“IS BABY COMING TODAY?” USING ROOTS OF EMPATHY TO SUPPORT SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN KINDERGARTEN

by

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ABSTRACT
This project examines ways in which the Roots of Empathy program can be used to support social and emotional learning (SEL) in kindergarten. It is designed to demonstrate to parents the importance of SEL for their children’s future success in school and in life, and it includes an interactive workshop that provides parents with examples of how the Roots of Empathy program is used as a catalyst for supporting their child’s social emotional development in kindergarten. Roots of Empathy (ROE) is a universal, classroom-based social emotional competence program developed for use with children in Kindergarten through grade eight. This project reviews the literature in the following areas: the effectiveness of ROE; children’s SEL and future success, and SEL and brain development. Research demonstrates consistent results - children who receive SEL programming demonstrate significant improvements in social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviour and self-regulatory functions, as well as an 11% gain in academic achievement. The project explores how Roots of Empathy can be expanded upon to offer SEL opportunities continuously and in a variety of classroom settings (not just during specific ROE lessons in the classroom), and how ROE supplements the BC Ministry of Education curriculum for social and emotional development in kindergarten. It provides an overview of classroom changes enacted to foster optimum SEL opportunities and demonstrates for parents the importance of SEL in their child’s classroom.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all”

~Aristotle

This project seeks to address the link between social and emotional learning (SEL) and children’s future success at school, and to give parents a glimpse into the ways that one SEL program—Roots of Empathy—can be used as a catalyst to promote a variety of other SEL opportunities in the kindergarten classroom. SEL skills include the ability to recognize one’s strengths and weaknesses, to form meaningful relationships, and to work cooperatively with others; the ability to understand feelings and deal with conflict situations effectively, to manage emotions in order to achieve one’s goals, and to show care, concern, and empathy for others; and the ability to make ethical, constructive choices about personal and social behaviour (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2011a).

Starting kindergarten presents a threshold of opportunity for both children and their parents. Children have opportunities to gain knowledge, make new friends, and explore different perspectives. Parents watch their children embark on their first year of formal schooling and can only dream about what might unfold for them in the future.

Many parents emphasize the acquisition of knowledge over the acquisition of SEL skills (Barbarin et al., 2008; Piotrkowski, Botko, & Matthews, 2000). They may report that their children are “ready” for kindergarten based on their children’s abilities to recite the alphabet, count past ten, and identify colours and shapes. Additionally, parents who perceive academic readiness as important tend to provide more formal learning opportunities for their children at home, and fewer hands-on activities or opportunities for social interactions that may foster SEL (Diamond, Reagan, & Bandyk, 2001).
Children’s later success in school, and indeed, in life, depends on more than just the ability to succeed academically (Spivak & Farran, 2012). Educators realize that children’s future success depends on their social emotional competence; socially and emotionally competent children are able to handle themselves, their work, and their relationships effectively (CASEL, 2011b). Social and emotional competence is comprised of five interrelated areas:

1. Self-awareness—the ability to accurately assess feelings, values and strengths, and to demonstrate self-confidence;
2. Social awareness—the ability to understand and appreciate others’ points of view, and to show empathy for others;
3. Self-management—the ability to control impulses and manage emotions effectively, and to work towards achieving one’s goals;
4. Relationship skills—the ability to cooperate and maintain healthy relationships, to solve conflicts appropriately and effectively, and to resist inappropriate social pressures;
5. Responsible decision-making—the ability to make decisions based on ethical standards, the concern for others’ points of view, and the ability to understand the consequences of one’s actions (CASEL, 2011a).

**Background, Context, and Setting**

According to CASEL, SEL helps children develop fundamental skills for life effectiveness. It “...promotes young people’s academic success, health, and well-being at the same time that it prevents a variety of problems such as alcohol and drug use, violence, truancy, and bullying” (CASEL, 2011c, emphasis in the original). However, I have experienced that parents place greater importance on their children’s intellectual development and are less aware of their children’s social and emotional competence. Because of this, I feel I constantly need to
justify the importance of SEL in the classroom. In light of the research that supports a positive correlation between social and emotional competence and future success in school (Denham & Brown, 2010; Elias, Wang, Weissberg, Zins, & Wahlberg, 2002; Rhoades, Warren, Domitrovich, & Greenberg, 2011; Vandivere, Pitzer, Halle, & Hair, 2004), I decided to make some changes to my classroom organization, routines, and teaching strategies so as to provide my students with many opportunities for SEL. I also decided to use the Roots of Empathy program—a structured, preventative program designed to foster empathy and SEL (Schonert-Reichl, 2012)—in my classroom, and to examine how this program can be used as a foundation on which to build and layer other SEL experiences (Vygotsky, 1986).

I have been teaching early primary children for 26 years, and have always been interested in their social and emotional development. However, seven years ago, when I began teaching kindergarten at an inner city school in Coquitlam, BC, Canada, I realized the crucial importance of children’s social and emotional development. It was then I noticed that many children came to school unable to demonstrate the social and emotional competencies needed in order to be successful in Kindergarten. I also noticed a rather disturbing trend, in that children were not being kind to one another, and many seemed to lack empathy and basic friendship-making skills.

The Merriam Webster Online Dictionary (2011) defines inner city as “…the usually older, poorer, and more densely populated central section of a city.” Although my school is in a suburb of Vancouver, BC, Canada, it has received this designation because of several factors. First, approximately two-thirds of the school population has a first language other than English, and almost one quarter of those children have refugee status. Second, a significant percentage of families live below the poverty line, and children deal with issues such as abuse, hunger, and
neglect. Third, many of the children entering my kindergarten class have not attended preschool, and have had limited interactions with other children of similar age (Janus et al., 2007).

The effects of poverty on children’s development in general, and more specifically on their social and emotional development, are clearly supported by research. In their review of studies examining the effects of poverty in urban centers on child development, Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley (2002) examined urban centers in the United States and found that factors such as high concentrations of poverty, single parent families, racial segregation, low rates of home ownership, and the transiency of the neighbourhood population can have cumulative effects on children’s intellectual and social development. Niles and Peck (2008) examined how poverty affects children’s social development and found that living in poor, inner-city neighbourhoods in the United States has damaging effects on children’s ability to develop social emotional competence. Their findings indicate that children who grow up in impoverished neighbourhoods are at an increased risk for a number of social problems including crime, delinquency, social, physical, and mental health disorders, low birth weight, infant mortality, school dropout, and child abuse and neglect.

In British Columbia, Canada, similar research has been undertaken to examine how neighbourhood factors can cause children to be more or less vulnerable in terms of both their social and intellectual development. The Early Development Index (EDI; Janus et al., 2007) was developed to provide a standardized measure of the readiness skills of young children during their kindergarten year. The EDI provides data for populations rather than individuals; these populations are defined by geographical boundaries such as a city, or by municipal boundaries such as a school catchment area.
The EDI assesses a child’s school readiness in the following five areas: physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive development, and communication skills and general knowledge (Janus et al., 2007). The authors note a distinction between a child’s readiness to learn and his/her readiness for school:

*Readiness to learn* refers to the state of a child’s neurosystem being ready to develop various skills and neuropathways based on the stimuli it will receive. A child is ready to learn right from birth, and likely even in utero. *School readiness* is a much narrower concept, focusing on a child’s ability to meet the demands of school. (Janus et al., 2007, p. 2; emphasis in the original).

**Rationale and Importance of Project**

Information gathered from the EDI in my school’s neighbourhood confirms that at least 32% of the population is considered vulnerable on one or more of the five scales noted above (Human Early Learning Partnership [HELP], 2011; see Appendix A for EDI data tables). The school where I work falls within the range of highest risk, with 16% or more of the population considered vulnerable, specifically in the areas of social competence and emotional maturity. Social competence includes behaviour in structured environments and measures attributes such as cooperation, respect for others, socially appropriate behaviours, self-control, and self-confidence; emotional maturity examines behaviour in less structured environments and measures attributes such as tolerance, helping, and empathy.

This data reflects what I was witnessing through experiences in my classroom. It became clear that I needed to examine my practice in order to promote and develop SEL amongst my students. I realized that I needed to shift my thinking about my teaching methods; that is, instead of teaching the *prescribed learning outcomes* and hoping that opportunities for SEL
would arise, or teaching SEL skills through specific lessons or activities that were isolated from the rest of the curriculum, I needed to look at SEL as being the critical part of the curriculum, and teach the prescribed learning outcomes through SEL situations. Prescribed learning outcomes are defined by the BC Ministry of Education as provincial curriculum standards that “…outline the expectations for what students should know and be able to do at each grade and within each subject area” (BC Ministry of Education, 2011a, para. 1). Additionally, because of the apparent lack of empathy in many of my students, I realized that I needed to teach specific SEL skills in order to improve my students’ chances for future success (Spivak & Farran, 2012). The Roots of Empathy program was a natural fit because it focuses on positive emotions such as empathy and sympathy (Gordon, 2000). Research shows that preventative programs including Roots of Empathy are more effective because they deal with prosocial behaviours (Schonert-Reichl & Scott, 2009), while classroom programs that focus on intervention often examine how to deal with negative emotions (Izard, 2002).

This project is important because it promotes social competence and emotional maturity in young children. The project attempts to help parents understand that, while academic skills are important, SEL skills are crucial to their child’s future success in school.

Key Terms

Empathy

*Empathy* is considered to be an integral part of children’s social and emotional development. Schonert-Reichl and Scott (2009) define empathy as “…an individual’s emotional responsiveness to the emotional experiences of another” (p. 244). Similarly, Schonert-Reichl (2012) discusses *prosocial behaviours*, and notes that:
The study of prosocial behavior is both relevant and important to the understanding of empathy because it is often assumed that empathy is the catalyst for the enactment of caring and helpful behavior. In addition to empathy, cognitive development, perspective-taking, and emotion understanding …have also been identified as factors that underlie children’s prosocial responding. (p.13)

Hoffman (2000) notes that empathy is important in motivating positive, helpful behaviours and for inhibiting hurtful and aggressive behaviours, and Zahn-Waxler and Radke-Yarrow (1990) discuss both the cognitive and affective components of empathy; the former including the ability to take the perspective of another and the latter including the ability to regulate one’s own emotions.

**Project-Based Learning**

Project-based learning is “…the study/research of a topic in depth where students’ interests, ideas, questions and predictions form the experiences lived and the works/activities undertaken” (Kaldi, Filippatou, & Govaris, 2011, p. 36). It involves students “…learning essential knowledge and life-enhancing skills through an extended, student-influenced inquiry process structured around complex, authentic questions and carefully designed products and tasks” (Mergendoller, 2006, p.4). Project-based learning promotes the development of social and emotional competence and self-regulation in children (Jolivette, Wehby, Canale, & Massey, 2001).

**Self-regulation**

Self-regulation is an important part of social emotional learning. Bodrova and Leong (2008) define self-regulation as the child’s ability to engage in mindful, intentional, and thoughtful behaviours, to control impulses, and to engage in necessary or non-desirable
activities. A related concept is that of *emotional competence*. Denham and Burton (1996) define this as the child’s ability to regulate negative emotions. *Emotion regulation* and *behaviour regulation* are terms that are defined within the larger context of self-regulation, and refer to the child’s ability to manage strong emotions, handle situations appropriately, and persevere at difficult tasks (Blair, 2003; Whitted, 2010).

**Scaffolding**

Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) discuss the concept of scaffolding, and define it as “…the means whereby an adult or ‘expert’ helps somebody who is less adult or less expert” (p.89). Wells (1999) states that scaffolding involves teaching and learning, where learners are able to complete tasks they would not be able to manage independently, bringing them into a “…state of competence which will enable them eventually to complete such a task on their own” (p.221).

**Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)**

Several researchers view SEL as a broad area consisting of integral components. CASEL (2011b) refers to SEL as “…a process for helping children …develop the fundamental skills for life effectiveness. SEL teaches the skills we all need to handle ourselves, our relationships, and our work, effectively and ethically” (para.2). Denham (2006) uses the term *social emotional competence* and defines this as being a subset of skills such as making and sustaining new friendships, initiating positive relationships with teachers and peers, demonstrating positive feelings about oneself (due to positive attachment relationships), as well as having knowledge of emotions and the ability to regulate one’s behaviour and social skills. Schonert-Reichl and Hymel (2007) refer to *social and emotional learning* as “…the process of acquiring the competencies to recognize and manage emotions, develop caring and concern for others,
establish positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle challenging situations effectively” (p.21). Whitted (2010) discusses social/emotional development and defines it as “a set of skills that children need to control their behaviour in the classroom” (p.10). Similarly, Ray and Smith (2010) define social and emotional development as the way in which children learn to interact with their peers in a constructive way. For the purposes of this project, I define SEL as a set of skills necessary for children to promote positive social interactions and optimal learning in the classroom. These skills include recognizing and managing emotions, developing care and concern for others, establishing positive relationships, making responsible decisions, and handling challenging situations constructively and ethically (CASEL, 2011a).

The Roots of Empathy Program

Roots of Empathy is a classroom-based social and emotional competence program developed for use with children in kindergarten through grade eight. The program was developed by Mary Gordon (2000) and has, at its heart, an infant as teacher. The baby and his family come into the classroom once every month. Children have the opportunity to interact with the baby, learn about his development, and experience healthy parent-child interactions. Through these interactions, children develop the ability to identify with the baby’s feelings and to respond appropriately to them (Gordon, 2009).

Roots of Empathy is considered an anti-bullying program because children learn to take responsibility for their actions (or inactions), and they learn perspective taking skills, the cognitive component of empathy (Roots of Empathy Organization, 2013a). Children who develop this cognitive component as well as the emotional component (empathic concern), display negative attitudes towards bullying and are less likely to participate in such behaviour (Espelage, Mebane, & Adams, 2004). Moreover, the program helps children learn to self
advocate. Children who advocate for themselves are less likely to be the targets of bullying behaviour, and are less likely to participate in bullying behaviour themselves (Gourneau, 2012). Conversely, Sheras (2002) found that children who lacked confidence or who appear shy are more frequently targeted by bullies. Studies examining the effectiveness of the program demonstrate consistent results—children who participated in Roots of Empathy, when compared with those who did not, were more advanced in their social and emotional understanding on all dimensions assessed (Schonert-Reichl & Scott, 2009). These research findings add to the growing body of empirical evidence regarding the positive impact of SEL programs in schools.

**Theoretical Framework**

The two theoretical perspectives that inform this paper are socioculturalism (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976), and the functionalist perspective on emotions (Campos, Mumme, Kermoian, & Campos, 1994; Izard, 2002). The development of social and emotional competence can be framed within a socioculturalist context. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1979) and Vygotsky’s concept of the zone of proximal development (1978) both offer insight. Bronfenbrenner (1979) explains the complex, interrelated social systems that are present in a child’s life and how the child both influences and is influenced by his/her environment. The child’s interaction with these various social systems affects his/her development and may help to explain why children develop varying degrees of social emotional competence.

Vygotsky’s concept of the zone of proximal development is defined as “...the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (1978, p. 86). The zone of proximal development refers
to the importance of teaching skills when children are ready to learn them and of providing the necessary teacher support—scaffolding—to challenge learners and to ensure student success (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). The idea of scaffolding (Bruner, 1963; see also Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) is central to Vygotsky’s concept of the zone of proximal development (Verenikina, 2003). Bruner (1963) notes that the responsibility for learning is transferred from the teacher to the student, emphasizing the collaborative relationship between teacher and learner (Mercer & Fisher, 1993). The teacher serves as a mediator who supports, encourages, and challenges the child to extend his/her thinking. The role of mediator is also important in the Roots of Empathy philosophy.

The Roots of Empathy program is based on the functionalist perspective on emotions (Campos, Mumme, Kermoian, & Campos, 1994). A functionalist view focuses on children’s ability to understand and express emotions, and how this plays a main role in establishing and maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships. Empathy, described as the ability to understand and react to the affective state of another (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987) is seen as the catalyst which promotes children’s willingness to engage in prosocial behaviours. These perspectives will be further expanded on in Chapter Two.

**Purpose, Significance, and Guiding Questions**

The purpose of this project is to examine the ways in which the Roots of Empathy program (Gordon, 2000) can be used to promote SEL in kindergarten. Specifically, the project will examine ways in which Roots of Empathy can be used to educate parents about the importance of social emotional development in kindergarten, how it can be expanded upon to offer SEL opportunities continuously and in a variety of classroom settings (not just during specific Roots of Empathy lessons), and how Roots of Empathy supplements the BC Ministry of
Education curriculum for social emotional development in kindergarten. This graduating project is important because it explains how SEL skills are taught in the classroom and it gives parents the opportunity to participate in a workshop that demonstrates how SEL affects their child’s daily life in the classroom.

**Guiding Questions**

I pose three guiding questions as a focus for this project. They are:

1. How can the Roots of Empathy program be used to educate parents about the importance of social and emotional development in kindergarten?

2. In what ways can the Roots of Empathy program be used as a starting point to increase opportunities for SEL throughout the kindergarten day?

3. How does the Roots of Empathy program supplement the BC Ministry of Education curriculum for social and emotional development in kindergarten?

**Organization of Project**

The project consists of four chapters and related appendices, and is organized as follows. Chapter Two presents a more detailed examination of the theoretical perspectives that inform this paper. Additionally, it comprises a review of the research literature, including the Roots of Empathy program and its effectiveness in supporting children’s social and emotional learning, the connection between SEL and future success in school and the support for integrated SEL opportunities throughout the day in primary classrooms, brain development and its effect on SEL, and the connection to the BC Ministry of Education Curriculum for social and emotional development.

Chapter Three provides the link between theory and practice. It describes what SEL opportunities look like in my classroom, the changes that I needed to make in both my teaching
and in classroom organization in order to maximize SEL potential among my students, and how Roots of Empathy is used as the foundation that enables SEL to occur naturally and continuously throughout the day in the classroom. In addition, Chapter Three describes a workshop for parents. This workshop examines the importance of SEL in kindergarten in general, and the Roots of Empathy program in particular and attempts to help parents understand the crucial link between SEL and their children’s future success in school and life. Chapter Four, the final chapter, includes my conclusions, describes some limitations, and has recommendations and ideas for future directions on this topic.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Real education should educate us out of self into something far finer; into a selflessness which links us with all humanity.

~ Lady Nancy Astor

This chapter includes an examination of the theoretical perspectives that inform this paper. It also reviews the literature in the following areas: the effectiveness of the Roots of Empathy program, the connection between SEL and future success in school, the support for integrated SEL opportunities throughout the day in primary classrooms, brain development and its effect on SEL, and the connection to the BC Ministry of Education Curriculum for social and emotional development.

**Theoretical Background**

This project is informed by two distinct yet related theoretical views. The first is a sociocultural perspective, drawing on Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1979), Vygotsky’s concept of the zone of proximal development (1978), and the concept of scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). Second, the functionalist perspective on emotions helps to explain the foundations of the Roots of Empathy program. These two approaches are discussed in detail below.

The sociocultural perspective sees learning as a product of the child’s interactions in various social and environmental contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Vygotsky, 1978). In *The Ecology of Human Development*, Bronfenbrenner (1979) states:

The ecology of human development involves the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process
is affected by relations between these settings and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded. (p. 21)

Bronfenbrenner notes that there are three important aspects of his definition. First, the child is seen as an active, engaged, and dynamic individual that continually interacts with and reacts to the environment. Second, the interaction between the child and the environment is mutually reciprocal as the child both influences and is influenced by his/her environment. Third, developmental processes occur not just in a single environment but also in one where the scope and sequence is considerably larger and where external influences of the greater society may still have an impact on the individual.

Bronfenbrenner’s theory is applicable to SEL. In any given classroom, children bring a wide range of skills and abilities learned through interactions in their home environment. Bronfenbrenner refers to this as the *microsystem*—the “…pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics” (p. 22). In other words, a child’s interactions with his/her immediate surroundings and immediate family will influence how that child acts and reacts in various social settings.

When children come to school, their values and skills must now coexist with those of other children from varying backgrounds, and these interactions become dynamic and reciprocal and create an optimum environment for social emotional learning. This larger sphere of influence—the *mesosystem*—is defined as “…the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates” (p. 25). The school, in turn, is further defined by events that happen in relation to it, but do not directly affect the child. Bronfenbrenner refers to this as the *exosystem* and cites the parents’ workplace, or the activities of the local school.
board, as examples. Finally, the school and all the external factors that affect it, either directly or indirectly, are part of a *macrosystem* that includes society’s “...subculture or culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying [them]” (p. 26).

Vygotsky’s concept of the zone of proximal development is a related sociocultural construct. He notes that children may learn by imitation first, but that learning is more effective and lasting when children are presented with skills that are a bit too difficult for them to tackle independently, provided that adequate teacher support is available if and when it is needed. He argues that the zone of proximal development is where optimal learning occurs and that this “...gives a more helpful clue than mental age does to the dynamics of intellectual progress” (p.187). The concept of scaffolding is central to Vygotsky’s notion of the zone of proximal development (Wood et al., 1976). It refers to a method of teaching wherein teachers bridge the gap between what a student can do independently and what he/she can do with assistance. The teacher’s role is that of a mediator—to provide assistance and guidance initially, so as to allow students to realize they will soon be able to manage on their own (Bruner, 1983).

The zone of proximal development is used to determine the instructional level of any subject matter being taught in the classroom, including skills to foster social emotional competence. Programs consisting of direct instruction in emotion identification, including *Roots of Empathy* (Gordon, 2000), together with strategies to develop cognitive control of emotions, such as *MindUP* (Hawn Foundation, 2011), and with programs that model effective interpersonal problem-solving strategies (including *The 4 R’s Program*) (Jones, Brown, & Aber, 2011), allow for children to learn through imitation and for teachers provide the support children need in order to acquire new SEL skills.
The Roots of Empathy program is grounded in the functionalist theory of emotion (Campos, Mumme, Kermoian, & Campos, 1994). Empathy is a key concept because it is central to the development of positive interpersonal relationships. Empathy not only promotes and sustains prosocial behaviour (Schonert-Reichl, 2012), but it also helps children avoid aggressive behaviour (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). The view that “...emotions form the basis for conscience and moral behavior through their role in empathy, sympathy, and caring” (Izard, 2002, p. 797) is the foundation of the program. Izard also notes that classroom programs focusing on intervention often look at how to identify and deal with negative emotions, while Roots of Empathy is a preventative program that teaches prosocial behaviours and focuses on positive emotions like empathy and sympathy.

In the mesosystem that the classroom represents, children need to be able to regulate their emotions in order to function successfully (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). The Roots of Empathy program teaches children specific skills, such as how to understand and label one’s own emotions, how to react appropriately in various situations, and how to manage extreme emotions. It allows children the opportunity to practice these skills, and at the same time, it allows teachers the opportunity to provide adequate support (Vygotsky, 1986). In addition, the Roots of Empathy program considers the concept of temperament. This not only draws attention to individual similarities and differences, but also provides children with reasons why others behave the way they do (Gordon, 2009).

The following section presents an overview of the Roots of Empathy program and the extant research that has examined its effectiveness.
Roots of Empathy

Roots of Empathy is a classroom-based social emotional competence program developed for use with children in Kindergarten through grade eight (Gordon, 2009). There are three main goals of the program:

1. to develop children’s social and emotional understanding,
2. to promote children’s prosocial behaviours and decrease their aggressive behaviours,
3. to increase children’s knowledge about infant development and effective parenting practices.

Each lesson provides opportunities for children to learn about empathy through activities that foster emotion identification, perspective-taking, and emotional sensitivity (Gordon, 2000). The program spans nine months and is administered in the classroom by a trained facilitator. The cornerstone of the program is a monthly visit by an infant and his/her parent(s). During these visits, children learn about normal infant growth and development and observe healthy interactions between parent and infant. The facilitator visits the classroom three times per month. A pre-visit explains what will happen when the baby arrives; the second visit involves bringing the infant and family into the classroom to interact with the children, and the post-visit reviews and extends the concepts presented in the previous visits. The parent-infant interaction serves as a starting point for discussions about understanding feelings, healthy infant development, and effective parenting practices. All lessons cultivate empathy, emotional understanding, and problem solving skills (Schonert-Reichl, 2012).

Effectiveness of the Roots of Empathy Program

Roots of Empathy was founded by Mary Gordon in Toronto in 1996. At that time, 150 children in the Toronto School District were beneficiaries of the program. Throughout
subsequent years, Roots of Empathy has expanded and is now offered in urban, rural, and First Nations communities in every province in Canada. Last year alone, the program reached over 58,000 Canadian children and over 450,000 children worldwide (Roots of Empathy Organization, 2012). The Roots of Empathy program is supported by empirical research. During the past ten years, independent research has been conducted in several countries, including Canada, the United States, and Australia (Roots of Empathy Organization, 2013b). According to the program’s report, research has consistently demonstrated that the program reduces aggression and increases social emotional understanding in the children who receive it (Roots of Empathy Organization, 2009). A search of the literature resulted in two published studies (Santos, Chartier, Whalen, Chateau, & Boyd, 2011; Schonert-Reichl, Smith, Zaidman-Zait, & Hertzman, 2012) and one manuscript under review (Schonert-Reichl, Smith, Zaidman-Zait, 2011). Additionally, Berkowitz and Bier (2007) have published a review of the literature and note 33 programs that effectively teach social emotional learning, with Roots of Empathy being one of them.

In a recent study looking at the impact of the Roots of Empathy program, researchers found that children who participated in the program, when compared to control group children, showed a significant increase in prosocial behaviours and a significant decrease in aggressive behaviours (Schonert-Reichl, Smith, Zaidman-Zait, & Hertzman, 2012). This study looked at three types of aggression, including proactive aggression, reactive aggression, and relational or social aggression. Proactive aggression is defined as “…attempts to influence or coerce others through aversive means in an unprovoked situation, requiring neither provocation nor anger” (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2012, p. 4; see also Dodge & Coie, 1987). Conversely, reactive aggression is impulsive and defensive and involves angry outbursts in response to actual or
perceived threats or provocations (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2012). Relational or social aggression is more subtle and involves damaging social relationships rather than inflicting physical harm. Crick (1996) defines relational aggression as ‘‘… harming others through purposeful manipulation or damage to their peer relationships (e.g., using social exclusion as a form of retaliation)’’ (p. 2317). Distinguishing between these types of aggression is important in general, as it may have an impact on the design of future intervention and prevention programs; this distinction is of particular importance in this study because it is one of the first evaluations of a program aimed at promoting social emotional competence where all three types of aggression were examined concurrently (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2012).

Other studies examining the impact of the Roots of Empathy program found similar results. Among primary grade children (grades one through three), children participating in the Roots of Empathy program showed a decrease in proactive aggression, while their control group counterparts actually showed an increase in proactive aggression (Schonert-Reichl, Smith, & Zaidman-Zait, 2011). A longitudinal study conducted by Santos, Chartier, Whalen, Chateau, and Boyd (2011) used cluster randomized trials with a three year follow up. Their results show that Roots of Empathy appears to be as effective as other similar programs that target high risk behaviours, and they note that the effects of the Roots of Empathy program (an increase in prosocial behaviours and decrease in physical aggression) are still present three years after program implementation.

There are few published studies that examine the effectiveness of the Roots of Empathy program; however, the results are consistent. Children who participated in Roots of Empathy were more advanced in all dimensions assessed, including emotional understanding, perspective-taking, prosocial behaviours and characteristics, peer acceptance, and classroom supportiveness
(Schonert-Reichl & Scott, 2009). Indeed, in their meta analysis of SEL programs in general and their effects on children’s future success in school, Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger (2011) examined 213 universal, school-based SEL programs that targeted over 270,000 children from kindergarten through high school. Findings from this research indicate that children who received SEL programming (including, but not limited to, programs like Roots of Empathy, MindUP (Hawn Foundation, 2011), or Tools of the Mind (Tools of the Mind, n.d.) demonstrated significant improvements in social emotional skills, attitudes, behaviour, and self-regulatory functions, as well as an 11% gain in academic achievement.

The next section presents a review of the research in the following areas: SEL and future success at school, brain development and its effect on SEL, and the effectiveness of the Roots of Empathy program in supporting children’s social and emotional development. In addition, the BC Ministry of Education’s Curriculum for social and emotional learning is examined.

**Social and Emotional Learning and Future Success in School**

Creating a classroom environment that best promotes children’s SEL is an area of interest to several researchers. A considerable body of research exists that suggests children’s early social emotional competence has a positive influence on later academic success in school (Denham & Brown, 2010; Rhoades, Warren, Domitro维奇, & Greenberg, 2011; Vandivere, Pitzer, Halle, & Hair, 2004). The quality of children’s early relationships with their caregivers is thought to influence the development of social emotional competence (Hymel & Ford, 2003), and a home environment that encourages creativity, curiosity, and exploration supports positive social emotional development in children (Chazan-Cohen et al., 2009). In their review of research examining ways in which teaching social emotional skills in schools can predict future
academic achievement, Elias, Wang, Weissberg, Zins, and Wahlberg (2002) list several teachable skills that enhance students’ social emotional development, including the following:

- knowing and managing emotions, recognizing strengths and areas of need, showing ethical and social responsibility, taking others’ perspectives and sensing their emotions, respecting others and self, appreciating diversity, setting adaptive goals, solving problems, listening and communicating clearly, building relationships, cooperating, negotiating, and managing conflict non-violently, and seeking and giving help (p.28).

**Social and Emotional Learning and Empathy**

Several researchers have examined the link between empathy and prosocial behaviours in children (Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990). Empathy is often regarded as one of the most essential personality traits as it is thought to be the motivation behind other prosocial behaviours (Hoffman, 2000). In their review of the literature, Zahn-Waxler and Radke-Yarrow (1990) note that children as young as two can not only cognitively interpret the physical and psychological states of others, but they also have the emotional capacity to experience others’ feelings, and the behavioural repertoire to try to alleviate others’ discomfort. Gini, Albiero, Benelli, and Altoe (2007) examined the association between empathy and bullying behaviours and found that children who defended those being bullied had high levels of empathy. Additionally, Caravita, Di Blasio, and Salmivalli (2009), found that bullying behaviour itself is associated with low levels of empathy, especially in adolescent boys.

**Social and Emotional Learning and Teaching Methods**

Spivak and Farran (2012) looked at the role of teachers’ interactions with students in promoting prosocial behaviours in the classroom. Their research suggests that teachers who deliberately encourage prosocial behaviour and empathy from their students and who strive to
create a positive, interactive social environment in their classrooms may see a significant increase in children’s prosocial behaviours. Hamre and Pianta (2005) examined at risk kindergarten children (e.g., children who exhibited demographic risk factors including low maternal education, and functional risk factors including behavioural, social, or academic issues) and focused on how teacher support can assist children’s SEL. Their results indicated that students who received both instructional and emotional support from their teachers often caught up to their low-risk peers. Hamre and Pianta (2005) note that “...beyond academic achievement, children’s ability to develop a strong relationship with their teachers, characterized by low levels of conflict, is a key indicator of positive school adjustment both concurrently and in the future” (p.962).

Similarly, schools that present a unified approach to their teaching of social skills, and promote and follow a school-wide implementation plan for behavioural expectations produce students who are more caring, cooperative, and empathetic (Berkowitz & Bier, 2007; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). In their review of the research into children’s prosocial development, Hyson and Taylor (2011) identify the following five ways to promote SEL in children: building secure relationships, creating a classroom and school community of caring individuals, modeling prosocial behaviour, establishing prosocial expectations, and supporting families. Elias, Wang, Weissberg, Zins, and Walberg (2002) found schools that are organized effectively around common values “...send messages about character, about how students should conduct themselves as learners, about the respectful ways staff members should conduct themselves as educators, and about how staff and parents should conduct themselves as supporters of learning” (p. 2).
The use of a project-based learning approach has been shown to enhance children’s social emotional competence in the classroom (Kaldi, Filippatou, & Govaris, 2011). In order for project-based learning to be successful, children need to have a certain level of social emotional competence and the ability to regulate their emotions and behaviours. Children need to effectively negotiate with others, share and cooperate in group situations, accept others’ points of view, and solve problems in socially appropriate ways. Project-based learning opportunities assist children in developing self-regulation as children are encouraged to make choices and take ownership of their learning (Jolivette, Wehby, Canale, & Massey, 2001). In a summary of the research into the effectiveness of project-based learning, researchers found that students demonstrated positive gains in their ability to collaborate and cooperate (Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning [CELL], 2009). Project-based learning opportunities involve groups of children working together. Consequently, SEL skills such as perspective-taking and flexibility of thought are enhanced (Curtis, 2002; Ha, 2010). Moreover, in their work with primary children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, Dresden and Lee (2005) found that project-based learning was beneficial, as these children showed improvements in both SEL skills and academic skills.

**Risk Factors Associated with a Lack of Social Emotional Competence**

The risk factors associated with a lack of social and emotional competence are well documented. Cushon, Vu, Janzen, and Muhajarine (2011) found that children who lack social emotional competence have trouble catching up to their socially competent peers and have declining academic performance in later school years. Additionally, these children have trouble forming meaningful relationships later in life (Mashburn & Pianta, 2006). They are also at greater risk for school failure and drop out (Dearing, 2008; Whitted, 2010).
The absence of quality parent/child relationships early in life also impacts his/her ability to develop positive peer relationships later on (Denham & Burton, 1996; Hymel & Ford, 2003; Schmidt, Demulder, & Denham, 2002). Children who experience a greater than average risk to their physical health and well-being as a result of living in impoverished neighbourhoods were found to have a higher prevalence of social emotional difficulties (Fantuzzo, Bulotsky-Shearer, Fusco, & McWayne, 2005). Additionally, living in a chaotic or stressful environment, experiencing homelessness, neglect, abuse, or hunger, separation from parents or caregivers, and lack of consistency in parenting and routines are all frequently cited as risk factors that limit social emotional competence (Bagdi & Vacca, 2005; Denham & Burton, 1996; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1995). These factors may also influence the child’s brain development, which may have an effect on the development of his/her social emotional competence.

Social and Emotional Learning and Brain Development

The relationship between brain development and self-regulatory processes is currently of interest to many researchers. Researchers discuss executive function (EF) skills, as these are often seen as critical for future success in school and life. EF skills include inhibitory control—the ability to resist temptations and distractions; working memory—the ability to mentally hold and use information; and cognitive flexibility—the ability to adjust to change (Diamond, Barnett, Thomas, & Munro, 2007). There is interest in the development of healthy EF skills in early childhood in part because of the rapid brain growth that occurs during this time (Diamond, 2002), and in part due to the fact that EF skills appear to be closely related to the child’s developing social emotional competence and future readiness for school (Blair, 2002). Several reviews discuss the suggestion that behavioural approaches and biological approaches are
integrated and mutually influential to one another (Goldsmith, Pollak, & Davidson, 2008; Thompson, Lewis, & Calkins, 2008). In a review examining the interrelationships between biological and social influences on the development of self regulation, Blair and Diamond (2008) conclude that there is a biological basis for, and an innate difference between, children with good executive function and those without, but that social influences, such as positive self-esteem, motivation to learn, and having a caring, significant adult present in their lives also have an impact on healthy development of EF skills in young children.

Social and Emotional Learning Program Evaluation

The Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences at the University of Washington (Seattle, USA), is currently conducting research to evaluate brain and behavioural development in five year olds receiving the Seeds of Empathy program, and in nine year olds receiving the Roots of Empathy program. Seeds of Empathy is the “younger sibling” of the Roots of Empathy program and involves program delivery to children between the ages of three and five (Seeds of Empathy, 2012). This study began in the spring of 2012 and will look at whether or not structural (MRI) and functional (MEG brain imaging) changes associated with participation in the programs occur (Roots of Empathy Organization, 2012).

Programs that promote the development of EF skills in schools exist. *Tools of the Mind* is one example. This is “…a research-based early childhood program that builds strong foundations for school success in preschool and kindergarten children by promoting their intentional and self-regulated learning” (Tools of the Mind, para. 4; Bodrova & Leong, 1996). In their study evaluating the effectiveness of the Tools of the Mind program, Diamond, Barnett, Thomas, and Munro (2007) found that the program’s curriculum was effective at improving inhibitory control, working memory, and cognitive flexibility in preschool children.
Another, similar program is the *MindUP* program. This is “…a comprehensive social and emotional learning program for pre-kindergarten through eighth-grade students, that is informed by current research in the fields of cognitive neuroscience, mindful education, social and emotional learning, positive psychology, and evidence-based teaching practices” (Hawn Foundation, 2011). In an evaluation of the effectiveness of the program, Schonert-Reichl and Lawlor (2010) found that children who participated in the program showed significant improvements in teacher-rated measures of social emotional competence.

The link between SEL and future success at school is clearly supported by research. However, many parents continue to view their children’s social and emotional development as being of secondary importance to their intellectual development. Additionally, since the provincial curriculum is noticeably vague in the area of SEL (BC Ministry of Education, 2011a), parents feel their concerns are justified. The following section looks at the BC Ministry of Education curriculum for social and emotional development and the extent to which SEL programs are included.

**BC Ministry of Education and Social and Emotional Development in Kindergarten**

To date, no specific curriculum for supporting children’s social and emotional development in Kindergarten has been developed in BC. There is, however, a *Performance Standards* document for Social Responsibility for grades K – 3. BC Performance Standards “…have been developed for voluntary use in BC schools. They describe the professional judgments of a significant number of BC educators about standards and expectations…” (BC Ministry of Education, 2011b; emphasis in the original). The BC Social Responsibility Performance Standards look at exemplars in the following areas: contributing to the classroom and school community, solving problems in peaceful ways, valuing diversity and defending
human rights, and exercising democratic rights and responsibilities (BC Ministry of Education, 2011b). While many of these exemplars do not specifically address issues in SEL, they do fall under the general umbrella of social development.

*The Primary Program: A Framework for Teaching* (BC Ministry of Education, 2000), is a guiding document for instruction in the primary grades (kindergarten to grade three). It contains prescribed learning outcomes in five goal areas, including aesthetic and artistic development, intellectual development, social and emotional development, physical development and well-being, and development of social responsibility. The document lists themes, called “Foundation Statements” for each of the five goal areas and links these to the learning outcomes for each grade level.

The next chapter presents an overview of the Roots of Empathy program in the classroom. It discusses the changes that I made in my teaching methods and classroom organization to allow further SEL opportunities to grow from Roots of Empathy lessons. It also includes a workshop for parents that explains the Roots of Empathy program and demonstrates the importance of SEL for their child’s overall development and future success, and how the Roots of Empathy program is used as a catalyst for supporting children’s social and emotional development in their child’s classroom.
CHAPTER THREE: CONNECTIONS TO PRACTICE

What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely: acted upon, it destroys our democracy.

~Dewey (1907)

In this chapter, I connect the theories behind SEL and the literature supporting its use to practice by articulating the changes I needed to make in my classroom. In the sections that follow, I discuss these changes in detail, review the teaching methods used to enact them, examine connections to how Roots of Empathy supports these modifications, and demonstrate how the program creates a classroom environment where opportunities for SEL are plentiful.

Classroom Changes

In order to provide my students with as many opportunities as possible to practice SEL in context, I realized that some changes to my teaching and the organization of my classroom were necessary. First, I needed to ensure that my classroom was a safe, caring environment. The trend that I noticed—of children coming to school demonstrating fewer caring behaviours and appearing less emotionally ready—made me cognizant of the need to identify and explicitly teach the SEL skills I wanted my students to learn. Second, I decided to work within the framework of core values at my school and use these as the foundation for SEL in my classroom. Third, I chose to implement a project-based learning approach, as this allows children to take ownership of their learning and assists with self-regulation by encouraging choice-making (Bodrova & Leong, 2008). Finally, some changes to my teaching methods and the physical organization of my classroom were necessary. These changes are discussed in detail in subsequent sections.
Creating a Caring Classroom Environment and Explicitly Teaching SEL Skills.

My first considerations were determining the SEL skills I wanted my students to know and finding ways to explicitly teach them. When children start Kindergarten, they bring a variety of lived and learned experiences with them (Bronfenbrenner, 2000; Moll, Amanti, & Neff, 1992). While all of these experiences are important and help to shape the child’s identity, they are also widely varied, as some children may have had more exposure to SEL opportunities than others. In order to foster an environment of mutual respect and consideration of others, I realized that I needed to create a common set of behavioural expectations in my classroom; that is, if I wanted children to exhibit certain social skills (including, but not limited to sharing, taking turns, cooperating, solving conflicts appropriately, and accepting others’ points of view), I needed to explicitly teach and model them (Spivak & Farran, 2012).

The Roots of Empathy program contributes substantially to creating a caring, supportive, and safe classroom environment. The Roots of Empathy instructor “…models Roots of Empathy program values and creates an optimal learning environment in the classroom” (Gordon, 2000, Appendix D: Getting Ready). The manual lists six areas of focus:

1. Communication—asking authentic questions that lead to exploration; promoting a climate of respect by accepting children’s thoughts, feelings, and opinions equally; creating a trusting environment where adults and children can share their feelings honestly; acknowledging a child’s contributions with thanks rather than praise.

2. Risk-free learning—establishing trust and civility in the classroom; accepting and validating all contributions and opinions; preparing children to honour the Roots of Empathy family and to be respectful of activities (such as breastfeeding) that might arise during lessons.
3. Intrinsic motivation—encouraging motivation by acknowledging children’s contributions without judgment or praise.

4. Attunement—highlighting the parent’s understanding of the baby’s moods and needs; demonstrating how parents use music to stimulate babies and encourage brain development; promoting music as a way to bring the classroom together and showing how music can encourage responsiveness and sensitivity to the mood of the baby.

5. Fairness—building a climate of compassion and civility; creating places where friendships can be nurtured; teaching children to recognize unfairness and find ways to challenge it.

6. Inclusion—celebrating individual differences and similarities; developing a sense of belonging by encouraging children to be inclusive of others and not to be hurtful; removing barriers that separate people by race, age, sex, or temperament; raising levels of awareness to those who may be feeling left out (Gordon, 2000).

**Working Within the Framework of my School’s Core Values.**

The second area I considered relates to my school’s core values. We use the acronym CARES (Caring, Acceptance, Respect and Responsibility, Empathy, and Safety) and this forms the foundation for building an effective school climate that optimizes SEL, as it provides common language and an underlying set of behavioural expectations for both teachers and students. Santrock (1993) calls this the “… *hidden curriculum*—the pervasive moral atmosphere that characterizes schools” (p. 452). Behavioural expectations are determined collaboratively by all staff members. Additionally, core values are defined in child-friendly language and behavioural exemplars are presented for each value across different school settings (see Appendix B for Core Values chart). Some examples follow:
1. Caring—sharing, being patient, helping others clean up, respecting the environment;

2. Accepting—including others, listening to others’ points of view, using encouraging language;

3. Respectful and Responsible—welcoming visitors, using appropriate voice and language, sharing space with others; doing the right thing when no one is watching, following directions, taking care of personal and school property;

4. Empathy—being aware of one’s feelings, considering how hurtful behaviours may affect others, comforting others when they are down;

5. Safety—keeping hands and feet to oneself, walking in the hallways, using equipment appropriately.

All staff members at the school where I work commit to upholding these values, and considerable time is spent at the beginning of each new school year reviewing the values and teaching terms and concepts to new students. Teachers realize that many of the behavioural expectations need to be “unpacked”, that is, for each expectation we need to make sure the children understand what the expected behaviours are and what they look like across all settings. For instance, “listening respectfully to others” is a behavioural expectation that is listed as an “accepting” behaviour in classroom settings (see Appendix B). All staff members understand that children need to be taught what listening respectfully means—sitting quietly, looking at the speaker, asking relevant questions, and making appropriate comments. We cannot assume that all children know what it means to listen respectfully, and as we want our entire school population to adhere to a common set of social and emotional skills, we need to ensure that we teach the desired behaviours to all students across all school settings.
The Roots of Empathy program dovetails nicely here because it establishes and nurtures these same core values. Children learn the language of these values and the teacher provides scaffolding for the transference of skills from Roots of Empathy lessons to their contextual application in the classroom (Vygotsky, 1986 Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1963). For example, Theme One in the Roots of Empathy Curriculum Manual is entitled “Meeting the Baby” (Gordon, 2000). One focus of this theme is the concept of temperament. Thomas and Chess (1977) define temperament as the independent personality attribute responsible for determining how children react to different situations. According to Gordon (2009):

Key to the development of empathy is the ability to understand a situation from another person’s point of view, and that ability goes hand in hand with a sense of how our innate temperament determines our response to particular situations. One of the approaches to learning more about the baby in the Roots of Empathy classroom is to explore the baby’s temperamental traits. Each of us enters the world with a unique temperament and this influences, among other things, our level of activity, how we cope with change, and how easily we are frustrated. Children move from observation of the baby’s temperament to discussion of their own temperament. (p. 60)

A key understanding is made through the discussion of individual temperaments. Children learn that everyone is unique and that being unique is acceptable. The teacher helps the children connect the concepts of temperament and the core value of acceptance by pointing out that when we accept others we recognize and celebrate their differences. When children understand these concepts, they are better able to empathize with those who may react to different situations in different ways.
Implementing a Project-based Learning Approach.

The third area I considered was the use of a project-based learning approach. This type of approach supports the Roots of Empathy philosophy of creating a risk-free environment, and is important for three reasons. First, it allows children to take ownership of their learning. Second, it encourages them to identify areas of interest and make choices, and, third, it validates their thoughts and ideas. A project-based learning approach allows children’s natural interests and curiosities to guide their learning. Additionally, because children are openly exchanging their thoughts and ideas, conflicts inevitably arise; however, children are motivated to solve them because they have a vested interest in the activity.

The following example illustrates how SEL skills and academic learning skills merge through project-based learning. The children decided that they wanted to change the dramatic play center from a house into a salon. They collaborated to decide what supplies they would need in order to decorate the salon, and they split themselves into groups and assigned each group a task. One group was to make posters, another group was to collect and make supplies that one might find in a salon (hair spray, shampoo, make up), and a third group was responsible for the physical set up of the space. This process took several weeks to complete, and the children were excited and engaged in their learning throughout the entire process. They practiced SEL skills including cooperation, collaboration, listening to another’s perspective, accepting another’s points of view, offering suggestions and corrections, and offering encouragement; and academic skills such as emergent reading and writing, basic math skills, artistic and aesthetic development, development of fine motor skills, and spatial skills. Project-based learning supports the development of social emotional competence because it involves opportunities to practice SEL skills in authentic, meaningful settings (Ha, 2010).
Physical Changes in the Classroom: Creating Choice.

The fourth area I considered was how to organize my classroom so as to maximize opportunities for children to practice SEL skills in context. In essence, I was trying to create situations in which children would have to problem-solve together. I decided to increase children’s choice-making opportunities by removing the seating plan and “opening up” the play centers—removing limits as to the maximum number of children allowed at each center, and removing restrictions on the centers where children could play. Allowing children to make choices acknowledges their voice in the classroom. It promotes honesty and advocates for an environment where children’s thoughts, feelings, and opinions are weighted equally with those of adults. This atmosphere of mutual respect is central to the Roots of Empathy philosophy (Gordon, 2000).

Removing the fixed seating plan. In many kindergarten classrooms, each child has a labeled spot to sit at on the carpet or at the work tables. This means that every time children are asked to sit somewhere, the decision about who to sit beside is made for them. In order for children to learn about making responsible choices, I removed all seating plans in my classroom so that children are free to sit beside whomever they choose. Children are taught what responsible choices are in the context of choosing a seatmate, and what logical consequences might occur if they make irresponsible choices. Through trial and error, children gain confidence in their ability to make responsible choices. This is an aspect that is vital to optimum social emotional development. Jolivette, Stichter, Sibilsky, Scott, and Ridgey (2002), concur: “…when taught how to identify, select, and initiate choice making opportunities, young children can become adults who independently make choices” (p. 397).
“Opening up” the play centers. It is common practice in many kindergarten classrooms to both limit the number of centers that children can choose and the number of children that can participate at each center. These limits, too, have been removed from my classroom in order to create more situations for responsible choice-making. Any number of children can attend any center, but there are conditions (based on core CARES values) that must be met in order for the center to remain functional. Children are taught that they must treat each other in a caring manner, accept the ideas and opinions of others, show respect for other children, and take responsibility for keeping the center safe.

Teaching Methods

Modeling and group discussion are the two underlying strategies for teaching SEL that are woven into all others. Additional strategies include fostering authentic communication, teaching emotional literacy (Gordon, 2009), and role play and dramatization.

Modeling. If I want the children to demonstrate the core CARES values, then I must always model them. As behaviours are modeled, they are labeled to promote common understanding and to build a common language that becomes a part of our class culture. This is especially important in an inner city school like mine, as many children entering Kindergarten have weak language skills. They may not have sufficient verbal skills or vocabulary to solve conflicts, and may therefore resort to physical means when solving problems (Kaiser, Kai, Hancock, & Foster, 2002). When appropriate behaviours are modeled, children are able to see what those behaviours look like within a specific context, and to internalize them.

Group Discussion. Group discussions empower children to advocate for themselves, as they realize they are often not alone in their feelings. Discussions may involve talking about problems that arise, and therefore generate ways to deal with these problems. At the same time,
they provide opportunities to analyze what to do if things do not go as planned. We have brief class meetings every morning, after recess, and after lunch, to review and discuss any problems that may have occurred, solutions we should consider, and what things we might do differently next time. Equal importance is given to the notion of preparing children for problems that might arise, and of prompting them to think ahead about how we might solve them.

Fostering Authentic Communication. Communication is a key concept in Roots of Empathy. Gordon (2009) refers to authentic communication and calls this “…speaking from the heart” (p.129). She states that the ability to communicate authentically is important because “…children develop social and emotional competence through the quality of relationships they first develop with parents and those closest to them” (p.131). Authentic communication involves actively listening to children’s ideas and accepting their thoughts and opinions as having equal weight of those of adults. Children gain confidence and develop the ability to advocate for themselves and others when they know their thoughts and ideas are valued.

The focus on authentic communication in the Roots of Empathy program augments the development of self-advocacy as children learn the dimensions of empathy—identifying emotions, taking another’s perspective, and developing emotional sensitivity—all of which are essential prosocial behaviours. Gordon (2009) states:

If children have a learned method for deciding, for making judgments, if they have internalized principles to live by, things that feel true for them, they have the armor they need to say no to things that make them feel uncomfortable or strike them as wrong. (p. 131)
Gordon’s statement resonates with my belief that advocacy is important, because children who are confident and who stand up for themselves and others are less likely to participate in bullying behaviour, and are less likely to be bullied themselves (Gourneau, 2012; Schonert-Reichl, 2012).

**Teaching Emotional Literacy.** Emotional literacy refers to the child’s ability to identify and accept the emotions of others and to respect individual similarities and differences. Gordon (2009) discusses the importance of giving children the words they need to describe their emotions in terms of facial expression, body language, and inner feelings, and the opportunity to discuss times when they have experienced various emotions. In the classroom, we talk about our feelings on a regular basis—during class discussions, when situations arise during play time or on the playground, or whenever children show extreme emotions. Children are encouraged to identify their feelings and to reflect on what causes them. We discuss the normal range of emotions that we all feel, and distinguish between feelings and behaviours. This frame of reference helps children truly understand the scope of their feelings and the triggers that cause them.

**Role Play and Dramatization.** In order for children to internalize a new set of skills, they need to practice them often. Dramatizing a classroom event or issue allows children to problem-solve in a group environment. When planning a dramatization, children must first identify the situation they wish to portray. Usually, these vignettes revolve around conflicts that occurred in the classroom or on the playground. Then, the group discusses the various ways to solve the problem, keeping our core CARES values and the Roots of Empathy concepts in mind. The children generate ideas and the teacher supports and refines them. Factors such as how many children need to take part in the dramatization, which children will enact which roles, and how they will demonstrate the solution, are developed. The dramatization is then performed for
the whole class, because often, conflict situations that turn into optimal SEL experiences do not involve the whole group, and it is important for those children not directly involved to experience the problem-solving process. After the “performance,” the class discusses the problem and the solution, and offers advice for scenarios that might happen – what to do if the situation escalates, and when they might need to seek an adult’s help. Children’s participation in play-based drama activities can generate benefits in social competence, self-regulation, and cooperation (Nicolopoulou, Barbosa de Sa, Ilgaz, & Brockmeyer, 2010). By working in role, children learn perspective-taking and develop empathy as they take on another’s characteristics (Baldwin & Fleming, 2003).

It is important to note that the children’s ability to plan and perform a dramatization develops throughout the school year. At first, I model these procedures and assign certain willing children to help me. As the year progresses, children become more familiar with the procedure and are eager to act out situations on their own. The act of planning a dramatization and performing it is, in itself, a cooperative activity that requires children to practice many SEL skills. Children love to perform, and these opportunities help to boost their self-esteem (Vespo, Capec, & Behforooz, 2006).

**Putting it all Together: the Workshop for Parents**

As described earlier in this project, it is my experience that parents are apprehensive about the amount of classroom time spent on developing social emotional competence. This is because they often see SEL as occurring at the expense of their child’s academic or intellectual development. This interactive workshop, designed as a power point, intends to show parents that intellectual learning and SEL can and do occur simultaneously. In addition, the workshop will highlight how the development of social emotional competency is crucial for their child’s future
academic success (Denham & Brown, 2010; Rhoades, Warren, Domitrovich, & Greenberg, 2011; Vandivere, 2004). The workshop would ideally be offered as a kindergarten orientation session that would occur in May before children start school in September. The intended audience is parents of soon-to-be kindergarten children; that is, parents whose children will start kindergarten in the fall after the presentation. This will allow parents to receive the information they need about the importance of their child’s SEL in kindergarten just before their children start school.

The workshop explains the four foundations that support the development of social emotional competence in my classroom—the Roots of Empathy program, SEL competencies defined by CASEL, curriculum connections, and classroom experiences. It highlights the importance of SEL, demonstrates the reciprocal relationship between intellectual development and SEL, and demonstrates how children rely on SEL skills to help them navigate through the many “teachable moments” that arise throughout the day. The workshop also provides examples of how SEL opportunities and Roots of Empathy lessons are linked to the curriculum. When children estimate the baby’s length and weight, they are learning about measurement. When they paint posters of the family, draw pictures of the baby, and sing the songs they learn in lessons, they are developing aesthetically and artistically. Many Roots of Empathy lessons and themes are linked to quality children’s literature that helps children understand the concepts and skills presented, and make connections to other aspects of their kindergarten day. SEL activities that grow out of Roots of Empathy concepts cover many of the prescribed learning outcomes for kindergarten (BC Ministry of Education, 2011a). This information is summarized in Figure 1.
Figure 1. Four foundations for social emotional competence in my classroom.
Description of the Workshop

This workshop is designed to inform parents of the importance of SEL in kindergarten, and to highlight the fact that children’s intellectual development can and will occur concurrently with social and emotional development. The workshop will take 2.5 – 3 hours and provides a summary of Roots of Empathy and background information on SEL. It demonstrates specific examples of the learning that occurs in the classroom and includes interactive activities for parents (see Appendix C for annotated presentation). Workshop components are discussed in detail below. Figure 2 shows the proposed agenda.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activities</th>
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| 9:00 - 9:15 | • Registration  
• Meet and Greet - chance for parents to get to know other parents in the school community  |
| 9:15 - 9:30 | • Welcome and Introductions  
• Brief welcome by the school principal  
• Introduce staff - kindergarten teacher(s) provide brief introduction and background information  |
| 9:30 - 10:15 | • Workshop Part 1  
• Think-Pair-Share activity  
• Introduction to SEL  
• Introduction to the Roots of Empathy program  
• Key concepts - CARES values and Project-based learning  
• Developmental Timeline activity  |
| 10:15-10:30 | • Coffee break                                                                                     |
| 10:30-11:15 | • Workshop Part 2 - SEL in action  
• Modeling  
• Group discussion  
• Fostering authentic communication  
• Teaching emotional literacy  |
| 11:15-11:30 | • Think-Pair-Share revisited  
• Presentation from current kindergarten class - demonstration role play and dramatization strategies for problem-solving  |
| 11:30     | • Questions and answers                                                                            |

Figure 2. Agenda for Parent Workshop.
Workshop Part One. This section of the workshop involves four parts. First, parents will participate in an introductory activity designed to get them thinking about SEL. Second, it defines SEL and provides an overview of the Roots of Empathy program. Third, it briefly highlights research supporting the importance of SEL and demonstrating the effectiveness of the Roots of Empathy program. Finally, it explains key terms, such as the core CARES values and project-based learning. Workshop components are discussed below.

Think-Pair-Share. This activity allows parents to access their background knowledge about SEL. The Think-Pair-Share strategy (Brownlie, Fullerton, & Schnellert, 2011) prompts parents to consider their ideas and beliefs about what SEL is and whether or not it has a place in the classroom. Parents then pair up and compare thoughts and ideas with a partner. Finally, parent pairs share their insights with the rest of the group. The teacher collects information and facilitates the ensuing discussion. Parents revisit this information at the end of the presentation and assess whether their thinking around SEL in the classroom has changed.

Introduction to SEL. Parents view slides of children engaged in classroom activities, and video clips that demonstrate the interrelatedness of the key concepts, and the teacher illustrates these relationships by presenting anecdotes from experiences in the classroom. The following example is a classroom anecdote that demonstrates the connection between CARES values, the concept of temperament covered in Roots of Empathy, and the kindergarten curriculum:

A group of children developed an interest in rocket ships, and had been working on a project at the light table. They were intent on building a rocket ship using all of the translucent, magnetic building blocks.

Nathaniel: “Let’s put these on top and see how high we can make it!”

Alexzander: “NO! I want to make it wider at the bottom!”
Xavier: “Yeah! Then we can put the animals inside and they can go to the moon.”

Nathaniel: “But it’s a rocket ship and it’s supposed to be high! I want to make it high!”

Nathaniel continued to argue his point, and Alexzander continued to hold his ground and argue that the ship should be wide, not high. The arguing escalated until Alexzander was nearly in tears. Xavier listened to both points of view and then offered the following solution:

Xavier: “I have an idea. Why don’t we make a tall one first, and get Mrs. Sudeyko to take a picture of it. Then we can make a wide one and put the animals inside it. We can take a picture of that, too.”

Alexzander: “Yeah! And then we can show the class the pictures and they can vote on the one they like the best! Can we make the wide ship first?”

The boys agreed that Xavier’s idea was a good one, and Nathaniel conceded to let Alexzander design his type of ship first.

The teacher highlights significant connections—in this case, a discussion about the concept of temperament explains why Nathaniel initially refused to listen to his friends’ points of view, why Alexzander became frustrated, and why Xavier reacted by proposing a solution. The teacher explains the dynamics of the classroom discussion that would follow this event—it would involve talking about the boys’ feelings and how their feelings influenced their behaviour.

Finally, the teacher demonstrates how this scenario and the discussion that follows can lead to activities that augment the kindergarten curriculum. Some of these might include documenting the different types of rockets the boys made through paintings, photographs, or drawings, writing stories about trips they might take on their rockets, measuring them to compare size and structure, or polling the class to determine which type of rocket is the favourite and graphing the
results. Actual samples of children’s work will be posted around the room so that parents can see the finished product.

An important issue surfaces from this scenario. Boyce et al. (2012) discuss the formation of social hierarchies in Kindergarten. Their study found that “...children occupying subordinate positions within their classrooms had more depressive symptoms, more frequent episodes of inattention, fewer positive peer relationships, and less evidence of prosocial behavior” (p. 3). Alexzander’s comment about having the class vote for their favourite rocket could inadvertently lead to a classroom activity that supports the development of these social hierarchies, as children might vote based on the popularity of the child who built the rocket, rather than on the attributes of the rocket itself. The teacher needs to ensure that both children’s rockets receive equal recognition based on their individual attributes. Additional connections can be made to the uniqueness of each rocket, and a discussion about why each one is special.

**Introduction to the Roots of Empathy program.** This part of the workshop demonstrates how Roots of Empathy is facilitated in the classroom. Parents will “virtually” meet the family through slides and pictures that demonstrate the children’s interactions with them in the classroom. They will also see how the program’s areas of focus are integrated into everyday classroom events.

**Key concepts: CARES values.** This section will introduce parents to the CARES values that underlie SEL at the school where I currently work (see Appendix B). The following anecdote is an example of a classroom discussion about how to deal with issues that might arise if a play center is too crowded. The discussion highlights the values of Caring, Respect and Responsibility, and Empathy, and fosters authentic communication, a foundation of the Roots of Empathy program:
Teacher: “What happens if you really want to play at the workbench, but there are already five kids there and you can’t fit? How will you feel?”

Ore: “Sad! And maybe mad because I really like to build things.”

Thomas: “Yeah, and sometimes kids run to get there before me. That’s not fair!”

Teacher: “So, what should you do if you get there and there’s no room? Should you snatch the tools out of someone’s hand and push them out of the way?”

Several students: “NO! That’s mean!”

Kaleb: You could ask one of the kids to come and get you when they are leaving, or when there’s a spot.”

Teacher: “That would be a responsible choice.”

Kayden: “Or you could sit on the chair and watch them, and wait until there’s room”.

Teacher: “Thanks, Kayden. That shows that you are respecting others’ space. What about when someone wants to leave the workbench center. Does that person have any responsibility to the rest of the group? Does she have to say anything to anyone, or help with any of the clean up?”

Hayln: “She should go and find someone who wants to play there, and tell them that she is leaving.”

Teacher: “Thanks, Hayln. That is a caring thing to do.”

Alexis: “She also needs to ask if she can help clean up before she goes.”

The teacher notes the significant connections that highlight the CARES values and promote authentic communication; that is, she accepts the children’s suggestions, labels the appropriate behaviours and values, and guides the children when she thinks more information might be needed. Discussions such as these motivate children to participate, as they feel they are
part of the process (Gordon, 2000). Additionally, connections to the curriculum are noted and examples of students’ work are shown to parents.

**Key concepts: Project-based learning.** This component of the workshop defines key terms and shows parents examples of what they look like in the classroom. The following anecdote accompanies slides showing children engaged in project-based learning, and illustrates how children’s natural interests and curiosities guide their academic learning as they simultaneously develop SEL skills:

Recently, we had an ant infestation in our classroom. A few children noticed thousands of ants amassed on the remains of a partially-eaten cookie on the coatroom floor. This event caused quite a commotion and soon all the children were interested and curious, and everyone crowded around for a closer look. The children noticed that the ant trail led to the far corner of the coatroom, and then disappeared into the outside wall. Several kids became fascinated by this and were determined to learn more. They asked for “scientist supplies”, like lab coats, clip boards, pencils, magnifying glasses, so that they could take a closer look at the ants and try to figure out where they were going. They wanted books about ants, as they thought these might provide clues as to where the ants might live. They soon discovered that the ants were, in fact, living in the sand between the concrete pads just outside our classroom door. As the entrance to the colony was in a relatively high traffic area, the children decided that they needed to protect the ants, and so worked together to build an enclosure around the entrance to the colony. They drew pictures and designed their enclosure, labeled their diagrams so that their classmates could help them and easily understand what they were doing, and posted signs so that other children in the school would not endanger the colony.
This example effectively illustrates that SEL and academic learning can occur concurrently. The teacher points out the significant connection to the parents—that children were engaged in academic skills (e.g., learning about insects and how they live, reading and comprehension, writing, drawing, and representing their thoughts and ideas), and SEL skills (e.g., working cooperatively, accepting others’ points of view, collaborating, and compromising) simultaneously.

**The “Developmental Timeline.”** The final activity in part one of the workshop is designed to demonstrate the concept of temperament and its connection to the core value of acceptance. Parents will create a collective Developmental Timeline, on which they will place markers indicating when their child reached various developmental milestones, such as sitting unaided or starting to crawl. The timeline presents a visual depiction of the large variation that represents normal child development. This activity and the ensuing discussion highlight individual differences while demonstrating that a broad range of abilities and temperaments are normal for every child.

**Workshop Part Two.** This part of the workshop demonstrates how the concepts covered during the Roots of Empathy lessons, in conjunction with the CARES values, form the foundation for teaching SEL skills throughout the day. Slides and video clips will show the following specific teaching methods used: modeling, group discussion, fostering authentic communication, and teaching emotional literacy. The final activity involves the presentation of a sample role play/dramatization activity by children in the current kindergarten class. The examples that follow illustrate the interconnectedness of the concepts and the curriculum activities that can arise from them.
Modeling. Modeling gives children a concrete example of what expected behaviours and concepts look like. For instance, through teacher modeling, children are taught to use specific language to navigate through various classroom situations and to avoid conflicts. In the following example, children model what to say if they want to join a play center, what to say if a center is too crowded, and what to say if they want to leave a center before the rest of the group:

Vignesh headed straight for the new hospital center, only to find six children already playing there. “Can I play?” He asked.

“It’s too crowded,” Alexis replied, “but if someone leaves I will come and get you and then you can play with us.”

A little while later, Joanna, who had been playing at the center for quite a while, decided she wanted to play somewhere else. “I’m leaving now. Do I need to help you clean up before I go?” she asked the group.

“No thanks, Joanna” replied Alexis. We’re still playing here. We’ll clean it up later.”

After Joanna left, Alexis went to find Vignesh. “Vignesh! Joanna’s not playing with us anymore, so you can come and play now.”

“Thanks! Can I be the patient?” Vignesh replied, as he rushed towards the center.

The important connection here is that when children have specific language tools to use, they are able to communicate their intentions effectively and eliminate many issues before they arise. It is important to note that examples such as the one above evolve over time; the teacher, in his or her role as a mediator, needs to model similar scenarios frequently and children need many opportunities to practice.

Group discussion. This section provides examples of how group discussions are an important part of many of the SEL opportunities in the classroom. The following example
illustrates how discussions help children gain exposure to others’ ideas and realize they are not alone in their thinking:

As we were preparing to go outside, some children realized that older children were already on the playground. They expressed some concern about having to be on the equipment with the “big kids;” some said that they were afraid of them, and others were concerned that they wouldn’t have enough room to play. We discussed ways that we could all play together, and talked about language we could use if conflicts arose.

Angelika: “If the big kids are on the monkey bars and you want to play, just ask them if you can have a turn.”

Breanna: “Maybe we could ask them to help lift us up to the monkey bars!”

Teacher: “What should you do if a bunch of big kids are playing and you feel afraid?”

Zain: “You could get some of your friends to go with you and then you won’t be scared.”

In this example children demonstrate how they gain confidence in their ability to problem-solve as the underlying values of CARES and a risk-free learning environment set the tone in the classroom. The teacher draws the parents’ attention to the differences in temperament that are exhibited in the example. Angelika and Breanna see the chance to play with the big kids as an adventure, while Zain feels apprehensive about sharing the playground with them. After discussing their feelings with the group, the children felt safe, empowered, and confident in their ability to deal with older children.

Fostering authentic communication. Authentic communication sets the tone in the classroom and is a foundation of the Roots of Empathy program (Gordon, 2000). In this section, parents view slides of children interacting with the Roots of Empathy baby during Theme Five,
that deals with the concept of sleep. An example of the discussion that occurred during the lesson follows:

ROE Facilitator: “Sometimes, when babies wake up in the night, it is hard for them to fall back asleep. Sometimes they might need some help to fall back asleep.”

Vignesh: “My baby wakes up all the time at night. He cries really loud and wakes me up, too.”

Facilitator: Thanks for sharing your story, Vignesh. It must be hard for you to go back to sleep, too. What do you do to get back to sleep?”

Vignesh: “I grab my blankie. Sometimes I call my mommy to come in, too, but she is always busy with my baby, so daddy comes in with me.”

Maria: “When I am tired I like to listen to my ‘sleep sheep’ because it plays nice music.”

Kaleb: “I like my favourite teddy bear. I have a blue blanket, too, but my dog chewed it.”

Facilitator: “It sounds like many of you have special things that help you to sleep. These kinds of things can help the baby go back to sleep, too. They are called ‘transitional objects’ because they help us fall asleep again once we wake up.”

In the above scenario, we notice that the teacher refers to how the facilitator fosters authentic communication; that is, she accepts the children’s contributions and expands on them when necessary. She thanks them for their insights rather than offering praise, and she asks open-ended questions that encourage them to add more to the discussion. These methods enhance children’s intrinsic motivation and elicit their participation.
Teaching emotional literacy. The importance of this concept is highlighted in this section. Parents observe how children’s emotional literacy is developed by labeling of emotions, modeling, and group discussion:

We read the book, Cookies: Bite-Sized Life Lessons by Amy Krouse Rosenthal (2006). The story follows a child making cookies, sharing them, and eating them. Through this process terms such as respect, cooperation, patience, compassion, and trustworthiness are defined in simple, child-friendly language. After reading, the children went off to play at centers, but Basil remained behind and did not want to play. Kieara and Zain gathered around him, trying to discover what was wrong.

“I’m just tired and I want to rest,” Basil replied.

Kieara and Zain helped Basil to the couch, got him some books and a stuffed toy, and set him up to have a rest.

When I noticed what was going on, I pointed out to the rest of the class, “Look how respectful Kieara and Zain are of Basil. They understand that he doesn’t want to play, and they are helping him to feel better.”

After labeling the children’s feelings and actions, the ensuing discussion describes what being respectful means in this case. Kieara and Zain were aware of Basil’s feelings; they accepted that he did not want to play and did not try to blame him or make him feel bad. They were intent on making him comfortable, and they concerned themselves with trying to make him feel better.

Connections to the literature and the curriculum are highlighted.

Think-pair-share revisited: New thinking around SEL. At this point in the presentation, parents will have the chance to review the information that has been presented and compare it to their initial thoughts and ideas generated in part one of the workshop. They will
meet in small groups to discuss their thinking and then report back to the large group with examples of how their thinking has expanded. The teacher facilitates a discussion and offers some guiding questions to assist with this task.

**Demonstration of role-playing and dramatization.** The final activity in the workshop involves an example of a role play/dramatization demonstrated by the current kindergarten children. As this workshop is ideally suited to occur in May, these children will have had nearly an entire school year to practice dramatizing issues and conflicts that arise in the classroom. It is important to note that children’s ability to identify situations and dramatize them on their own is a year-long process; that is, it takes time for some children to be able to initiate role play without teacher support.

The workshop for parents provides a glimpse into children’s daily lives at school. It is designed to ease parents’ apprehensions about the amount of time spent on SEL in the classroom, and it allows them to see how SEL opportunities supplement intellectual development and academic performance. The examples presented show children engaged in authentic, meaningful learning scenarios, and showcase the importance of respecting the child’s voice in the classroom. Additionally, parents see how the Roots of Empathy program dovetails with SEL opportunities and fosters authentic communication and risk-free learning—essential ingredients in the development of social emotional competence (Spivak & Farran, 2012).

Chapter Four presents conclusions and additional reflections. Some limitations are also noted, as well as recommendations and future directions on this topic.
CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

"Relationships teach the child."

~Mary Gordon (2009)

In this final chapter, I return to the guiding questions I formulated in Chapter One of this project, that refer to 1) how the Roots of Empathy program can be used to educate parents about the importance of SEL in kindergarten, 2) ways that the Roots of Empathy program can be used as a starting point to increase opportunities for SEL throughout the kindergarten day, and 3) how the Roots of Empathy program supplements the BC Ministry of Education curriculum for SEL in kindergarten. In the following sections, I present reflections that address these questions, as well as some limitations and ideas for future directions.

Roots of Empathy and the Importance of Social Emotional Development in Kindergarten

The Roots of Empathy program offers parents a chance to see SEL “in action” as their children learn new skills by observing and interacting with the baby and then apply them in classroom situations. In has been my experience that parents whose children have participated in this program anecdotally report they notice a difference in their children’s emotional literacy—the ability to identify their own emotions and those of others (Gordon, 2000).

The fact that children’s future success in school depends, in large part, on their degree of social emotional competence (Denham & Brown, 2010; Rhoades, Warren, Domitrovich, & Greenberg, 2011; Vandivere, Pitzer, Halle, & Hair, 2004) is supported by empirical research. Additionally, research supports the fact that schools that provide an integrated program (including Roots of Empathy) to teach SEL skills, in concert with a school-wide structure and philosophy around SEL, produce children who are more socially and emotionally competent
(Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Spivak & Farran 2012). However, parents want to know how programs taught in their child’s classroom will directly affect their child, and at the same time, these research findings are not always readily available for parents to read. The Roots of Empathy program provides parents with a framework that allows them to see how their children develop SEL in context in the classroom.

Another important reflection on how Roots of Empathy can educate parents about the importance of SEL refers to the prevalence of bullying in our society. Bullying appears to be on everyone’s minds these days, and parents are both afraid that their children will be victims and worried that they, as a result of parenting incompetence, may be producing bullies themselves. According to the Roots of Empathy website, one of the goals of the program is “…to break the intergenerational cycle of violence and poor parenting” (Roots of Empathy, 2013b). Unlike programs that specifically target bullying and/or aggression (for example, Call it Safe; BC Ministry of Education, 2011c) Roots of Empathy is a universal program that teaches core values of respect, acceptance, tolerance and diversity to all children. Children who participate in the Roots of Empathy program are more aware of how others feel, and of how their actions and behaviours affect others. They are less likely to be the victims of bullies or to be bullies themselves (Espelage, Mebane, & Adams, 2004; Schonert-Reichl, 2012).

In a recent article published in the Globe and Mail, Wente (2012) offers her thoughts on bullying and how to eradicate it:

There’s no sure way to bully-proof our kids. But the best protection isn’t legislation or a bunch of new programs. It’s the constant, close involvement of responsible adults—parents, teachers, coaches, bus drivers, aunts, uncles, neighbours—who’re aware of their role in modelling good conduct, empathy and emotional regulation. It’s showing kids how
they’re supposed to treat other people every moment of the day, not just on Anti-Bullying Day. Character education is useless work if it’s just an extra class in school. It has to be embedded in every element of life.

Wente’s comments support using a program such as Roots of Empathy to educate parents about the importance of developing social emotional competence in their children. When it is used as a foundation for SEL in the classroom it does, indeed, embed character education into every element of school life. The second guiding question, addressed next, further examines this point.

**Roots of Empathy and Increasing Social Emotional Learning in the Classroom**

The Roots of Empathy philosophy dovetails nicely with both the core competencies listed by CASEL (2011a) and the core CARES values of the school where I currently teach. The teachers at the school rely on the common language and common set of behavioural expectations sustained through the use of our core CARES values. At the same time, the children in my class rely on the similar framework and common structure of the Roots of Empathy program. Using common language also helps children avoid conflicts that may arise, as this helps children to understand what others say and mean, and to label their emotions (Gordon, 2009). Additionally, the common set of behavioural expectations established in the classroom help to promote an atmosphere that is conducive to social and emotional development. As the examples presented in Chapter Three suggest, children know, for example, that they must treat others with respect and that they also have the right to be treated respectfully.

Kindergarten children are the youngest members of the school community. Older children in the school can sometimes make them feel as though they need to be “looked after” because they are young, and because they are unable to do certain things by themselves. In light of this, it is a welcome change for kindergarten children to have the Roots of Empathy baby to
look after. The baby occupies an important place in the children’s lives. At the same time, they develop rapport with the baby and look forward to their monthly interactions with the family. Additionally, they incorporate the skills covered in weekly Roots of Empathy lessons into other aspects of their classroom lives. For example, children will often act out their own Roots of Empathy scenarios at the dramatic play center. In doing so, they have the opportunity to extend their thinking and transfer the skills they have learned to new or different situations. They may be just role-playing empathy, but the process involves practicing new skills, problem-solving, and developing oral language proficiency.

**Roots of Empathy and the BC Ministry of Education Kindergarten Curriculum**

Currently, a curriculum for SEL in kindergarten in BC does not exist. Social and emotional development is listed as one of the five goal areas of the Primary Program (BC Ministry of Education, 2000). The Primary Program provides a framework or outline of areas that should be considered when teaching kindergarten children. In 2001, the BC Ministry of Education added Social Responsibility as one of its four “foundational skills” (BC Ministry of Education, 2011d). This includes a common set of expectations in four broad areas: contributing to the classroom and school community, solving problems in peaceful ways, valuing diversity and defending human rights, and exercising democratic rights and responsibilities. Although there are facets of SEL in social responsibility, the two areas are different. Importantly, social responsibility goals remain optional; schools are not mandated to adopt them. In addition, because social and emotional development is closely aligned to morals and values, there is a risk that some parents may interpret an SEL curriculum as instructions on how to parent. It is important to focus on the skills that children need rather than the qualities or values they should
possess. Perhaps this is the reason why our provincial government has not yet developed curriculum in this area (Wente, 2012).

**Concluding Thoughts**

It is difficult to explain the importance of SEL to parents when the government does not make funding programs that support SEL a priority. There appears to be an interest in SEL programs on the part of the provincial government. In discussing the Roots of Empathy program in BC, Premier Christy Clark states:

> I am so pleased to be a part of this annual celebration of such a successful and worthwhile program. The Roots of Empathy program is a cornerstone of our anti-bullying strategy in B.C., with young children learning the core values of kindness, trust, empathy and respect through their interactions with babies (BC Government Online News Source, 2012).

The government appears to understand the importance of SEL and its benefit in the classroom, and they have committed to funding the Roots of Empathy program for the 2012-2013 school year. However, in the Coquitlam, BC school district where I work, the program has recently been cut because of the local School Board’s budget shortfall. This means that no new facilitators can be trained to run the program in Coquitlam schools, so the program is unable to grow and will remain only in those schools where there is currently a trained facilitator. Children entering kindergarten now and in the future will not benefit from exposure to this program, unless government funding is reinstated (Steffenhagen, 2009).

The findings from the literature review highlight the importance of children’s social and emotional development, and its connection to their future success in life. Parents, teachers and administrators who know the value of the program and who have seen positive results in school
populations that have been exposed to the program can be valuable advocates and should continue to campaign for its funding. With incidents of bullying being at the forefront of the news lately (Wente, 2012; Vancouver Sun Editorial, 2012), the fact that children who participate in the Roots of Empathy program show an increase in prosocial behaviours and a decrease in bullying and aggressive behaviour (Schonert-Reichl, 2012) should be cause enough for governments to continue funding the program throughout the province and indeed, the country.

To conclude, I continue to believe that social and emotional competence is one of the most important areas to develop in our children. Experiences in my classroom have further illustrated how children are more confident in both their ability to interact effectively with others and in their ability to develop intellectually. These experiences consist of explicitly teaching SEL skills, including but not limited to sharing, cooperating, developing empathy and perspective-taking, and appreciating others’ differences and similarities. In *Roots of Empathy: Changing the World Child by Child*, Gordon (2009) writes, “What greater contribution could we make to our sustainable future than to promote a development of the heart that runs parallel to the development of the mind?” (p.34). Learning to read, add, and subtract are academic skills that are important for children to learn, just as learning to cooperate, empathize, and respect others are important social emotional skills. The latter foster the development of the heart, and as such can—and should—be explicitly taught.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

One limitation of this project is that it did not address whether teachers would find similar information useful or relevant, nor did it consider the next steps in disseminating this information to teachers. In conversation with colleagues during the writing of this project it became clear that, while all of them understood the importance of developing SEL in the
classroom, many of them—just like parents—could not justify spending more time on the development of SEL skills. They noted the amount of prescribed learning outcomes (PLO’s) they were expected to cover and felt that some of these would be overlooked if too much classroom time was devoted to SEL. Moreover, this sentiment seemed to grow stronger as the grade level increased; that is, the higher the grade level, the stronger the perceived pressure to cover all the PLO’s. This project presents a theoretical shift; that is, from thinking about learning through an intellectual development or facts-based lens, to thinking about learning as a process of gaining social emotional competence. For this reason, it presents itself as a useful tool for educators because it establishes that it is possible to focus on SEL and still cover the PLOs. In fact, children with a high level of social emotional competence will perform better academically and will be set up for greater success later in school (Bagdi & Vacca, 2005; Denham & Brown, 2010; Elias, Wang, Weissberg, Zins, & Walberg, 2002; Hymel & Ford, 2003).

Two facts previously noted, first, that no curriculum for SEL exists in BC and second, that Social Responsibility standards remain optional (BC Ministry of Education, 2011d) are serious limitations that provide insight into possible future directions for research. Moreover, although this project presented a workshop for parents, designed to help them understand the importance of SEL, perhaps designing a similar workshop for teachers may prove beneficial in assuring them that SEL and academic learning can occur concurrently and that one does not happen at the expense of the other.
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opportunities for preschool children with or without disabilities to make choices.


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Appendix A

EDI Data Table for Coquitlam - Wave 4 Data – 2009/10 – 2010/11

The following figures show the Early Development Index data for Coquitlam, BC, Canada, collected between 2009 and 2011 (Human Early Learning Partnership, 2011). Data is presented for Physical Health and Well-being (Figure A1), Social Competence (Figure A2), Emotional Maturity (Figure A3), Language and Cognitive Development (Figure A4), and Communication Skills (Figure A5). Additionally, Figure A6 and A7 show areas where children are vulnerable on one or more scales. The school where I currently teach is located in the Lougheed/Maillardville area. These figures demonstrate that my school ranks in the highest vulnerability categories in all areas except Physical Health and Well-being.
Figure A1. EDI data for Physical Health and Well-being. This scale measures attributes such as motor development, daily readiness for school, washroom independence, and handedness. The school where I currently work is located in the Lougheed/Maillardville area. This map shows that 12 – 16 percent of children from this school are considered vulnerable in this area.
Figure A2. EDI data for Social Competence. This scale measures behaviour in structured settings and includes the ability to cooperate, share, and get along with others. The area that encompasses the school where I currently work ranks as the most vulnerable on this scale.
Figure A3. EDI data for Emotional Maturity. This figure measures behaviour in less-structured environments and includes SEL skills such as helping others, tolerance, and empathy. The area around the school where I currently work falls in the most vulnerable in this category.
Figure A4. EDI data for Language and Cognitive Development. This area measures attributes such as interest in books and language-related activities, as well as interest in simple math. The school where I currently work is in the Lougheed/Maillardville area, which ranks as the most vulnerable on this scale.
Figure A5. EDI Data for Communication Skills. Measuring attributes such as the ability to communicate with others, to understand others, and general interest in the world. The school where I currently work is in the Lougheed/Maillardville area, which is among the most vulnerable in this category.
Figure A6. EDI data showing children who are vulnerable on one or more scales. This map shows that 35 percent of the children in my school’s area are vulnerable on more than one of the scales of the EDI (Physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, and language and cognitive development, and communication skills.)
Figure A7. Star plot showing percentage of children vulnerable on each EDI scale. This graph shows the percentage of children that are vulnerable on one or more of the EDI scales. The area where my school is located ranks among the highest vulnerability ratings.
Appendix B

Alderson CARES Core Values Matrix

The Core Values Matrix is the foundation for building an effective school climate that optimizes SEL at the school where I currently teach. It provides common language and an underlying set of behavioural expectations for both teachers and students. The following table shows the five core values and examples of behavioural exemplars for each value.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CAREING</th>
<th>ACCEPTING</th>
<th>PLAYGROUND</th>
<th>ASSEMBLIES</th>
<th>HALLWAYS AND WASHROOMS</th>
<th>LUNCH TIME</th>
<th>SCHOOL GROUNDS</th>
<th>ALL CLASS SETTINGS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• include others • share equipment • help a friend solve a problem</td>
<td>• include others • be understanding when kids want to play different games • be understanding when kids are not comfortable doing things that you do</td>
<td>• make room for others • sit appropriately • be patient with others and allow them to make mistakes.</td>
<td>• make room for others • pick up litter • help keep common areas clean</td>
<td>• help others keep the classroom clean</td>
<td>• pick up other people’s stuff • respect the environment and other people’s property</td>
<td>• encourage others • use encouraging language (put-ups) • show patience with others</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• listen politely • clap appropriately • use encouraging language</td>
<td>• respect personal space • respect privacy • enjoy hallway displays with your eyes only • use encouraging language • greet others appropriately</td>
<td>• understand that people may eat different foods • try new foods when you can • invite others to sit with you</td>
<td>• greet others appropriately • understand that everyone is different – people may dress differently, have a different way of getting to school, or may have different family members</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| RESPECTFUL | • follow supervisor’s directions  
• play sports by following the rules  
• use appropriate language  
• be warm and welcoming to visitors | • keep personal space when sitting  
• eyes on the speaker, mouths quiet, hands still, ears listening  
• sit criss-cross  
• clap appropriately  
• anthem – stand tall, hands at side, sing | • use and inside voice  
• stay in line  
• greet others appropriately  
• enjoy hallway displays with your eyes only  
• respect privacy in the washroom | • wipe desk and clean up after yourself  
• use eating time wisely – finish eating on time | • share space with others  
• use appropriate tone of voice and language | • use appropriate voice and manners  
• respect others’ space  
• listen politely and raise your hand  
• keep school property clean  
• stay in your own workspace  
• be prepared and on time | • be on time  
• take care of belongings  
• make wise choices  
• follow directions of teachers and adults  
• use time wisely  
• be your own problem-solver (ask 3 before me) |
| RESPONSIBLE | • come in quickly when the bell rings  
• return all equipment  
• use the garbage cans  
• help with “Environmental Beautification” | • choose appropriate people to sit beside  
• follow directions  
• bring only materials you need  
• practice self-control | • return to class quickly  
• stay on task when working in the hallway  
• use washroom appropriately  
• report damaged property and unsafe behaviours | • recycle  
• take home uneaten food  
• follow directions from supervisors and monitors | • be on time  
• take care of belongings  
• use garbage containers  
• know and follow the rules  
• follow supervisor’s directions | • be patient with others  
• allow others to make mistakes  
• listen to others’ thoughts and ideas  
• take turns and share  
• understand that it is OK to be different |
| EMPATHETIC | • help others solve their problems  
• share equipment  
• invite others to play  
• help people who are hurt of get the supervisor to help  
• watch out for little kids and help them if needed | • think about others when you are watching, sitting, participating  
• understand that performers might feel nervous  
• use encouraging words  
• respect privacy  
• respect personal space  
• respect others’ right to work without being disturbed by hallway noise | • respect personal space  
• be open to trying new foods  
• help others if needed | • be considerate of others  
• welcome visitors warmly  
• play appropriately  
• watch out for little kids and help if needed | • be patient with others  
• allow others to make mistakes  
• listen to others’ thoughts and ideas  
• take turns and share  
• understand that it is OK to be different |
| SAFE | • use equipment appropriately  
• keep hands and feet to self  
• play inside the boundaries | • enter/exit quietly  
• walk  
• stay in your spot  
• keep your body to yourself  
• keep your body to yourself  
• walk quietly  
• hang up coats and backpacks  
• look after your | • wash your hands  
• stay in your seat  
• eat your own lunch  
• take home leftover food | • walk  
• use crosswalks/follow traffic signals  
• keep hands and feet to self  
• walk  
• use equipment and materials appropriately |
Table B1. CARES core values matrix showing behavioural exemplars across various school settings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavioural Exemplars</th>
<th>Belongings</th>
<th>Supervision</th>
<th>Permissions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>keep rocks, snow, wood chips, gravel, etc. on the ground</td>
<td>follow supervisor directions</td>
<td>ask for help when necessary</td>
<td>leave the room only with permission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>walk bikes and scooters on school property</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

Workshop for Parents – Using Roots of Empathy to Support Social Emotional Learning in Kindergarten

The following is the annotated power point presentation and workshop for parents. All photographs of the Roots of Empathy family and the Roots of Empathy facilitator are used by permission. Parental permission was obtained for the use of children’s photos, stories, and artwork.

Slide 1

Our Roots of Empathy family – Dad Chris, Mom Mary, and Baby Roenick

Pre-workshop set up - additional supplies needed:

- Chart paper
- Markers
- Samples of children’s work posted around the room – demonstrating how SEL connects to PLO’s
- Large horizontal chart for developmental timeline activity
- Post-it notes
- Hand out – including: copies of Alderson CARES Matrix (See Appendix B), script for parent demonstration (see slide 16; Appendix D)
- Book – *Cookies: Bite-sized Life Lessons* by Amy Krouse Rosenthal
Personal introduction:

- education background
- number of years of teaching experience and a grade level experience
- specific number of years at this school
- reflections on teaching at this school and why it is a good place to foster SEL skills in children.

Workshop overview:

This workshop involves both listening times and interactive times. In part one of the workshop, you will:

- Participate in an activity designed to get you thinking about Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and to access your prior knowledge about it
- Be introduced to SEL and the Roots of Empathy program, and be shown examples of what both of these look like in the classroom
- Be shown how classroom organization and teaching methods can provide for optimum SEL experiences
- Be given an overview of the CARES matrix, which is the underlying philosophical foundation of all teachers and staff at Alderson
- Participate in a Developmental Timeline activity designed to highlight the concept of temperament

After the break, Part Two involves:

- Examples of teaching methods used to foster SEL
- Revisiting the Think-Pair-Share activity from Part One
- A presentation involving some of the children from the current kindergarten class. They will demonstrate two methods used extensively in the classroom to develop SEL – role play and dramatization.
- Finally, there will be ample opportunity to ask questions at the end.
Think – Pair – Share
What is Social Emotional Learning? (SEL)

- What does Social and Emotional learning mean to you?
- Talk with a partner about your ideas around social and emotional learning
- Share some of your ideas with the large group

- Explain that this is to get parents thinking about SEL
- Allow 5 or 10 minutes of chat time, depending on level of engagement.
- Large group discussion and sharing – write key ideas on chart paper as they will be revisited at the end of the presentation.
Social emotional competence refers to the level at which children acquire SEL skills.

Social emotional competence is a better predictor of future academic success than is academic readiness (Denham, 2006; Schonert-Reichl & Hymel, 2007).

This means that socially and emotionally competent children—those who are better able to share and cooperate with others, accept others’ points of view, demonstrate care and concern for others, and handle emotions in socially acceptable ways—are more likely to succeed later in school and in life.
• CASEL is the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. It is the leading authority on social emotional learning in the United States that supports top researchers in the field of social and emotional learning (CASEL, 2011, “What is SEL?”)

• CASEL defines SEL as having 5 competencies:

  • **Self-awareness** – recognizing one’s emotions, values, strengths, and weaknesses

  • **Self-management** – the ability to effectively manage one’s emotions and behaviours (related to self-regulation, which will be discussed later)

  • **Social awareness** – refers to the ability to understand others’ similarities and differences, to accept other points of view, and to show empathy and concern for others

  • **Relationship skills** – cooperative teamwork, positive relationship skills (sharing, cooperative behaviour, flexibility) and dealing effectively with conflict

  • **Responsible decision-making** – making ethical, constructive choices about personal and social behaviour (CASEL 2011)
These competencies relate directly to the school’s CARES values, which will be discussed shortly.
Why do we spend so much time on SEL in Kindergarten?

- This picture shows another example of how SEL skills are developed through collaborative activities in the classroom, and how they enhance academic learning and intellectual development. During center time, these children decided that they wanted to build a store. They worked together to build the “walls” out of plastic connectors and then proceeded to make signs advertising the products they were “selling”. This process involved SEL skills such as planning cooperatively, sharing ideas, and listening to others’ points of view, and academic skills such as emergent writing, basic addition and subtraction, and research.

- The fact that this project rose out of the children’s natural interests and curiosities is important: the children have a vested interest in the activity and are motivated to write and do math. Children willingly participate because the activities are meaningful to them - many children who would balk at being asked to pick up a pencil if they think it involves “work” will willingly choose to write if it means something to them.
It is important to develop SEL skills at an early age, because empirical research shows a strong correlation between socially and emotionally competent children and future success in school and life (Denham & Brown, 2010; Elias, Wang, Weissberg, Zins, & Wahlberg, 2002; Rhoades, Warren, Domitrovich, & Greenberg, 2011; Vandivere, Pitzer, Halle, & Hair, 2004).
Social emotional competence is a better predictor of future success in school – and life – than is academic achievement (Denham & Brown, 2010; Rhoades, Warren, Domitrovich, & Greenberg, 2011; Vandivere, 2004).

For example, children who are able to play cooperatively with others will later be able to work cooperatively with others, both in later grades in school and once they enter the work force.

Empathy is defined as “…an individual’s emotional responsiveness to the emotional experiences of another” (Schonert-Reichl and Scott, 2009, p. 244). Empathy is important for promoting positive behaviours and inhibiting negative ones (Hoffman, 2000).

In other words, children who display empathy towards others show care and concern for them. They may try to comfort others when they are hurt, or they may change their activities, plans, or points of view to accommodate others.
Examples of prosocial behaviours include making and sustaining new friendships, initiating positive relationships with teachers and peers, demonstrating positive feelings about oneself, understanding one’s own emotions and handling challenging situations effectively (Denham, 2006; Schonert-Reichl & Hymel, 2007).

Children who develop empathy not only are more likely to stand up for those being bullied, but are less likely to become bullies themselves or to be the targets of bullies (Espelage, Mebane, & Adams, 2004; Schonert-Reichl, 2012).
What is Roots of Empathy?

- Roots of Empathy is a classroom-based social emotional competence program for use with children from Kindergarten to grade 8.
- The baby is the teacher. Through the baby’s naturally occurring actions and activities, the children learn about empathy.
- The Roots of Empathy program involves bringing a baby and his parents into the classroom once a month for 9 months. The children learn about typical infant growth and observe healthy interactions between the parents and the baby.
- It was developed in Canada by Mary Gordon in 1996.
- Mary Gordon’s initial idea was to develop a program that would “...break the intergenerational cycle of violence and poor parenting” (Roots of Empathy, 2013b). Gordon witnessed the effects that these social conditions have on children, and she thought that she could break these cycles by teaching children basic infant care, such as...
never to shake a baby, always put a baby to sleep on his back, babies cry because they need something, not because they are bad.

- Mary Gordon was a recipient of the order of Canada in 2006, for her role in developing this program (Roots of Empathy, 2011).

- The program started in Toronto with 150 children, and is now offered in every province throughout Canada, in urban, rural, and first nations communities. It currently reaches over 450,000 children worldwide (ROE, 2012).

- Mary Gordon’s aim – was to create caring communities…one school at a time. Her book breaks down this message even further, as it is entitled *Roots of Empathy: Changing the World Child by Child* (Gordon, 2009).

- Roots of Empathy lesson activities foster emotion identification, perspective-taking, and emotional sensitivity (Gordon, 2000).

- Research shows that SEL is enhanced through the use of structured, universal classroom programs – in other words, programs that target all children, not just those at risk, and that follow a curriculum (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, R.D., & Schellinger, 2011). Roots of Empathy is one such program. In addition, Roots of Empathy is beneficial for the development of SEL because it focuses on positive behaviours, such as cooperation, sharing, and empathy, rather than negative ones, such as bullying (Schonert-Reichl, 2012).
The program has three main goals:

- **Goal 1:** To develop children’s social and emotional understanding – emotional literacy (Gordon, 2009).

  Emotional literacy is defined as the ability to identify and label one’s own emotions, as well as those of others. It involves the ability to read a person’s facial expression and body language, in addition to verbal cues (Gordon, 2009).

- Mary Gordon talks about the importance of emotional literacy for all children. Mary has especially mentioned boys, as traditionally, western society encourages girls to talk about their feelings but discourages boys from doing so.

- To date, researchers, including Dr. Kim Schonert-Reichl at UBC and her collaborators have evaluated Roots of Empathy and this research shows that boys who have participated in the Roots of Empathy program have a similar emotional vocabulary as that of girls, and that they are more likely to talk about their problems and feelings than boys who have not experienced the program (Gordon, 2009).
- **Goal 2:** To promote children’s prosocial behaviours and decrease their aggressive behaviours.

- Ask parents for examples of prosocial behaviours. (Examples of prosocial behaviours include sharing, cooperating, accepting other points of view, managing emotions in socially appropriate ways).

- Ask parents for examples of aggressive behaviours (these include physical aggression – hitting, kicking, punching; relational or social aggression – manipulation of the social group to exclude or limit social interactions with certain children; teasing, name calling (Schonert-Reichl, 2012).

- This is important, because children who demonstrate fewer aggressive behaviours are less likely to be bullied or to become bullies themselves (Schonert-Reichl, 2012)

- to increase children’s knowledge about infant development and effective parenting practices (Gordon, 2000).

- Mary Gordon originally started the ROE program as a way to combat poor parenting practices – she felt that if she could educate children about effective parenting at an early age she could help to break the cycle of poor parenting (Gordon, 2009).
The program spans 9 months and includes one theme each month.

- It is delivered in the classroom by a trained facilitator. Facilitators may be teachers or school personnel (at this particular school, the facilitator is the Youth Worker) who undergo training through the Roots of Empathy organization.

- Facilitators are trained to administer the program following the six areas of focus:

  - **Communication** - asking authentic questions that lead to exploration; promoting a climate of respect by accepting children’s thoughts, feelings, and opinions equally; creating a trusting environment where adults and children can share their feelings honestly; acknowledging a child’s contributions with thanks rather than praise.

  - **Risk-free learning** – establishing trust and civility in the classroom; accepting and validating all contributions and opinions; preparing children to honour the Roots of Empathy family and to be respectful of activities (such as breastfeeding) that might arise during lessons.
• **Intrinsic motivation** – encouraging motivation by acknowledging children’s contributions without judgment or praise.

• **Attunement** – highlighting the parent’s understanding of the baby’s moods and needs; demonstrating how parents use music to stimulate babies and encourage brain development; promoting music as a way to bring the classroom together and showing how music can encourage responsiveness and sensitivity to the mood of the baby.

• **Fairness** – building a climate of compassion and civility; creating places where friendships can be nurtured; teaching children to recognize unfairness and find ways to challenge it.

• **Inclusion** – celebrating individual differences and similarities; developing a sense of belonging by encouraging children to be inclusive of others and not to be hurtful; removing barriers that separate people by race, age, sex, or temperament; raising levels of awareness to those who may be feeling left out (Gordon, 2000).

• Program integrity is essential and Roots of Empathy ensures that all facilitators receive the same training. Additionally, they retain strict control over course materials and curricula (Roots of Empathy, 2012)

• The facilitator works with the classroom teacher and the ROE family and visits the classroom three times per month – a pre-visit explains what will happen when the baby arrives; the second visit involves bringing the infant and family into the classroom to interact with the children, and the post visit reviews and extends the concepts presented in the previous visits.

• Parent-infant interaction serves as a starting point for discussions about understanding feelings, healthy infant development, and effective parenting practices. All lessons foster
empathy, emotional understanding, and problem solving skills (Schonert-Reichl, 2011; see also Gordon, 2009).
• The green blanket is an important part of the program because it defines the baby’s space. Children sit around the green blanket as equals, and their thoughts and ideas are accepted openly and carry equal weight as those of adults. This fosters authentic communication and a risk-free learning environment, which are cornerstones of the ROE program (Gordon, 2000).

• During the past ten years, independent research has been conducted in several countries.

• According to the program’s report, research has consistently demonstrated that the program reduces aggression and increases social emotional understanding in the children who receive it (Roots of Empathy, 2009).

• Researchers found that children who participated in the program, when compared to control group children, showed a significant increase in prosocial behaviours and a significant decrease in aggressive behaviours (Schonert-Reichl, Smith, Zaidman-Zait, & Hertzman, 2012).
The Roots of Empathy Organization has produced this short clip that explains Gordon’s philosophy and the program’s goals. It is called *The Science of a Meaningful Life* (Greatergoodscience, 2011) (Approx. 4 minutes)

- Video clip in which Mary Gordon talks about the Roots of Empathy program and summarizes the research.

- One of the main concepts of the program is that of Temperament – that all babies are different and may react differently to various situations.

- Throughout Roots of Empathy lessons, connections are made between temperament and the baby’s/children’s emotions. By watching the baby and interacting with him, children learn to “read” how the baby is feeling, using their emotional literacy skills, and the teacher and facilitator mediate the connections to how they may feel under similar circumstances.
the discussion of the concept of temperament, through the use of examples like these, help children to realize that all people have individual similarities and differences. This helps children understand why others may react to similar situations differently, and this understanding leads to the development of empathy that transfers to other situations that arise in the classroom.
The “Rocket Predicament” is an example of how the ROE concept of temperament can be used to explain why certain situations may arise in the classroom. Alexzander and Nathaniel were building rockets at the light table when an argument ensued. One wanted to build tall rockets; the other wanted the rockets to be wide. The boys argued back and forth; voices were raised and the boys were near tears. A third boy, Xavier, offered some advice – he suggested they first build a wide rocket, and then a tall one, and then take pictures of both. The boys even suggested that they could show the pictures to the class and the class could then vote for their favourites.

Following this event, we would have a whole-class discussion about what happened and how the boys solved their problems.

This is important because when issues arise, they rarely involve the whole class; it is important to draw attention to others’ struggles as then children can label the emotions
and make connections to times when they had similar issues or feelings (there is a connection here to emotional literacy again, too).

- The discussion that follows would involve talking about the boys’ feelings and how their feelings influenced their behaviour.

- It would also include connections to the ROE concept of temperament and how this explains why different people react to different things in different ways: the boys’ temperaments explain why Nathaniel initially refused to listen to his friends’ points of view, why Alexzander became frustrated, and why Xavier reacted by proposing a solution.

- This “predicament” led to activities that augment the kindergarten curriculum: kids were building, measuring, and comparing rockets, some wrote journal entries and stories about them, others painted posters such as those in the photo above.
• The concepts of temperament and emotional literacy are important because they underlie all activities connected to SEL in the classroom.

• In order to foster opportunities to learn and practice SEL skills in the classroom, some changes needed to happen.

• Next, we will discuss these changes – using the CARES values, creating choice in the classroom, and implementing a project-based learning approach.
- CARES (Caring, Acceptance, Respect and Responsibility, Empathy, and Safety) and this forms the foundation for building an effective school climate that optimizes SEL, as it provides common language and an underlying set of behavioural expectations for both teachers and students.

- Behavioural expectations are determined collaboratively by all staff members; core values are defined in child-friendly language and behavioural exemplars are presented for each value across different school settings.

- All staff commit to these values and there is a common language in our school, so that when children transition from grade to grade, they know the behaviours that are expected of them.

- Refer to CARES matrix hand out. Teachers spend considerable amount of time teaching the desired behaviours and discussing what they look like across all settings, at the beginning of the year.
• For example, we need to show the children what it means to ‘listen responsibly’, as this might look different in different situations, and it might mean different things to different people.

• Teachers and staff emphasize intrinsic motivation and logical consequences for misbehavior. For example, there is an expectation that children will be caring, accepting, respectful, responsible, empathetic, and safe because it is the right thing to do, and because our entire school community follows these values, not because they will receive and external reward for “good” behavior. An example of a logical consequence might be the expectation that a child take responsibility for his actions by telling his parents about his behavior, writing apology letters, or repairing or replacing damaged or broken school property.
What would you do if...

- The center is too crowded?
- Someone runs ahead of you and takes your supplies?
- You want to change centers and kids are still playing there?

The CARES values provide a structure for emotional literacy to happen in the classroom. It encourages problem-solving rather than antagonism.

When a confrontational situation arises in the classroom, the teacher initiates a group discussion and facilitates problem-solving among the group.

Many of our discussions start this way – what would you do if…

These kinds of discussions highlight the CARES values

They also foster authentic communication, which was mentioned earlier, and is a foundation of the Roots of Empathy program.

Refer to the sample script in the handout package. Solicit parent volunteers to read the lines and role-play the following scenario, which is a sample of a discussion that might arise in the classroom:
Teacher: “What happens if you really want to play at the workbench, but there are already five kids there and you can’t fit? How will you feel?”

Ore: “Sad! And maybe mad because I really like to build things.”

Thomas: “Yeah, and sometimes kids run to get there before me. That’s not fair!”

Teacher: “So, what should you do if you get there and there’s no room? Should you snatch the tools out of someone’s hand and push them out of the way?”

Several students: “NO! That’s mean!”

Kaleb: You could ask one of the kids to come and get you when they are leaving, or when there’s a spot.”

Teacher: “That would be a responsible choice.

Kayden: “Or you could sit on the chair and watch them, and wait until there’s room”.

Teacher: “Thanks, Kayden. That shows that you are respecting others’ space. What about when someone wants to leave the workbench center. Does that person have any responsibility to the rest of the group? Does she have to say anything to anyone, or help with any of the clean up?”

Hayln: “She should go and find someone who wants to play there, and tell them that she is leaving.”

Teacher: “Thanks, Hayln. That is a caring thing to do.”

Alexis: “She also needs to ask if she can help clean up before she goes.”

After the role-play, note the significant connections that highlight the CARES values and promote authentic communication – how the teacher accepts the children’s suggestions, labels the appropriate behaviours and values, and guides the children when she thinks more information might be needed. Discussions such as these motivate children to
participate, as they feel they are part of the process (Gordon, 2000). Additionally, connections to the curriculum are noted and work samples are again highlighted.
• When structures within the classroom are removed, children have the opportunity to make choices.

• The ability to choose is closely tied to the development of self-regulation (Bodrova & Leong, 2008). Self-regulation refers to the child’s ability to engage in mindful, intentional, and thoughtful behaviours and to control impulses.

• Allowing children to make choices acknowledges their voice in the classroom. It promotes honesty and advocates for an environment where children’s thoughts, feelings, and opinions are weighted equally with those of adults. This atmosphere of mutual respect is central to the Roots of Empathy philosophy (Gordon, 2000).

• Choice is important because it allows children to take ownership of their learning and it encourages the exploration of logical consequences for behaviour.
• Removal of many of the structures in the classroom – the number of children allowed to play at a center, assigned seating, etc. provides children with the opportunity to make choices and with many opportunities to problem solve.

• Examples – in the picture of the two boys, they were allowed who to choose as a partner when playing this particular math game. We discussed as a group the consequences of various types of choices – if children choose someone they can work well with, they will have a better experience playing the game, and will be better able to focus on the skill being presented. If they make a poor choice, they will likely not be able to focus, will be off-task and may be disruptive to other classmates.

• In the picture of the children finger painting, they had to decide criteria such as how many people could fit at the table in order for everyone to have enough room, how they would ensure that everyone who wanted to paint would have the chance to do so, who would go first, etc. These decisions involve many SEL skills – negotiation, flexibility, managing extreme emotions, listening to other perspectives, to name a few.

• Classroom discussions always accompany the opportunity to make choices - whether their choices were effective, and if not, what they can do differently next time.
This video clip is a humorous look at the different levels of self-regulation in children (IgniterMedia, 2009). You will see examples of how each child’s unique temperament flavours the way they deal with the issue.

Children who can self-regulate are better problem-solvers, because project-based learning opportunities involve groups of children working together. Consequently, SEL skills such as perspective-taking and flexibility of thought are enhanced (Curtis, 2002; Ha, 2010).

Researchers found that students who self-regulate – who control their emotions and handle difficult or challenging situations in socially appropriate ways - demonstrate positive gains in their ability to collaborate and cooperate (Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning [CELL], 2009).
• Project-based learning provides opportunities for students to practice SEL through daily activities.

• Above are some examples – in the photos on the right, the children decided they wanted to change our dramatic play center into a Salon. The boy at the top is making posters to advertise services (and at the same time practicing his drawing and fine motor skills, emergent writing skills, and math skills, as he was including prices for services). The inset picture shows some of the items the children made for the salon – they represent containers of hair spray and skin cream (ideas the children came up with themselves). The picture on the left shows some children making butter – we had some cows visit our school, and the discussion on how to make butter rose from the children’s interest in where dairy products come from. Academic skills involved in this endeavour included estimating (how many times will we have to shake the jar?), graphing (who likes butter;
our favourite crackers – with and without butter), nutrition, social studies (where food comes from) to name a few.

- Project-based learning is essentially ‘learning by doing’ (John-Steiner & Mann, 1996).
- It is driven by the children’s natural interests and curiosities and usually involves in-depth study of a particular area. When children lose interest it is time to move onto another area.
- In order for project-based learning to be successful, children need to have a certain level of social and emotional competence and the ability to regulate their emotions and behaviours – they need to effectively negotiate with others, share and cooperate in group situations, accept others’ points of view, and solve problems in socially appropriate ways.
- Project-based learning opportunities assist children in developing self-regulation as they are encouraged to make choices and to take ownership of their learning.
- Project-based learning supports the Roots of Empathy philosophy of creating a risk-free environment, and is important for three reasons:
  - it allows children to take ownership of their learning
  - it encourages them to identify areas of interest and make choices (and thus assists with self-regulation)
  - it validates their thoughts and ideas.
- A project-based learning approach fosters SEL because children are openly exchanging their thoughts and ideas, and conflicts inevitably arise, but children are motivated to solve them because they have a vested interest in the activity.
This is an example of a project-based learning activity that was initiated entirely by the children. It was extremely popular and went on for weeks, and all the children in the class eventually got involved. It is a good example of how PBL can encompass many areas of the curriculum:

- The children discovered an ant infestation in the classroom, and decided they wanted to find out where they lived. They came to me and asked to study them – they asked for clip boards, pencils, magnifying glasses – “scientist supplies”. They decided they would need some books on ants to find out more about what they were seeing. Many books were brought in from the library. Kids pored over them for days. One boy drew a complete life cycle drawing, from egg to larvae to adult.

- We connected their new knowledge to the duck life cycle and the salmon life cycle we had previously learned about.
• This example effectively illustrates that SEL and academic learning can occur concurrently.

• Significant connections— that children were engaged in academic skills (such as learning about insects and how they live, reading and comprehension, writing, drawing, and representing their thoughts and ideas, learning about life cycles), and SEL skills (such as working cooperatively, accepting others’ points of view, collaborating, and compromising) simultaneously.

• It is impossible to engage in activities such as these and not practice SEL skills, because project-based learning activities are so collaborative in nature.
Developmental Timeline Activity

Infant development takes place along a continuum and most infants travel the continuum in the same sequence. There is tremendous variation, however, in the age at which a skill is acquired and in the degree of proficiency.

- Draw parents’ attention to the large poster showing the developmental timeline, posted on the wall of the presentation room.

- The last section talked about school and classroom conditions that provide optimum opportunities for children to learn and practice SEL – the underlying CARES values at the school, creating choice, and project – based learning. Now, we are going to participate in an activity designed to demonstrate the concept of temperament, which is important in the Roots of Empathy program, because it helps children to understand and appreciate individual similarities and differences. To do this, we will look at developmental milestones (which is also a part of the Roots of empathy program).

- The concept of Developmental Milestones is important to the Roots of Empathy program.

- Milestones are points in time at which babies and children first learn a certain skill; for example, the age when a baby first learns to sit unaided is a developmental milestone (Gordon, 2000).
• Point out the large timeline poster mounted on the wall (a horizontal strip of chart paper that has a line drawn in the center and increments marked out in months – one month, two months, etc. – from birth to age three.) Parents are to take sticky notes and place them at the approximate month or year marker to show when their children reached important milestones.
Discuss the differences found for each milestone

This presents a visual illustration of the large variation in development that is typical for every child.

Temperament may account for some of these differences – for example, children who were slower to walk may have been more content to just stay in one spot and take in their surroundings.

When we talk about this with children, we talk about the differences and the similarities. The discussion about temperament focuses on how all children are different and that these differences make us who we are today.

This concept is important for parents to understand, too, because it highlights the importance of temperament and how it can attribute to individual differences and similarities among children.
Discussion with parents – is there anything new that you are now considering in terms of your child’s development in general, and their social emotional development in particular?
• This is an example of the children demonstrating what different emotions look like—this was in one of the pre-family visit lessons during the Emotions theme.

• During the break, I invite you to discuss your thoughts on SEL with other parents in the group. We will bring our thoughts and ideas together at the end of the presentation.
Welcome back.

In the first half of the presentation, we looked at what SEL and Roots of Empathy are. We also looked at some of the underlying structures in the school and in my classroom and discussed how these structures allow for optimum SEL opportunities.

In order to foster opportunities to learn and practice SEL skills in the classroom, some changes needed to happen.

Next, we will discuss these changes – using the CARES values, creating choice in the classroom, and implementing a project-based learning approach.

These terms - modeling, group discussion, authentic communication, and emotional literacy – are methods to develop SEL in the classroom. We will define and describe them in the following slides.
• Children are constantly learning from modeling. At home, your child might watch you build a fence and then attempt to build something on her own. In the community, children watch adults interacting in public and on TV. Children model our attitudes and behaviour, good or bad. If I want the children to demonstrate the core CARES values, then I must always model them.

• This helps children to see what behaviours look like in context and internalize them.

• As behaviours are modeled, they are labeled to promote common understanding and to build a common language that becomes a part of our class culture.

• In these pictures, children are working on various collaborative activities. Before they started, we would have had a group discussion that highlighted what behaviours were expected in each situation – for example, what does it look like when you read quietly with your friend? What does your body look like? How do you feel? How will your behaviours make your friend feel?
• Another way to foster SEL in the classroom is through group discussion.

• Group discussions empower children to advocate for themselves, as they realize they are often not alone in their feelings.

• Discussions may involve talking about problems that arise, generating ways to deal with these problems, and analyzing what to do if things do not go as planned.

• We have brief class meetings every morning, after recess, and after lunch, to review and discuss any problems that may have occurred, solutions we should consider, and what we might do differently next time.

• Of equal importance is the notion of preparing children for problems that might arise, and prompting them to think ahead about how they might solve them. Children are more confident in situations where they know what to expect and where they feel as though they can solve the issue independently.
Communication is a key concept in Roots of Empathy. Gordon (2009) refers to *authentic communication* and calls this “...speaking from the heart” (p.129).

Authentic communication involves actively listening to children’s ideas and accepting their thoughts and opinions as having equal weight of those of adults.

Can you think of examples of when we, as adults, practice authentic communication?

Children gain confidence and develop the ability to advocate for themselves and others when they know their thoughts and ideas are valued.

Authentic communication is important because it augments the development of self-advocacy as children learn the dimensions of empathy—identifying emotions, taking another’s perspective, and developing emotional sensitivity—all of which are essential prosocial behaviours like making and sustaining new friendships, initiating positive relationships with teachers and peers, demonstrating positive feelings about oneself,
understanding one’s own emotions and handling challenging situations effectively (Denham, 2006; Schonert-Reichl & Hymel, 2007).

- Authentic communication is important for children to be able to develop emotional literacy, which we talked about earlier.
• Emotional literacy refers to the child’s ability to identify and accept the emotions of others and to respect individual similarities and differences.

• Children who lack emotional literacy may have trouble reading or understanding other’s facial expressions or body language. These misunderstandings can lead to conflicts.

• It is important to give children the words they need to describe their emotions in terms of facial expression, body language, and inner feelings, and the opportunity to discuss times when they have experienced various emotions (Gordon, 2009)

• In the classroom, we talk about our feelings on a regular basis – during class discussions, when situations arise during play time or on the playground, or whenever children show extreme emotions.

• Children are encouraged to identify their feelings and to reflect on what causes them.
• We discuss the normal range of emotions that we all feel, and distinguish between feelings and behaviours. This frame of reference helps children truly understand the scope of their feelings and the triggers that cause them.

• This example involves the book, *Cookies: Bite-sized Life Lessons* by Amy Krouse Rosenthal.

• Read book aloud to parents, and explain the following scenario to the group:

  After reading this story, the children went off to play at centers, but Basil remained behind and did not want to play. Kieara and Zain gathered around him, trying to discover what was wrong. “I’m just tired and I want to rest”, Basil replied.

  Kieara and Zain helped Basil to the couch, got him some books and a stuffed toy, and set him up to have a rest.

  When I noticed what was going on, I pointed out to the rest of the class, “Look how respectful Kieara and Zain are of Basil. They understand that he doesn’t want to play, and they are helping him to feel better.”

• This is an example of labeling the children’s feelings, to foster emotional literacy.

• The ensuing discussion describes what *being respectful* means in this case. Kieara and Zain were aware of Basil’s feelings; they accepted that he did not want to play and did not try to blame him or make him feel bad. They were intent on making him comfortable and they concerned themselves with trying to make him feel better.
• Has your thinking around Social Emotional Learning changed? If so, how?
• Talk about your thoughts with a partner
• Share some of your ideas with the large group

Parents again talk to a partner about any new concepts and ideas that they have after the presentation, and then they report to the large group.

Compare these thoughts and ideas with those suggested at the beginning of the workshop.

Guiding questions: How has your thinking expanded? What are new or different thoughts on SEL in the classroom, and why? How do you now view or understand Roots of Empathy?

What do you still wonder about SEL? About ROE?

Is there anything in particular from this presentation that has added to your previous notions or understanding of the role SEL plays? Have you reconsidered the importance of SEL after this presentation?

Do you have any recommendations for school or classrooms, based on what you have learned?
Next, you will see an example of role-play and dramatization—two strategies that we use frequently in the classroom to help with problem-solving and to develop SEL.
And now! Introducing...

- Introduce children from current Kindergarten class, who will perform a short skit demonstrating the dramatization technique.
- First, we discuss the problem that needs to be solved, and talk as a group about possible ways to solve it.
- Then, children arrange groups and go off to practice acting out various ways to solve the problem.
- Finally, the group reports back to the larger group and “puts on a show”.
- Afterwards we discuss if there is any other ways to solve the problem, or if anything could have been done to avoid the problem in the first place.
Although Mary Gordon never intended the Roots of Empathy program as an anti-bullying program, it has turned out to be an effective one. Research shows that children who participate in the Roots of Empathy program are not only less likely to become bullies, but they are less likely to be the victims of bullies (Schonert-Reichl, 2012; Espelage, Mebane, & Adams, 2004).

This quote from Mary Gordon’s book *Roots of Empathy – Changing the World Child by Child* is a good summary of Gordon’s thoughts on the issue of bullying:

> If children have a learned method for deciding, for making judgments, if they have internalized principles to live by, things that feel true for them, they have the armor they need to say no to things that make them feel uncomfortable or strike them as wrong. (p. 131)
Special thanks to...

Our ‘Roots’ Family – Chris, Mary, and Roenick

The Kindergarten kids of Division 10

Marna Omichinski, ROE Facilitator

The Roots of Empathy Foundation
References:


References (cont.)


Appendix D

Permission to use photographs and artwork.

This letter asks for parental permission to allow children’s photographs and work samples from Roots of Empathy lessons and related classroom activities to be used for the interactive parent presentation included in Appendix C. Permission was obtained from the parents of all children in the class. The letter is included as Figure D1 below.
Dear Parents/Guardians:  

As you know, our class is currently participating in the Roots of Empathy program. During the program, I will be taking pictures and video clips of the children interacting with the baby and his family. Some of these pictures may be posted in the classroom on our Roots of Empathy bulletin board, and also on the bulletin board in the foyer of the school, so that the (school name) community can see what we are doing in the classroom.

In addition, I would like to use some of the pictures, as well as some samples of children’s work and artwork related to the Roots of Empathy program, in an interactive power point presentation that is required as part of my graduating project requirements for the Masters in Education program at UBC. Photos and work samples will be used for the sole purpose of the project and will not be posted on the internet.

If you agree to allow your child’s photographs and/or work samples to be used for this purpose, please sign below and return the slip to me at school no later than (date). If, at any time, you would like to withdraw your consent, just let me know. Your child will still be able to participate in the program if you do not wish photographs or work samples to be used for this purpose.

Thank you for your support. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any further questions.

Best regards,
Please complete and return this slip to me at school by (date)

**Please circle:**

**Yes / No**  I give permission for my child’s photograph to be used in the interactive power point presentation.

**Yes / No**  I give permission for samples of my child’s work to be used as part of the graduating project.

____________________________________  ________________
Child’s name                           Parent’s name

____________________________________  ________________
Parent’s signature                     Phone number

Fig. D1.  Letter of permission.