Suzuki Charter School and the LEAFF Model: Summary of SSHRC Research

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Many educational experts agree that there are a variety of excellent instructional and assessment tools (e.g., differentiated instruction, formative assessments). However, without clearly understanding the reasons why instructional and assessment tools work well with some learners and not others, it is difficult to (a) develop systematic evidence-based practices and (b) share these practices confidently with other educators and learners.

A major criticism of some forms of public spending on educational tools is that they are well intentioned but are subject to fads and may focus on short-term goals. Some of these fads may be ambiguous for teachers to implement and not work for many learners. Ceci, Papierno, and Mueller-Johnson (2002) describe the "twisted relationship" between school spending, meaningful learner access and academic outputs.

Suzuki Charter School (SCS) consistently demonstrates superior academic results. Often superior academic results are attributed to high levels of family education and income (SES). However, we have evidence to indicate this is not the main reason students at Suzuki perform so well. The SES profile of SCS is similar to many other schools in Edmonton. In 2012 and 2013, I collaborated with administrators, teachers and students at SCS to measure variables that we considered to be instrumental in reflecting the "Suzuki Approach" – an approach designed to nurture student engagement, motivation and strong learning. We found some very positive and interesting results using techniques that allow us to track data over time – for example, we found student trust in teachers predicted their empathy towards peers, their school engagement and not surprisingly their achievement and wellbeing. It makes intuitive sense that variables such as trust, empathy, engagement and wellbeing would enhance student learning *but the question is how?* What is it that teachers and students do in the classroom that builds this connection? Sharing this knowledge would be important for helping other educators and students, especially students at-risk for leaving school.

For the past decade, and prior to our work with SCS, we have been working on a learning and assessment framework (the Learning Errors and Formative Feedback [LEAFF] model) that focuses on how learning "climates" or environments influence students' emotionally and socially for meaningful and long-lasting achievement. The LEAFF model was developed based on decades of conceptual and practical evidence on learning and performance, and it has been used to guide a series of large- and small-scale studies for understanding the conditions for meaningful learning. Recently, I was awarded a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) to investigate whether the LEAFF model can help us identify, understand and construct simple socio-emotional learning and assessment strategies to help learners achieve. SCS is an ideal partner school for this collaboration given its focus on personal and academic excellence.

The objectives of this collaborative research are to: (1) use the LEAFF model to guide the identification of key places in the math and science program of studies where simple but specific socio-emotional instructional and assessment strategies can be outlined (or constructed) to further promote student learning and wellbeing; (2) investigate specifically how these instructional and assessment strategies impact student wellbeing and learning, especially their comfort with feedback in subject areas where they wish to better perform and excel, relative to a control or comparison school; and (3) modify the learning and assessment strategies based on the "pilot" to see how these can be enhanced to support teachers and learners.