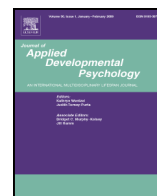




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## Measuring social-emotional development in middle childhood: The Middle Years Development Instrument

Kimberly C. Thomson<sup>\*</sup>, Eva Oberle, Anne M. Gadermann, Martin Guhn, Pippa Rowcliffe, Kimberly A. Schonert-Reichl

Human Early Learning Partnership, School of Population and Public Health, University of British Columbia, Suite 440, 2206 East Mall, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z3, Canada

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## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the conceptualization, development, validation, and application of the Middle Years Development Instrument (MDI) – a population-based child self-report tool that assesses children's social-emotional development and well-being in the context of their home, school, and neighborhood. The MDI is administered at a population-level to 4th and 7th grade students within participating public school districts across British Columbia, Canada. Children respond to items in five domains: (1) social-emotional development, (2) connectedness to peers and adults, (3) school experiences, (4) physical health and well-being, and (5) constructive use of after-school time. Results are aggregated for schools and communities and reported back in comprehensive reports and community maps to inform planning and decision making at local and regional levels. Shared testimonials exemplify how MDI results have been used by educators, community organizers, and city planners as a catalyst for promoting children's social and emotional competence and facilitating collaboration between schools and communities.

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## 1. Introduction

Parents, educators, and society at large have long agreed that a main goal for young people is to become independent, socially skilled, and well-rounded citizens who are ready to responsibly navigate their personal and professional pathways into adulthood (Greenberg et al., 2003). Yet, until the turn of this century, students' social-emotional development and well-being played only a negligible role in school-based assessments (Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013; Elias et al., 1997; Schonert-Reichl & Hymel, 2007; Schonert-Reichl & Weissberg, 2014). The past two decades have seen an explosion of interest in systematically promoting and assessing children's social-emotional skills, development, and well-being in schools and communities (Humphrey, 2013; Osher et al., 2016). A multitude of school and community based intervention and prevention programs that enhance social-emotional development have been designed, implemented, and evaluated; and numerous programs that are evidence-based, sustained, comprehensive, and implemented with high fidelity have been supported through positive evaluation outcomes (e.g., Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Sklad, Diekstra, Ritter, Ben, & Gravesteyn, 2012).

Further, educational policies that mandate teaching social-emotional skills and assessing social-emotional growth alongside academic growth have emerged (e.g., school-district policies, state or provincial policies) (Mart, Weissberg, & Kendziora, 2015; Meyers et al., 2015).

Building on these milestones, scholars have discussed essential steps to advance the future agenda of supporting children's social-emotional needs and prioritizing their social-emotional development in schools and communities (Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015). One essential step involves the development and implementation of psychometrically sound and developmentally appropriate measurement tools to assess and monitor children's social-emotional development. "What gets assessed gets addressed" – this widely known axiom suggests that systematic assessment is key to create an accountable system in which social-emotional skills are prioritized, evaluated, and intervened upon to promote children's ability to care for themselves and others and prevent adjustment problems later in life.

The present paper has four main objectives. First, we introduce the Middle Years Development Instrument (MDI) – a population-level measure of children's social-emotional development and well-being in middle childhood that was developed to address key questions about children's healthy development in schools and communities. Specifically, we illustrate the research-to-action project that led to the collaborative creation of the MDI in a partnership among researchers at the Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) at the University of British Columbia (UBC), community leaders, and educators. Second, we review the development and validation of the MDI survey instrument. Third, we illustrate

<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [kimberly.thomson@ubc.ca](mailto:kimberly.thomson@ubc.ca) (K.C. Thomson), [eva.oberle@ubc.ca](mailto:eva.oberle@ubc.ca) (E. Oberle), [anne.gadermann@ubc.ca](mailto:anne.gadermann@ubc.ca) (A.M. Gadermann), [martin.guhn@ubc.ca](mailto:martin.guhn@ubc.ca) (M. Guhn), [pippa.rowcliffe@ubc.ca](mailto:pippa.rowcliffe@ubc.ca) (P. Rowcliffe), [kimberly.schonert-reichl@ubc.ca](mailto:kimberly.schonert-reichl@ubc.ca) (K.A. Schonert-Reichl).

the infrastructure of knowledge mobilization strategies that has been developed to report research findings from the MDI back to the schools and communities in which students completed the MDI. Examples are provided that illustrate the ways in which MDI data have been used to inform practice by influencing decisions, policies, and actions in schools and communities including the development of jointly-operated after-school and school-based programs to promote children's social-emotional development and well-being. Finally, we close with a discussion of challenges encountered in the promotion and implementation of the MDI, and provide recommendations for overcoming these barriers that may be informative for other researchers and stakeholders involved in similar social-emotional assessment systems.

### 1.1. Addressing a community need: measuring social-emotional development in BC at a population-level

In concert with the increasing awareness of the importance of social and emotional learning (SEL) and its assessment in the United States (e.g., Durlak et al., 2011; Mart et al., 2015), educators and community members within the province of British Columbia (BC), Canada, have developed a heightened interest in measuring children's social and emotional development. In 2005, the United Way of the Lower Mainland engaged researchers at UBC in a large-scale cross sectional study to investigate children's social-emotional development, well-being, and experiences inside and outside of school (Schonert-Reichl, 2011). The study included over 1400 children ages 9–12 across eight school districts, and was supported by stakeholders invested in identifying ecological factors in children's schools and communities that are associated with children's social and emotional competence and healthy development. The study found that children's social-emotional well-being, belonging at school, and connectedness to adults at home and in the community was significantly lower among 6th and 7th grade students than students in 4th and 5th grade. Furthermore, students in 6th and 7th grade spent significantly more time alone in their home after school compared to students in younger grades (Schonert-Reichl, 2011). These results corroborated other research documenting the decline of children's social-emotional well-being from early childhood to adolescence (Eccles, 2004) and raised the question of how schools and communities can support children's social-emotional competence and well-being during this transition. This study also emphasized the need to investigate students' social-emotional development and well-being across time and regional boundaries, and called for a longitudinal and a representative population-level approach to assessing and monitoring children's social-emotional development in communities.

### 1.2. MDI core properties: children's voices, population data, and community collaboration

In 2007, UBC researchers engaged in a further partnership with the United Way of the Lower Mainland and BC school districts to develop the original middle childhood study into a population-wide, recurring monitoring platform on children's social-emotional development, well-being, and social contexts, thus leading to the development of the MDI. The goal was to design an instrument that would routinely and reliably assess children's development and well-being during the transitional 'middle childhood' years between early childhood and adolescence. Grade 4 was selected as a relevant baseline measure before the documented decline of children's social-emotional well-being (Eccles, 2004) and at an age when children have the attention and capacity to reliably self-report their feelings and experiences (Riley, 2004). Later, a second version of the survey was developed for grade 7 to capture children's adjustment and assets at a critical transitional point in development from middle childhood to early adolescence. The resulting MDI surveys, administered to children in grades 4 and 7, ask children report on their social-emotional development and well-being, feelings about

school, home, and life, and the presence of social and contextual assets at home, in schools and communities (e.g., the supportiveness of adults and peers, after-school program participation).

At its core, the MDI is characterized by three unique properties that have contributed to the survey's acceptance and usefulness within BC schools and communities: First, the MDI gives children a voice in reporting how they feel, how they spend their time, and what they would want to see changed within their school and community environments. Aligned with Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), the MDI enables children to participate in shaping their environments and emphasizes the value of listening to children's perspectives by demonstrating valid and reliable psychometric properties (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2013). Second, the survey gathers data at a population-level; all children within participating school districts take part in the MDI unless they, or their parent, opt-out. This method avoids common sampling pit-falls including under-representation of children from ethnic minorities or families with lower educational attainment (Anderman et al., 1995; Ellwood et al., 2010). It also promotes stakeholder interest in the results as the survey data represent actual children within a local context as opposed to statistics derived from a weighted sample (Guhn et al., 2012). Third, implementation of the survey requires collaboration between schools, school districts, and community partners, which facilitates the use of the data once results are reported. Systematic evaluation of MDI knowledge translation activities has identified that knowledge users including policy-makers, community stakeholders, and school administrators value the MDI as a "common language" that facilitates resource allocation and goal-setting between otherwise isolated departments and organizations invested in children's healthy development. Between 2010 and 2016, the MDI has been implemented in 28 out of 60 BC school districts and has been completed by nearly 29,000 grade 4 children and over 15,000 grade 7 children.

### 1.3. Relevance of the MDI within the BC assessment landscape

Including school and community partners in the development of the MDI was an important step that led to buy-in for MDI implementation in schools and ensured the usability of data. Because stakeholders in schools and communities had a voice regarding core questions and concepts to address within the MDI, many were eager to implement the survey to learn how their children were doing in regard to their social and emotional skills and their social contexts. Furthermore, stakeholders were keen to implement the MDI specifically in grades 4 and 7 because it measured dimensions of children's development not currently being measured elsewhere in the system, but that complemented existing student data (i.e., measures of academic ability, and school readiness in kindergarten). In BC, academic skills are routinely assessed in grades 4 and 7 using the standardized Foundation Skills Assessment exam (FSA; BC Ministry of Education, 2016). Children's school readiness, including cognitive, motor, and social skills, is routinely assessed in kindergarten using the Early Development Instrument (EDI; Janus & Offord, 2007).<sup>1</sup> In this context, many BC schools were experienced with implementing large-scale assessment systems. Furthermore, several school district and ministry administrators had personally participated in past collaborations with the MDI research team on the EDI survey which had already been administered province-wide for the past decade. Stakeholders therefore saw the MDI as a valuable expansion of the established assessment routine in BC: it was the first time children could routinely self-report on their own well-being, it provided insight into development during middle childhood and early adolescence, it was strengths-based, and it was linkable to children's

<sup>1</sup> The EDI is a teacher-reported measure of children's school readiness that has been implemented in BC province-wide since 1999. It is overseen by the same research team that administers the MDI.

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