional readings or collaboration with their more experienced colleagues as has been reported by the participants. The later has been emphasised as one of the most valuable kinds of transferable lived experiences knowledge. Finally, parents should also try as much as possible to inform themselves on their contribution to the development of their children’s emotional regulation skills. This can facilitate their adjustment to the kindergarten classroom, and will affect positively on their social competencies, academic achievements, and behavioural problems.

5.4 Areas for Further Research

Through the conduction of this research it seemed that most of the research in the area of teaching emotion regulation has been focusing on the roles of the school and the teacher, but not many have asked what parents can do to help their children learn how to self-regulate their emotions. The effects of the parent-child attachment in the early ages has been discussed extensively (Eisenberg & Morris, 2002; Kopp, 1989; Laible & Thompson, 1998), but the question what can parents do to foster the development of their children’s emotion regulation skills still remains. With the understanding that parents are not professional educators, scholars should direct their attention to simple strategies that parents could easily apply and use with their children on a day-to-day basis rather then waiting until they enter to kindergarten. This is important especially
The effects of attending a daycare at an age earlier than the kindergarten age on children’s emotion regulation skills is another area that needs to be studied. This is due to the participants’ report on the adjustments difficulties students who have not attended a program similar to a kindergarten setting before had when compared to their peers who have attended a daycare. Since education in Ontario is publicly funded only from the age of four, many families cannot afford to place their children in a daycare before reaching this age. This creates a gap in many other areas, but the effects of this gap in the area of emotion regulation skills for children younger than four has yet to be researched, and should be given more attention.

The findings of this research suggest that the teachers’ perspectives on teaching emotion regulation have an impact on their practice in this area. However, since this is a qualitative study, I am unable to generalise these suggestions and draw conclusion that apply to all teachers. I think that the connection between these variables is important to research as this can provide valuable information to policy makers who ask to change certain practices and school principals who seek a better match to their kindergarten classrooms. Lastly, a closer look should be taken on the faculties of education programs in order to learn on the discrepancies found in this research in the area of teachers’ preparation programs. Since the participants did not agree on the sufficiency of emotion regulation content in teachers’ college, this issue should be clarified in order to make sure that teachers are getting enough preparation to teach emotion regulation in kindergarten.

5.5 Concluding Comments

The purpose of this research was to learn how the perspectives of a small sample of kindergarten teachers inform their practice in regards to teaching emotion regulation. The findings suggest a strong and deep connection between the participants’ perspectives on teaching emotion regulation to their practice in this area. While the research on teachers’ willingness to
teach emotion regulation implied their reluctance to do so due to lack of knowledge, the participants in this research reported actively seeking knowledge that will improve their practice in this area. They also acknowledged the importance of teaching emotion regulation, and were able to see the positive impacts that the mastering of the skill had on their students. The overarching conclusion is that regardless of the training teachers receive, their perspectives on the importance of teaching emotion regulation and its relevance to the curriculum will probably determine their devotion and knowledge seeking.

The strategies the participants used were learned mostly from their colleagues rather than their formal education. It is possible that in areas related to the students’ social-emotional development most of the learning comes from teachers’ lived experience, and even when these issues are addressed in formal education, novice teachers will master these skills through their application in the classroom and not through theory. Overall, what seems to matter the most is the teacher’s dedication to teaching emotion regulation.
References


Thorne, S. (2000). Data analysis in qualitative research. *Evidence-Based Nursing, 3*(3), 68-70. doi:10.1136/ebn.3.3.68


Appendix A: Letter of Signed Consent

Date: April 4th, 2016.

Dear ____________________________

My Name is Sarit Gazman and I am a student in the Master of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT). A component of this degree program involves conducting a small-scale qualitative research study. My research will focus on teachers’ perspectives on emotion regulation in kindergarten. I am interested in interviewing teachers who currently teach kindergarten students in Ontario public school system and have acquired their teaching certificate in Ontario as well. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

Your participation in this research will involve one 45-60 minute interview, which will be transcribed and audio-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient for you, outside of school time. The contents of this interview will be used for my research project, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates. I may also present my research findings via conference presentations and/or through publication. You will be assigned a pseudonym to maintain your anonymity and I will not use your name or any other content that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information will remain confidential. Any information that identifies your school or students will also be excluded. The interview data will be stored on my password-protected laptop and the only person who will have access to the research data will be my course instructor, Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic. You are free to change your mind about your participation at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may also choose to decline to answer any specific question during the interview. I will destroy the audio recording after the paper has been presented and/or published, which may take up to a maximum of five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks to participation, and I will share a copy of the transcript with you shortly after the interview to ensure accuracy.

Please sign this consent form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. I am very grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,
Sarit Gazman

Course Instructor’s name: Dr. Angela MacDonald-Vemic
Contact info: angela.macdonald@utoronto.ca
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 from this research study at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Sarit Gazman and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described. I agree to have the interview audio-recorded.

Signature: _______________________________________
Name: (printed) _______________________________________
Date: ______________________________________
Appendix B: Interview Protocol/Questions

Introductory Script: Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study, and for making time to be interviewed today. This research study aims to learn what perspectives a small sample of kindergarten teachers in Ontario hold in regards to teaching emotion regulation, and how these perspectives affect their practice. This interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes, and I will ask you a series of questions focused on your experiences in regards to emotion regulation. I want to remind you that you may refrain from answering any question, and you have the right to withdraw your participation from the study at any time. As I explained in the consent letter, this interview will be audio-recorded. Do you have any questions before we begin?

To begin can you state your name for the recording?

Section A - Background information

1. What is your current position?
   a. What grades do you teach?
   b. Which have you taught previously?
   c. In addition to being a teacher, do you fulfill any other roles in your school? (e.g. coach, councillor, advisor etc.)

2. Can you tell me more about the school you work in? (e.g. size, demographics, program priorities)
   a. Does your school have any special programming focused on social-emotional learning?

3. Can you please tell me about your professional education?
   a. What did you study in your undergraduate degree?
   b. Where did you go to teacher’s college?
   c. Did you have any teachable subject areas?
   d. Have you completed any additional qualification courses? In what areas?

4. Have you had any formal education or training related to social-emotional development?
   If yes, what training have you had?
Section B – Teacher’s perspectives about children’s emotion regulation

5. What does emotion regulation mean to you? How do you understand this term?
6. In your view, is it important that schools teach students how to regulate their emotions? Why / why not?
7. At what age do you think this work should begin and why?
8. In your experience, what are some indicators that students could benefit from learning how to regulate their emotions?
9. From your perspective, how do schools and teachers commonly respond to students who have difficulty regulating their emotions?
10. How do you feel about teaching students to regulate their emotions?
11. Do you see any emphasis in the curriculum on this topic?
   a. If yes, where in the curriculum do you see attention to this?
   b. Do you feel prepared to teach social-emotional learning? What concerns, if any, do you have?

Section C – Teacher’s practices related to emotion regulation

12. What is your initial reaction to students’ emotional outbreaks? How do you respond when a student has an inappropriate emotional response to something and why?
13. How do students commonly respond to the approach you take?
14. What are some of the next steps you take to deal with students who have repeated emotional outbreaks and what changes do you see in students’ behaviour after they had an intervention?
15. What do you think would be helpful to know in order to improve your practice in regards to emotion regulation?

Section D - Supports and challenges to dealing with emotion regulation problems

16. How do you feel your professional education informed you, or not, about emotion regulation? Would you add something to teachers’ training program in relation to emotion regulation?
17. What challenges do you experience in the area of emotional regulation in the early years classroom? What helps you when you face some difficulties dealing with students’ emotion regulation?

18. [If applicable] What factors and resources support you in teaching emotion regulation in the early years classroom? (e.g. books, websites, play materials, videos, songs, physical space etc.)

Section E - Next Steps

19. What learning goals, if any, do you have in the area of teaching students to self-regulate their emotions?

20. What advice do you have for beginning teachers with regard to fostering emotion regulation in the early year’s classroom?

Thank you, sincerely, for your time and considered responses.