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Addressing career-related social problems using experiential learning: a pilot study

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Abstract

Purpose – We examined skill building techniques and changes over the course of a semester with pre and post-test data collection after implementing experiential learning assignments.
Design/methodology/approach – The Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SEEIT) was used to measure emotional intelligence among students who interned for a 16-week period.
Findings – We found a significant difference using a paired samples *t*-test in SSEIT scores between the pre (M = 126.6, SD = 4.3) and the post-internship (M = 133.8, SD = 5.7) scores. t(5) = -5.61, $p = 0.002$. Students had an overall increase in mean scores over the course of one semester.
Research limitations/implications – This was a pilot study that we completed to determine applicability of internship and increasing emotional intelligence. Overall, we saw an increase in EI in pre and post-test comparisons. This was a pilot study, so more research is needed on this topic.
Practical implications – Students were placed in situations during the internship process to help facilitate real world problems and were required to apply applicable textbook knowledge, develop theory-based activities and report their findings. Students worked with various age groups and learned how to work with a variety of populations including faculty, teachers, children and parents on a regular basis and this process contributed to their experience and potentially increased emotional intelligence over a 16-week period.
Social implications – This research addresses the importance of emotional intelligence (EI) in career readiness and its role in potentially mitigating burnout in psychological professions.
Originality/value – This is important to those in the field of psychology and child development and family studies because it addresses concerns with the shortage of skilled and prepared workers.

Keywords Career-ready, Student development, Experiential learning
Paper type Case study

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The United States is experiencing a shortage of employees in many sectors nationwide (Ferguson, 2023). Retention of employees, obtaining quality candidates, and workforce preparedness are essential for businesses to maintain successful operations. Many candidates who enter the professional workforce will have taken courses at a college or university campus. In 2024, campuses will begin graduating the first class of individuals who have experienced the shutdown of normal campus operations from the pandemic. Hansen (2021) reported 8.1 million jobs were not filled in 2021, and many recent college graduates were not applying for many of these entry-level positions because they do not believe they are qualified or prepared. Transformational experiences that are geared towards academic and field engagement are highly beneficial to expose students to a wide variety of situations to prepare their career-readiness skills. Furthermore, creating opportunities to build emotional intelligence might be a way to further prepare students for the workforce (Hansen, 2021).

Emotional intelligence (EI) enables an individual to understand and regulate emotions, while accurately assessing the behaviors of others (Fiori and Vesely-Maillefer, 2018). This involves the ability to identify and label different emotions accurately, understand how those emotions are interconnected and how they affect behavior, and use knowledge to guide decision-making and interpersonal interactions (Fiori and Vesely-Maillefer, 2018). In addition, EI facilitates an individual to become a better problem solver and learn how to deal with difficult situations. In careers supported by degrees in Psychology and Child Development and Family Studies, this is a crucial factor to consider in career preparedness.

According to Moeller *et al.* (2020) mental health issues are on the rise and understanding how emotional intelligence plays a role in protecting mental health is an area that warrants exploration. Regulation of emotional intelligence helps individuals tackle stress and feelings of burnout (Holland, 2019). It also plays a role in life satisfaction and can consequently assist in career or academic achievement (Cazan and Nastasa, 2015). Burnout can occur when individuals feel overwhelmed with life circumstances, including work-related stress. Being overwhelmed can lead to mental exhaustion and overall low satisfaction with life. According to Cazan and Nastasa (2015), individuals with higher emotional intelligence can navigate through their own stress levels and may be able to take precautionary measures to avoid burnout. In addition, the aforementioned authors posit that individuals with higher emotional intelligence are more likely to be more optimistic, socially aware, and confident. Individuals with lower EI are more likely to dwell on negative feelings and engage in depersonalization and detachment, which can discourage success and may inhibit them from attaining goals (Cazan and Nastasa, 2015). Similarly, burnout in academic settings can lead to a higher rate of absenteeism, higher drop-out rates, low motivation levels, and an overall low satisfaction with life.

Emotional intelligence and careers in the fields

College students in Psychology or Child and Family Studies have broad-based career options. They may go into case management, counseling, teaching, social work settings, careers working with children, advocacy, human resources, or the criminal justice field to name a few. Therefore, it is important that university personnel understand and develop programs that prepare students for situations that foster a wide variety of skills. Hansen (2021) stated that two and four-year institutions need to revamp their antiquated teaching methodologies and develop a strong relationship with businesses to prepare students for real-world situations. According to Forbes (2019), preparedness is the number one item that employers seek in hiring new candidates. Unfortunately, there are less than 15% of college students who take part in these real-world experiences because universities "lack the infrastructure to make all of the experiential learning opportunities available [and] easily accessible to students" (para. 14). These opportunities can include experiences that expose students to external

opportunities that can be used in the field. These can include but are not limited to: "internships, undergraduate research, volunteering, student journals, conferences, and more." (Forbes, 2019, para., 13).

Research has shown that individuals working in certain industries can develop something called emotional labor. Emotional labor is defined as being able to control one's own feelings and only display feelings that are considered acceptable by the organization, which further leads to emotional dissonance (WELD Lab, 2023). These situations can lead to cynicism, and higher levels of stress and frustration (Moon and Hur, 2011). Moon and Hur (2011) emphasized a negative correlation between emotional exhaustion and emotional intelligence. Moreover, individuals with higher levels of emotional intelligence are less likely to develop feelings of burnout and can efficiently deal with stressful environments. They also possess higher levels of job satisfaction (Cazan and Nastasa, 2015; Moon and Hur, 2011).

Careers in the criminal justice field are common among those who have majored in psychology. Research has shown that it is important to address emotional intelligence in correctional officers (Hull, 2020). The nature of their job is quite difficult; they are required to work long hours, often with low pay. Those in the criminal justice field can succumb to burnout and fatigue, which can further affect their mental and physical health. Due to the increased pressure and burden of their responsibility, they may suffer from emotional exhaustion, detachment, and low persistence to achieve future goals (Hull, 2020). If correctional officers were to have higher emotional intelligence, it may prevent a dangerous situation from escalating. Higher emotional intelligence has been associated with higher job satisfaction, empathy, ability to manage extreme emotions, stronger communication, desire to achieve goals at one's workplace, and a higher probability of a successful career (Hull, 2020). For instance, higher levels of emotional intelligence among correctional officers can assist in understanding tone and body language, which may be necessary to prevent violence in the workplace.

Academic burnout has become increasingly prevalent in today's world. The effects of academic burnout can range from lower levels of motivation, low sense of achievement, and a diminishing desire to become successful and persist in the field of education (Loi and Pryce, 2022). According to Loi and Pryce (2022), students in tertiary education are under immense pressure to keep up with the demands and hectic schedules. Students suffer from lack of sleep, course load pressures, financial setbacks, and other menial life stressors that can lead to burnout. As students advance in their studies, stress can increase in the pursuit of educational advancement. Research has also shown a strong correlation between academic burnout and levels of depression and stress. Baruah *et al.* (2022) compared support modalities among traditional and non-traditional college-aged students and found that traditional aged females who enrolled in more than 13 hours had an increase in perceived stress compared to males. They also concluded that online support modalities may be used as a tool to address supportive mechanisms for college students seeking social support.

Emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced efficacy are indicators of academic burnout (Loi and Pryce, 2022). Burnout can lead to feelings of depletion, exhaustion, and an overall state of melancholy. Findings have again shown that elevated levels of emotional intelligence led to lower levels of burnout. This is a result of individuals who rank high in emotional intelligence. The positive side of this is the capability to understand themselves and others around them, handle the daily stressors of life and view obstacles as challenges (Loi and Pryce, 2022). Individuals with high EI can withstand a heavier workload while maintaining psychological well-being. In addition, people with high EI tend to practice mindfulness and engage in self-care practices including diet and exercise. Self-care practices can prevent individuals from being mentally drained and can allow them to fulfill and accomplish their academic goals (Loi and Pryce, 2022).

Burnout is not only eminent in the field of continuing education but can carry over to the workplace upon completion of the degree. According to Zysberg *et al.* (2017), stress is one of the main predictors of burnout, but emotional intelligence is a common thread as well. There is an inverse correlation related to EI scores and burnout. The occurrence of burnout was studied among childcare workers and primary school teachers (Zysberg *et al.*, 2017). In study one, three-hundred childcare workers were recruited from 35 facilities, and in study two, 209 primary school teachers who were teaching elementary, middle school, and high school teachers were studied. It was found that emotional intelligence protects against the severe effects of burnout like loss of interest, motivation, absenteeism, low self-efficacy, and an overall diminishing outlook on life accompanied by increasing exhaustion (Zysberg *et al.*, 2017). Thus, similar to other findings, there is a moderate inverse correlation between emotional intelligence and burnout. Emotional intelligence acts as a protective layer and protects an individual from the adverse effects of stress, which leads to burnout. Therefore, the findings have also shown a positive correlation between stress and burnout (Zysberg *et al.*, 2017).

According to Hamilton and Fenzel (1988) interning, providing community service, and volunteering are important experiences for our youth and can assist with EI growth. Specifically, opportunities to participate in responsibility-based activities provide an experiential learning environment that can increase social, intellectual, and psychological growth. Students cannot simply be placed in an internship; the internship experience must be crafted so that they also need to engage in service and transformational learning experiences. Doing so can enhance performance in future workplace environments. In addition, student EI growth helps improve job placement after graduation (Kastberg *et al.*, 2020).

Students need to be exposed to discipline-specific careers, internships, or volunteer opportunities in addition to their content coursework to develop the skills necessary to be successful. "A recent Cengage survey of Americans who graduated from a two-year community or four-year college in the past five years found that nearly one in five (19%) reported that their college education experience did not provide them with the skills needed to perform their first post-degree job" (Hansen, 2021, para. 5). This is an area that universities need to address in order to have students that are competitive for positions after they complete their education. In addition, students need higher-paying positions to afford daily living expenses and manage their potential student loans. Borchardt (2021) found that students engaged in service-learning opportunities related to the field developed higher emotional intelligence scores over a semester. These items can be associated with a transformational learning experience.

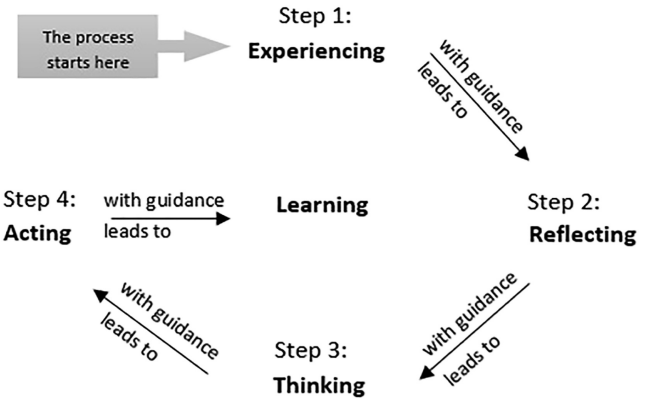
Theoretical framework

Experiential learning

Experiential learning theory is the idea that learning takes place "through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). When a student engages in field experience over time, they are taking the knowledge presented in the classroom and applying it to the site location. For this study, student interns were required to use theoretical perspectives derived from human development coursework and apply them to the situations in the preschool classroom. Figure 1 below describes the model of experiential learning theory as the process of experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and learning (Egbert and Roe, n.d.). The interns had to complete four learning activities over the course of the 16-week period that were specific to developmental activities with children, which gave them the opportunity to observe and implement activities specifically related to course content.

Emotional intelligence

As of this writing, there are three common models of emotional intelligence: ability-based (based on emotional skills and abilities by Mayer and Salovey), mixed model (based on skills



Note(s): The concept, construct, and proposition concepts are presented in a step-wise cyclical mode for a continuous experiential learning model. From "Experiential Learning Theory" by Asiri (2020)

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Figure 1.
Model of experiential learning theory

and competencies by Goleman), and trait model (based on personality traits by Allport) (Wicks *et al.*, 2023). The ability model is related to emotional processing, thinking and managing emotions. The mixed model relates to competencies in understanding and managing both self-regulations and others' emotions as it pertains to interpersonal relationships. Finally, the trait model focuses on overall well-being related to understanding emotional regulations in self and others.

For the purposes of this study, the Goleman model was used and has four dimensions, including social awareness, relationship management, self-management, and self-awareness. Because this model incorporates a mixed methods approach, some of the benefits can include both personal and social competencies. People who have higher levels of emotional intelligence are often happier, more motivated and more successful (Serrat, 2017). Related to our research, this can include positive implications for the development of personal relationships. In the educational setting, this might foster relationship building among faculty and students, workplace staff and students, customers and students, and relationships with students and any community members involved. According to Borchardt (2021) fostering collaborative opportunities for students to engage with people outside of their everyday social network is beneficial and can foster social growth. Next, workplace environments may foster transformational learning experiences where students can engage in communication building skills with those who are more knowledgeable about the field. In an internship experience, a student is mentored by faculty, field supervisors and professionals who are currently in the workforce. Finally, by the end of the internship they may have exposure to leadership building skills. These are areas that we should seek to expand on in a university setting as career readiness is necessary in our current society.

The dimensions were measured using the subscales of the Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT), i.e. managing self-relevant emotions, managing others' emotions, emotion perception, and utilizing emotions. This pilot study will serve as a gauge to develop opportunities to increase emotional intelligence among students during a 16-week internship.

Based on previous research, it may be necessary to increase EI to prevent burnout. We hypothesize that EI scores will increase upon completing the student internship. Field experiences that engage undergraduate students in difficult situations are opportunities to increase learning and preparedness for the workforce upon graduation.

Methods

Participants

Participants were fourteen undergraduate student interns who were placed at one preschool facility in rural Texas. Thirteen students identified as female, and one person did not answer the question related to gender. Seven students identified their ethnicity as Hispanic or Latino, seven identified as Non-Hispanic or Latino. There were eight students that identified their race as White, three who identified as Black or African American, one who identified as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, one who identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native, and one person who did not complete the section related to race. The age range was 18–23, with a mean age of 19 and a median of 21. For the remainder of the reported data, please note that not all participants completed both pre and post-test surveys. The results are over those who completed both the pre-test and post-test SSEIT.

All participants were provided an electronic informed consent document and agreed to participate in the research. All items were approved through the Institutional Review Board prior to data collection.

Materials

For our study, the Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT) was used to measure emotional intelligence among students who interned at a child development center in a pre and post-test survey. There are four sub-scales: emotional perception, utilizing emotions, managing self-relevant emotions, and managing others' emotions. This is a 33-item, 5-point Likert scale that allows students to self-report emotional intelligence.

Analytical design

A paired samples *t*-test was used to assess the significance of differences among our population. Data collection was carried out by obtaining paired scores from each participant in the study. This involved paired scores that were obtained before and after the 16-week internship. Next, data preprocessing was conducted using Just Another Statistical Package (JASP Team, 2023) to calculate the difference scores between the pre- and post-SSEIT measurements for each participant. Following this, descriptive statistics were computed to summarize the mean and standard deviation of the difference in scores.

Procedure

As part of their course, students had to complete an average of 10-hours per week over a 16-week semester. Students were required to attend mandatory training at the beginning of the semester, an orientation process, complete background checks, first aid, and CPR training before the first day on site. A schedule was created in a Google Sheet to setup placement for each preschool classroom to prevent overlap among interns with lead teachers. Student-led activities were supposed to follow the developmental play related to the learning centers associated with the preschool. These centers targeted cognitive and motor-skill development to accentuate learning and include blocks, home living, dramatic play, listening, manipulatives, math, science, writing, and art. Students had to complete learning activities that centered around child development theories and had to be pre-approved before implementation. Interning provided access to children, lead teachers, parents, and day-to-day

situations, but the activities brought in the experiential learning piece from Psychology and Child and Family Studies into the field experience. Students were required to complete learning activities based on age-appropriate tasks approved by the professor and the lead teacher in advance, failure to do so resulted in a zero on the project. In addition, each learning activity (See Appendix, p. 22) required an in-person classroom component and an activity with instructions to send home with parents as a follow-up. An example of one of our student-led activities was instructing children about the weather and dressing appropriately. This activity was tied to Erickson's Autonomy vs Shame and Guilt Stage. The student discussed the theory and relevance tied to a sense of independence. Children were given photographic laminated weather scenarios (i.e. depictions of scenes that included snow, rain and sun) and were asked to place cut-outs of the appropriate clothing on the correct scene. This activity was designed for the four-year old classroom. Instead of simply doing an activity, they were required to tie it back to a developmental theory, which aids in content awareness at a deeper level. The activities were also aligned with the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework: Ages Birth to Five, Preschool Standard Goals contained in the Domain: Scientific Reasoning Domain.

Results

Design. To address the research question, we examined EI before and after the completion of an internship. We hypothesized that participation in an internship would increase EI scores over a 16-week period. The SSEIT was administered before starting the internship hours and re-administered upon the internship's completion. Students were asked to voluntarily complete the pre-test and post-test SSEIT, and only six students completed both surveys.

Descriptive analyses. The SSEIT scores range between 33 and 165. Scores below 111 or above 137 are considered unusually low or high. Our pre-internship scores were ($M = 126.6$, $SD = 4.3$) and the post-internship ($M = 133.8$, $SD = 5.7$) scores (see Figure 2). Cohen's effect size value ($d = -2.29$) suggested a large significance at a 95% CI. The assumption of normality was not violated, as assessed by Shapiro–Wilk's test ($p = 0.25$).

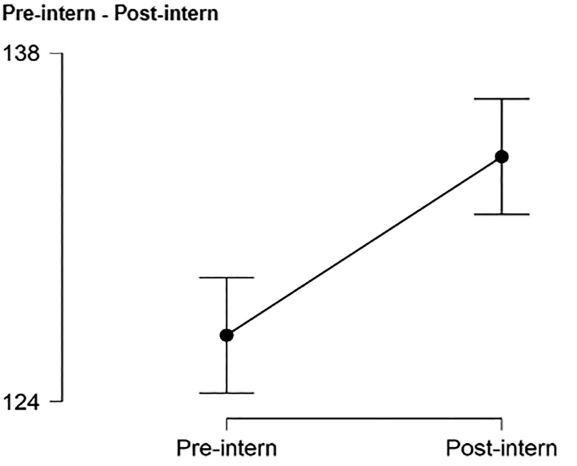


Figure 2.
SSEIT pre and post

Note(s): Figure 2 is the visual representation of the SSEIT pre-intern and post-intern differences in mean scores

Source(s): JASP Team (2023). Figure created by authors in the JASP program

Inferential analysis. A paired samples *t*-test was used to compare emotional intelligence among students in a pre and post-test survey. The results confirmed our hypothesis that there was a significant difference in SSEIT scores. $t(5) = -5.61, p = 0.002$ before and after internship.

Bayesian analysis. Given the small sample size, we also conducted a Bayesian paired samples *t*-test using JASP. Bayes factors provide a measure of the likelihood of the observed data under one hypothesis compared to another. Instead of relying on *p*-values alone, Bayes factors offer a direct measure of evidence for or against the hypothesis. The paired samples *t*-test revealed a Bayes factor of BF10 = 39.73, indicating strong evidence in favor of the alternative hypothesis that pre-internship SSEIT scores were lower than post-internship SSEIT scores (see Figure 3).

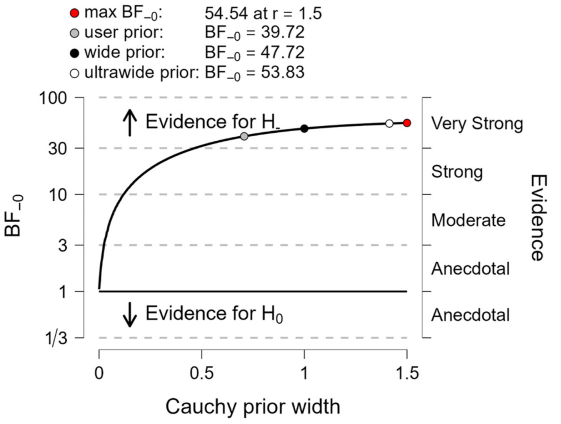
The estimated mean difference between pre-internship and post-internship scores was 7.17, with a 95% credible interval ranging from [122.08–131.24] in pre-internship and [127.80–139.85] at the post-internship survey data.

Both the traditional and Bayesian paired samples *t*-tests suggest that participants demonstrated a statistically significant improvement in performance on the cognitive SSEIT task from pre-internship to post-internship.

Discussion

Major findings

Our study investigated the differences between emotional intelligence scores before and after completing an in-depth internship course. Although we had a small number of students complete the pre and posttest survey, thirteen out of the fourteen students participated in the overall internship experience and completed all activities required for the course grade. The students who completed the survey represented around half of our class and they showed a significant increase in overall mean scores. Our students had relatively high EI scores to begin with, and involvement in the internship likely offered novel opportunities to engage in situations with children in various age groups, parents, the facility director, teachers, a faculty member, and other classmates that were outside of the traditional classroom setting. Overall, in a 16-week time frame, we did see the increase in scores in students at one pre-school facility. It is our hope that we can continue to evaluate EI on a larger scale at various internship locations.



Note(s): Figure 3 shows the Bayes Factor robustness check and evidence for the alternative hypothesis

Source(s): JASP Team (2023). Figure created by authors in the JASP program

Figure 3.
Bayes factor robustness check

Similar to other EI findings, field engagement led to higher EI scores (Borchardt, 2021). Students in the internship were engaged in similar service learning opportunities, where they applied what they know in a field experience setting. It is not enough to volunteer, one must take what they have learned and actually apply it to the internship experience. Kastberg *et al.* (2020) discussed job placement and benefits in increasing EI. Students are better equipped to handle stressful situations and are more prepared for jobs in the field.

Circling back to Goleman's theory on emotional intelligence, those with higher EI scores develop competencies related to personal and social characteristics (Serrat, 2017). These are attributes that are beneficial in humanistic fields such as psychology and child and family studies, where students work in face-to-face settings. Serrat (2017) stated that EI can increase through repetitive training and practice. Therefore, exposure through the educational and professional settings can better prepare these students for a career-ready mindset.

Limitations

This study does have three main limitations. The first limitation is the small number of participants. Participants were recruited from students pursuing their baccalaureate degree programs at one university; therefore, the results are not generalizable. As such, the participants came from one geographic location and performed their internships at one early childhood development center. The second limitation of this study is that there was only one method of data collection via a survey. The study could have been strengthened by including interviews, either as a focus group or individually with the participants to determine their perceptions of their own experiential learning of professional skills. The final limitation is that the participants were limited to students. For a more balanced view of the participants' emotional intelligence, the teachers with whom the participants worked with could have been interviewed to determine if the participants did in fact display that they had learned the skills necessary to become successful in their future careers.

Future research

Future research to broaden the knowledge of this study need to include additional measures of emotional intelligence such as the Multifactor Emotional Intelligence Scale (MEIS) or the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test (MSCEIT, V 2.0) which would establish different perspectives of emotional intelligence (Craig, 2019). Using this measure would provide an ability-based view. Additional future research would necessitate using structured interviews of the participants and the teachers to garner a deeper understanding of how the internship had any impact on the emotional intelligence of the participants. Structured interviews in this research are successful in "identifying competencies and predicting other important outcomes (i.e. ethical behavior, job performance, etc.)" (Lloyd *et al.*, n.d., para. 2). A third, and final, area that could be derived from this study is to have multiple child development locations, or a variety of placements for participants to complete their internships. Next, including students from different geographic locations in a longitudinal research design would assist in establishing that EI is positively impacted by internships so that generalizability and transferability would be better substantiated. Although generalization cannot guarantee that the same positive increase in EI would occur in every individual who participates in internships, it might show a trend positive trend. Likewise, the study could be duplicated for other career-based internships to establish positive growth in EI for transferability (Urquijo *et al.*, 2019).

Conclusion

The Schutte Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT) was implemented in a pre and post-test setting to address EI among our pilot group. This was a small class to begin with,

and unfortunately, we did not have 100% participation in the research portion of the project, so further insight needs to be gathered in the future. The overall impact of this study might suggest that exposure to diverse or real-world experiences positively impact their future careers. Opportunities like this one give way to service learning and experiential learning that may create pathways for success upon graduation, and increase the likelihood of workforce preparedness.

Higher EI has been associated with less alexithymia, depression, increased feelings of optimism, and lower rates of pessimism. EI testing has been measured on a diverse group of populations including, but not limited to, college students, adolescents, and health care workers. Overall our students gained experience working with a diverse population including children of various age groups, preschool teachers, faculty and parents. They were able to take what they have learned in the college classroom and apply it to the field. They were presented with tasks on a daily basis related to child development and they were required to pull in their knowledge to create activities that required careful thought. The child development theories that were utilized pulled in the experiential and transformational learning experience. According to Aisiri's (2020) model of experiential learning theory, one needs to experience, reflect, think and act. It is our belief that exposure to these situations increased overall emotional intelligence for this group of students in a short 16-week timeframe. Future research is needed to address various groups, placement location and overall efficacy of the theory behind the experiential learning experience.

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Appendix

Learning activity instructions

Every classroom has specially designed learning centers targeting the cognitive and motor-skill needs of its students. The Lead Teachers have thoughtfully and intentionally prepared activities at these centers to accentuate child development. Your job is to create an activity that can be done in the classroom, and a modified version with instructions to use at home to encourage the learning and play to continue. Please

use a developmental theorist or a theory when creating your activity, and keep the age of the children in mind when you are working on your project (ex. Piaget, Erikson, Bandura, Vygotsky, etc.) or (Behaviorism, Cognitivism, Social Learning, etc.).

(1) Title your activity

(2) Explain the activity and develop instructions that could be able to be implemented by any person reading the materials. What age group is this catering to?

(3) Identify materials needed for the activity (keep in mind the age group, safety and cost related to the materials)

(4) Identify the developmental theorist or a theory that is associated with this type of activity. For example, if you were to do a conservation task, discuss the information related to conservation and Piaget. This is a very important part of your application, as you are taking what you have learned in psychology about child development and applying it to the real-world setting.

(5) Speak to the Lead Teacher about the project and get feedback about the modifications that may need to be made. Get the activity approved by me and the teacher before implementing it.

(6) Create the activity that could be modified for parents, and create the instructions etc. for the parents. This facilitates the learning process.

(7) Implement the activity and report the results.

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