

**Part B Project Summary**

<b>Project Title:</b> Happy Start School Project: A Social and Emotional Learning Programme to Facilitate Children's Transition to Primary School (開心好開始: 社交情緒學習計劃以促進學童至小學的過渡)	<b>Project No.</b> 2017/0328 (revised)
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**Name of Organization:** Learning Sciences AoS, Faculty of Education and Human Development, The Education University of Hong Kong

(1) Objectives: (i) To facilitate children's transition from kindergarten to primary school so that they can develop positive attitudes towards school and learning; (ii) To strengthen the social and emotional skills as well as growth mindset of children so that students can be better prepared for the academic and social demands for learning in primary school; (iii) To enhance classroom emotional climate that reflects warmth and support; (iv) To enhance teachers' skills and knowledge in creating positive emotional climate in the classrooms; (v) To educate parents on how best to support their children in the first year of transition to the primary school; and (vi) To provide research evidence on the effectiveness of the programme for its value of wider promotion.

(2) Targets:

Targets	Activities	Expected number of beneficiaries
Students	1. 1-week summer orientation programme	640 P.1 students from 4 primary schools (40 students x 4 classes x 4 primary schools)
	2. 12 sessions of social and emotional learning (SEL) lessons	640 P.1 students from 4 primary schools (40 students x 4 classes x 4 primary schools)
Teachers	3. Professional development workshops	200 teachers from 4 primary schools (50 teachers x 4 schools)
	4. Onsite and teacher support for the implementation of summer orientation programme and the SEL lessons	4 primary schools (i) One implementation workshop for the summer orientation programme (16 class teachers from 4 primary schools) (ii) One implementation workshop for the SEL lessons (16 class teachers from 4 primary schools)
Parents	5. Education seminars for parents	1280 parents from 4 primary schools (40 students x 2 parents x 4 classes x 4 primary schools)
Public	6. Project Website	The website will be open to the public, which can benefit all parents and primary school teachers in Hong Kong.
	7. Research and evaluation	Findings will be disseminated in the project website, conference and journal papers, which can benefit all educators, administrators and policy makers

(3) Implementation Plan:

(i) Duration: Nov 2018 to Aug 2020 (22 months)

(ii) Process / Schedule:

Phase One (Nov 2018 to June 2019) – Focus Groups, Programme Development and Preparation;

Phase Two (July to Dec 2019) – Implementation of the Orientation Programme, SEL lessons, professional development workshops for teachers, education seminars for parents;

Phase Three (Jan to Aug 2020) – (i) Implementation of the delayed programme for control group of students, (ii) production of project website and research and evaluation report and (iii) dissemination of project findings.

(4) Deliverables: (i) An open website will be developed to share all the relevant materials, including a teacher manual and other teaching and learning resources, such as lesson plans, training materials, and videos, and research findings; and (ii) a final report and research papers will be prepared to share the findings of this project.

(5) Values of the Project: (i) Facilitating children's transition from kindergarten to primary school; (ii) strengthening their social and emotional skills to meet the academic and social challenges in the new learning environment; (iii) Provide a positive learning environment for children by enhancing parents, teachers and school awareness towards social and emotional learning.

(6) Budget: The budget and its major items include: Total= \$959,300

[Staff Cost=\$668,250; General Expenses=\$252,575; Services=\$30,000; Contingency =\$8,475]

(7) Evaluation - (i) Evaluation parameters: children's adjustment to school. engagement and motivation in learning. emotional abilities of children. exhibition of prosocial and problem behaviours. psychological well-being. peer relationship and academic performance as well as positive emotional climate in the classroom. (ii) Method: Data about student will be collected via parents and trained interviewers. Students, parents and teachers will be surveyed and interviewed to collect their feedback on the programme. Class observation will be conducted by trained observers to observe the emotional climate in the classroom.

## Quality Education Fund - Project Details

Project No: 2017/0328 (revised)

### 1. Project Theme

Healthy Lifestyle and Positive Development of Students

### 2. Project Title

Happy Start School Project: A Social and Emotional Learning Programme to Facilitate Children's Transition to Primary School (開心好開始: 社交情緒學習計劃以促進學童至小學的過渡)

### 3. Background

#### *3.1.1 Significant Changes from Kindergarten to Primary School*

The move from kindergarten to primary school is a critical period for children, with successful transition setting the foundation for short- and long-term academic and social success. A positive start at school is linked to positive learning outcomes in both academic achievement and social competence (Dockett & Perry, 2007). It is, therefore, pivotal to ensure a "happy start" among students in transition.

The transition from preschool to formal primary schooling, however, is a challenging experience for many children, with challenges presented not only in the changing physical environment and the extended school hours, but also in their academic, social and emotional experiences (Margetts, 2002). For example, children entering primary school are expected to work independently, handle more demanding homework, form new friendships, behave in a disciplined way, conform to the new rules in school and adapt to the expectations of different teachers and routines of primary school (Chan, 2010; Loizou, 2011; Margetts, 2002). While some children may navigate these changes easily, not everyone can make the adjustment so smoothly. It is especially so for children who have more difficult temperaments (such as higher shyness, or higher activity levels), they may face greater challenges and hence react with negative emotions when adjusting to their new lives in primary school (Curby, Rudasill, Edwards, & Rerez-Edgar, 2011). When children fail to make a satisfactory transition to the new academic and social demands of primary school life, the results are manifested in under-achievement, behavioral and even psychological problems that may emerge in and last beyond the first year of the primary school (Cowen et al, 1997; Griebel & Niesel, 2002).

#### *3.1.2 Alarming Levels of Stress and Anxiety Experienced by Primary Students in Hong Kong*

Studies have shown that children who have difficulties in adjusting to school tend to develop a sense of insecurity and the emotional strain created will affect cognitive activities as well as the orientation and exploration for learning (Kienig, 2002). Furthermore, a poor transition may result in behavioural and psychological problems, such as separation anxiety, school phobia and psychosomatic disorders (Carida, 2011).

In Hong Kong, many recent studies have shown that the levels of stress and anxiety experienced by primary students have already reached an alarming level. For example, according to a study conducted by the Baptist Oi Kwan Social Service (2015), among 1022 P1 to P3 students surveyed, 27.8% showed symptoms of anxiety (as reported in SCMP, 2015). In another study involving 4000 primary and secondary students conducted by the Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups (2015), 40% of school pupils reported feeling under pressure and anxious when a new term started and experienced symptoms such as fatigue, stomachache and insomnia (as reported in SCMP, 2015). In a recent study conducted by Yang Memorial Methodist Social Service (2016), with the participation of 1359 P3 to P6 students from 10 primary schools, it was found to have an 8% increase in the anxiety level of students, compared to the study findings in 2012 (as reported in Sing Tao Daily, 2016).

Results from the Baptist Oi Kwan Social Service (2015) revealed that academic result was the

biggest source of stress of students (22.7%), followed by the fear of scolding or other types of punishment from parents (21.4%). Some also indicated worries for performing not well enough and feared that they were not doing as well as their classmates.

### ***3.1.3 Room to Strengthen the Existing Measures to Facilitate Transition to Primary Schooling in Hong Kong***

The findings above indicate the significance of providing early support to children so that they can be better prepared for the academic and social challenges in primary school. Indeed, there are several key social and emotional skills that are identified by researchers and practitioners as critical for children's success as they transit into school, which include self-confidence, the capacity to develop positive relationships with peers and adults, concentration and persistence on challenging tasks, an ability to effectively communicate emotions, and skills in solving social problems (Hemmeter, Ostrosky, & Fox, 2006). Similarly, Smith (2002) pointed out that children who were provided with activities that aided in identifying feelings and promoting friendship developed a greater sense of belonging, formed more friendships and showed greater resilience than children not provided such support.

In Hong Kong, as proposed by the "Basic Education Curriculum Guide - To Sustain, Deepen and Focus on Learning to Learn (Primary 1 - 6)", various measures have been in place in both the kindergarten and primary school sectors to facilitate smooth transition of students from kindergarten to primary one. For instance, there are many schools that offer one or half-day orientation programme that aims at introducing to parents about the school and to let their prospective P1 students to familiarize with the new environment. Moreover, there are some other schools which offer longer summer programmes with a view to strengthening the subject knowledge of students, e.g. Chinese, English, and Mathematics. Yet, there is no support measure that is specifically related to strengthening the social and emotional abilities of children so as to facilitate transition. That said, there is still room to strengthen the existing measures to facilitate transition, which indeed is also the view of the Committee on Free Kindergarten Education on the transition from kindergarten to primary school (Education Bureau, 2015, April).

As suggested by the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2007), emotional well-being and social competence provide a strong foundation for brain development and emerging cognitive abilities. The abilities to recognize and manage emotions and establish and maintain positive relationships affect both the readiness to learn and the ability to benefit from learning opportunities (Brackett, Rivers, & Salovey, 2011; Mavroveli & Sanchez-Ruiz, 2011). Social and emotional learning in an early stage, therefore, is critical in setting a good foundation to facilitate effective learning of students.

### ***3.1.4 The Importance of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Early Intervention***

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) refers to "the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (CASEL, 2016, para.1).

There is compelling evidence supporting the effectiveness of SEL programmes in promoting and enhancing students' academic, social and emotional outcomes. For example, based on a large-scale review of research involving 324,303 participants from 317 studies, it was found that SEL programmes improved students' social emotional skills, attitudes about self and others, connection to school, positive social behavior and academic performance in addition to reducing students' conduct problems and emotional distress (Payton et al., 2008). The improvement in academic performance is notable, as the SEL programmes yielded an average gain of 11 to 17 percentile points on achievement test scores. Similarly, results from another meta-analytic study of social-emotional interventions, which included 213 schools and 270,034 kindergarten to high school students, showed concurring results as on average, students receiving social emotional interventions improved significantly than the control group in social emotional skills and social behaviors as well as academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011).

Indeed, decades of research have underscored the significance of early intervention as children's early experiences play a critical role in brain development (NECTAC, 2011). First, early social and

emotional development provides the foundation for cognitive and language development. Second, neural development, which creates the foundation for learning, is the most flexible during the first three years of life. Over time, they become increasingly difficult to change. Third, intervention is more effective and less costly when it is provided earlier in life rather than later (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2016). Thus, it is critically important to intervene as early as possible. Our proposed intervention which focuses on the transition to P1 may yield larger dividends compared to interventions that target older groups of students.

#### **4. The Happy Start School Project**

##### **4.1 Overview**

In view of the above, the proposed project aims to facilitate children’s transition to primary school by creating positive emotional climate in the P1 classrooms, which is achieved through strengthening children’s social and emotional skills and their academic mindset as well as enhancing teachers’ interaction with students. The project involves a summer orientation programme and 12 sessions of social and emotional learning (SEL) lessons for P.1 students as well as teacher professional development workshops and education seminars for parents. The effects of the programme will be evaluated by obtaining data at the beginning and after the intervention (see Sec 6.5 for detail of evaluation). Four primary schools will take part in this project. All the contents and materials of the programme will be designed by a panel of experts from different disciplines, including educational psychologists, academics, social workers and primary school teachers. To ensure that the programme is meeting the real needs of P1 students, student and teacher focus groups will be conducted to collect real experiences and difficulties encountered by P1 students as illustrations and case discussions in the programme. A project website will be created so as to share the lesson plans, teaching and seminar materials as well as findings from this project to all teachers and parents.

##### **4.2 Objectives**

The ultimate objective of this project is to facilitate children’s transition from kindergarten to primary school. More specifically, this project aims at achieving the following -

- (i) To facilitate children’s transition from kindergarten to primary school so that they can develop positive attitudes towards school and learning;
- (ii) To strengthen the social and emotional skills (e.g., the ability to identify, express and regulate emotions of the self and others) as well as growth mindset of children so that students can be better prepared for the academic and social demands for learning in primary school;
- (iii) To enhance classroom emotional climate that reflects warmth and support due to the improvement in social and emotional skills of children and teachers’ skills and knowledge in creating a positive emotional climate in the classroom;
- (iv) To enhance teachers’ skills and knowledge in creating positive emotional climate in the classrooms;
- (v) To educate parents on how best to support their children in the first year of transition to the primary school; and
- (vi) To provide research evidence on the effectiveness of the programme for its value of wider promotion.

##### **4.3 Activities and Expected Number of Beneficiaries**

<b>Targets</b>	<b>Activities</b>	<b>Expected number of beneficiaries</b>
Students	1. 1-week summer orientation programme	640 P.1 students from 4 primary schools (40 students x 4 classes x 4 primary schools)
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Teachers	3. Teacher professional development workshops	200 teachers from 4 primary schools (50 teachers x 4 schools)
	4. Onsite and teacher support for the implementation of summer	4 primary schools (i) One implementation workshop for the

	orientation programme and the SEL lessons	summer orientation programme (16 class teachers from 4 primary schools) (ii) One implementation workshop for the SEL lessons (16 class teachers from 4 primary schools)
Parents	5. Education seminars for parents	1280 parents from 4 primary schools (40 students x 2 parents x 4 classes x 4 primary schools)
Public	6. Project Website	The website will be open to the public, which can benefit all parents and primary school teachers in Hong Kong.
	7. Research and evaluation	Findings will be disseminated in the project website, conference and journal papers, which can benefit all educators, administrators and policy makers

**Remarks:** *The numbers for students, parents and teachers are estimation only, which will be adjusted according to the real situation of the 4 participating schools. Since the number of students in each class and the number of P1 classes can vary from 25 to 40 students and 3 to 6 classes respectively across schools, the actual number of beneficiaries of students, parents and teachers may be more or less than the number stated in the table.*

## 5. Theoretical Ground and Conceptual Framework of the Project

### 5.1 *Positive Classroom Emotional Climate*

Classroom emotional climate refers to “the average level of emotional support experienced by children in a classroom” (Buyse, Verschueren, Doumen, Van Damme, & Maes, 2008). Classrooms with a positive emotional climate are typically characterized by low levels of conflict and disruptive behavior, high levels of warmth, respect and positive affect in the interactions among the teacher and students as well as a child-centered focus with teacher showing supportiveness and responsiveness to students’ needs (Patrick, Kaplan, & Ryan, 2011; Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, & Salovey, 2012).

Creating a positive classroom emotional climate is particularly important to P.1 students, as they are still adapting to a novel and unfamiliar social setting. When students feel safe in the class and welcomed and supported by their teachers and classmates, they tend to be less anxious, show more interest and have higher levels of engagement in learning, e.g., participate more in class discussions and exert more effort in class activities (Dotterer & Lowe, 2011; Reyes et al., 2012). In creating classroom with a positive emotional climate, there are two main determinants –

#### (i) *Peer Relationship*

The collective competencies and problems of the classmates are likely to influence the overall quality of peer interactions, which in turn affect children’s social and emotional development as well as adjustment in the first grade (Kellam et al, 1998). Indeed, having a group of well-adjusted, prosocial peers in the classroom increases children’s exposure to and modelling of positive social behaviours (e.g., helping and caring others) (Brody, Dorsey, Frehand, & Armistead, 2002). In this connection, building the social and emotional skills of individual students is fundamental to creating a positive classroom emotional climate.

#### (ii) *Teacher-Child Relationship*

Teacher-child relationships play an important role in influencing children’s adaptation to the elementary school environment (Rucinski, Brown & Downer, 2017). Supportive relationship with teachers can help to promote feelings of safety and connectedness with schools, providing the social support necessary for adjustment to the new school environment (King, 2015). Conversely, lack of supportive relationship with teachers may lead to dislike and fear of school. Over time, it may lead to feelings of alienation and disengagement. As such, strengthening teachers’ skills and knowledge in

interacting with students and creating a positive classroom emotional climate are crucial in establishing a positive learning environment that is facilitative of transition.

### 5.2 Conceptual Framework

The Happy Start School Project is to facilitate children’s transition to primary school through creating a positive emotional climate in the classroom. To achieve this, the project incorporates three core frameworks in structuring the activities for students, teachers and parents: The RULER Approach to Social and Emotional Learning, Theories of Growth Mindset and Growth Goals and the framework on Creating a Positive Classroom Emotional Climate.

At the individual student level, the RULER Approach is adopted to strengthen social and emotional skills of students so as to improve peer interactions in the classroom. To better prepare students for the academic challenges ahead of their learning in primary school, the project is also incorporated with the intervention of Growth Mindset and Growth Goals. While the intervention can help students to better embrace academic failure as part of the learning process, it can also help them to see learning as a process of self-improvement, rather than comparison of performance with others, thereby creating a positive learning atmosphere in the classroom.

Beyond students, teachers play a crucial role in establishing the classroom atmosphere. Hence, the framework of Hamre & Pianta (2007) is taken to strengthen teachers’ knowledge and ability on creating a positive emotional climate in the classroom. Moreover, the knowledge of the RULER approach and the Growth Mindset and Growth Goals can also help teachers to set the positive tone of the classroom, such as better understanding and responding to students’ emotions, knowing how to generate and use emotions, such as joy and enthusiasm to motivate learning, encouraging students’ learning that target at self-improvement and setting up behavioural guidelines that handle conflict situations and promote prosocial behaviours in the classroom.

As to parents, the knowledge of the RULER approach and the Growth Mindset and Growth Goals can also help them to play a more supportive role at home, especially at times that their child encounter academic and social frustration at school. Figure 1 below presents the conceptual framework of the Happy Start School Project –

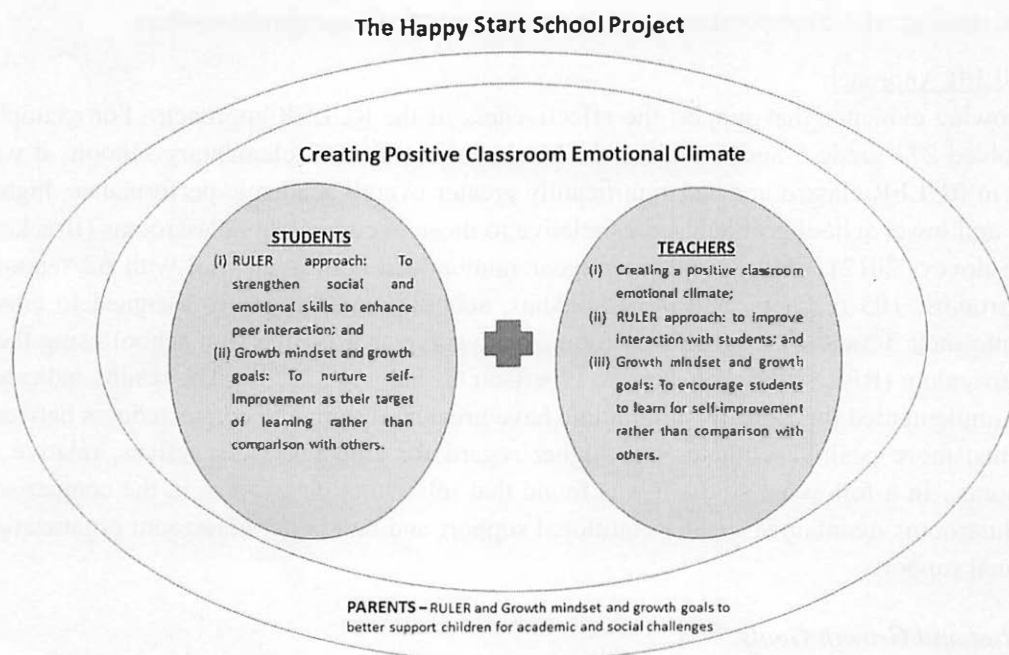


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the Happy Start School Project

### 5.3 Details of the Three Core Frameworks of the Project

#### 5.3.1 The RULER Approach to Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

RULER is devised on the basis of emotional intelligence (EI) framework developed by Prof. Peter Salovey, the President of the Yale University. Specifically, the framework encompasses Mayer and Salovey's (1997) four-branch ability model of EI, which involves "the ability to perceive accurately, appraise and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth" (p.10). Specifically, RULER is an acronym that represents the following five skills:

- (i) *Recognizing emotions of the self and others* – Accurate recognition of emotional cues and experiences is fundamental for making appropriate responses. For example, a child who interprets a peer's anxiety as anger may respond aggressively instead of supportively.
- (ii) *Understanding the causes and consequences of emotions* – Emotions are triggered by appraisals of events. Children who understand emotions are better able to anticipate and recognize emotions that are likely to arise in a given situation and hence, react more appropriately. For example, a child who knows that falling behind with homework will make her feel unhappy is more likely to work harder to prevent that situation. This skill also helps students to better analyse the situations from others' perspectives, which facilitates the development of empathy.
- (iii) *Labeling emotions with accurate and diverse vocabularies* – Accurate labeling of emotions enhances children's ability to communicate about their feelings, reducing misunderstanding in social interactions. Students who are deficient in labeling emotions tend to have more behavioural and learning problems (Rivers et al., 2012).
- (iv) *Expressing emotions constructively across contexts* – It refers to expressing emotions in socially appropriate ways, which vary across contexts and are often culturally specific. It involves an understanding of display rules or the implicit and explicit norms that affect when and how to express emotions.
- (v) *Regulating emotions effectively* – It refers to employing a collection of strategies to manage one's emotional states for the sake of meeting personal goals. Students who know and use a wide range of emotion regulation strategies are able to meet different goals, such as concentrating to study for examinations, dealing with disappointing news and managing challenging relationships.

#### Evidence of the RULER Approach

There is growing evidence that support the effectiveness of the RULER approach. For example, in a study that involved 273 grade 5 and 6 students in 15 classrooms from 3 elementary schools, it was found that students in RULER classrooms had significantly greater overall academic performance, higher adaptability scores, and lower school problem scores relative to those in comparison classrooms (Brackett, Rivers, Reyes, & Salovey, 2012). Moreover, in a 2-year randomized controlled trial with 62 schools, including 155 classrooms, 105 teachers, and 3824 students, schools were randomly assigned to either integrate RULER into their 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> English classrooms or to serve as a comparison school using their standard English curriculum (Rivers, Brackett, Reyes, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2013). The results indicated the classrooms that implemented the RULER programme have greater warmth and connectedness between teachers and students, more positive climates and higher regard for students' perspectives, relative to comparison classrooms. In a follow-up study, it was found that relative to classrooms in the comparison schools, RULER classrooms maintained greater emotional support and had better classroom organization and more instructional support.

#### 5.3.2 Growth Mindset and Growth Goals

It is important to prepare the academic mindset of students so that they can be better prepared for the academic challenges ahead when they start learning in primary school. Indeed, when students doubt their capacities in school, e.g., seeing fail in a test as evidence of their incapability in academic study, they will lose their interest to learn that may lead to avoidance behaviours in learning. In this connection, the

academic mindset intervention is to tune students' core beliefs about school and learning with growth mindset and growth goals. Growth mindset refers to the degree to which students believe their intelligence, skills and ability are malleable (Dweck, 2000). Those with a growth mindset tend to believe that their intelligence, skills and abilities can be changed through effort, and that their current performance is just a reflection of their present rather than absolute ability (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Dweck, 2000). As to personal growth goals, they are goals with self-improvement as their target (Elliot, Murayama, Kobeisy, & Lichtenfeld, 2015). That said, by positively setting the initial construals of learning, it helps student to better embrace failure, work hard and persist on challenging tasks and understand that academic struggle is part of the growing process, rather than a sign of their incapability in learning.

### Evidence of the Growth Mindset

Studies have shown the positive associations between students' growth mindset and academic outcomes (Dweck, 2000; Paunesku et al., 2015). For example, students with a growth mindset were reported to have higher levels of academic engagement and achievement (Blackwell et al., 2007). In addition to increasing students' motivation to learn, it also helps to promote learning and resilience, especially for underperforming students (Burnette, O'Boyle, VanEpps, Pollack, & Finkel, 2013).

### **5.3.3 Cultivation of a Positive Classroom Emotional Climate**

Teacher's ability to create a positive classroom climate has a direct impact on the quality of children's experience in a classroom (Curby, Rudasill, Edwards, & Perez-Edgar, 2011). As proposed by Hamre & Pianta (2007), there are three main domains in which a teacher can work on to create an emotionally supportive classroom climate –

- (i) *Emotional Support for Learning* – It refers to the teacher's ability in fostering positive classroom climate, minimizing negative climate, being responsive to individual student needs, and student interests in learning (Hyson, Copple, & Jones, 2006). In classrooms, which are emotionally supportive, teachers are responsive to student needs when they are struggling or need extra support no matter academically or socially. There are four main dimensions that reflect the emotional support for learning:
- Positive climate – It reveals the positive relationships between teachers and students (e.g., smiling, laughter, a general tone of respect in the classroom);
  - Negative climate – It involves the extent of teachers' display of negative affect (e.g., irritability and harsh tone) and the use of punitive control (e.g., yelling, threats and physical punishment);
  - Teacher sensitivity – It pertains to teachers' awareness of and responsiveness to individual student needs; and
  - Regard for student perspectives – It concerns teachers' flexibility and student focus (e.g., following students' lead in a discussion), support for children's interest, and encouragement of students' expression.
- (ii) *Classroom Organisation* – It refers to the teacher's ability in creating a positive classroom climate that prevent problem behavior of students in the classroom and in which students are engaged in learning in a variety of ways (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008). In relation to this, there are four main dimensions that reflect the quality of classroom organization –
- Behavior management – It focuses on teachers' proactive use of strategies to avoid behaviour problem (e.g., clear expectations) and the efficient redirection of misbehaviour when it occurs;
  - Productivity – It is related to teachers' management of time to maximize learning opportunities; and
  - Instructional learning formats – It concerns teachers' use of a variety of methods to maximize students' interest and engagement in learning.



- (iii) *Instructional Support for Learning* – It refers to teachers’ ability in promoting deeper thinking as students learn new concepts and providing constructive feedback that helps students to further engage in the material (Curby, Rimm-Kaufman, & Ponitz, 2009). There are three major dimensions under this domain -
- Concept development - It indicates the degree to which teachers encourage conceptual rather than rote understanding of the material by providing students the opportunities to analyze, reason, and integrate knowledge.
  - Quality of feedback - It involves the promotion of student understanding primarily through the use of scaffolding and feedback loops.
  - Language modelling – It is related to teachers encouragement of conversation in the class and the extent of elaborating students’ language with more advanced language.

#### Evidence of a Positive Classroom Emotional Climate

There is growing evidence supporting that positive classroom climate is associated positively with students’ motivation, engagement and achievement at school (Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, & Salovey, 2012). For instance, students were found to have higher achievement and lower levels of problem behaviours in classrooms with high emotional support (Mashburn et al., 2008; Pianta, La Paro, Payne, Cox, & Bradley, 2002). In a study that involved 14 first grade classrooms, Perry, Donohue, and Weinstein (2007) found that more classroom emotional support predicted higher mathematics and reading achievement at the end of the year. More importantly, positive classroom emotional climate was found to contribute positively to children’s adjustment and their attitudes towards school in addition to learning engagement, self-directed behaviour, self-regulation and social competence in early elementary school samples (J. Cadima, Doumen, Verschueren, & Buyse, 2015; J. Cadima, Verschueren, Leal, & Guedes, 2016).

### **6. Project Implementation**

#### **6.1 Format and Contents of the Project**

##### ***(i) Summer Orientation Programme and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Lessons for P.1 Students***

To facilitate children’s transition to learning in primary schools, there are two main events that will be organized for P.1 students in the four participating schools -

First, it is an orientation programme, which will be carried out in 5 days with 3 hours each day during the period of summer holidays. The aim of is to familiarize the P.1 students with the teachers, peers and the new learning environment through play and group game activities, which in turn, can help to reduce their anxiety when the school formally starts in September. The orientation programme will include learning activities that cover the following topics: Transition to Primary School Life, Building a Positive Self-Concept, Developing Relationship Skills and Expressing Affection for Others, Knowing and Learning with Individual Differences and Building a Positive and Supportive Classroom.

Second, there will be 12 sessions of SEL lessons, which will be implemented in the format of one lesson per week during the semester. The purpose of the SEL lessons is to strengthen the social and emotional skills of children so as to facilitate positive interactions among peers, which is critical in building a positive emotional climate in the classroom. Moreover, it aims to fine tune the academic mindset of children so that they can be better prepared for the academic challenges ahead in their learning in primary school. The contents of the lessons are set out in Appendix I.

#### Major Characteristics

1. *Programme Contents* – The design of the summer orientation programme and the SEL lessons will be guided by the RULER approach and the idea of growth mindset. To ensure meeting the real needs of students, the programme will be designed according to: (i) the focus groups of students and teachers so that real past experience of students can be incorporated as case studies for discussions; and (ii) a panel

of experts from different disciplines e.g., educational psychologists, academics, social workers and primary school teachers.

2. *Stress of Active Learning* – To ensure effectiveness, the programme will be designed with the use of active learning methods such as role play or behavioral rehearsal with feedback, which are shown to promote better student learning outcomes (Durlak et al., 2011; Durlak, Weissberg, & Pechar, 2010).
3. *Innovative Use of IT* - the programme will be integrated with the use of IT to enhance teaching effectiveness and students' learning interest, e.g., the use of IT to record and display the facial expressions of students in different emotional states so as to help students to identify and label the different emotions.
4. *Intervention and Control Groups to Evaluate Programme Effectiveness* – To evaluate programme effectiveness, the programme will be implemented differently between the intervention group and control group so that there can be comparison of the results between the two groups. More specifically, in each participating school, half of the P1 classes will be the intervention group, while the other half of the P1 classes will be the control group. For the intervention group, in addition to the summer orientation programme, they will have the SEL lessons implemented in the first semester. While for the control group, students will participate in the normal orientation activities organized by the schools and have the SEL lessons in the second semester. The orientation programme will be delayed to be implemented at time subject to schools' arrangement in the second semester.

#### ***(ii) Professional Development Workshops for Teachers and Education Seminars for Parents***

Teachers play an important role in creating a warm and positive learning environment in the classroom. Hence, there will be two 4-hour sessions of professional development workshops offered to all teachers in each participating school, which will cover the topics of RULER and the Growth mind set as well as Creating a Positive Classroom Emotional Climate. Apart from the workshops, there will be two rounds of identical education seminars for P1 parents organized for each participating school. The seminar will cover the topics of RULER and the Growth mindset, which aims at increasing parents knowledge in better understanding and responding to their child's emotions and academic frustrations.

#### ***(iii) Onsite Support and Training for Teachers***

Since class teacher is a significant figure in the classroom, which may facilitate positive affect and attitudes towards school in the transition process, P1 class teachers are expected to be involved in delivering the summer orientation programme. Having said that, there will be onsite support offered by the Project Officer and members of the project team as well as student helpers. In this connection, there will be one implementation workshop organized for the class teachers and student helpers prior to the summer orientation programme.

As to the 12 sessions of SEL lessons, there will be specific teaching guide and materials developed. In the process of developing these materials, teachers' feedback will also be collected for programme enhancement. Support will also be offered to schools so that they can integrate the project content into their school-based curriculum. To ensure effective delivery of the SEL lessons, one implementation workshop will be organized for class teachers. Moreover, there will be ongoing individual support offered to teachers to support their teaching.

#### ***(iv) Focus Groups on Students and Teachers***

Four focus groups will be conducted on students and teachers with a view to better understanding the academic and social challenges faced by P.1 students. The information collected will be used as case studies for discussion in the orientation programme and SEL lessons. For the student focus groups, P2 students will be invited from 4 schools to talk about their social, emotional and academic experiences in P.1. As to the teacher focus groups, they will be formed by teachers with experience in teaching P.1 students. It is expected that there will be a total of 32 P2 students (8 students x 4 schools) and 16 teachers (4 teachers x 4 schools) involved in the focus groups.

### **6.2 Implementation Plan with Timeline – Nov 2018 to Aug 2020 (22 months)**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Project Development</b>
Nov 2018 to June 2019	Phase One – Focus Groups, Programme Development and Preparation
Jul to Dec 2019	Phase Two – Implementation of the Following – (i) Summer Orientation Programme (Aug 2019) (ii) SEL Lessons (Sep to Dec 2019) (iii) Professional Development Workshops for Teachers (Sep to Dec 2019) (iv) Education Seminars for Parents (Aug to Dec 2019) (v) Implementation workshops for summer orientation programme and SEL lessons (July 2019)
Jan to Aug 2020	Phase Three – Implementation of the Following – (i) Delayed Programme for Control Group (ii) Production of Project Website (iii) Compilation of Research and Evaluation Report (iv) Dissemination of project findings and website resources

### **6.3 Teachers' and Principals' Involvement in the Project**

PI class teachers and school principals are to be involved in the operation of the Happy Start School Project. While the school principals will provide leadership and support to the project and teachers, the class teachers will coordinate with parents and students in the summer orientation programme. Moreover, they will be involved in the design of the summer orientation programme and the SEL lessons. More importantly, during the interventions, the class teachers will be the ones that deliver the summer orientation programme and the SEL lessons.

### **6.4 Professional Expertise of the Project Team**

The project is fully supported by the Learning Sciences Research Group, a new area of strength of the Faculty of Education and Human Development, the Education University of Hong Kong (EdUHK). The team is comprised of educational psychologists and academics with expertise and knowledge in applying educational and psychological concepts in designing classroom intervention to foster positive change of students.

### 6.5 Budget

Expenses	Description	Total (HK\$)
<b>I. Staff Cost</b>		<b>\$668,250</b>
A Project Officer for 18 months (\$33,000 p.m. + MPF \$1500) x 18 months	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Responsible for the running of the whole project including orientation programme for students, workshops for teachers and parents</li> <li>2. Provide assistance and support to the Project leader</li> <li>3. Responsible for project administration and data collection work</li> <li>4. Report writing</li> <li>5. The project officer should have 5 or more years of experience in teaching, preferably in primary schools and a Master degree in Education or equivalent</li> </ol>	\$621,000
Services from part time/ Student Helpers for 750 hours with 5% MPF (\$60 per hour + 5% MPF x 750 Hours)	Support orientation programme, data collection and data entry	\$47,250
<b>II. Services</b>		<b>\$30,000</b>
Website setup and maintenance fee		\$ 30,000
<b>III. General Expenses</b>		<b>\$128,500</b>
Seminars and Workshops	\$2500 x (8 seminars + 11 workshops) + \$3500 x 8 orientation programmes for 4 schools (including delayed intervention) (such as workshop or orientation programme activity materials and transportation fee for volunteers)	\$75,500
Production of a teacher manual		\$30,000
Consumables	Stationary, handouts, postage, material delivery, venue charges and transportation fee, etc.	\$8,000
Books, instrument fee, references and others		\$10,000
Audit Fee		\$5,000
<b>IV. Contingency (3%)</b>		<b>\$8,475</b>
<b>V. Administrative Overheads</b>	EduHK administrative overhead for research administration service, staff appointment & payroll service, accounting service, and space utilization.	<b>\$124,013</b>
Total (Round off to hundred):		<b>\$959,300</b>

### 6.6 Evaluation parameters and methods

As suggested by Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2012), programmes are considered “evidence-based” only if their research included a comparison group in

addition to pretest and posttest measurement of behavior. As such, the evaluation will be designed along this line. Given the aims and contents of the programme are to facilitate children's transition from kindergarten to primary school and to strengthen their social and emotional skills as well as academic mindset in meeting the different social and academic demands in the new environment in P.I, the following domains are to be assessed to examine if the programme is able to achieve its intended objectives, which include: children's adjustment to school, engagement and motivation in learning, emotional abilities of children (expressing, understanding and regulating emotions), exhibition of prosocial and problem behaviours, psychological well-being, peer relationship and academic performance as well as positive emotional climate in the classroom.

To ensure valid and reliable measurement, due regard will be paid in selecting instruments that are age appropriate. Data about students will be collected via parents and trained interviewers. Moreover, feedback from parents and teachers will be collected by questionnaires at the end of the seminars and workshops. Furthermore, students, parents and teachers will be interviewed to collect their comments on the project after the programme implementation. As to the emotional climate in the classrooms, it will be assessed through class observation by trained observers based on the presence or absence, frequency and quality of specific observable indicators (e.g. positivity or hostility in classroom interactions)<sup>1</sup>.

### **7. Innovative practice to facilitate transition to learning in primary school**

Successful transition provides children with the foundation for later school success. Children with greater social and emotional competencies were shown to have more success in making friends, more positive about schools and achieve better grades and achievement later in elementary school (Birch & Ladd, 1998). As such, different from other existing transitional practices, the current project is innovative in proposing the importance of creating a positive classroom emotional climate in facilitating children's transition from kindergarten to primary school. In achieving the objective, it integrates three core frameworks in guiding the design of activities for students, teachers and parents, i.e., the RULER Approach, the theories of Growth Mindset and Growth Goals as well as the building of a positive classroom emotional climate. That said, in addition to strengthening the social and emotional skills of children as well as their academic mindset, the project also facilitates teachers and parents to play a supportive role in assisting children to better transit to their lives in primary school.

### **8. Values of the Project**

As a transitional programme, the project gives children the experience of having lessons in primary school, which has the merit of letting the prospective PI students familiarize with the new school environment, teachers and peers that can help to ease their anxiety when the school starts in September. Besides, the programme is implemented at a critical time, when children are still very cooperative and moldable, it helps to shape children to better understand the norms, values and the expected behaviours in school, which are facilitative of building a positive learning environment in schools. More importantly, strengthening the social and emotional skills of children in early childhood is considered critical for school readiness and academic success, especially research has repeatedly shown that children's learning is tied to their emotional states (Zinsser, Weissberg, & Dusenbury, 2013). Last but not least, the study adopts an empirical design, which will generate research evidence on the effectiveness of this programme, thereby informing its values for a larger scale of implementation in long term.

### **9. Sustainability of the Project**

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<sup>1</sup> An instrument will be developed with reference to the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), which measures the quality of interactions among teachers and students (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008; Rivers, Brackett, Reyes, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2013). The observational assessment of classroom emotional climate includes the emotional support domain that consists of the dimensions of positive climate (degree of warmth and connection) and negative climate (degree of negativity). Trained observers will use a 7-point scale (1-2=low, 3-5=mid, 6-7=high) to rate the specific observable indicators.

The main product of the proposed project is a localized SEL programme developed. To facilitate sustainability of the project, a website, which is freely accessible by the public, will be developed to share all the relevant materials, such as lesson plans, teaching and learning resources, training materials, videos and research findings. A teacher manual will also be produced so that schools can have a clear reference to develop a programme that can cater for the needs of their students. Schools are encouraged to make use of the materials to incorporate the SEL programme in their life education lessons or through other kinds of school activities (such as class period) as in accordance with their own needs and situation. Furthermore, a dissemination seminar will be arranged, which is to share the project experience and findings with all schools and the general public. The collaborating schools will also be invited to share their implementation experience. Above all, the project will garner evidence to evaluate for the value of the Happy Start School Project for wider implementation. Findings of the project will be disseminated not only in the project website, but also in conference and journal papers, which can benefit all educators, administrators and policy makers.

#### **10. Report Submission Schedule**

My organization commits to submit proper reports in strict accordance with the following schedule:

<b>Project Management</b>		<b>Financial Management</b>	
<b>Type of Report and covering period</b>	<b>Report due day</b>	<b>Type of Report and covering period</b>	<b>Report due day</b>
Progress Report 01/11/2018 –30/04/2019	31/05/2019	Interim Financial Report 01/11/2018 –30/04/2019	31/05/2019
Progress Report 01/05/2019 - 31/10/2019	30/11/2019	Interim Financial Report 01/05/2019 - 31/10/2019	30/11/2019
Progress Report 01/11/2019 - 30/04/2020	31/05/2020	Interim Financial Report 01/11/2019 - 30/04/2020	31/05/2020
Final Report 01/11/2018 - 31/08/2020	30/11/2020	Final Financial Report 01/05/2020 - 31/08/2020	30/11/2020

#### **11. Asset Usage Plan**

Category	Item / Description	No. of Units	Total Cost	Proposed Plan for Deployment	Justification(s)
General Expenses	Books and references	15	HK\$ 5000	For use in the university	The books and resources can benefit more students taking the teacher education programme in the university.

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### Appendix 1: Social and Emotional Learning Lessons

Modules	Topics	Contents
Module 1	Recognising and identifying the emotions of the self and others (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Labeling emotions with accurate and diverse vocabularies;</li> </ul>
Module 2	Recognising and identifying the emotions of the self and others (II)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Able to identify a variety of emotions through facial expressions, gestures, movement and sound, e.g. contentment, distress, happiness, sadness, surprise, dislike, anger, fear, pride, embarrassment, shame and guilt.</li> </ul>
Module 3	Understanding Emotions (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Understanding the causes and consequences of emotions, e.g., stress</li> <li>Will help students to understand situations involving oneself or someone else, such as characters in a story book.</li> <li>Able to understand the values of different emotions</li> </ul>
Module 4	Understanding Emotions (II)	
Module 5	Understanding Emotions (III)	
Module 6	Expressing emotions constructively (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Able to express concern for the needs of others and people in distress</li> <li>Able to understand the situations from others' perspectives and demonstrate sympathy and caring e.g., showing support to peers with frustration or academic difficulties</li> </ul>
Module 7	Expressing emotions constructively (II)	
Module 8	Regulating emotions effectively (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>help students know how to regulate their emotions by taking a step-by-step process</li> <li>help students to appropriately respond to emotional triggers (e.g. an insult, negative feedback, bad news) by using effective strategies (e.g. positive self-talk, reappraisal) instead of ineffective ones (e.g., screaming, acting aggressively, withdrawing)</li> <li>Able to understand and use different emotion regulation strategies in face of academic and social challenges, e.g., handling conflicts with peers</li> </ul>
Module 9	Regulating emotions effectively (II)	
Module 10	Regulating emotions effectively (III)	
Module 11	Learning with Growth Mindset (I)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>setting academic goals</li> <li>dealing with challenging tasks</li> <li>facing tests and examinations</li> <li>embracing failure</li> </ul>
Module 12	Learning with Growth Mindset (II)	