

Shannon Jessiman-MacArthur

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Master of Education Thesis

Social Justice Education Program

The REACH Program:

An alternative for students-at-risk in order to remain in their home school environment

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Abstract

This thesis describes an evaluative case study, which researched the benefits of using the REACH program in two Thunder Bay elementary schools, eliminating the need to have students-at-risk removed from their home school to attend alternative programming. The REACH acronym stands for Relationships, Environment, Attitude, Co-Regulation, and Holistic Education, and the program focuses on bringing all of these elements into the school to create opportunities for students-at-risk to experience success throughout their school day. This study was implemented throughout the 2017-2018 school year, with the REACH program beginning in the 2016-2017 school year. The participants were teachers, principals and student support professionals, as well as students and parents who were part of the REACH program and were asked to participate in the study. Data were generated through interviews and document review of principal case conference notes, student records, and office referral documents. The generated data were coded into each section of REACH, further explaining why this program is necessary. The a priori themes are: Relationships, Environment, Attitude, Co-Regulation, and Holistic Education. Emergent themes of student relationships and next steps for the program are also discussed within this thesis.

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Chapter One: Introduction

This thesis explores, describes and examines the creation, development, and overall effectiveness of the REACH program (Relationships, Environment, Attitude, Co-Regulation, and Holistic Education), a program created by a team of educators with the goal of keeping students-at-risk in their home school environment. This thesis is divided into six chapters. The first chapter introduces my background as an educator, and how and why the REACH program began. It also introduces the thesis question: *Does the REACH program create the conditions for students-at-risk to remain in their home school, eliminating the need to be removed to attend outside programs?* The second chapter includes a review of literature, examining relevant literature for each of the elements of the REACH program, as well as the student-at-risk and what students-at-risk need to be successful at school. The third chapter discusses the case study methodology used to evaluate the program, including information about stakeholders, instruments, data analysis, ethics and limitations. The fourth chapter discusses the findings and interpretation from the interviews and analysed school data, separated into each of the elements of the REACH program. The fifth chapter includes a discussion of all elements of the REACH program, and further explores why each is a necessary component of the program. The sixth, and final chapter discusses recommendations for the program's continued success and concludes the thesis.

In this introductory chapter, I will reflect on my personal experiences that brought me to the creation of the REACH program, and the steps that were taken in my schools to begin its implementation. I will also introduce the thesis question and describe current options for students-at-risk in the school board, revealing why a program like REACH is necessary.

I began my teaching career in a tiny community school 45 kilometers North of Sioux Lookout, Ontario. Ninety percent of our students came from the nearest Reserve, and ten percent from the town itself. The school was unique, in that it received both Provincial and Federal funding. Our students had a lot of support, yet a great deal of need.

My first job was teaching a grade three and four class. I spent the preceding summer preparing, creating grade-appropriate units and lessons that were going to be absolutely amazing! I arrived in the fall with bins and binders full of my planning and on the third day of school, I threw it all away. I learned very quickly that a teacher cannot plan anything that is going to work well in a classroom until they know their students; where they come from, where they're at, and what they need in order to move forward.

It was a difficult job, to say the least. The majority of our students were dis-regulated, struggled with behavioural issues, and were disengaged at school. Most students spent their time crawling around the room, hiding under desks, crying, hitting, spitting, running away and getting in fights. Most students had dealt with trauma in their lives. We dealt with children's and families' mental health, poverty, abuse, and neglect on a daily basis. We were teachers, social workers, nurses, parents, educators; we worked hard every day to help these students learn and want to learn. It was a long and arduous process. It was a community - and a life - I had not experienced before: As a white, highly educated, middle-class, lesbian woman, I had no background experience with these students, their needs, and their community.

In order to make a difference in the lives of my students, I needed to build relationships and work tirelessly to show these children and their community that I cared. After my first month at the school, I didn't think I would last the year, and by the end of the year, I was sure I would never leave. This job is what inspired my passion for differentiated instruction – the belief that

every student can learn and achieve with the right supports in place and that those supports look different for each child (Dweck, 2015, Tomlinson, 2014).

After building relationships, we focused on learning processes and strategies that would lead to student success. Differentiated instruction became a major focus for us in the North: I was part of action-research projects, studies, and specialized training to improve my teaching practice. I spent seven years at that tiny Northern school, and in that time, we saw our school change from a dismal place to a place of wonder. When I began, our students struggled in every way, and when I left, the struggles were still there but our students were achieving more than we expected. Families and students were engaged in learning and achievement began to soar. We were excited to see our hard work pay off in so many ways and to see what the future held.

After my seventh year, changes in the school resulted in my relocation. The tiny school closed when the Reserve built their own school, and I moved home to Thunder Bay to continue my teaching career with Lakehead Public Schools. I spent the next two years teaching in various schools around the city and practicing strategies that I learned in the North. I then became an administrator and I continue to build on my experiences in this role. My experiences in the North shaped who I was as a teacher and now they shape my growth as an administrator.

There were many similarities between my Northern school and my new school in Thunder Bay, Brookside Elementary¹. Students were struggling with self-regulation, teachers were giving up their authority and sending students to the office for minor infractions, and our school population had changed in recent years to include more families living in poverty, and more Indigenous families. Teachers were slow to respond to the changing demographics of the students in their

¹ Brookside Elementary is a pseudonym for a school.

classrooms. In the book *Cultural Proficiency*, a quote by a teacher summarized the situation: “It is so clear now, we have been trying to educate the kids who used to go to school here! Our task is to learn how to be successful with the students who are in our classrooms now” (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2009, p. 130). Something needed to change; it was time to bring what worked in the North to the schools in Thunder Bay.

I started an initiative at Brookside Elementary school entitled “calming classrooms,” aimed at helping students learn to self-regulate and be ready to learn when they come to school (Alvarado, 2015). We implemented programs to help students learn about their brains and feelings, practiced calming activities and mindfulness, and learned to be more prepared for the classroom. Our classrooms had calming corners where students could take a break, use tools to soothe, reflect on their emotions, and learn about how to calm their brains and bodies when needed. The strategies worked and created change in some classrooms, but not in others. Why was it only successful in some? It seemed to boil down to teacher mindset. If a teacher believed that a calming environment would help students, then the teacher put in the time and effort to implement the programs and it worked. When teachers were resistant or refused to implement the calming classrooms programs, the dis-regulated and anxiety-related student behaviours continued to be present in their classrooms.

By my fourth year at Brookside Elementary, almost all classrooms were implementing the principles of calming classrooms and doing differentiated activities for student learning. The few student behaviour challenges that we had were being dealt with appropriately. We were successfully transforming the school culture to meet the needs of our students.

Despite the success of the calming classrooms initiative, we had a high number of “red-zone” or “tier three” students, also referred to in educational research literature as “students-at-

risk”. These are students whose needs extended beyond the interventions provided at our school and who had exhausted all of the resources and interventions that we can provide at a school level. These students required outside programming to continue with their schooling. In cases like these, the school looks for alternative schooling arrangements. For example, a student who is unable to stay in his or her regular classroom environment safely due to violent outbursts, which puts themselves and others around them in danger, would be considered for enrolment in a specialized program outside of their regular school.

At Lakehead Public Schools, a school can apply to have students-at-risk placed in educational programs outside of their school. Options include home instruction, day treatment programs, or residential programming. Some students may require home instruction, for example, if they have extreme school anxiety, extreme behaviour challenges, or a short-term disability that makes attending class in a school building very difficult. For home instruction, a qualified teacher meets the student for one-on-one instruction in their home or at an agreed-upon public location. Others may go to one of the day treatment programs. The day treatment programs are operated as Section 23 classrooms, which are funded by the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME), and have students attending in small class sizes (with a maximum of six to eight students) and three educators (normally one classroom teacher, a student support professional, and a child and youth worker). According to the OME (2017), Section 23 programs are intended for children and youth who are at risk of not completing elementary or secondary education in a traditional setting. In these classrooms, students learn school-appropriate behaviours, how to manage their feelings, and calming techniques to help them self-regulate in order to eventually return to their school. Students can also be referred to a residential program, where they are removed from their home. They continue to attend their home school but live in

an alternate location. This is normally an option for students who struggle greatly with mental health challenges resulting in attendance difficulties that cannot be dealt with in their home environment.

These programs are all temporary; the goal is to have the students re-integrated into their school within a short time period. Typically, students are placed on a lengthy waiting list before being accepted into the program, if they are accepted at all. Please note that during the writing of this thesis, the Ontario government changed the name of Section 23 classrooms to *CTCC*: Care and/or Treatment, Custody and Correctional facilities. “A transformation seeks to achieve the following vision: As an integrated part of Ontario’s education system, CTCC provide critical support to meet the needs of students unable to attend regular schools and facilitate specific pathways to ensure future educational success” (p. 5). Therefore, both terms are used throughout this thesis.

Students accepted into the day treatment program face challenges when reintegrating back into their home school. Re-integration of students at-risk typically occurs through a series of short visits to the school. The student-at-risk, however, is accustomed to being one-on-one or in a class with only 5-7 other peers, and 3 teacher/adults. They are then placed into a typical classroom with 25-35 classmates, one teacher, and no other adult support. Typically, the student finds this re-integration process challenging.

The current re-integration model is ineffective and does not result in a smooth transition back into the regular school environment. This problem is at the root of my thesis. To address it, the following must be examined: (a) the re-integration of students from out-of-school programs back into their home schools, and (b) determining whether the students’ needs can be met without sending them to out-of-school programs. For example, in our experience at Brookside

Elementary, even if students had made behavioural gains by being in the program, they quickly reverted to their old behaviours when placed back into their school with no supports in place. A solution is needed so that students can return to school in a more positive and supportive manner. Further to this, it would be even more beneficial to the students and the school if the need to send students to an out-of-school type of program could be eliminated in the first place; perhaps if the school had the right supports, spaces, and programs in place.

Some work on these problems has already begun. At Brookside, I created the acronym “REACH” to represent our school focus on relationships, environment, attitude, co-regulation, and a holistic approach to helping students-at-risk. Whenever the school team met, or had conversations about what we were doing for these students-at-risk that was working to help them be more successful at school, these five themes were always part of the meeting or conversation. This is where the idea for the REACH program began. *Relationships* are key; students must feel accepted in their school and *environment*. Students (as well as staff and parents) must develop an *attitude* of growth mindset; the belief that one can accomplish things by persevering. Students need adults who can *co-regulate* with them, and a *holistic* approach to education is paramount to student success. With those key themes in mind, the school team - which included me (vice principal at the time), the school principal, a special education facilitator, classroom teachers, and a Master of Social Work student from Lakehead University - created a program that we hope will keep students in their home schools, and eliminate the need to send them to an out-of-school program. The REACH program is an in-school program for students-at-risk that supplements their regular classroom day with extra supports and individualized programming to meet their needs.

In January 2017 at Brookside Elementary, we began a REACH pilot project program with a few students who had been labeled as red-zone students. Unfortunately, two of the three moved away in our first month but we continued with one student, trying out different strategies to help him be successful in school.

In February, the school team visited the 'BELONG' program in Kingston, Ontario. We were pleasantly surprised to see that a heavily researched program model was doing the exact same things that we were doing at our school. We returned with renewed excitement to continue taking small steps to help our students-at-risk succeed.

In April 2017, I was placed in a new school as principal. Not surprisingly, Garden public school had the same problems with students returning from the day treatment program unsuccessfully and were looking for an alternative. I was so excited to be able to continue my work on the REACH program there. Instead of talking about our students-at-risk in terms of when they would get into the day treatment program, we began to implement strategies throughout their day to help them be more successful within the school and focused instead on keeping them there.

The program is personalized for every student, depending on their needs. Below is a list of changes in our school and in the classrooms that we implemented in order to help our students-at-risk succeed. This is only the beginning; as we work through this process, the lists will grow, and our priorities will change.

In the School

- The creation of a sensory room in the school
 - Include a variety of sensory items and sensory toys to help students regulate (e.g., fidget toys, crash mats, water tubes, lights/sounds, trampoline, body sock, etc.)
 - Set up a variety of stations and specific goals for students to have sensory needs met.
 - Note: This requires schools to become creative in finding a space for this to take place (in my small city school, we transformed a book room, and at Garden, we built a new sensory space in the back of the library)
 - Funding: The equipment for a room like this can come from a SEA claim (special education allotment), or school funds.
- The creation of a safe space in the school for kids to take a break (e.g., Chill Room)
 - At Garden, the ‘Chill Room’ is a living room style space in the school for alternate work options. It includes alternate seating arrangements (high tables and chairs, couches) and also more active seating (such as balance balls and an exercise bike)
 - Just like the sensory room explained above, schools must be creative in finding a space for this room/area in the school.
 - Students know this space is available and staffed, and if they need to take a break from the classroom, it is there for them to re-set and return to the regular classroom. At Garden, all classrooms have a ‘chill pass’ that students are trained to use when they need a break.
 - Also, have sensory toys available in this space.
- Transforming Existing Spaces to meet the needs of current clientele:

- The special education facilitator's office became a calm classroom/chill room so that she could spend more time working in the spaces above with dis-regulated students, and so the space was always staffed and available to students.
- A team-approach to education
 - Have board specialists on-hand to help and consult (behaviour resource, student support professional lead, mental health leader, board psychologist, special education officer)
 - Other community organizations on board with school initiatives
 - Family Involvement & Engagement
- Ongoing professional development for staff (the attitude starts here!)
 - A great deal of staff training is important so that all staff are on the same page about students' needs and the best ways to approach them.

In the Classroom

- It's all about relationships!
 - Administration to assist teachers in creating strong literacy and math programs that focus on relationship building for the first months of school
 - Administration team to lead staff in relationship building activities, the development of strength walls, and other needs as identified.
 - Note: (strength walls are interactive, changing walls that showcase students' strengths and are meant to grow and change as time goes on)
 - A whole-school focus on strengths, building growth mindset, and positive self-image (discussed at school assemblies, and on the announcements daily) note: this can include the seven grandfather teachings.

- Create a calm corner in the classroom for students to take a break
 - Note: the teacher needs training on how to implement a space like this successfully; what to include, how to introduce it to students, etc.
- Practice calm classroom strategies (and create calm kits with students that are available to them in the calm corner of the classroom, or even in their desks)
- Focus on student strengths
- Practice daily mindfulness with the class (this can include yoga, meditation, breathing exercises, etc.)

For the Team

- Schedule “students of interest” meetings to discuss student needs (a meeting with the school team to discuss students in each classroom who require extra learning supports) and make an action plan to ensure all students are being supported.
- Be open to a modified day schedule if needed for student success
- Keep families informed and involved in the process
- Look at the possibility of hiring extra staff (and/or partnering with other community resources and people who can offer support to the student(s); e.g., having a social worker available to students and on staff)
- Look at how we can best use the resources we have in our school building:
- Facilitator to run social thinking groups (the mind up curriculum, Zones of Regulation or We thinkers program are all available at Lakehead Public Schools)
- Principal/vice principal role to support teachers in implementation of these ideas in the classrooms.
- Flexible Student Support Professional schedules to meet the needs of all students

Research Questions

Through my thesis work, I implemented the REACH program in my school with the help of my school team and some key community partners, and then studied and evaluated its effectiveness, in an attempt to answer my thesis question: *Does the REACH program create the conditions for students-at-risk to remain in their home school, eliminating the need to be removed to attend outside programs?*

There are other questions that were addressed through observation and interviews:

- *Was the REACH program implemented as intended?*
- *Is the REACH program a viable alternative to out-of-school programs for students-at-risk?*
- *How could the REACH program be improved in order to meet the needs of students-at-risk?*

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding my thesis is Carol Weiss's (1972) theory of change, a theory that describes how and why initiatives work. In this thesis, I explain how the REACH program was created, and then how it was evaluated to find out if it works in creating a positive alternative for students-at-risk. I wanted to know if the REACH program is something that will work to change education, making schools more successful for students-at-risk. Using theory of change helps to address the thesis questions listed above. By evaluating each theme of the REACH program and whether or not it created a change in educational success for students-at-risk, I was able to evaluate the program's effectiveness in creating change. "Theory of change enables a portfolio of data to be collected, exploring the real-world setting in which the project is being implemented" (Laing, 2015, p. 3). In the evaluation of the REACH program, I created a

portfolio of data which explores the effectiveness of the program. Weiss (1972) further discusses program evaluation by stating that its purpose is “to measure the effects of a program against the goals it set out to accomplish as a means to contributing to subsequent decision making about the program and improving future programming” (as cited in Msila & Setlhako, 2013, p. 323). This is exactly what I am doing through an evaluation of the REACH program. This evaluative case study explored the actions of educators and consequent results to determine the change of the level of success for students-at-risk in a traditional school setting. If strategies outlined in the REACH program are implemented as outlined in this thesis, this can result in the outcome that students are able to be successful in a regular school setting.

The end goal of the REACH program was to keep students in their home school and eliminate the need for them to attend outside programming. I strongly believe that students can be successful in regular schools if there is a focus on relationships, their environments, attitudes, co-regulation, and if they are provided with a holistic education. They can REACH their full potential, and everyone (the student, family, school and partners) benefits. Based on my personal experience with students-at-risk, I believe this program is needed, and needs to be researched, as nothing formal exists within the board’s schools to meet the needs of students-at-risk; sending them out of their home school to receive an education is not the solution.

Researching a program as an insider is a new role for me. This program was developed by myself and a team of educators at my school. I am not an outside observer, but very much a part of the program. This is what Merriam and Tisdell (2016) call “*emic*, or insider’s perspective” (p. 16). This comes up as a criticism in the limitations section. However, I believe that because I am so passionate about this program and helping students-at-risk succeed at school, that my role in the program, its development, and its evaluation, are very important. I

was very critical of the program as we created it; constantly changing things to ensure they worked best for our students and fit the needs of the school. As discussed in the ethics section, I have been a part of the program since the very beginning, and having conversations about students' experiences at school and what they need in order to succeed have always been part of my practice with colleagues and families at school. When my questions became more research-based and part of this thesis, families and colleagues were happy to contribute, in hopes that their experience in the REACH program could benefit other schools and students. I discuss my positionality as an insider further in the ethics section. Everyone involved hopes that sharing what is working for our school will help other schools adapt their practices to better meet the needs of their students-at-risk.

Further to this, this research is necessary in the field of education, as there is a significant gap in the research; very little research surrounding section 23/CTCC programs has been completed, and there has been no evaluation of programs' effectiveness. What has been done to address the needs of students-at-risk in schools must be explored, so that there are effective and researched programs in place for schools to use in the future.

The REACH program could address this lack of current research and provide schools with a well-researched program to meet the needs of their students-at-risk in their home school environments. Every student deserves a high-quality education, and it is a school's job to figure out how to REACH every student. In the following chapter, the literature review, the student-at-risk will be examined: what is "at-risk", and what works for students-at-risk at school? Next, each theme (each letter in the REACH acronym) will be explored in detail: relationships, environment, attitude, co-regulation, and holistic education; highlighting research relevant to

each theme and providing background as to why each of these themes need be addressed and implemented in schools in order for students-at-risk to succeed.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The main themes that I propose to explore through my literature review are: the student-at-risk, the importance of building Relationships, the learning Environment, student Attitude and strengths, self and Co-regulation, and Holistic education (REACH). Beginning with an exploration of the term ‘the student-at-risk’ and the effectiveness of existing programs for these students, the chapter concludes by examining each of the themes signified by the REACH acronym. The REACH themes are the basis of the program. The themes were chosen because educators and the school team noticed, through observation, conversation and practice, that each of these themes seemed to be making a difference for students-at-risk at school. The literature review will discuss each theme in depth, and provide research to support each one as a continued theme of the REACH program. In developing the program, we found these themes to encompass the program elements that best met the needs of students-at-risk. Because this research is an evaluation of the REACH program, I chose to focus on an exploration of these themes within the literature review.

The Student-At-Risk

The Learning Partnership’s 2004 report on the *Quality of Public Education in Canada* identifies the problem of students-at-risk as complex with no easy solution. The authors of the report state that “roughly one quarter of Canadian children have some definite vulnerability to risk, while ten to fifteen percent experience adverse consequences based on their current situation and conditions” (p. 3). Poverty is one of the main contributors to students being at-risk, linking high poverty rates to poor educational outcomes (p. 3). Keith Brownlee and Edward Rawana (2009) have also linked poor educational outcomes to students who are navigating the child welfare system:

Children involved in the child welfare system have experienced disruptions in their home life, often from emotionally unsettling events. Frequently, changes in primary caregivers, either entering foster care, returning to immediate or extended family, or moving between caregivers, affects children's school performance. (p. 107)

In my experience, most of the students who are tier three or red zone students fit the categories listed above: living in poverty, navigating the child welfare system, having experienced childhood trauma, and more. Bruce Ferguson further discusses what can contribute to a student being at risk, including: "low socio-economic status, minority group status, gender, community characteristics, household stress, and family dynamics" (Ferguson, et al. p. 56). Over the past 15 years, each student-at-risk that I have worked with has been a child living in foster care, in a household experiencing trauma, or living in extreme poverty. "It is now known that early exposure to violence, or chronic stress, alters the structure and chemistry of children's brains (and they) often fail to acquire the self-regulatory and social competencies necessary for academic success" (Craig, p.4)

What do students-at-risk need to be successful at school? In order for students-at-risk to be successful at school, many things must be in place, such as caring adults, a feeling of safety at school, manageable expectations, and consequences that are appropriate for their actions (Brownlee & Rawana, 2009, Craig, 2008, D'Angelis, 2012, Lamperes, 1994). In the past, it was appropriate to send a student who was struggling in the classroom down to the principal's office. Today, some teachers believe that this is still an appropriate consequence for poor behaviour choices (Johnson & Pugach, 1990). Teachers must maintain their authority in the classroom and have a repertoire of effective behaviour management strategies that show their concern for students. In the *Journal of Special Education*, Lawrence Johnson and Marleen Pugach (1990)

published an article reporting on the use of intervention strategies for students with learning and behaviour problems. Their findings state that removing a student from the classroom (e.g., to go sit in the hall, or at the principal's office) is the *least* effective intervention strategy in dealing with inappropriate behaviour in the classroom compared to other intervention strategies studied. "Sending students to the principal or isolating students from the classroom may deal with the immediate situation effectively, but they are less likely to result in long-term solutions" (Johnson & Pugach, 1990, p. 81). Additionally, students are missing valuable instructional time when they are out of the classroom and are not benefiting from the guidance and support of their teacher. The Learning Partnership (2004) also states that "active support from caring teachers is an important factor in children's success" (p. 3). Therefore, when looking for a long-term solution, it is best to keep the student in their classroom and school environment.

Existing programs for students-at-risk. With student and school success as a goal, many caring educators have created programs for students-at-risk (see Clinton, 2013, D'Angelis, 2012, Lamperes, 1994). What follows is an exploration of highlights from various programs that already exist to help students-at-risk succeed in school. Some of the programs are in-school alternatives to our current Section 23 classrooms, and some are analogous to Section 23 classes but have tried a different approach.

Bill Lamperes, the principal of Centennial High School in Colorado, created a program that was implemented school-wide, motivating students-at-risk to succeed. Lamperes (1994) noted that "the school climate began to change when all our staff members became committed to our mission: create an intimate, nurturing environment in which students can achieve personal, academic and vocational success" (p. 2). Using grounding (or mindfulness) activities, highlighting student's strengths, and building strong relationships with struggling students were

all important pieces of the change recorded in the school climate. This program highlights the importance of teacher commitment and that this type of program can only work when all staff are committed to the same goal (Lamperes, 1994).

Tori DeAngelis's (2012) article *Helping At Risk Students Succeed*, states that teachers need to "build students' sense of competence, self-determination and connections with others" (p. 3). Further, D'Angelis suggests that in order to help students-at-risk succeed, school action is required in 6 areas:

1. Making innovative changes to classroom instruction;
2. Supporting children through transitions;
3. Connecting families to schools and school activities;
4. Maximizing use of community resources;
5. Reorganizing crisis assistance and prevention; and
6. Improving links to external mental health and behavioural services. (p. 3)

It takes a dedicated staff who are committed to the program and the program's goals in order for it to succeed (Lamperes, 1994). There are also some things on the list (e.g., reorganizing crisis assistance) that a school cannot do on its own, and would require assistance from outside organizations and community partners (Lamperes, 1994). Some programs are fortunate to have very close ties to their community partners and the success of their programs are paramount to the support of these community partners.

The BELONG program is a Section 23 classroom in Kingston, Ontario. Psychologist Dr. Sian Phillips (2016) wrote about the success of the program. It began because, "the education system, although well-meaning, has typically responded (to poor behaviour) by further shaming the child through suspensions, expulsions and restrictions" (p.8). The BELONG program focuses

on Dan Hughes's PACE (Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity, and Empathy) model (Hughes, (n.d.). The program focuses on each individual student and their needs. Phillips, quoting Hughes, writes: "The structure of the program allows for focus on small things that might get missed in a larger more traditional classroom" (p. 8). It is important that students feel cared for; taking the time to meet their individual needs and attend to the small things makes a difference for them in the classroom (Phillips). This well-researched program includes activities done in a differentiated way with caring adults who plan the day with the needs and interests of the students in mind. There is a team of three educators in the BELONG program: the classroom teacher, a student support professional, and a child and youth worker who acts as a community partner and liaison between the home and the school. The program provides a school environment where students-at-risk can thrive.

The REACH Program

Results of these research studies suggest that students-at-risk need calm classrooms, teachers who are self-regulated, who can teach them to co-regulate, and strong and positive relationships. For programs to succeed, there needs to be staff agreement/cooperation, and staff who are committed to a common goal. There also needs to be support from outside of the school, from community partners, families and other organizations. For students-at-risk, school needs to become a secure place where they can feel ready and able to learn. In the following paragraphs, each of the themes denoted by the REACH acronym (relationships, environment, attitude, co-regulation, and holistic education) are explored further to highlight the importance of each in helping students-at-risk succeed at school and to provide further research which supports the continuation of each one of the themes as a vital component of the REACH program.

R: Relationships. Children who have at least one close bond with a considerate and competent adult are more likely to become stable and successful adults themselves (Groh et al., 2014). If a child is surrounded by adults who are dysfunctional, abusive, or unsupportive, the child will naturally face greater challenges in their emotional development (Crosson-Tower, 2008; Lowell, Renk, & Adgate, 2014). Relationships are the key to success in the REACH program.

In John Hattie and Gregory Yates' (2014) book *Visible Learning and the Science of How we Learn*, Hattie and Yates write, "There are sound reasons for teachers to be concerned with developing high quality relationships with their students" (p. 16). If a child grows up in an unsupportive environment at home, school becomes their (only) place for social learning, and teachers may be the only positive adult role models that certain children have in their lives (Hattie & Yates, 2014). Susan Craig (2008) adds that "negative past experiences with adults leave emotional scars that make forming new relationships difficult" (p. 110), and that it can be especially difficult to form a relationship with a student who has experienced trauma. "Traumatized children need to feel cared for and supported by their classroom teachers. Without this type of nurturing relationship, the demands of learning may exceed the children's capacity to cope" (Craig, 2008, p. 125).

Being cared for and supported at school comes from relationships, as well as the climate a teacher sets in their classroom, or an administrator sets in their school. Having a warm, caring, trusting and empathetic climate is not all that is needed; students need to feel that the classroom is fair, empathetic and trustworthy enough that they are safe to make mistakes and show that they do not know something in front of both their teacher and their peers, as "learning thrives on error" (Hattie, 2014, p. 187). Hattie writes a great deal about peers and social supports at school,

urging that thought be given to supporting students in not only building positive and lasting relationships with their teachers, but also with their peers. Relationships are one of the keys to success at school.

Strong relationships take time to build. This is an argument for keeping administrators in schools for long periods of time, for stability. Often moving from school to school, an administrator does not have the time to work with teachers on building those important relationships that will then lead them to change their practice. Dr. Edward Rawana, school psychologist for Lakehead Public Schools, said that “an administrator is like the parent of a family... how would a family run if we changed the parent every couple of years?” (personal communication, 2016). Just like a teacher needs to build strong relationships in their classroom to affect student achievement, an administrator needs to develop good relationships with their staff and a school environment that affects teacher learning and therefore teacher practice and student achievement (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2013; Hattie, 2013). In *Learning as a Way of Leading*, Stephen Preskill and Stephen Brookfield (2008) found that “leadership has little to do with formal authority or where one is in the chain of command, and a great deal to do with forming and sustaining relationships that lead to results in the common interest” (p. 4). Jingping Sun and Kenneth Leithwood have also written a great deal on the topic of leadership and a leader’s influence in a school. They state that teacher commitment to their leader is formed by the leader’s authenticity, personality, values, motives and attitude (2015). A teacher is more likely to be positively influenced by a leader if they share similar beliefs or values and/or if they “like” their leader. It can be argued, then, that a good relationship between teacher and administrator makes the teacher want to work harder for them, and a negative relationship

actually decreases their commitment to the leader, and therefore the school (Dweck, 2010; Sun & Leithwood, 2015). Relationships are important at all levels in a school environment.

Another researcher who believes in the power of common interests and relationships is Jean Clinton. In a workshop given by Clinton, she spoke about an Aboriginal community she worked with where the word for child was translated to “he who has the light within.” She wondered aloud what would happen if all teachers saw it as their duty to ignite that light (personal communication, October 2015). Clinton (2013) stresses that students need someone in their lives whose eyes light up when they walk in the room, they need to know that they are valued and cared for, and that someone will always be there for them. Unfortunately, many students do not feel these things at home, so they look for them at school instead. When the school can provide these needs, students are more likely to succeed. “When students feel a sense of belonging and safety within a community of learners, they are empowered to take risks and explore new ideas” (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2012). A quote from a teacher within the OME (2012) publication *The Third Teacher* reads: “We have learned that the highest impact we can have on our students is taking the time to talk with them and connect with them” (p. 3); in other words, to build relationships. Craig (2008) adds that building strong relationships with students, especially traumatized students, can actually alter their perception of self: “Nurturing experiences with a caring adult (can) help children change their beliefs about themselves.” (p. 12). A student who hears that they are worthy, that someone who cares is happy to see them each day, may begin to believe in themselves through that relationship.

Relationship building is of utmost importance in our schools. The mental health lead at Lakehead Public Schools, Dr. David Tranter, and the school board psychologist, Dr. Edward Rawana, are both strong believers in relationship-building with students, staff and families alike

(personal communication, Rawana, 2017). Creating a school community where all parties feel valued, respected, trusted and hopeful will help educators connect with their students and families on a deeper level, and help engage them more in school activities. Building on students' strengths gives them the confidence to try new things.

Further, Rawana spoke of strengths-based education as something that shows a teacher's commitment to building relationships and getting to know their students (personal communication, 2017). Bonnie Benard (2006) researches the importance of using strengths-based practice in the classroom, highlighting that students must have "the opportunities to be heard, to voice one's opinion, to make choices, to have responsibilities, to engage in active problem solving, to express one's imagination, to work with and help others, and to give one's gift back to the community" (p. 203). Michelle Probizanski (2009), past principal at McKellar Park School, states in her work on strengths that "it's the culture of strengths that makes the children feel like this is a home environment, that they're respected" (p.112). Her article goes on to explain that "the culture of strengths within a school becomes a springboard for these children to realize their potential in all areas of their lives" (p. 112). When an educator builds a strong relationship with a child, the child is more willing to share their strengths and let them show. Relationships and strengths-based education go hand-in-hand.

In order for students to learn deeply, teachers must understand that no two students are alike, and that they will all need different things to be successful in the classroom. Carol Ann Tomlinson (2014), who has done extensive research on the topic of differentiated instruction in schools, also believes that creating relationships with students is very important to their learning. She highlights that all learning involves taking risks and that an educator's job is to teach students how to take these risks. Educators must have a range of instructional strategies and be

able to shape the learning environments to fit the needs of the learners. Teaching is not an easy task; the best and strongest teachers are needed in order to move forward with today's most challenging students (Tomlinson, 2014). These teachers must use their skills not only to build relationships, but also to build an environment that helps their students succeed.

E: Environment. The classroom environment in the REACH program must be responsive to the needs of the students. In the OME (2012) document *The Third Teacher*, the authors write about how the classroom environment (the physical space and the social aspect) acts as a third teacher, and that teachers need to learn to use this environment to their advantage. Susan Fraser (2012), in her book *Authentic Childhood*, states “a classroom that is functioning successfully as a third teacher will be responsive to the children’s interests, provide opportunities for children to make their thinking visible and then foster further learning and engagement” (p. 67). Students will feel more comfortable in a classroom that they can see themselves in, that they are an important part of, and which they helped create (personal communication, Rawana, 2017). When a teacher shares the responsibility of creating the classroom with the students, everyone is invested in the final product. Letting go of total control in a classroom can be difficult for a teacher, and strong classroom management is a necessary skill in building that positive learning environment that can act as a third teacher for students (Clinton, 2013; Probizanski, 2009; Tomlinson, 2012).

Making the classroom into a calm learning environment is also important to Stuart Shanker (2013), who writes about the importance of classroom management in making classrooms work, and gives the following advice to teachers: keep the daily schedule predictable, do a lot of classroom observation to get to know students (including their triggers and needs), provide activities so that the students have choice in their learning and how it is represented, and

establish a connection with each student and each student's family. Classroom management can also incorporate calming classroom principles when teachers are trained and invested in doing so. Mary Britt Postholm (2013) argues that when a teacher has strong classroom management practices and creates and models mindfulness and a positive classroom environment, their students are more likely to experience academic, social and emotional success. Without strong classroom management, it is difficult to get anything done as a teacher. Further, Postholm states that "pupils do not want to listen to a teacher who does not care about them" (p. 397). It all goes back to building relationships, being mindful, present, and caring as a teacher.

A: Attitude. Recent research considers growth mindset, a set of beliefs regarding one's ability to succeed and learn, as an attitude toward learning (Dweck, 2015, Tomlinson, 2014). Carol Dweck (2015), in her research about growth mindset, made the following observation: "Students' mindsets – how they perceive their abilities – played a key role in their motivation and achievement, and we found that if we changed students' mindsets, we could boost their achievement" (para. 2).

Teachers have a huge impact on the mindset of students in their classrooms. How a teacher sets up their classroom, plans for student learning, and interacts with their students on a daily basis will all have an impact on their students' attitudes about school and learning (Dweck, 2015, Tomlinson, 2014). Just like a growth mindset must be instilled in students, a growth mindset must also be instilled in teachers. "Teachers who understand growth mindset do everything in their power to unlock that [student] learning" (Dweck, 2015, para. 9). If a teacher has a fixed mindset, which is described as the opposite of a growth mindset, and believes they have no control over a student's educational outcomes, then a student who enters their classroom struggling is much more likely to leave their classroom as a struggling student. On the other

hand, when a struggling student enters the classroom of a teacher who has a growth mindset, and that teacher believes that all students can succeed, that once struggling student is more likely to leave with moderate to significant positive leaps in their education. Teachers must be aware of the impact that their attitude has on the students in their classrooms. “Adults are always sending messages that shape students’ mindsets” and they need to be very aware of what they are modeling and passing on to their students” (Dweck, 2010, p. 28).

The idea of growth mindset has been critiqued by some researchers, such as Susan Mackie, who found that “some educators claimed to have a growth mindset, but (their) words and actions didn’t reflect it” (Tomlinson, 2015). Not all educators in their research understood the concept of growth mindset, nor did their actions in the classroom reflect the belief of one. A further critique of growth mindset is presented by Victoria Sisk and a team of researchers (2018) who conducted meta-analyses examining the relationships between growth mindset and academic achievement. In their research they found little to no correlation between growth mindset interventions in the classroom and academic achievement in low-risk students. However, high-risk students with low socioeconomic status or those who are academically at risk showed a “significant effect with growth mindset intervention” (p. 565). These findings support the teaching of growth mindset strategies as an important piece of the REACH program, as all of the students in the program fit the above description. All of the red zone students struggle academically, and most are also living in poverty. Growth mindset teaching can help them to a) become more aware of their thoughts, and b) work hard to overcome negative self-talk (which is something that all red-zone students struggle with). (Brownlee & Rawana, 2009, Craig, 2008).

When a teacher understands the concept of growth mindset, and is passionate about developing growth mindset in the classroom, they do things like giving students meaningful

work, honest and helpful feedback, advice on future learning strategies, and opportunities to revise their work and show what they have learned. “For this tool [growth mindset] to be effective, it has to be understood and used properly” (Dweck, 2016, para. 14). The building of growth mindset in students, with teachers who believe in the power of developing growth mindset and practice it themselves, will be an important part of the REACH program, that is, ensuring growth mindset is being developed properly, and in a positive way.

Teachers must have a positive attitude to be effective in a challenging classroom (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2013; Tomlinson, 2014). It is a challenge to know the signs for a variety of learning disabilities, to differentiate instruction for an entire classroom of students who operate at different levels, and to have a repertoire of strategies to deal with difficult children and adults alike (Dweck, 2010; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2013). Teaching requires technical knowledge, high levels of education, strong practice, and continuous improvement (Hattie, 2014). Making a difference in the learning and achievement of all students takes time (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2013). The development of wise professional judgment and the building of a growth mindset will help teachers meet the needs of their students-at-risk in the classroom (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2013; Hattie, 2014). Building a growth mindset and positive attitude among staff and educating them that they have the ability to change, grow and learn will help in the development of wise judgement, a necessary skill to have.

In researching the attitudes of teachers, there exists a stereotype that older and more experienced teachers are more resistant to change. Fullan and Hargreaves (2013), found that there are four types of experienced teachers: renewed teachers, who are always challenging themselves and continue learning; disenchanted teachers, who were once very positive about change, but after many negative experiences (such as lack of support, the demands of the job, an

increased workload, the changing role of family, changing school demographics, and an increase in student behaviour concerns) have become discouraged in their careers (the positive thing about disenchanted teachers is that they can become re-enchanted!); quiet teachers who are introverted and likely to prefer working with only a very small group of colleagues; and, finally, the fourth group are resisters, who struggle to meet the needs of the students, but do not (and will not) change their classroom practice in any way. In order for an administrator to get to know the type of teachers in a school, and how to best support them, it is also important for the administrator to take time to build relationships with all staff (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2013). When the staff see the administrator as their leader, and understand the administrator's philosophy, and share their vision and dreams for the school, it will be easier to move forward and positively affect the school learning environment, and therefore student achievement. A growth mindset and the belief that all students can achieve are necessary attitudes for moving a program for at-risk students ahead.

C: Co-regulation. Co-regulation is defined as “a dyad functioning as an integrated entity to regulate each other's' behaviour” or “each individual altering behaviours according to the behaviours of the other” (Fogel & Garvey, 2007, p. 251). Students-at-risk struggle with self-regulation (Alvarado, 2014; Craig, 2008; Tranter & Kerr, 2016). Research suggests that when children-at-risk have someone calm that they can turn to for guidance, they are more likely to calm themselves in order to match that person's state of arousal or temperament (Alvarado, 2014; Shanker, 2015; Tranter & Kerr, 2016).

In their article *Understanding Self-Regulation: Why Stressed Students Struggle to Learn*, David Tranter and Donald Kerr (2016) state that “difficulties in self-regulation arise when students are unable to match their arousal state with their circumstances” (p. 2), and that this is

especially challenging for students who are experiencing chronic stress on their system due to trauma. One of the most interesting findings in the article is that “student regulation starts with teacher regulation” (p. 3), and that if a teacher is stressed, this will pass on to their students, as states of arousal are contagious and can pass from teacher to student. Juli Alvarado (2014) suggests that teachers must calm their classroom environments in order to calm the brains of their students. She suggests that classrooms limit the use of overhead lighting and use as much natural lighting as possible. She also recommends getting rid of the clutter in classrooms to make them more spacious. Alvarado states that playing soothing sounds instead of harsh ones (e.g., using a chime instead of a loud bell or yell) will be beneficial to students, as well as playing soothing sounds in the background during work periods. She stresses that when students who live with trauma come to school, they need ways to get out of that state so that they are ready to learn, and the role of the teacher is to make sure students are ready to learn by being a calm influence in the classroom.

Stuart Shanker (2013), in his book *Calm, Alert and Learning: Classroom Strategies for Self Regulation*, writes about the importance of giving children the language to talk about their brain and their level of arousal or regulation while they are engaged in different activities at school. Shanker argues that “children need practice in learning how to adjust to variances in activity levels (for example, up-regulating for a math quiz or down-regulating after recess) so that they can achieve-and maintain-a calm, alert state” (p. 3). Craig (2008) adds that in order to be able to self-regulate, children must learn how emotions feel, and teachers need to “teach them a vocabulary that they can use to label feelings and describe their emotions” (p. 112).

Regulation is also strongly connected to the classroom environment. Shanker (2013) gives teachers a list of strategies to enhance their classroom environment for optimal learning

states in students. Using natural lighting and natural colours, keeping bright posters and clutter to a minimum, limiting the loud noise in the classroom, and providing calming areas where students can go to calm down when they need space are among top strategies. These strategies connect to the environment of the classroom: if the environment is calm and the teacher is calm (regulated), then the students are more likely able to regulate themselves. Further, Shanker writes about the importance of establishing a connection with each student and each student's family. Looking at the whole child, we must take their life outside the building into account and recognize that family and the home environment have an impact on student learning, as well as what we do during the school day.

H: Holistic education. In the REACH acronym, the term “Holistic” refers to a holistic education for the student, taking all aspects of a student's experience at school into account while planning and delivering lessons at school for them, at their own individual level. The term “holistic” also refers to the holistic leadership needed to make the REACH program work. For example, when considering a student's school experiences, their entire school environment must be taken into consideration, both the academic part of school, and also the social/emotional part of school. This involves: the classroom, teachers, peers, school administration, and all the parts of school that they interact with on a daily basis—the entire school plays a role in shaping the education of the child. It is also important to look at factors outside of school: the role of family, good sleep, hygiene, and activity level also all play a part in their education (Tranter, 2018, Craig, 2008). In holistic education, all of these aspects of a child's education are valued, and an importance is placed on learning in all of those aspects (social/emotional learning, as well as academics). This is what Tranter (2018) calls “The Third Path,” integrating both academics and well-being into schools and teaching, and the fact that educators must see the path of academics

and the path of well-being merging into one; a third path, where schools are meeting students' social and emotional needs as well as their academic needs. Similarly, Indigenous knowledge describes holistic education as the four interconnected dimensions of knowledge: emotional, spiritual, cognitive, and physical. The well-being and development of students (and of all people) involves attending to and valuing all of these dimensions, and teaching that all aspects of life are interconnected. (Blackstock, 2007).

Holistic education is important for students, and it is equally important for teachers and leaders. Sun and Leithwood (2015) describe the characteristics of holistic leadership: supportive relationships, shared vision, collaboration and commitment to community and connectedness. Holistic leadership promotes commitment of teachers to the school and its students, increasing student learning. Holistic leaders build strong relationships, they create a positive school culture, and are committed to the success of their staff and students. School boards across Ontario are now placing more importance on a leader's emotional intelligence and ability to form relationships, along with a strong classroom practice and knowledge of the position (personal communication, Rawana, 2017). This holistic mix of attributes is really what drives a school to success.

Conclusion

There are significant gaps in the current research pertaining to Section 23 classrooms and the use of effective strategies in educating students-at-risk in the school environment. No articles or books on the topic of the effectiveness of Section 23/CTCC classrooms have been peer-reviewed or published. In 2007, researchers from the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO) stated that to the best of their knowledge, "no Section 23 day treatment program in the province of Ontario had undergone systematic evaluation, despite their existence for the past 30

years” (Kortstee, Holahan, Dumouchel, & Lowe, 2007, p. 4). Most of the research that has been done is observational and anecdotal; little empirical evidence is available.

With a focus on children’s mental health and well-being at the forefront of much of what is going on in education today (Dweck, 2015; Shanker, 2013), there should be more research to draw from. Furthermore, much of the research about calm classrooms and the programs that are currently in place is American; more research within the Canadian context is necessary. Overall, there are very few published articles on the topic; only one researcher who has argued against Section 23 classrooms, stating that “while some behaviours improve over the course of a child’s admission, many do not” (Kortstee, Holahan, Dumouchel, & Lowe, 2007). More extensive research is needed on the topic: what works, what does not work, and strategies to ensure students-at-risk are successful in a school environment.

I believe that students-at-risk can be more successful in a regular school setting if the REACH program and principles are followed throughout the entire school. When a committed team of educators are following the same goals and working together to meet the needs of all their students, even the most difficult students will be better able to experience success in a regular school setting. The need for students-at-risk to be removed from their home school and placed into Section 23 programs could be minimized by creating the proper conditions for all students and their specific learning styles within the school. This is something that will take time, but I believe must be done for students, schools, and the future of education.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Merriam (1998), in *Qualitative Research and Case Study Applications in Education*, states that “a case study design is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning for those involved” (p. 19), and that “a case study is an intensive, holistic description and analysis” (p. 34). Merriam’s description of case study fits my research question and its goal: *Does the REACH program create the conditions for students-at-risk to remain in their home school, and not need to be removed to attend outside programs?* My goal in choosing case study methodology was to gain a deeper understanding of each component of the REACH program; what worked and did not work in a school, and what a school needed in order to continue implementing the REACH program. Furthermore, Weiss (1972) stresses the importance of program evaluators understanding programs and how they work. Being part of the program put me in a very good position to evaluate it, as I created the program and had a deep understanding of the rationale behind the program, and how it worked. Weiss’s theory of change strives to improve the implementation of a program. As I studied and evaluated the REACH program, I was working to do exactly that: improve the program for future generations of students-at-risk.

I chose an evaluative case study in order to evaluate each component of the REACH program. Further to Merriam’s above description of case study, Creswell (2013) in *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, defines case study research in the following way:

Case study research is a qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations,

interviews, audio-visual material, and documents and reports) and reports a case description and case-based themes. (p. 97)

The analysis of the effectiveness of the REACH program fits the above description of case study research well. I explored the effectiveness of the REACH program as the case. Each student involved in the REACH program represents an embedded unit of analysis within a single case; the school is the bounded system in which a particular case occurs. I collected multiple sources of data and information from a variety of stakeholders to evaluate the program's effectiveness.

The design model for this case study is adapted from Yin (2018) (see Figure 1). According to Yin (2018), this is a type 2 evaluative case study. A type 2 case study is a single case, embedded with multiple units of analysis (Yin, 2010, p. 48). The context is the problem I face in my work, which is that the re-integration model currently used for students-at-risk is ineffective and does not result in a smooth transition for the student back into the regular school environment. The case is within the context of the students' home school (my school) and school board, and the embedded units of analyses represent each individual student's case.

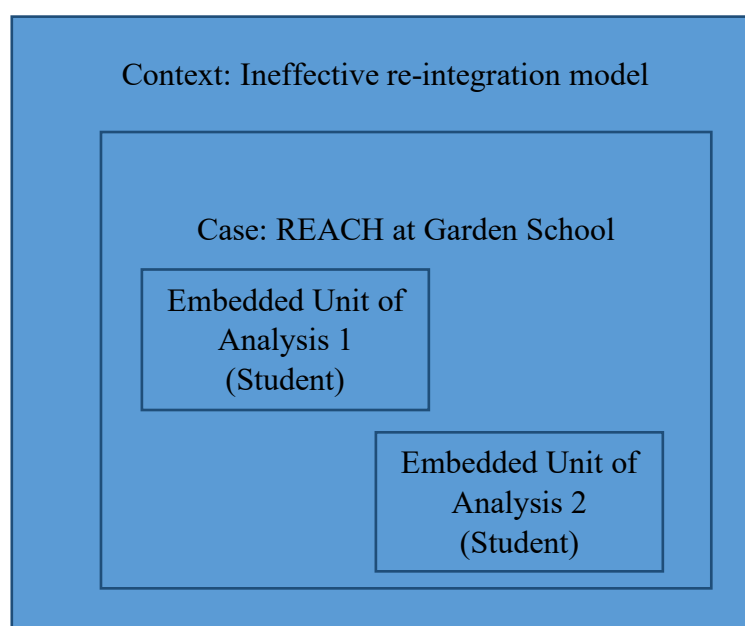


Figure 1: Design model of case study (Yin, 2018, p. 48)

Methods

To evaluate the effectiveness of the REACH program, I used a variety of research methods to collect data about the program from several sources (Patton, 1990). The research methods (i.e., strategies for collecting data) included interviews, journals, observations, questionnaires, student records, and any other information that was relevant in evaluating the effectiveness of the REACH program. The sources were the stakeholders/participants: students, families, teaching staff, support staff, and administration. Please read below for specific information about how each source contributed to the data set.

Stakeholders / participants. As there are many people involved in the success of students-at-risk at school, it was important to gather interview data from all of them, as each plays a role in the REACH program. Participants who agreed to participate in the study include teachers, student support professionals, principals, students and parents. Participants who were instrumental in the development of the REACH program, or currently part of the REACH program, were approached to be part of the study. The participants interviewed for this study were solely from Brookside Elementary, where the program began, not from Garden, where I am currently the principal. However, observational data, school documents, and journals are reflective of participants from both Brookside and Garden schools. All participants signed consent forms and were fully educated about the study and their voluntary participation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at mutually agreed-upon times at the school, were recorded for data-gathering purposes, and lasted from 7-14 minutes in length, with one student interview lasting only 2 minutes, as the student had very little to contribute. Here is a list of stakeholders and participants who were instrumental in the implementation, research and data collection stages:

Students. For this thesis, I interviewed two of the three students who were part of the REACH program about their experiences in school (see Appendix B for interview protocol). Only two students were interviewed, as one of the students is non-verbal and struggles with communication. Semi-structured student interviews were conducted one-on-one at the school. Only three students were part of the REACH program at the time of these interviews. Each school has a small number of what would be labeled as red-zone students. In a school of 450, there may only be 2-10 students who are labeled as red-zone.

Families. The family interviews followed the student interviews. All three families of students in the REACH program were interviewed (see Appendix A for interview protocol). Three semi-structured family interviews were conducted. One family came with a mother and father together, and the other two were mothers alone. Families, like students, were also interviewed about their views on the program and its effectiveness with their child.

Teaching staff/students' support staff. As the classroom teacher is ultimately responsible for the student while they are at school, they are instrumental in the program's success. Only teachers who worked with the students in the REACH program were interviewed, as well as any support staff who worked with the students on a regular basis. For this thesis, the school special education resource teacher (facilitator) was interviewed, as well as three student support professionals who worked with those students participating in the REACH program (see Appendix C for interview protocol).

Administration. Semi-structured, face-to-face, one-on-one interviews with administration were done throughout the year. For this thesis, I interviewed one principal and one vice-principal, both from Brookside Elementary where the REACH program was originally

implemented (see Appendix D for interview protocol). I also used my own observations and notes from Garden Public school where the REACH program was implemented the following year, when I moved from Brookside to Garden. It was important to include my observations, having implemented the program in two schools.

Data Collection Methods

As the researcher of a qualitative study, I am considered the primary instrument (i.e., as a qualitative researcher, I am the one both gathering and interpreting/analyzing the data). (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 1990). Other instruments and methods used to gather data regarding the effectiveness of the REACH program included interviews, principal journals and notes, school documents and records, and the Strengths Assessment Inventory (2017). Below, each instrument is explained in detail:

Interviews. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were held following the program's first year of implementation in June of 2018. It was important that I gathered data and input on the program's effectiveness from all stakeholders: students, families, teaching staff, support staff, and administration. Participants were questioned about the REACH program and its impact on students. Outlined in appendices A-D are questions asked of each stakeholder/participant through interviews about the REACH program's effectiveness.

Journals. I kept a journal and notes of my own experiences and observations as principal as we went through the process of implementing the REACH program. I included any important observations or experiences that related to the effectiveness of the REACH program as part of the data collection.

School documents and records. School documents and records, including student behaviour records (school ‘pink slips’ [behaviour reports] and suspension notes on file), and attendance data were examined, with the goal of determining if the REACH program correlated with positive outcomes in behaviour and attendance (e.g., did students participating in the REACH program have better attendance or fewer office referrals?)

Strengths Assessment Inventory. I used Lakehead Public Schools Board’s Strengths Assessment Inventory (SAI) (2017), developed by the board’s psychologist Dr. Edward Rawana, with all students in the REACH program in order to determine their attitudes and beliefs about school before and during the implementation of the REACH program. The SAI (2017) is designed to measure “specific strengths in children and adolescents, which helps to clearly identify their talents, skills and commitments in the different areas of their daily lives” (para. 1). The data collected from the SAI “provides an opportunity to draw upon existing strengths in order to build upon other areas of their life” (para.1). The SAI was administered twice throughout the year; once before the REACH program began, and again after one year of implementation. It was administered one-on-one with students, and I recorded their answers on the form.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the following documents and data took place through the creation of what Ulla Graneheim and Berit Lundman (2003) explain as “meaning units, condensed meaning units, sub-themes, and themes from content analysis” (p. 108). I examined the meaning units: what people told me in the interviews, or what I extracted from the writing in case conference notes and logbooks. I described and condensed these meaning units and sorted them into sub-themes and overall themes. I also used my experience and prior knowledge of the REACH program to

develop themes. The school team began the REACH program, having noticed that each of the elements in the REACH acronym was making a difference at school for students-at-risk, as noted in the literature review (see p. 14). This is what Gery Ryan and Russell Bernard (2003) call “an a priori approach” (p. 88). “A priori themes come from the characteristics of the phenomenon being studied; from already agreed on professional definitions found in literature reviews; from researchers’ values, theoretical orientations, and personal experiences” (p. 88).

The data from student, family and staff interviews, principal documents, case conference notes and office data have been synthesized. In analyzing the interview transcripts, key words and statements were highlighted, and those words and statements were grouped into common topics related to the five main themes previously identified – the elements of the REACH acronym: Relationships, Environment, Attitude, Co-Regulation, and Holistic Education. The emergent themes of “student relationships” and “next steps” for the program were also highlighted. The following sections describe the varied sources I used in my research to gather data about the REACH program:

Interviews. I recorded all interviews by voice recorder and later transcribed them verbatim, and then edited the quotes for ease of reading (pauses, ums and ahs, and false starts have been removed). Reading through each transcript, I looked for trends and information that stood out from participant/stakeholder interviews: looking at the REACH themes, coding them into colour-coded categories, as well as any other emerging theme; looking for patterns and relationships to show evidence of the program’s effectiveness, areas for improvement, and next steps.

Journals. Notes from case conferences, as well as information from phone calls with families and outside agencies regarding students who participated in the REACH program were

recorded in principal logbooks or journals at both Garden and Brookside schools. Anything that showed evidence of the effectiveness of the REACH program, or ideas for its growth or next steps, was included as part of the data and is discussed in the findings section.

School documents and records. Many school documents and records became part of the data that helped to determine the effectiveness of the REACH program. Data regarding student behaviour, student attendance, and students' overall attitude towards school were collected.

Pink slips. At Garden Elementary, the school collects student behaviour data with pink slips for poor behaviour. Students are sent with these pink slips to the office for a meeting with school administration. Students' behaviour records were examined, looking for behaviour trends over time (e.g., did participating in the REACH program have an effect on students' overall behaviour?)

Suspension data. Student suspension records at both Garden and Brookside schools were examined as part of the data collection stage, also highlighting behaviour trends over time (e.g., did participating in the REACH program have an effect on students' overall behaviour?)

Attendance data. Through the creation of reports in Lakehead School's Trilium system, which tracks student data, I looked trends in student attendance at both schools (e.g., did students in the REACH program have poor attendance? Did it change when they became part of the program?)

Strengths Assessment Inventory. Dr. Rawana's SAI (Strengths Assessment Inventory) was administered to all students in the REACH program before and during the program's implementation in order to examine the students' overall attitudes about school and themselves

(e.g., did the student's perception of themselves or of school change as a result of their experience in the REACH program?)

Ethics

Ethics approval from Lakehead University's Research Ethics Board (REB) as well as the Public School Board were granted before research on the REACH program began. The approval documents are found in Appendices E and F. Throughout this research, confidentiality and anonymity of participants was maintained: names of the school and individuals were changed, and as the principal, I worked as a co-participant, colleague, and peer. Elements of the REACH program were already in existence when I began at my current school, and throughout the implementation, I have been part of a team, not the sole leader of the REACH program. As written in the Ontario Ministry of Education's "Principals as Co-Learners" monograph, the principal should be a co-learner, learning and working alongside with staff, with all parties sharing their ideas, experiences and expertise (OME 2014). This has been my role, and I have always aimed to present myself as part of the team, therefore, participants, (staff, students, and community partners) are less likely to be influenced by the power of the principal. However, to guard against any possible influence, perceived or otherwise, I affirmed for all participants that my role as principal is not part of this research, and that their participation is entirely voluntary and will not impact any decisions I might make as principal. My research is not intended to use any power that I have as principal in a coercive way, however I recognize that it could be perceived this way. The measures I have taken, listed above, have minimized that dynamic and any type of coercion that participants might have felt. The interviews were conducted in my previous school; therefore I was not, at the time of the interviews and data collection, the immediate supervisor of staff, students or parents who were answering my questions. Also, it is

important to note that as a principal, relationships and a team approach to education have always been at the forefront of my practice. Beginning the REACH program was a collaborative effort that staff, students and parents were all a part of and, as a team, we had constant meetings and conversations about implementing this program at school, so when families were approached to be part of the research of its effectiveness, this was not out of the ordinary from our past practice.

Students who are part of the REACH program could potentially be singled out, as they are leaving the classroom for specialized instruction on calming techniques, relationship building with peers and adults, and working on special projects that meet their needs. Any student selected for the program is already identified in the school community as a red-zone or tier-three student, struggling to remain in a regular classroom environment, and generally spending a great deal of time out of the classroom and at the office. Classmates and other staff would not likely notice that there is anything different going on; the students would still be taking breaks from their regular day, only in a more controlled manner than in previous years. The REACH program is designed to be an extra support for tier-three students' traditional day at school; prior to the program, they may have been spending a lot of time at the office, whereas they are now spending time with educators and other students, building the skills, attitudes, and stamina necessary to be at school.

As a principal, it is my sincere hope that this program makes a difference in my school, but, as a researcher, I need to take a step back and really look at the effectiveness of this program in a school: Is this program something that we should be putting a great deal of time and energy into? Will the REACH program work for students, teachers, families, and the school? What exactly do we need in order to make it work?

I have researched the effectiveness of the REACH program by taking on the role of observer, and conducting the research as transparently and bias-free as possible by recording statements accurately, using prepared questions, and interviewing staff, families, and students who have been part of the program for quite some time now, and with whom I have already built strong relationships. To ensure that students, families, and staff did not feel pressured by a superior to be part of this study, I gained informed consent from those who were already a part of the project and the opportunity to not consent or to withdraw at any time from the research was made clear to each participant.

It is in all of our best interest (staff, families, and students) to see our students succeed at school, and this is the message that the family of any student who is part of the program has received. I have strong relationships with students and families who have been through the day treatment program, as well as the staff who have been implementing calm classroom techniques, and REACH-like strategies for a few years now, and they were the ones implementing the REACH program at the time of the research. I recognize that, since I was part of creating the program, that I have biases in terms of hoping to see the program as successful, and hoping that it is providing necessary supports for students-at-risk. However, in recognition of this, I am continually reflecting and trying to be aware of my biases through reflective journaling and through the use of *bracketing*. Authors Tufford and Newman (2010), define bracketing as “researchers acknowledging their beliefs and biases early in the research process to allow readers to understand their positions, and then suspend those researcher biases as the study progresses” (p. 83). One way that bracketing is recommended is through reflective journaling, which informed my research process, as well as being a source of data. There is also a large team making program decisions with me; the Vice Principal, special education facilitator, teachers, the

school board psychologist, social workers, other community partners, as well as students and families. My eyes were not the only ones looking at school records, notes and data, or making decisions concerning program effectiveness or next steps.

Limitations

This is only one, small study of the efficacy of an intervention program within a single case, two schools in a small Northern Ontario city. As a consequence, the findings are limited in scope but will allow initial insights into the possibilities inherent within the REACH program. As stated above, my being both the principal and primary researcher of the program could also be seen as a limitation. My involvement in the program does not allow me critical distance; this is a challenge. Keeping a researcher journal helped me to mitigate this challenge by constantly reflecting and being transparent in my work.

Further, this program has only been in existence for one year, so this is not a longitudinal study, and at this point, it cannot be determined if the interventions used in the REACH program cause lasting effects for students. To evaluate the effectiveness of the REACH program further, it would be ideal to implement the program on a broader scale, such as across multiple school sites or throughout an entire school board or district, over a longer period of time, and evaluate its effectiveness systemically. This would ensure that the REACH program can meet the needs of all schools and therefore ensure the continued success of students-at-risk in their home school environments. This study of the effectiveness of the REACH program may help to facilitate a board-wide or multi-school implementation of the program in our city.

Chapter Four: Findings and Interpretation

This chapter presents the findings and interpretation of the case study related to the effectiveness of the REACH program. The five a priori themes of REACH were explored through the analyses of the data: relationships, environment, attitude, co-regulation, and holistic education, along with the emergent themes of student-to-student relationships and next steps for the program. The purpose of this study was to determine if the REACH program could eliminate the need for students-at-risk to be removed from their home school environment to attend outside programs. Interviews, case conference notes, principal journals, office/student records and the Strengths Assessment Inventory were all part of the data that contributed to the findings and interpretation.

The a priori themes of relationships, environment, attitude, co-regulation, and holistic education as well as the emergent themes of student relationships and next steps for the program were brought up by participants in nearly every interview, with some participants highlighting all elements of the program in their answers. Each theme is discussed further in this section, with examples of participant interview answers that support each theme. In Table 1, each theme and sub-theme are highlighted, with topics of interest (also called meaning units) and examples listed in the third column. Each of these themes will be presented and described in detail in this chapter, following the table.

Theme	Sub-Themes	Topic/Meaning Units	Quotes to Support Themes
Relationships	Student-Teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teaching students to foster relationships 	<i>“They (students) needed some ‘go-to’ relationship people”</i> (Facilitator 1)
	Student-Student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Found friends through social group Interacting in positive ways Peer-mentorship 	<i>“Socially he’s been doing excellent, with the social group that he’s been part of, and has found some friends that way”</i> (Parent 1)
	Relationships and student behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Correlation between building relationships with adults and peers and decreased office visits for students 	<i>“Since the program began, I’ve been seeing less overall incidents in behaviour at the school”</i> (Principal 1)
Environment	Classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Slow and low Natural lighting 	<i>“When she came into our classroom, we changed our environment to ‘slow and low’. We saw great improvement with that”</i> (Student Support Professional 1)
	School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Chill-room” type spaces for students “Break Cards” or something similar 	
Attitude	Self-Esteem/Confidence in Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loves coming to school Decrease in negative behaviours 	<i>“There have been times that he didn’t want to come to school, but now he wants to be there all the time”</i> (Parent 2)

Co-Regulation	Self-Regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students learning to monitor themselves 	<p><i>“A big decrease in behaviours being reported. He knows how to turn his behaviour around with the strategies he’s learned”</i></p> <p>(Parent 3)</p>
	Teacher as model/mentor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentoring one another in the school • Mentoring students in the classroom and modelling for them daily 	<p><i>“Seeing less overall incidents in behaviour because they are learning to co-regulate along with their peers and staff”</i></p> <p>(Principal 1)</p>
Holistic Education	Differentiated Instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting students where they’re “at” • Whole-team approach to education 	<p><i>“The whole-school support is amazing”</i></p> <p>(Parent 1)</p>
Next Steps	Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resources/funds to further the program 	<p><i>“Not even in the way of money, but thinking outside the box for flexible programming is essential.”</i></p> <p>(Principal 1)</p>
	Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training for school staff on REACH 	<p><i>“I think people (staff) need to be educated and see the program in action”</i></p> <p>(Student Support Professional 1)</p>
	Personnel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staffing considerations (the right fit) • Outside agency involvement (Child and Youth Worker - CYW) 	<p><i>“It has to be the right fit. Personnel is everything. They have to have the same philosophy”.</i></p> <p>(Principal 1)</p>

Relationships

The importance of building strong relationships came up in each interview. The phrase “relationships are key” was voiced multiple times throughout the interviews. The importance of relationships was highlighted by all groups: parents, students, teachers, and administration.

For example, parents made the following statements:

He's doing great. He loves coming to school. Everyone knows him. He's accelerating in his learning. (Parent 2)

I see a lot of excitement when they come to school now. They are forming friendships. (Parent 3)

School staff were also able to articulate the importance of the relationship aspect of the program:

Students are interacting with their peers in a positive way now, which is a huge benefit; they are gaining social skills and life skills through the experiences we provide. (Principal 1)

Becomes a real peer-mentorship piece; working together on social skills. Not only are we building relationships between student and teacher, but also student and student, and teaching them how to foster those relationships. (Principal 1)

Their relationship with us has helped them to build relationships with other people in the building and other students. (Student Support Professional 3)

One staff member reflected on a couple of students who would normally be referred to a section 23/CTCC classroom but because of the REACH program being implemented in their school, and specifically in their classrooms, they have been able to remain in their home school:

Relationships are huge. She wouldn't listen to anybody because she didn't have a relationship with anyone and she didn't trust them. After a short period of time (doing relationship building activities) she started to trust. She started to come back when she ran away. This was so important in helping her to function in a regular classroom. A year ago, she wouldn't even attempt a conversation with another student, and now she has the courage to do this. She would not be able to sit at her desk without shuffling, tapping, etc. Negative attention was better than nothing at all. Clearly, she wanted a relationship with her classmates but didn't know how to go about doing that. She got better and better at staying in her desk. This year, she sits at her desk and completes work. She has breaks built into her day, and is now able to go back to her work. She can focus and get work done, and she feels good about it. This program has really helped her to remain in the classroom and become a productive and successful member of our classroom. I have not seen the behaviours from 2 years ago at all. (Student Support Professional 1)

Other staff members and parents also reflected on the relationships that students had built throughout their time in the REACH program, and how this had helped to eliminate some of the negative behaviours that students were displaying at school:

They also have a friendship base, and that eliminates a lot of issues right there.

(Facilitator 1)

A big decrease in behaviours being reported to the home (Parent 2)

Relationships between students and teachers was an expected theme evident in the data. The theme of student-to-student relationships emerging from the REACH program is a benefit

that was not discussed prior to beginning the program. Students learned to build relationships with a safe adult in the classroom, and then this skill was transferred to their peers and the school community as a whole. This is what Tranter and Kerr (2016) call *attachment theory*: the child forms a secure base by having a solid relationship with a trusted adult, then are more willing and able to take risks, knowing they will always have that secure base to return to. After much focus on building, fostering and modelling good relationships in the classroom, students were seeing their teachers as their secure base at school and thus becoming more comfortable to take risks not only academically, but socially as well, building relationships with other students in the classroom and school community.

At Garden Elementary, suspension and behaviour reports were reviewed in relation to student relationships. The administration team began implementing an in-school suspension program for students instead of sending them home, unless absolutely warranted. They called the program “active discipline” and it resulted from learning that most students who were sent home from school were playing video games alone, or not supervised after being sent home for poor behaviour choices. When possible, these students were asked to stay at school, however, instead of missing their physical activity time (recess) or social time (lunch), they were supervised by the administration team while engaging in active, team-building initiatives, such as racing to fill buckets of snow while walking on snowshoes, or even going on a brisk walk and then eating lunch together as a team. Other activities included guided group meditation, yoga, and sporting activities. This “active discipline” philosophy helped students to not only build a relationship with one another (especially when the relationships had been previously damaged by rude, mean, or bullying behaviour), but also helped to build a positive relationship with school administration. When outdoor activities were not available, students played board games like

“Sorry,” and ate lunch together in the administration office. When looking at parent comments and staff comments about the success of these programs (in comparison to having students sent home alone and unsupervised, or spending lunch time in the office foyer in detention), it was obvious that this strategy of active discipline is a much better and more positive alternative. One parent called the school and commented,

I am so pleased with what you did for my son. He feels like the relationship (with his classmate) has become stronger as they were challenged to perform a task as a team, and I think that more learning has come out of this method of discipline than having him sent home or sitting at the office. Thank you so much.

The above comment alone makes it worth continuing.

During the current school year at Garden elementary, administrators are on daily duty on the playground, interacting with students, and the school community, including parents, supervisors, and staff, have all observed and commented on a decrease in overall student behaviour incidents by having administrators present and active in the field. This overall decrease was also noted in the school’s suspension data, as well as the school behaviour *pink slip* program. Fewer students are exhibiting poor behaviour choices when their needs are being met in the classroom on a daily basis through the implementation of the REACH program.

The success of this program has resulted in new ideas and programs coming together that will help students continue to build positive relationships not only with one another, but also with other staff at the school. Building positive relationships with a variety of staff, and not only their classroom teacher helps at-risk students feel more connected to the school. In the 2018-2019 school year, the Garden Elementary administration team has begun a work-out club at

lunch time (when most of the students-at-risk at the school have the most difficulty managing their behaviour) and students were invited to the gymnasium to participate in a daily work-out program with peers and staff. Garden staff hope that this program will continue to build students' self-confidence, as well as create more positive relationships among them and the staff. Classes are pairing up to do different types of 'buddy' programs (reading buddies, technology buddies, math buddies, yoga buddies). Students are seeing other parts of the school beyond their own classroom and learning from other school staff, and not only their own teachers. Other staff members have come on board and are currently leading activities that allow students-at-risk to be seen as leaders; the entire school is shifting toward becoming REACH focused.

One of the biggest shifts noted at Garden and Brookside is that all students in the school are "ours" (student support professional 3, and administrator 2), and that simply because a classroom teacher has a student on their roster, this does not mean that they are the only one supporting that child. Everyone works hard to build relationships and share the load. This creates a very positive school culture and environment.

Environment

The connection between environment and relationships is something that surfaced as a clear benefit of this program, and something which needs to be developed and researched further. As discussed in the literature review, there is much evidence that supports the environment as an important teaching tool in the classroom; the classroom environment has a direct correlation with student well-being. There were no formal notes or documentation throughout the research period regarding the environment in the participating schools, aside from notes about the equipment in the sensory spaces at the schools, and what specific students could use in those spaces to de-escalate and remain calm in order to return to class. As a principal observer, I can say that in my

short time at Garden, and at Brookside before Garden, one of the main things that was commented on when people walked into the school was the *feeling* of the school atmosphere and positive school climate. This is something that is difficult to understand, and even more difficult to explain, but that feeling of a positive environment makes people feel good about being in the school, and all schools want their students, families, and visitors to feel good about being there.

In the interviews, parents, staff, and students commented about how the environment in the classroom and school has had a positive impact on their learning. Below are some statements from parents, students, and school staff about the environment in the classroom and school that illustrate how the environment has contributed to the success of students:

For him to be able to have breaks when he needs and explore other options while still contributing to learning is very important for him. (Parent 3)

I think that he's more willing to learn, more patient. He knows he can go there (to the chill room) if he needs it. Since that has happened, it's his safe zone, and resource area to calm himself. Having this infrastructure in place makes such a huge difference. Being able to disengage from the busy-ness and stress (of the classroom) helps him then focus on some of his work. (Parent 3)

Re: the panther DEN: *It's a quiet place to do your work so you're not in the noisy classroom. (Student 1)*

All interviews highlighted the importance of having a safe space available in either the classroom or the school for students to go when they needed a break. At Brookside, this space is called the “Panther DEN” (standing for Diverse Education Needs), and at Garden it is simply called a “Chill Room.” Both school principals have case conference notes and documentation

that supports the creation of these spaces: parents and students have all expressed the importance of having these spaces available to students. At Garden, the creation of the room was so important that the local Children’s Center, a community partner, matched the school fundraising dollar-for-dollar to outfit the room with furniture and accessories that make it a calm, welcoming, and inviting environment.

Both schools also have classrooms that have created “calm corners” in the room (a living room-like atmosphere with a variety of calm-down objects and tools for students to use, such as stress balls, glitter jars, drawing tools, etc.). This is something that many schools and classrooms within Lakehead Public Schools are adopting in order to meet the needs of the growing population of at-risk students in the classroom. Similar to the notion that a secure base with a person is needed to form quality relationships, a secure base *location* (environment) is needed for students; somewhere they know they can go, free of judgement, where they can get help with whatever they need – socially or academically. This is what the “chill room” is for them; it helps them to be more successful, which in turn helps change their attitude towards school, and return to their classrooms, ready to learn.

Attitude

One of the most surprising things for school staff that came up in the interviews were the friendships built by the students; students who normally did not feel part of the class became part of a group through the REACH program. These students were then more equipped with skills to befriend others in the classroom and school, creating students who gained self-confidence and a stronger sense of self. Because of the focus on strengths in the classroom and school, students became able to recognize, not only their own strengths and become proud of who they are, but also to recognize strengths in those around them. Though the attitude of teachers was researched

in the literature review, students' attitudes as a result of the program were not researched as part of the initial literature review. The a priori theme of attitude evolved during the research, and the attitudes of the students became one of the most prevalent themes to emerge from the data.

Below are some comments made by participants about attitude changes as a result of the REACH program being implemented at school:

He is actually excited about coming to school to do all the different programming that there is. (Parent 1)

He has started participating in extracurricular activities, which he has never done before. Staff have been encouraging his participation too; he's more engaged and more successful. (Parent 3)

A lot of these kids flew under the radar, because they are so quiet. I know they had anxiety, I know they had poor self-confidence. You might have seen more mental health stuff coming up in the classroom, which we don't see as much of anymore. They are happy, and always have something to look forward to. (Facilitator 1)

One of the biggest benefits is the confidence that has come from these kids. They are more confident and assertive. (Teacher 1)

Based on participant interviews, students' attitudes have changed in a positive way due to the REACH program being implemented in schools. Students are excited to come to school because the school is meeting their needs in various ways. Their strengths are being highlighted and they feel that they have a place in the school. Using a strengths-based program is also helping to build students' confidence and positive attitudes at school. Many schools at Lakehead are running grade seven and eight learning academy programs: strength and interest-based programs,

focusing on inquiry-based and experiential learning opportunities for students. When students have exciting opportunities to look forward to at school, attendance, motivation and attitudes all change.

In the initial literature review for this thesis, the teacher's attitude was researched as being instrumental in the delivery of the REACH program; the educators needed to be on board and believe in the philosophy of the program in order for it to work in their classrooms. Some teachers continue to struggle to meet the needs of students-at-risk, and have great difficulty getting on board with new initiatives such as the REACH program. The excerpt below from one of the staff interviews explains this well:

It was to the point where the child was spending more time at the office or out in the hallway than in the classroom. (The teacher would become agitated with every negative behaviour he demonstrated, and yell at him to leave the classroom).

Administration decided we needed to try something different, and so he came to our classroom. It was a slow and low classroom; we were all very calm. We started to see all the students benefit from how we were conducting ourselves in the classroom, and the environment of the classroom (not only this student; in a matter of days his "behaviours" were gone). We have had successes with not only children with severe behaviours, but with all children (by changing our environment).

(Student Support Professional 1)

Attitude was also inferred from attendance data – it was noted that students who were part of the REACH program very rarely missed any school. They were excited to come to school, as noted by parents, and attendance records showed an increase in student attendance throughout the year.

Teachers use many tools to measure student strengths and attitudes at school. The Strengths Assessment Inventory was administered to students during the program. Ideally, this type of assessment is administered by a classroom teacher in the beginning of the year (through multiple intelligences surveys, seating preference questions; anything that can help a teacher get to know their students more thoroughly) and then again at the end of the year to see if there have been changes. The results showed an increase for all students in the following areas:

- Confidence (this was noted by staff, but also came out in the SAI results).
- Self-esteem (e.g., students scored themselves higher on questions such as ‘I like myself’ following their year in the program)
- Identifying personal strengths (e.g., students could identify more personal strengths after having participated in the program for a year)

The REACH program was effective in improving the attitudes of students towards school, towards one another, towards school staff, and towards themselves.

Co-Regulation

Co-regulation begins with self-regulation, and *this* is where the outlook of the teacher is instrumental in making this program work. A teacher must sincerely believe in the program and philosophy, otherwise it will not work. Below are some of the comments that were made with regard to co-regulation and self-regulation:

We (staff) had to do a lot of modeling (Facilitator 1)

They are learning how to monitor themselves. (Student Support Professional 2)

When he needs time away, he gets a break. (Parent 2)

With perseverance and modeling, they are now reaching out to other adults in the school.

(Principal 1)

Their confidence has just unfolded (Facilitator 1)

The school makes sure I have good goals every day (Student 1)

She learned to self-regulate throughout the day in order to get to do preferred activities later. Before, she would run around the classroom, make sounds, shout out, bother others... but after the first week we noticed improvement (Student Support Professional 1)

Much staff training began in the areas of self-regulation and co-regulation while the REACH program was being implemented. Staff were eager to learn more. Staff meetings began with “mindful moments” where staff would practice breathing and meditation. Overhead lights in the office and at staff meetings were kept to a minimum; administration was modeling what they hoped teachers would implement in their classrooms to help students co-regulate.

When staff put in the effort to model for students what it means to self-regulate and then teach them effective self-regulation skills and strategies in the classroom, their students can follow their lead and become more regulated themselves. When teacher and students are both regulated (co-regulated) in the classroom, more learning can happen, and teachers can better meet the needs of the whole child.

When meeting the needs of the whole child, a teacher must take into account both the academic growth of their students as well as their social-emotional growth. Many social thinking programs have been implemented at Garden to help teach the students about social-emotional learning, about their brains, and ultimately about self-regulation skills. The Zones of Regulation (2011), and WE thinkers (2013) have been adopted by most classrooms, with students

participating in whole group and small group lessons, with the goals of improving self-regulation, self-reflection skills, and teaching positive character traits. At Garden, every classroom has a large Zones of Regulation poster hung in the classroom, and all staff wear a lanyard with the zones outlined on a tag, so that all staff have a common language when speaking to students about their behaviour and regulation.

Outside of the REACH program, and social emotional learning programs, schools are also piloting other programs and changes to help students experience more success at school. For example, in the 2018-2019 school year, many elementary schools in the Lakehead board have new staff positions to help build student success. Many schools have in-school guidance counselors and social workers, and though these staff may not be in schools every day, they provide students with another positive relationship and someone to check in with at school if they are struggling. All of these initiatives have begun with the same goal in mind: student success by meeting the needs of the whole child.

Holistic Education

Holistic Education is about meeting the needs of the whole child: academically, socially, emotionally, and so forth. It is about figuring out what students need, and then thinking outside the box for creative ways to meet those needs in a school. The holistic education benefits of the REACH program only came out in principal notes when meeting with school board psychologist, Dr. Rawana, as well as in the interviews. Many participants highlighted how the REACH program was effective in meeting the needs of their child:

Lots of support in the school; school facilitator, teachers, principal; everybody is very much supportive of his alternative way of learning. (Parent 4)

He's not treated any different. (Parent 2)

We had a large group of students in need of life skills, social skills and confidence building. (Facilitator 1)

They have found a little community of their own. They help each other out. They are starting to recognize their own strengths too. (Student Support Professional 2)

One benefit is improvement in student success. (Principal 1)

We've seen kids staying in class during instruction more often. We've seen them improve their attendance here at school, because we feel that they're having more success and therefore coming more often. I think that the academic success is born out of that program. (Principal 1)

The participants highlighted how the whole school needs to come together and be on the same page for students in order to make positive change. It takes a dedicated team who is willing to try new things and do things differently in our schools and buildings.

Relationships, the environment of the classroom, the attitudes of both teachers and students, the ability for them to co-regulate, and teachers educating the whole child through holistic education are all very important pieces of the REACH program, and the benefits of the program have been researched and reported in this chapter. However, I am left with the question: how can we ensure it is able to continue? During their interviews, participants were also questioned about next steps for the REACH program. What they thought the program might need in order to continue, or any ideas they had relating to the growth, development, or continuation of the program, are reported in Table 2, found on p. 76. A deeper discussion of the participants'

ideas for the REACH program's next steps are outlined in Chapter Six: Conclusions and Recommendations.

Chapter Five: Discussion

The goal of this thesis is to answer the research question: *Does the REACH program create the conditions for students-at-risk to remain in their home school, eliminating the need to be removed to attend outside programs?* The other questions asked are:

- *Was the REACH program implemented as intended?*
- *Is the REACH program a viable alternative to out-of-school programs for students-at-risk?*
- *How could the REACH program be improved in order to better meet the needs of students-at-risk?*

First, I will examine the thesis question: *Does the REACH program create the conditions for students-at-risk to remain in their home school, eliminating the need to be removed to attend outside programs?* Further to this, is the REACH program a viable alternative to out-of-school programs for students-at-risk?

At Lakehead Schools, many schools use a ‘tier of interventions’ chart (see appendix G) to ensure they are meeting the needs of all the students in their classroom. Interventions are listed as “green” (good teaching practice that is available to ALL students), “yellow” (necessary for some students, yet good for all), and “red” (strategies used for at-risk students). At both Brookside and Garden elementary, bi-yearly *students of interest* meetings are held with the school team (teachers, administration, and special education) and staff place students on this chart based on the interventions they require to be successful at school. Each school is different and some schools will have many more red-zone students than others. In my experience, about seventy-five percent of students fit into the green zone; they can manage at school with interventions such as strong classroom management, predictable routines in the classroom, a focus on strengths and relationship building. The next twenty percent of students fit into the

yellow zone; they are students-at-risk, the ones who frequently need breaks from the classroom, use the chill room or calming corner on a regular basis, and frequent the office more than their green zone counterparts. They may require extra services to be successful at school, such as regular visits to the social worker, or check-ins with the attendance counselor. Finally, there are about five percent of students who fit the red zone category; who require the support of a student support professional and team of board supports to remain at school successfully. These students who are severely at-risk are normally put on the waiting list for a CTCC (Care and/or Treatment, Custody, Correctional) classroom, such as the day treatment program. To put this into perspective, in a classroom of 25, this means that about 15 of the students are in the green zone and can be expected to respond to regular classroom practice and good teaching strategies, around 8 of the students are yellow zone and may need some extra supports to manage in the classroom, and finally, 1 to 2 students are red zone. These students will need intensive interventions in order to be successful at school. This has implications in the classroom, and is something that is very important for a teacher to know and reflect on. Furthermore, knowing *why* a student falls into a particular zone will help a teacher to plan and prepare for that student, both emotionally and academically.

What I have found in my last 15 years of school experience, and now through the research for this thesis, is that every school has a very tiny pocket of students who are beyond red zone; students who the team places in the red zone, but, no matter what we try to implement in the school or classroom, will require outside programming in order to be successful. This may be 1 or 2 students in a school of 450. Often, the family requires a referral to a paediatrician or mental health professional outside of the school. The entire team meets frequently to ensure the success of the student, but usually this process results in an outside-of-school alternative. The

REACH program is effective in managing green, yellow and even most red zone students, but there are some who are beyond this tier and will need outside-of-school interventions in order to eventually succeed at school. The story below, from one of the parents interviewed about the REACH program, illustrates this further:

The supports at school have been amazing within the context of what the school can provide, and what is available funding-wise and staffing-wise. But, we've exhausted all of those, so my son has to go to a program outside of the school which we are excited about but sad at the same time; we'd love to see him stay in his home school (cries). (Parent 5)

The current REACH program is very successful in meeting the needs of most students. Not all students who are at-risk and in the red zone are being removed from their home school, and we are hearing more success stories, like this one:

We have outside agencies that have worked with this student, and they came in to talk to her recently. She used to run around the library and pull things off the shelves, now she sits at a table and has a conversation. This child has not gone to an outside program. This child was in the classroom. Was it easy all the time? No. But was it worth it? 150%. (Student Support Professional 1)

I believe that with more supports in the school, we could keep a student like the young boy described above by his parent in his regular classroom, and he could experience success, just like the student mentioned in the second quote. This concept is discussed further in Chapter Six in the recommendations section.

Throughout the implementation of the REACH program in the 2017-2018 school year, I was also doing research to support the program and each of the elements of REACH. Below is some of the newest research. One thing that has come up very clearly is that most, if not all, of our students-at-risk have experienced some sort of trauma. This information surfaced in case conferences, in conversations with parents and staff, and in student record data. Becoming a “trauma informed” teacher, school, or district, is of broad and current interest in education at this time (Souers & Hall, 2016; Tranter, 2016). The REACH program is supported further by the following information that was revealed through ongoing research during the program implementation, research that further supports the findings presented in the literature review, and in chapter four. I think that the most rewarding phenomenon I found in this new research on trauma-informed teaching was that all elements of the REACH program flow seamlessly into one another and overlap in so many areas that, combined, they feel much like a single program that is making a difference in the education of children.

For educators, change theory is like a road map leading to change (Weiss, 1975). For the REACH program, this road map has been created with all of the elements of the REACH program taking off from the core of the map, which is success of students-at-risk in their home school. Each of the elements is also connected to the other. Evaluating the program, and adding to it through continued research and trials has made it stronger and more successful. It was important to look at all elements of the REACH program with a trauma-informed lens, in order to ensure the needs of the students were being met through the program.

Relationships

When researching about trauma informed teaching, building relationships came up as the most powerful way to connect with children who have experienced trauma. In the literature review, it was stated that research has repeatedly shown that children who have at least one close bond with a considerate and competent adult are more likely to become stable and successful adults themselves (Groh et al., 2014; Werner, 1995). In many cases, teachers spend more time with students on a daily basis than their own families, and school, at times, is the safest place for students to build relationships with adults and peers. Many red-zone students need extensive coaching in positive relationship-building, as they never had the chance to form positive connections as young children. Souers and Hall (2016) speak about the importance of teachers building sincere relationships with students: “[the relationships] need to be authentic and sincere. Kids, particularly those who have experienced trauma, can see right through your façade of an insincere relationship” (p. 111). This is similar to what was highlighted in the literature review, that “pupils do not want to listen to a teacher who does not care about them” (Postholm, p. 397).

Building a genuine and caring relationship applies not only to teachers and students, but also to administrators and school staff. Administrators need to model positive relationship building, and ensure that their staff knows it is important to take the time to get to know their students. Without spending the time to build relationships in the classroom, especially with the most difficult students, teachers will have a difficult time meeting curriculum expectations, as they will constantly have to stop the classroom teaching to deal with red-zone behavioural issues. Many teachers get stuck in a rut of having to accomplish all of the curriculum guidelines at the expense of taking the time to show students that they care about them, accept them, and want to know more about them. “As educators, our unconditional acceptance carries a message of

belonging and emotional safety. It communicates that the student is part of the fabric of the classroom and school” (Zacarian et. al., p. 37). Relationships are key for students who have experienced trauma, and for red-zone students. They must feel that they are part of the school, that they are important, and that they matter to the adults who care for them at school each day. The REACH program was successful in building relationships with students-at-risk. Relationships were strengthened between students and their teachers, their peers, and school administration. Strengthened relationships led to more confidence, better overall behaviour, and a school environment that was more conducive to learning for all.

Environment

Creating a learning environment in which students feel safe, ready to learn and prepared to take risks and be themselves is not an easy task. When teachers strive to create this environment alongside their students, the benefits are countless. In the book, *Fostering Resilient Learners*, Souers and Hall (2016) state,

It is our demeanour, our approach, our behaviours, our volume, and our presence that affect how young people live, breathe, and perform in the classroom. When we create a stable, consistent, and safe environment, our students are able to enter and remain in the learning mode. (p.61)

They state that “it’s up to us to provide the safe environment and healthy atmosphere in which that [positive] relationship can take hold” (p. 157). The authors believe a perceived “lack of control” is a trigger for teachers, and this is why they have difficulty adopting something new (like the REACH program). “Making students leave class and putting labels on them are both forms of dismissal that stem from our need for control” (p. 116). This need for absolute control and quick dismissal of students-at-risk is detrimental to their well-being at school, and normally

results in heightened behaviours (on both the students' and the teacher's part). This research is synonymous with the research presented in the literature review, addressing the need for strong classroom management and teaching practices.

The education of teachers is vitally important to successfully implement the REACH program. When an entire staff sees the students as *theirs*, possibilities open up for alternate arrangements to “going to the office”: maybe another teacher can help to reset a student to return to their own class for learning, or give a struggling student a job to remove them from a difficult situation. It is about shifting one's attitude about the students in the school. The REACH program endeavoured to change the environment in the school and classroom by changing the way a school looks at behaviour and discipline, and creating spaces and opportunities in the learning environment and throughout the day where students-at-risk were able to experience success. Whether it be a calm corner in the students' classroom or a chill room down the hall, playing cooperative games at recess or looking at active discipline versus detention, when changes to the environment were made, they had a positive effect on student behaviour as well as attitude.

Attitude

The attitude of accepting the entire school as “ours” does not come easily for all educators. Some prefer to keep their doors closed, and work in solitude. This is really a culture shift that all staff in a school need to be on board with in order for the change to occur. It takes a great deal of time and effort on the part of the whole school team (teachers, support staff, administrator, secretaries, custodians, etc.) to change the culture of a school. The entire team needs to be working toward the same goal of student success. At Garden, the whole school is

focusing on positive character traits (e.g., The Seven Grandfather teachings, teaching empathy, kindness, and growth mindset) through school assemblies, over the announcements, and in daily classroom lessons. There has also been specific teaching for staff about strategies that work with certain red-zone students, so that all students are being dealt with in similar ways by all staff, and there is a common language and a common understanding about how to best approach our most difficult students. When everyone has a positive attitude about what the school is doing and believes in our mission statement of student success, the culture begins to change in a positive way. The REACH program was successful not only in changing the attitudes of the students, but also the attitudes of the teachers and even of some parents! Being in the first years of implementation, there is still much work to be done, but the shift in attitude is happening already, and it is very exciting.

Co-Regulation

With a great deal of work on mindfulness and learning about one's brain and emotions, students are becoming more able to express themselves and their emotions at school. With their increase in ability to communicate about feelings and emotions, they are becoming better able to self-regulate and co-regulate. Students will respond to and match the regulation level of the adults (and other students) around them. Dr. Stuart Shanker (2016) describes this as a "co-regulation process, in which each [the student and teacher or parent and child] responds automatically, both behaviourally and viscerally, to what the other is feeling" (p. 164). Shanker continues on to say, "through their facial expressions, gestures, movements, posture, and vocalizations, they not only signal their feelings to each other but also trigger each other's feelings" (p. 164). For this reason, it is imperative that teachers teach self-regulation to their students, but even more imperative that they come to school as regulated adults themselves.

There are many programs being implemented in Lakehead Schools to support the teaching of co- and self-regulation to students. The *Zones of Regulation* (Kuypers, 2011) and *We Thinkers* (Hendrix, 2013) are social-emotional learning programs that teachers can implement in the classrooms with support from school board professionals to ensure students are being explicitly taught the skills necessary to build appropriate relationships, communicate their feelings, show empathy, and regulate their emotions appropriately at school. When educators have the tools necessary to teach these skills in a meaningful way, through researched programs that are proven to work with kids, everyone benefits. The REACH program focused specifically on ensuring that teachers had access to these programs and the supports needed to run them in their classrooms, and supporting teachers with their learning on this topic by addressing it at staff meetings and professional learning meetings. When the school focuses on co-regulation, and adults are modeling regulated behaviours, students are also regulated. When a student is regulated, and can communicate their needs, it is easier for a teacher to meet the needs of the student.

Holistic Education

Holistic education is about meeting the needs of all students, and thinking outside the box to make that happen. Holistic education applies not only to the students in a school, but also to the way the staff in a school is educated. In the literature review, Preskill and Brookfield (2016) write about “Learning Leaders: they try constantly to make connections between what they have learned, the issues that matter to them most, and the goals they are trying to achieve as leaders” (p. 3). When administrators “walk the talk,” and model holistic education in their everyday dealings with staff, staff are more likely to “walk the talk” in their classrooms as well. In the schools implementing the REACH program, administrators walked the talk on a daily basis by modeling holistic education in their dealings with both staff and students in the building, by

providing staff with professional learning opportunities on the topic, and by being open to ‘outside the box’ ideas that would benefit students’ well-being at school in a holistic way. The REACH program was a springboard for other programs that are now part of the school; buddy programs, intramurals and strength-based clubs to name a few.

Teachers and schools all over the world work diligently to meet their children where they are “at” and give them experiential learning opportunities within and beyond the classroom. Kindergarten educators in Ontario have received years of training on inquiry-based learning, the importance of play and experiential learning, and how to educate the whole child in a full-day, early-learning program. Differentiated Instruction has been something that schools and boards have practiced for years. With the new focus on children’s mental health and well-being, holistic education is going to be something that will be widespread before we know it. Some of the core beliefs in Ontario’s *Learning for All* (2013) document also fit the holistic education theme of the REACH program:

- All students can succeed,
- Each student has his or her own unique patterns of learning,
- Classroom teachers need the support of the larger community to create a learning environment that supports students with special education needs, [and]
- Fairness is not sameness. (p. 1)

Students participating in the REACH program need teachers who practice and model these core beliefs in their everyday teaching. This must be part of their pedagogy as a teacher. Schools implementing the REACH program focused on these core beliefs at staff meetings, and through the development of school improvement plans, with the goal of ensuring teachers were aware of

the beliefs and practicing them on a daily basis. Good teaching practice is about a teacher taking all of these documents, all of their training, and all of their passion, and applying it to the students in front of them in their classroom. All students can succeed, it just might look a little different for each and every one. When a teacher is open to the REACH program, and understands the philosophy behind it; the WHY and the HOW, and they have the correct supports in place to be able to implement it in the classroom, the student (and teacher) benefits are huge. These supports are further explored in Chapter Six: Recommendations and Conclusion.

Chapter Six: Recommendations and Conclusion

This study is a qualitative evaluative case study of the effectiveness of the REACH program in eliminating the need for students-at-risk to be removed from their home school environment. Five main themes emerged from the literature and are supported by the findings: Relationships, Environment, Attitude, Co-Regulation, and Holistic Education (all the letters of the REACH acronym). There was also a sixth theme regarding relationships among students, and a seventh devoted to the next steps of the program that emerged from the data. Within this “next steps” theme were the following sub-themes: reaching more students, building capacity of school staff, resources, and staffing. These sub-themes will be discussed as recommendations for the continuation of the program.

Recommendations

The recommendations come from the participants’ interviews, when asked the question “what does the REACH program need in order to continue” and “can you think of any next steps or recommendations for the REACH program in the future”? The recommendations, as voiced by the participants, are listed in Table 2 (found on page 76). Listed below are the four main recommendations from the interview data and research: reaching more students, building staff capacity, staffing, and resources. For each recommendation, participant feedback and ideas are included in order to move forward with the recommendations in the REACH program’s future. My biggest recommendation however, comes from the fact that all of my research demonstrates that the REACH program is a successful program for the majority of students-at-risk, and therefore, it provides a strong model of a program to support students-at-risk. With a school focus on each of the REACH components: on building relationships, the learning and classroom environment in the school, the attitudes of staff and students, explicit teaching of self-regulation

and adults in the school who are able to co-regulate with their students, and provide students with a holistic education, students showed that they were better able to manage their days at school, and in most cases eliminated the need to have students-at-risk attend programming outside the school in order to be successful. Please read on to see more recommendations and next steps for the program, as voiced by the interview participants. Table 2 provides interview data highlighting each of the recommendations that came out of the research, which are described in detail following the table.

Table 2	
<i>Next Steps</i>	
Recommendations	Comments/Quotes
#1. Trying to reach more students	“This is something we work on every day. There are only so many people in the building, so more staff resources could help us reach more students.” (Principal 1)
	“This program is having huge impacts down the road. So the sooner we start kids in this program, the sooner they are able to co-regulate, and then we have less issues down the road, and then everyone buys in and the team works together for the betterment of the student”. (Principal 1)
#2. Building capacity within our staff	“We need to build capacity in our staff so they are able to recognize the importance of these skills so students don’t have to be removed from the classroom, so the teachers know how to recognize the signs and then make adjustments in the classroom” (Principal 1)
	“Every student is so different and until you build a relationship with that student it’s very difficult to say “I know what do to” until you know them well” (Facilitator 1)
	“The teamwork aspect is hugely important” (Principal 1)
	“As an administrator, knowing your staff and their strengths can really help” (Principal 1)
	“I think people (staff) need to be educated and see the program in action” (Student Support Professional 1)
	“Training for existing staff on the way to treat kids like my son and to not make them feel less-than.” (Parent 2)
#3. Resources	“Not even in the way of money, but thinking outside the box for flexible programming is essential.” (Principal 1)
	“Having a pool of money to draw from would be one improvement” (Parent 4)
	“Some kind of extra funding. Some schools have special needs classes, which is different from this, but they get special funding for things like field trips.” (Facilitator 1)

#4. Staffing	“Social work co-op placement really helped us this year” (Facilitator 1)
	“More staffing, because kids like him need a smaller student-to-adult ratio” (Parent 3)
	“Nice to have an assigned SSP to the program.” (Facilitator 1)
	“It has to be the right fit. Personnel is everything. They have to have the same philosophy”. (Principal 1)
	“There is a need for a parent liaison, (CYW, social worker, counselor) or someone who would have a client list, so there is a person to go between the home and the school. That home piece would complete the process for those kids.” (Facilitator 1)

Recommendation #1: Trying to REACH more students. Reaching more students is something that educators will always strive to do. In its first year of implementation, with no extra funding, staffing, or resources, the REACH program began to make big changes in the lives of staff and students at school. The program focused on elementary-aged students, but the program was not open to kindergarten students. Beginning the REACH program in kindergarten would be a very logical next step. It would entail taking students-at-risk out of the classroom daily to work in social groups and on self-regulation skills. This practice would then continue on each year, and hopefully those students labeled at-risk in kindergarten would gain the skills needed to be successful in a regular school as they grow and develop through the program. They would become mentors as they get older, mentoring new generations of students-at-risk in the program. This would not only help them develop a strong sense of self, and focus on their strengths, but would also help them build leadership skills which they would carry throughout their schooling and beyond. With this recommendation in mind, the staff at Garden began implementing the REACH philosophies to the kindergarten program in the 2018-2019 school year with great results; students-at-risk are becoming more successful when they are able to take breaks as needed in sensory spaces in the classroom and school, are being taught about mindfulness, and are coached by trained adults in self-regulation and positive relationship

building strategies. Students are also being targeted in oral language groups; those who are lacking in communication skills are being explicitly taught by trained educators in small groups throughout the week, giving them the language to express themselves and their emotions, thus becoming more confident and positive at school.

Recommendation #2: Building capacity within staff. Building capacity within school staff is imperative in order for this program to continue. Staff need to be aware of the program and especially aware of the background and reasoning behind it. We must also ensure that staff are aware of all spaces in the school (e.g., the chill room, sensory room, etc.), how to use them, how and why students might access them (or when to send them there), and what is available to them in terms of training and resources. Sharing the philosophy of REACH during information sessions at monthly staff meetings and professional learning community (PLC) days, would be a good first step in ensuring that all staff (and not only those who are part of the program) are involved in and knowledgeable about it. Using the REACH model with staff would also create a school community that better responds to the needs of the staff, and in turn, the students.

Recommendation #3: Staffing. Staffing is a huge cost to the school board, and Lakehead is already taking some steps to ensure that schools have extra supports for students-at-risk. In January of 2018, a CTCC (Care and/or Treatment, Custody and Correctional facilities) team was formed when one of the day treatment classes closed. This team travels from school to school, observing at-risk students in their classroom environment and then making recommendations to the teacher and school about next steps. My recommendation would be to have a small team, or dedicated person in each school to deal with situations immediately. Following the REACH philosophy, students-at-risk need relationships to trust and therefore

learn, and if there was a known adult already in their school, this may be more effective than having an outside team visit intermittently.

The recommendation to have a liaison between school and home, like some of the other CTCC programs that were highlighted in the review of literature (Brownlee & Rawana, 2009; Craig, 2008; D'Angelis, 2012; Lamperes, 1994), though a costly endeavour, would give the program that link to the home that might be missing from the program. A child and youth worker (CYW) has different hours and restrictions than the school or board, yet they could go between the home and the school in a way that administrators and staff cannot do now, and connect with families at convenient times for them.

One of the difficult aspects to manage in this recommendation of appropriate staffing is the comment that was made by one of the educators interviewed: "it has to be the right fit" and "they must share the same philosophy." What is meant by the "right fit" is ensuring that the staff who are involved in the program have a great understanding of at-risk students' needs and that they practice the REACH philosophy pedagogically in their teaching practice. With union and seniority rules, it can be difficult to bring in staff who are the right fit unless a school or the board is hiring for specific positions. To connect with the recommendation above, if there was a REACH worker designated to each school, they could be hired as "the right fit" and that person would become a part of the school team.

During the writing of this thesis, some big changes happened at Lakehead Schools. When the day treatment program was re-named CTCC, the Ministry of Education and board reviewed the current day treatment programs that the board was offering, and cut the programs by 50 percent, removing two of the four day treatment classrooms. Lakehead Schools took positive steps at that time by requesting that the staff positions from those programs remain with the

board. The ministry agreed, and staff were hired as the CTCC team. This way, staff who were the right fit for the program could be hired. These staff travel from school to school to work with students who have been identified as at-risk. Though this traveling team is making positive changes for students-at-risk in the schools in which they work, my position remains that every school should have REACH staff to support their students-at-risk on a daily basis.

Another positive change that has occurred is that Lakehead has partnered with the Children's Center, and has four dedicated elementary social workers as well as elementary guidance counselors in 5 of their schools. When all schools can access this extra support, there will be a team in each school large enough to successfully implement the REACH program fully.

Recommendation #4: Resources. Lakehead Schools is very fortunate to have a partnership with Dr. David Tranter, co-author of the book *The Third Path*, which was released in January 2018. Dr. Tranter was also the Mental Health Lead of Lakehead Schools in the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 school years. All Ontario school boards have a Superintendent and staff who are mental health leads at the board level. Many schools are working with school board mental health leads, to bring student well-being and achievement to the table. These mental health professionals are presenting to entire school teams at staff meetings and professional development days on the importance of becoming trauma-sensitive schools and programming to meet the needs of all students. At Garden, in the 2018-2019 school year, there will be staff training throughout the year on the elements of the third path, which reflect the elements of the REACH program. At Garden, a team of teachers with another team from a sister school doing similar work, put together a proposal for a Teacher Learning Leadership Program (TLLP) grant with the Ontario Ministry of Education and were granted \$30 000 to continue their work on

trauma-sensitive learning (which is synonymous with the REACH program). The continuation of the program is exciting.

Monetary funding connects to all four recommendations. With money, more students could access the program, staff capacity building could be done without time constraints, the school could hire new positions for the program, and resources to support the program and teachers could be financed. Without funding, it has been necessary to think outside the box to make the program work, and Garden school staff did this.

One criticism of the REACH program is that it really is not a ‘program,’ but a series of adjustments to a school or classroom. It is not an easy-to-follow, or prescribed program. It is more a ‘way of being’ and this is something that may be very difficult for teachers, administrators, and other school staff to adopt. This is also something that staff must believe in and put honest effort into in order to make work, and it cannot be forced. This is not a quick fix. This takes a great deal of time, energy, and effort, as well as outside-the-box thinking. With all of this in mind, it is safe to say that the REACH program cannot be implemented anywhere; that the right staff and the right mindset must be present in a school in order to make it work.

A shortfall of the REACH program is that, unfortunately, it is unable to reach all red zone or tier three students. As I stated in the discussion section, every school has a very tiny pocket of students who are beyond red zone; students who the team places in the red zone, but, no matter what we try to implement in the school or classroom, these students will require outside programming in order to be successful. We cannot reach them in a traditional school setting. This is incredibly frustrating as an educator, and it is something that needs to be researched further.

It is my sincere hope that in reading this thesis, educators are able to gain an understanding of the REACH program and its potential to help students-at-risk succeed. The benefits that it can have on individual students, groups of students, whole classrooms, and even whole schools could transform current educational programs and practices. This could then result in educators becoming passionate about finding a way to make it work in their schools, in every school, so that students can remain in their home school and experience success. It can be done, because it is happening right now, and it is working. It is incredibly exciting and necessary work.

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Appendix A – Family Interview Protocol

“Hello and thank you for joining me today. Thank you also for signing the consent form. Before we begin, do you have any questions? You do not have to answer all questions. I know you are volunteering. This interview is going to take about 15 minutes. I will be recording this interview. I will ask you one question, and would like as much detail as possible in your answer”.

Question: Is there a difference in your child’s learning as a result of the REACH program being implemented at the school?

Leading Questions:

Is there a difference in your child’s motivation to come to school?

Is there a decrease in behaviours being reported from the school?

That concludes today’s interview. Thank you again for your time. If you have any questions following the interview, please do not hesitate to email me at

Shannon_jessimanmacarthur@lakeheadschoools.ca

Thank you.

Appendix B – Student Interview Protocol

“Hello and thank you for joining me today. Thank you also for signing the consent form. Before we begin, do you have any questions? You do not have to answer all questions. I know you are volunteering. This interview is going to take about 15 minutes. I will be recording this interview. I will ask you a series of questions, and would like as much detail as possible in your answer”.

- What helps you learn at school?
- Who helps you learn at school?
- What has the school done to help you be a successful learner?
- What could the school do more of to help you be a successful learner?

That concludes today’s interview. Thank you again for your time. If you have any questions following the interview, please do not hesitate to email me at

Shannon_jessimanmacarthur@lakeheadschoools.ca

Thank you.

Appendix C – Staff Interview Protocol

“Hello and thank you for joining me today. Thank you also for signing the consent form. Before we begin, do you have any questions? You do not have to answer all questions. I know you are volunteering. This interview is going to take about 15 minutes. I will be recording this interview. I will ask you a series of questions, and would like as much detail as possible in your answer”.

- What effect do you think the REACH program will have on at-risk students in your class?
- Has the REACH program changed anything for student X?

That concludes today’s interview. Thank you again for your time. If you have any questions following the interview, please do not hesitate to email me at

Shannon_jessimanmacarthur@lakeheadschoools.ca

Thank you.

Appendix D – Administrator & Facilitator Interview Protocol

“Hello and thank you for joining me today. Thank you also for signing the consent form. Before we begin, do you have any questions? You do not have to answer all questions. I know you are volunteering. This interview is going to take about 15 minutes. I will be recording this interview. I will ask you a series of questions, and would like as much detail as possible in your answer”.

- How are students selected to be part of the REACH program?
- What benefits have you seen from the REACH program?
- What are some areas of growth that are still needed?
- Has there been any change in office referrals following the implementation of the REACH program?

That concludes today’s interview. Thank you again for your time. If you have any questions following the interview, please do not hesitate to email me at Shannon_jessimanmacarthur@lakeheadschoools.ca

Thank you.

Appendix E – Research and Ethics Approval Documents



Research Ethics Board
t: (807) 343-8283
research@lakeheadu.ca

June 5, 2018

Principal Investigator: Dr. Joan Chambers
Co-Investigator: Shannon Jessiman-MacArthur
Faculty of Education
Lakehead University
955 Oliver Road
Thunder Bay, ON P7B 5E1

Dear Dr. Chambers and Ms. Jessiman-MacArthur:

Re: REB Romeo File No: 1466518
Granting Agency: N/A
Agency Reference #:N/A

On behalf of the Research Ethics Board, I am pleased to grant ethical approval to your research project titled, "The REACH Program: Eliminating the need for at-risk students to be removed from their home school environment".

Ethics approval is valid until June 5, 2019. Please submit a Request for Renewal to the Office of Research Services via the Romeo Research Portal by May 5, 2019 if your research involving human participants will continue for longer than one year. A Final Report must be submitted promptly upon completion of the project. Access the Romeo Research Portal by logging into myInfo at:

<https://erpwp.lakeheadu.ca/>

During the course of the study, any modifications to the protocol or forms must not be initiated without prior written approval from the REB. You must promptly notify the REB of any adverse events that may occur.

Best wishes for a successful research project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Kristin Burnett".

Dr. Kristin Burnett
A/Chair, Research Ethics Board

/sm

Appendix F – School Board Approval Documents



Lakehead
Public
Schools

Leslie Hynes
Education Officer
leslie_hynes@lakeheadschoos.ca

Jim McCuaig Education Centre
2135 Sills Street Thunder Bay ON P7E 5T2
Telephone (807) 625-5169 Fax (807) 623-7848

June 6th, 2018

Ms. Shannon Jessiman-MacArthur
159 Seneca Cres.
Thunder Bay, ON
P7C 5W4

Dear Ms. Jessiman-MacArthur,

We are pleased to inform you that your research project, The REACH program: eliminating the need for at risk students to be removed from their home school environment has been approved to be conducted within the Lakehead District School Board. We wish you success as you embark on your work within the Claude E. Garton Public School and Kingsway Park Public School networks.

Kind Regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "L. Hynes". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letter of the last name being a large, prominent capital 'L'.

Leslie Hynes
Education Officer
Lakehead District School Board
Office: 807-625-5169

Your Children Our Students The Future
www.lakeheadschoos.ca

Lakehead District School Board

RESEARCH APPLICATION FORM

Approved by Leslie Dymnes for Sherri Lynne Charand.
 Superintendent Responsible for Research
 Lakehead District School Board

Date Approved June 6/18

1. Title of Research
The REACH program: eliminating the need for at risk students to be removed from their home school environment
2. Name of Researcher(s)
Shannon Jessiman-MacArthur
3. Position(s) of Researcher(s)
LU Masters Student & Principal with Lakehead Public Schools
4. Name of Faculty Advisor or Organizational Supervisor
Dr. Joan Chambers
5. Brief Abstract of Research Project (Maximum 500 words, typed)

The REACH program (relationships, environment, attitude, co-regulation, holistic education) provides an alternative, in-school program for at-risk students. This study evaluates the effectiveness of the REACH program through interviews with students, teachers, administrators and families involved in the program.

5.1 Purpose

The purpose of this research is to evaluate the effectiveness of the REACH program; looking at whether the program is effective in providing schools with an alternative to sending their at-risk children to Section 23 classrooms, outside of their home school environment. Section 23 classrooms are funded by the Ontario Ministry of Education, and are intended for children and youth who are at risk of not completing elementary or secondary education in a traditional setting (often referred to as children at-risk).

OUTLINE OF A RESEARCH AGREEMENT

MADE BETWEEN - and -	Researcher Shannon Jessiman-MacArthur LAKEHEAD DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD
RESEARCH	The REACH program: eliminating the need for at risk students to be removed from their home school environment
PROCEDURE	Proposals received must be approved by researcher's education institution prior to being submitted to the Lakehead District School Board for approval. After approval, the researcher must obtain the following from the Superintendent or delegate responsible for research. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Research Policy and Research Procedures 2. Appropriate Research Agreement 3. Research Application Form <p>The researcher must abide by the Research Policy Procedures. The Research Application must be completed and forwarded for approval to the Superintendent (or delegate) responsible for research.</p>
CONFIDENTIALITY OF INFORMATION	Persons contemplating research shall attach to the proposal their signed copy of the Code of Ethics with respect to confidentiality of information gathered in the schools.
DURATION OF RESEARCH	June 2018.

Dated at THUNDER BAY, ONTARIO, this 1st day of June, 2018.

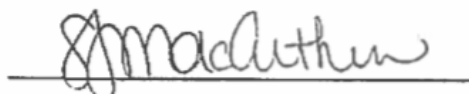
FOR:

LAKEHEAD DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD

FOR:

Shannon Jessiman-MacArthur, researcher


Superintendent Responsible for Research



Appendix G – Tier of Interventions Chart



Supporting Positive Student Behaviour and Well-being Continuum of Interventions

Committed to the success of every student
Tier of Interventions: 03.2018

TIER ONE | Behaviour Strategies and Supports

ALL

Universal, Preventative, Proactive Classroom

- Well structured, organized classroom
- Established and consistent routines
- Clear expectations explicitly taught
- Prompt and cue appropriate behaviour - verbal and non-verbal
- Expectations and schedule are VISUALLY presented for ALL to see
- Quiet space within the classroom to calm
- Flexible schedule - allow for and encourage breaks
- Planning for transitions
- Classroom is simplified, uncluttered, and calm
- Sensory/calming tools available
- Individual student profile guides social emotional expectations

Relationships

- Purposefully and intentionally get to know your students
 - Strengths
 - Learning style(s)
 - Interests beyond school
 - Relevant family and cultural background
 - Accommodations that are necessary for student success
- Build Positive Relationships with students and community
- Develop a growth mindset
- Co-construct a coping plan with your students
- Model and promote resilience and empathy
- All students have access to a caring adult
- Staff feel supported in their buildings (consistent school wide expectations)
- Regular and ongoing communication and collaboration within the school
- Provide opportunities for all students to build, maintain and preserve relationships
- Avoid power struggles - pick your battles
- Opportunities for all students to feel a positive sense of belonging
- Opportunities for meaningful participation and leadership
- Engage parents in supporting expected behaviour
- Use inclusive language

Instructional Strategies

- Differentiated instruction
- Ensure expectations are developmentally appropriate and understood by the student
- Desired behaviour is labeled, taught, modeled, and reinforced
- Strategies for emotion regulation are taught, practiced, modeled and positively reinforced – intentional breathing, movement breaks, coping skills, calming kit/centre, Mind Up curriculum
- Provide cues to expected behaviours across a variety of environments
- Recognize and praise effort in trying to control behaviour
- Chunking of work
- Teacher proximity
- Wait time to allow for processing
- Access to appropriate technology
- Provide easy access to necessary materials
- Redirection
- Provide choice
- Be efficient with your words... sometimes "less is more"
- Staff are aware of brain based interventions

TIER TWO | Behaviour Strategies and Supports

SOME

Targeted Interventions

- Facilitator Support/Student Services
- In school team meetings
- Consultations with Board Supports
 - Consulting Psychologist
 - Learning Supports Coaches
 - Social Worker
- Targeted ABA strategies
 - Reinforcement strategies/schedules
 - Preferred schedules/breaks
 - Specific prompting/priming
 - Task analysis with explicit teaching
 - Pairing
 - Chaining of events
 - Social stories
- Social skills training and coping skills strategies
- Social Thinking Curriculum (We Thinkers, Zones of Regulation, etc.)
- Administrator Support
- Consultation with External Partners
 - Occupational Therapist
 - Physiotherapist
 - Speech Therapist
 - Mental Health Professional
 - Child Welfare
- Case Conference with Family and Community Partners
- Alternative Learning Environments
 - Small groups within classroom
 - Small groups within school
 - Calming space available within the school
 - Use of Sensory room or Snoezelen room
- Data collection and tracking of interventions
- Developing individual accommodations and modifications to programming
- Formal transition planning
- Student Support Plan
- IEP

TIER THREE | Behaviour Strategies and Supports

FEW

Intensive & Individualized

- IEP (with Alternative Behaviour expectations)
- Student Support Plan
- Formal Behaviour Identification
- Intensive ABA Support
 - Board ABA Specialist
 - Community ABA Supports
- Social Work Referral
- Psychological Consultation - Formal
- Mental Health Nurse
- Crisis Response
- SSP Support
- Alternative Program Referrals
 - Day Treatment (CCTB or Dilica)
 - Spring Program
- School Based Student Support Team (intensive Board resource team)
- Community Collaboration

