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Increasing Social-Emotional Development in Early Childhood

Brianna Navarro

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A Capstone Project for the Science in Human Development and Family Science

Introduction

This capstone project focuses on the importance of increasing social-emotional development in early childhood through school age (5 through 7 years). Social-emotional learning (SEL) is a methodology designed to assist students in understanding their emotions, empathizing with others, and making responsible decisions. These acquired skills aid students in forming positive relationships and achieving their goals while navigating challenging behaviors. For example, SEL teaches students how to share with those around them, manage frustration during difficult tasks, and effectively communicate their needs, all of which contribute to a more beneficial and productive learning environment. To address these challenges, students must be taught self-awareness, social awareness, and self-management. SEL refers to evidence-based programs and practices that aim to improve social, emotional, and cognitive skills, promote good conduct, foster healthy interpersonal connections, and boost academic achievement (Weissberg et al., 2015). Researchers suggest SEL contributes to academic success, well-being, and positive life outcomes when intentionally integrated into curriculum, and school climate (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). With this awareness, students may develop confidence in self-management, leading to behavioral challenges. Therefore, this project implements three lessons focusing on cultivating self-awareness, social awareness, and self-management mechanisms for negative emotions. The first lesson aims to help students identify and label basic emotions, while the second lesson focuses on exploring the cause of emotions. In the final lesson, students learn self-calming techniques to manage negative emotions effectively. The participants were 11 underserved African American students in the early childhood development program at the Mae C. Johnson Education and Cultural Enrichment Academy in Seaside, CA.

Needs Statement

To address the importance of increasing social-emotional development in early childhood development, which encompasses students ages 5 through 8 years struggling with social-emotional skills, it's vital to acknowledge the specific challenges faced by young children in this developmental stage. Young children often encounter difficulties that result in difficulties regulating emotions, expressing themselves appropriately, and understanding the emotions of others. In the academic environment, these challenges may result in disruptions in the classroom, conflicts with peers, and academic disengagement, impacting the overall learning experience and well-being of the child. I implemented a set of three lessons focusing on the following concepts: emotional self-awareness, social-emotional awareness, and self-management mechanisms for negative emotions. This capstone project promotes social-emotional learning (SEL) and emotional intelligence (EI). Emotional intelligence comprises skills related to monitoring one's and others' emotions and utilizing emotions to inform one's thoughts and behaviors (Salovey & Mayer, 1990).

Early childhood development in low-income African American communities is a critical area that warrants attention, particularly regarding SEL. Research underscores that children from these communities often confront unique challenges stemming from systemic inequities, socioeconomic disparities, and historical marginalization (Howard & Reynolds, 2008). For instance, limited access to quality education and healthcare services and exposure to adverse living conditions can hinder their social-emotional development (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). These factors can significantly impact African American children's ability to regulate emotions,

cultivate positive relationships, and navigate social contexts effectively. Culturally responsive interventions that acknowledge and validate the strength and resilience inherent in these communities while offering support and resources to address obstacles are essential for bridging these disparities (Howard & Reynolds, 2008). This Needs Statement will research the importance of emotional self-awareness, social-emotional awareness, and emotional self-management methods in improving emotional intelligence and establishing the foundation for a proposed curriculum that aims to address these crucial needs.

Enhancing SEL during early childhood is underscored by its potential to mitigate challenging behaviors and promote positive developmental outcomes. Several factors contribute to the necessity of amplifying SEL in this critical stage of development. During early childhood, a critical developmental phase, fundamental social and emotional skills are established, laying the groundwork for future socio-emotional functioning (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). Furthermore, children from underserved African American communities may encounter additional stressors and adversities, such as exposure to violence, discrimination, and economic hardship, which can impede healthy socio-emotional development (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). By prioritizing SEL and EI interventions early on, educators and caregivers can provide crucial support and scaffolding to help children build resilience, regulate emotions, and develop positive relationships, thereby mitigating the emergence of challenging behaviors and promoting overall well-being.

Younger children in this age group are developing how to recognize and articulate fundamental emotions such as happiness, sadness, anger, and fear. They may also begin to develop rudimentary empathy and understanding of others' emotions, although this is still in the early stages of development. Compared to older children, younger children may struggle more

with emotional regulation, experiencing intense emotional reactions that can be challenging to

manage without adequate support and guidance from caregivers and educators. Emotional

challenges during this period may manifest in behaviors such as tantrums, mood swings, and

difficulty coping with stress or frustration (Eisenberg et al., 1999).

Developing emotional self-awareness is critical for children in early development,

especially those from underprivileged areas due to the unique challenges that can interfere with

their inability to recognize and understand their emotions. Early childhood development stages

may encounter difficulties with self-awareness due to the following factors, particularly in

underserved, challenging behavioral, and African American communities. These factors can

include limited access to resources and support systems, exposure to adverse childhood

experiences, and systemic inequities that impact their socio-emotional development. Integrating

reflection practices into daily routines, such as journaling or guided reflection exercises, can

facilitate children's development of a deeper comprehension of their emotions and internal

states. Furthermore, offering opportunities for children to participate in activities that foster self-

expression, such as art, storytelling, and role-playing, can enhance their ability to identify, label,

and comprehend basic emotions in themselves and others (Goleman, 1995). In addition, research

suggests that children's understanding of emotional facial expressions plays a crucial role in their

emotional self-awareness (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). By providing opportunities for students to

learn and practice recognizing and interpreting facial expressions, educators can further expand

and support their emotional development and self-awareness.

Student's development of social-emotional awareness, particularly in understanding the

causes of emotions, is a crucial aspect of early childhood development. Following the second

lesson focused on exploring the origins of emotions, students engaged in activities aimed at

deepening their understanding of the six emotions introduced in "The Color Monster". Using coloring materials and worksheets, students will be able to recognize the causes of emotions and work to label, with specificity, their feeling states with a scenario, specifically correlating chosen colors with their emotional states, providing insight into students' comprehension of the lesson content. Overall, this activity aimed to enhance students' ability to recognize the cause of emotions and develop an understanding of their feelings.

In addition to mindfulness practices, fostering emotional self-awareness, social-emotional awareness, and emotional self-management mechanisms for emotions is essential for enhancing EI and addressing behavioral challenges in early childhood development. Human development literature suggests various strategies for supporting children in developing these skills. Mindfulness programs have emerged as promising interventions for promoting self-awareness, emotional regulation, and social-emotional learning in young children (Black, Milam, & Sussman, 2009). These programs typically incorporate activities such as breathing exercises, guided imagery, and mindfulness practices to help children cultivate attentional control, impulse management, and empathy. In addition to mindfulness, fostering self-awareness, social awareness, and self-management mechanisms for negative emotions is crucial for enhancing EI and addressing behavioral challenges. This can involve implementing curriculum-based interventions that explicitly teach children about emotions, encourage taking perspective, and provide opportunities for practicing problem-solving and conflict-resolution skills (Denham et al., 2012). Integrating these tactics into early childhood education settings allows educators and caregivers to successfully help children acquire the social-management skills they need to thrive in school and beyond.

In summary, addressing EI and SEL in early childhood is crucial for decreasing behavioral challenges. Understanding the significance of emotional self-awareness, social-emotional awareness, and emotional self-management allows for the development of targeted interventions that support children's emotional well-being and academic success. The proposed curriculum aims to equip underserved students with the essential skills to navigate relationships, regulate emotions, and thrive across various aspects of their lives. Through these efforts, aiming to create a nurturing environment that fosters emotional growth and resilience in early development.

Theory

The theoretical framework for my capstone project is based on Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development, which provides valuable knowledge about how students gain knowledge and develop thinking abilities. Piaget, a Swiss psychologist, proposed that children go through four phases of development: the sensorimotor stage, the preoperational stage, the concrete operational stage, and the formal operational stage. Piaget was more concerned with understanding how fundamental concepts develop than with typical IQ tests, which focus on specialized abilities such as spelling or problem-solving (Greenfield, 2019). According to Piaget's theory, children actively create their understanding of the world as they move through various stages. The preoperational period, which lasts from ages 2 to 7, is distinguished by symbolic representation and language development. Egocentrism is strong throughout this period, showing children's effort to distinguish their perspective from that of others (Kesselring & Müller, 2011). This constraint might make it difficult for them to grasp life from other viewpoints. This theory emphasizes the importance of the world through exploration and interactions. Utilizing the preoperational stage obtains insight into how young children interpret

the world, guiding the creation to help focus on optimizing age-appropriate educational learning experiences for students aged 5 to 7, aligned with cognitive development and the student's developmental needs.

Piaget's cognitive theory is relevant to understanding the social-emotional development of early childhood development, in addition to the increasing ability to understand and navigate social interactions. The preoperational child struggles with egocentrism, which affects the child's ability to empathize and understand others' perspectives. The preoperational stage is characterized by a focus on one's perspective and thoughts, which can limit children's social interactions and emotional regulation abilities. As children learn to recognize and understand the causes of others' emotions, they begin to develop their emotional regulation skills. This includes learning how to be self-aware, and socially aware, identify appropriately the emotions one expresses, as well as manage their emotional responses in social situations through self-management. This stage highlights the importance of adult guidance and support in facilitating children's cognitive and social-emotional development. Adults play a crucial role in helping children overcome egocentrism by providing opportunities for perspective-taking and encouraging empathy. They can also help children understand social interactions and foster meaningful connections with others. Piaget emphasized teaching strategies and the importance of hands-on, experiential learning for children in the early stages of development. I designed activities that encourage perspective-taking and empathy. Incorporating hands-on interactive activities, and visual aids to help children identify and label different emotions accurately, aligns with Piaget's emphasis on experiential learning. These activities not only address Piaget's theories directly but also aim to promote children's social-emotional skills in line with their cognitive development in the preoperational stage understanding abstract concepts developing

and understanding critical thinking skills. Understanding the characteristics of challenges and strengths of the preoperational stage, educators can tailor their curriculum accordingly to promote optimal learning and social-emotional development.

Consideration of Diversity

This project was conducted at The Mae C. Johnson Education and Cultural Enrichment Academy in Seaside, CA. This academy creates a promising environment assisting with homework and provides tutoring for underserved students seeking support in school subjects through exploring activities and topics that foster academic, social, and life skills along with community integration (The Village Project, Inc., Originality section). The socio-demographic statistics of Seaside, CA, where Mae C. Johnson Education and Cultural Enrichment Academy is located, reflect a diverse community. Seaside has a population of approximately 34,000 people, with a racial composition that includes 45% White, 17% African American, 17% Hispanic or Latino, and 12% Asian residents. The students from the Mae C. Johnson Education and Cultural Enrichment Academy represent a mix of cultural backgrounds and low socioeconomic statuses. Students attending the academy come from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, including White, African American, Hispanic or Latino, and Native American. Furthermore, the academy serves students from low-income backgrounds with 13.0% of persons in poverty, ensuring inclusivity among its participants.

The diverse characteristics of the participants at the Mae C. Johnson Education and Cultural Enrichment Academy significantly shaped the development of the project. One crucial aspect I considered was the prevalence of hardships and trauma experienced by many students, as indicated by discussions with those involved in the Village Project. In response, my lessons on emotions were carefully planned to provide a safe and supportive environment where students

could explore and express their feelings. I incorporated activities that encourage open dialogue

and offered coping strategies tailored to address stress and trauma sensitively. Additionally, I

was mindful of gender diversity ensuring that the materials and activities appealed to both boys

and girls. For instance, when selecting stories or examples to illustrate emotional concepts, I

chose a diverse range of different emotions and scenarios that resonated with all students,

regardless of gender. Providing collaborative and interactive learning experiences allowed

students to engage with the content in ways that suited their interests and preferences. This

approach fostered inclusivity and participation across the lessons.

Learning Outcomes

I created three 30-minute lessons to address the importance of increasing social-

emotional development in early childhood. These lessons targeted school-age children between 5

and 7 years old who are struggling with social-emotional skills.

1. Students will be able to identify 2 basic facial expressions listed below:

   Happy, sad, angry, afraid, calm, and love.

2. Students will be able to recognize the causes of emotions and work to label, with

   specificity, their feeling states with a scenario.

3. Students will be able to demonstrate one self-calming strategy

Methods

Location and Participants

The social-emotional development lessons were conducted at The Mae C. Johnson

Education and Cultural Enrichment Academy in Seaside, CA. The lessons were conducted in one

classroom, with the number of students varying from nine to eleven participants across the three

sessions. The focus was on students who were struggling with developing their social-emotional skills. I have worked with this nonprofit organization for eight months as a tutor, building an understanding and rapport with the students. I selected a group of individuals whom I observed over my course of employment. The eleven underserved African American students that I recruited were ages 5 to 7, both in early development through school age. Out of the eleven participants, there were 5 girls and 6 boys.

Procedures and Materials

three thirty-minute lessons were conducted and focused on the following concepts: self-awareness, social awareness, and self-management mechanisms for negative emotions. Before beginning my project, I communicated with the staff. I was encouraged to associate my lessons with SEL and EI in early childhood development resulting in decreasing behavioral challenges. Before initiating the lesson I interacted with these students before implementing the project to assist in creating a developmentally appropriate curriculum on SEL.

The first lesson focused on self-awareness of emotions listed below: Happy, sad, angry, afraid, calm, and love. First, I prepared the materials and gathered the students from recess. I started the lesson by displaying a read-aloud of Anna Llenas's story on emotions, "The Color Monster" (Appendix A). The Color Monster teaches students about emotions since each color results in an emotion. Also helps students develop understanding and empathy for others, as the emotions in the narrative are linked to detailed descriptions of how the monster feels inside. One day, the monster realizes that all of his feelings are connected. He is very confused. The book provides straightforward, easy-to-understand advice on how to deal with his feelings. Teaching youngsters to evaluate, isolate, and store their emotions in jars to help them feel better. At the beginning of the book, I highlighted the six different emotions: happiness, sadness, anger, fear,

calm, and love. At the end of the story, I asked the group of students to raise their hand and tell

me a time they expressed one of these emotions, allowing them to implement connections they

learned from "The Color Monster" story. Proceeding forward, out of the group of eleven

students, six students raised their hand and told me one of these emotions: happiness, sadness,

anger, fear, calm, and love, and why they think they felt ___. I then provided visual

representations by incorporating facial expressions along with scenarios that intertwined with the

emotion in The Color Monster story. The school-aged students verbally recognize, label, and

understand the basic emotions that the color monster was experiencing then tying it in with one's

own experiences. As for the students in early childhood development who were not confident to

verbally express their thoughts and feelings, they were still able to recognize and label one of the

character's emotions. After the first lesson on "The Color Monster" emotions,

I conducted an assessment to measure each student's ability to recognize and demonstrate two

basic emotions.

        In the second lesson focusing on the causes of emotions, I gathered coloring materials

such as colored pencils, colored markers, crayons, and watercolors along with a worksheet for an

activity centered on examining and reflecting on six emotions introduced in "The Color

Monster." Students revisited the emotions discussed previously and worked on labeling their

feelings with specificity. The assessment involved correlating chosen colors blue for sad, red for

anger, grey for fear, yellow is happy, green is calm, and pink is love with their emotional states.

Overall, the lesson aimed to deepen students' understanding of emotional causes and promote

self-awareness. Lastly, to assess the students I collected students "The Color Monster

Worksheets"(Appendix B) used to assess the school-aged participants' comprehension along

with the earlier childhood development participants I circled assessing each student by having

them recognize the correlation between the color they have chosen that labels the emotion and their feelings states. The emotions identified included calm, excitement, happiness, and love, demonstrating a comprehensive understanding of the lesson content.

The final lesson focused on a self-calming strategy when experiencing negative emotions and behavior challenges. On this day, I set up a 1 on 1 station for students to rotate in where they found a basket full of uninflated balloons of various colors, flour, and a small funnel. I began the rotation of my 1 on 1 station. I then began by welcoming the students to join me in learning self-calming strategies they can do on-site when experiencing behavioral challenges and negative emotions. Next, I moved on to a demonstrated self-calming strategy they can create with only three materials. Demonstrating how to create a stress ball from an inflated balloon, flour, and funnel provides a hands-on and experiential learning opportunity, teaching students self-calming strategies that they can utilize in times of stress. Emphasizing the appropriate use of sensory fidget toys such as stress balls can result in demonstrating calm, relaxation, and focus when experiencing negative emotions. To assess each participant at the end of the lesson I had students demonstrate one self-calming strategy when experiencing negative emotions when rotating in the 1 on 1 station.

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Results

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Learning Outcome 1: Recognition and Understanding of Basic Emotions

The first assessment aimed to determine participants' ability to recognize, label, and understand basic emotions in themselves. During the assessment, students were asked to raise their hands and share two emotions that were incorporated in "The Color Monster", along with reasons for labeling them as such. Out of the eleven participants, six demonstrated the ability to recognize and articulate at least one basic emotion discussed in the lesson, accounting for 45% of

the participants meeting the passing criteria for this learning outcome. While this learning

outcome was partially met, there's room for improvement, considering the different

developmental stages of the students.

Learning Outcome 2: Examination and Reflection on Emotion Causes

Following the second lesson, an assessment was conducted to evaluate participants'

ability to examine and reflect on the underlying causes of emotions and label their feelings with

specificity. All eleven participants engaged in the developmentally appropriate activity of

identifying and labeling their emotions on a worksheet. Additionally, to assess their

understanding of the causes of emotions, participants were asked to identify situations or

scenarios that would likely elicit specific emotions—this assessment component aimed to gauge

their comprehension of the factors influencing emotional experiences. Despite the complexity of

this task, 100% of the participants successfully passed the learning outcome criteria,

demonstrating proficiency in reflecting on the causes of emotions and accurately labeling their

emotions. This indicates that the learning outcome was fully met. This Learning Outcome 2

differs from Learning Outcome 1 in that it focuses not only on recognizing and labeling basic

emotions but also on understanding the factors or situations that may lead to experiencing those

emotions.

Learning Outcomes 3: Demonstration of Self-Calming Strategies

After the third and final lesson, participants were assessed on their ability to demonstrate

self-calming strategies when experiencing negative emotions and behavioral challenges. Out of

eleven participants, five were able to demonstrate at least one self-calming strategy that can be

used when experiencing negative emotions. At the beginning of the lesson, approximately 46%

of participants met the criteria. I had 11 participants initially, but the number decreased

throughout the lesson, ending with 9 participants. This learning outcome was partially met, as

less than half of the participants successfully demonstrated the targeted self-calming strategies.

There is a need for further reinforcement in addition to practice in this area to enhance

proficiency.

Discussion

The focus of this capstone project was to enhance social-emotional learning development

among underserved African American Students ranging from the ages of 5 to 7 by implementing

three targeted lessons. The first learning outcome, which focuses on recognizing and

understanding basic emotions, was partially met, with over half of the participants demonstrating

the targeted skills. As for the second learning outcome, examining and reflecting on emotional

causes was fully met, and all participants successfully engaged in the activity and demonstrated

proficiency. While the first two learning outcomes were fully met, the third one, demonstrating

self-calming strategies, was only partially achieved, with less than half of the participants

demonstrating the targeted techniques. This could be attributed to varying levels of familiarity

with self-calming methods among the participants or the need for more reinforcement and

practice in implementing these strategies. Despite this, the project effectively engaged

participants through interactive and developmentally appropriate activities, such as storytelling

and hands-on experiences, aligning with the principles of social-emotional learning and Jean

Piaget's theory of cognitive development.

Addressing challenges encountered during the project is valuable, especially regarding

participants' varying developmental stages. The students in early childhood found certain

activities challenging, potentially impacting their ability to fully grasp the concepts. This

highlights the importance of tailoring activities to accommodate diverse developmental needs,

ensuring that all participants can actively engage and benefit from the lessons. For example, to

suit individual abilities I could support students who may struggle with certain activities due to

developmental differences. By implementing these adjustments, I can create a more inclusive

and supportive learning environment that caters to the needs of every student.

Moving forward, several adjustments and considerations could enhance the effectiveness

and accessibility of the project. Additional time allocated for each lesson could allow for

instruction and incorporation of practice, ensuring that all participants have ample opportunity to

engage with the material. Implementing the capstone project into the general school curriculum

could provide ongoing support and reinforcement of social-emotional learning concepts.

Developing individual lesson plans for small groups of students could benefit by allowing more

personalized instruction and targeted support. To implement student engagement and

participation, incorporating more interactive and experiential learning activities would enhance

the relevance and applicability that Piaget emphasized the importance of hands-on, experiential

learning for children in the early stages of development. Overall, despite the limitations

encountered, I remain optimistic about the potential impact of this project and am confident to

continue to refine and adapt it to meet the needs of underserved populations in early childhood

development.

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Appendix A
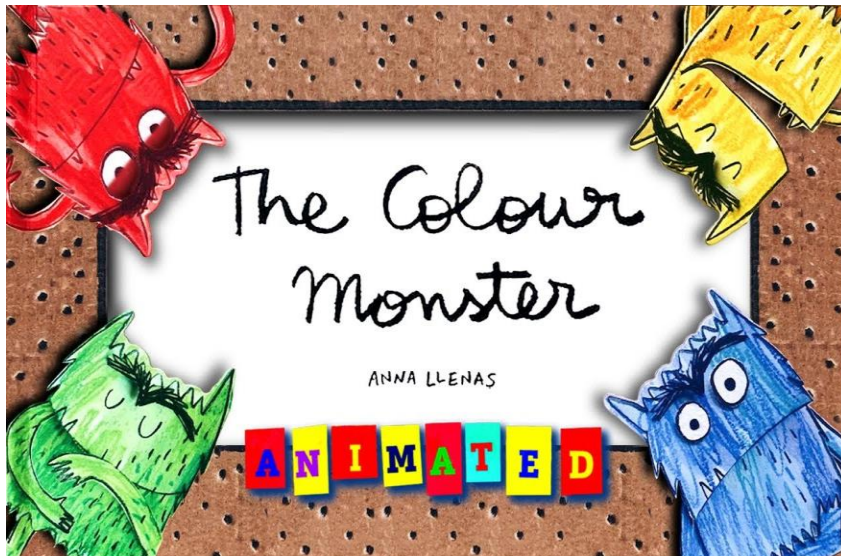
Appendix B

Increasing Social-Emotional Development in Early Childhood

Brianna Navarro

Human Development & Family Science

Introduction

As a Tutor at The Village Project in Seaside CA. I observed the increase in behavioral challenges in early childhood development.

My capstone project focuses on the importance of increasing social-emotional development in early childhood through school-age struggling with social-emotional skills to decrease behavior challenges.

Needs Statement

Focal Group:
Early Childhood Development (ECE) through School-aged Students ages ranging from 5-7

Problem

Children in early childhood struggle with:
- Social-emotional skills
  (identify, express & manage emotions)

- Behavioral challenges

Need

In the results of this issue, there is a need for instruction that teaches:
- Self-awareness: Identifying & labeling
- Social awareness: Understanding other's emotions
- Self-management mechanisms for negative emotions

Research Findings

During this period may manifest in behaviors such as <u>tantrums, mood swings, and difficulty coping with stress or frustration</u> (Eisenberg et al., 1999).
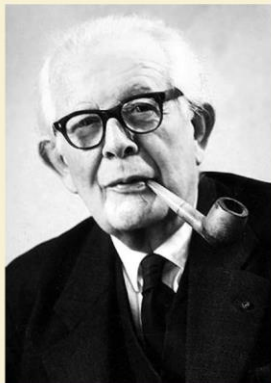
Importance in Fostering Emotional Intelligence

Benefits of Emotional Intelligence
- Positive behaviors
- Academic achievement
- Positive self-management mechanism
- Interpersonal relationships

(strengthening children's empathy and social relations with others)

Cognitive Development Theory

The theory suggests that children progress through four main stages each with their unique characteristics and abilities. :

(1) Sensorimotor intelligence,
(2) <u>Preoperational thinking,</u>
(3) Concrete operational thinking, and
 (4) Formal operational thinking.

Jean Piaget, Swiss Psychologist, 1896-1980s

Theory

Preoperational thinking
Ages 5 to 7 year olds

Focus on:
Using symbols to represent words, things, pictures, people, and ideas. As a result of being able to think symbolically.

Egocentric:
Refers to the child's inability to differentiate between their perspective and others (Kesselring & Müller, 2011).

Supports my project by:
Increasing Social-emotional Development & strategies for managing negative emotions.

Learning Outcomes

I designed a 3-day 30-minute lesson plan on increasing social-emotional development with a group of eleven students.

01. Students will be able to identify 2 basic facial expressions listed below:
- Happy, sad, angry, afraid, calm, and love

02. Students will be able to recognize the causes of emotions and work to label, with specificity, their feeling states with a scenario.

03. Students will be able to demonstrate one self-calming strategy
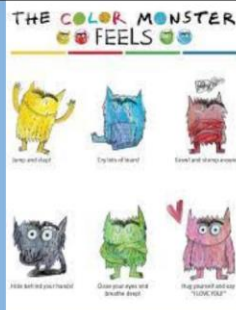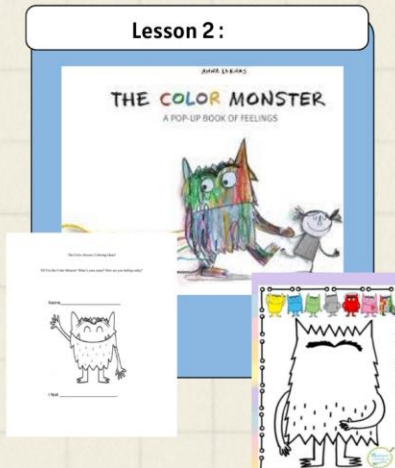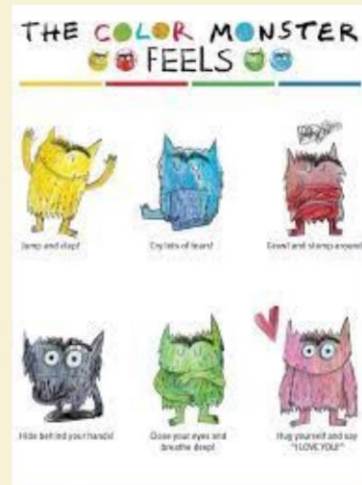
Results: LO #1

Learning Outcome #1
Students will be able to identify and label at least 2 of the basic emotions listed below:
- **Happy, sad, angry, afraid, calm, and love**

Asked a group of students to raise their hand and tell me 2 of the emotions and why they think they might label it as _____.

Not Met 6 out of 11 students (55%) participated in raising their hands to share

Results: LO #2

Learning Outcome #2
Students will be able to understand the underlying causes of emotions and work to label, with specificity, their feeling states.

Identify and label their emotion
- **Fully Met 11 out of 11 (100%) participates**

Emotions Identified:
- **Calm & Exicted**
- **"Almost all of the emotions"**
- **Happy & Love**

Results: LO #3

Learning Outcome #3
Students will be able to demonstrate one self-calming strategies when experiencing negative emotions.

Demonstrate one self-calming strategies they can do on-site when experiencing negative emotions

Asked each student for an example:
- Gardening
- Blowing out the candles
- Running
- Fidget Toys and/or stress ball
- Meditating
- Art and/or drawing

Partially Met 6 out of II participants (60%) were able to demonstrate one self-calming strategy at least

Take 5 deep breaths.
1 2 3 4 5

DISCUSSION

Successes

01

- Learning outcome #2: fully met
- Learning outcome #3: partially met
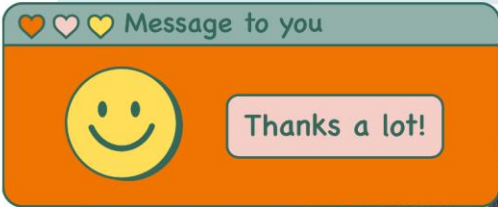
Limitations

02

- Learning outcome #I: Not met
- Needing additional time

Future Directions

03

- Implementation into general school curriculum
- Create smaller groups with individual lesson plans with the following Los instead of 3 separate lessons