Enhancing Empathy and Mental Health Through Social Emotional Service Learning

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ABSTRACT

Background: Child mental health and social–emotional learning (SEL) are foundational to school health and lifelong well-being. Preparing pre-service teachers and health education students to deliver SEL-informed programming offers a practical approach to supporting children's emotional development while strengthening community partnerships. This project utilized a reading-based SEL intervention aligned with the CASEL framework to promote empathy, emotional regulation, and positive social behaviors in elementary-aged children.
Methods: This IRB-approved initiative employed a multistep service-learning model engaging pre-service teachers and health education majors. Undergraduate participants completed structured training and delivered a standardized SEL reading curriculum across elementary schools, libraries, and community organizations. Program components included pre-assessment, facilitator preparation, five guided reading and discussion sessions, and post-assessment.
Results: A total of 180 undergraduate pre-service teachers and health educators participated across six cohorts over nine years. Program evaluation demonstrated positive outcomes for participants, including a 30% increase in interest in service learning, a 19% increase in community engagement interest, and an 18% increase in understanding of empathy.
Conclusions: Findings suggest that integrating SEL-focused service-learning benefits both child participants and future health and education professionals. The program supports child mental health promotion while fostering empathy, social responsibility, and civic engagement among pre-service educators. As a low-cost, scalable, and adaptable intervention aligned with SEL standards, this model shows strong potential for replication across school and community settings and offers a practical strategy for health professionals seeking evidence-based approaches to preventive mental health promotion and school–community collaboration.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to assess the impact of an IRB-approved initiative which employed a multistep service-learning model engaging pre-service teachers and health education majors. Participants were assessed on the on the knowledge and skills related to the development of social-emotional learning and empathy towards animals and it's impact on their own social-emotional skill development.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Describe the process of training, implementing and evaluating an animal empathy reading program for elementary school aged children.

2. Assess the impact of the animal empathy reading program on pre-service educators and health education students.



METHODS

Implementation of this project involved an IRB approved four step process:

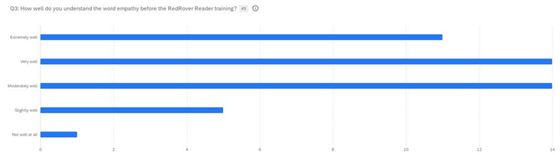
1. Train college aged students to administer the reading program curriculum.
2. Conduct a pre-assessment of college aged students' knowledge and skills about empathy.
3. Have college aged students implement the reading program with elementary school aged children which consisted of at least 5 guided reading activities.
4. Conduct a post-assessment of college aged students' knowledge and skills about empathy.

Research Questions

1. Do college students who implement the health education reading program with children ages 6-12 from low-income families have significant increases in their self-reported ability to (a) implement lesson plans and (b) use question strategies in a non-judgmental way to strengthen children's higher-order thinking skills?
2. Are college students who implement the health education reading program with children ages 6-12 from low-income families likely to report an increased desire to work in community service programs after their service learning experience?

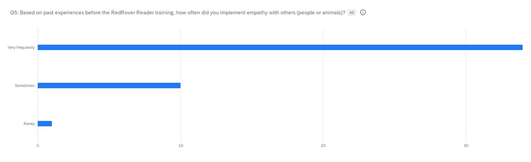
SELECTED RESULTS

SELECTED PRETEST RESULTS

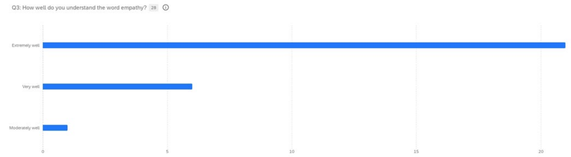


Q1: How confident do you feel about the following teaching skills before the Re... 42

How confident do you feel about the following teaching skills before the Re...	Average (How confident do you feel about the following teaching skills before the Re...)	Minimum (How confident do you feel about the following teaching skills before the Re...)	Maximum (How confident do you feel about the following teaching skills before the Re...)	Standard Deviation (How confident do you feel about the following teaching skills before the Re...)	Variance (How confident do you feel about the following teaching skills before the Re...)	Count
Engaging and motivating students	3.14	1.00	5.00	1.21	1.46	42
Designing questions that foster students' higher order thinking skills	2.48	0.00	5.00	1.12	1.25	42
Implementing storytelling as an instructional method	2.95	1.00	5.00	1.13	1.28	42
Redirecting students' behavior to foster an environment conducive to learning	2.76	0.00	5.00	1.29	1.66	42

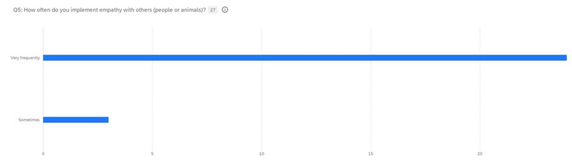


SELECTED POST TEST RESULTS



Q1: After implementing the RedRover Readers program, how confident do you feel... 27

After implementing the RedRover Readers program, how confident do you feel...	Average (After implementing the RedRover Readers program, how confident do you feel...)	Minimum (After implementing the RedRover Readers program, how confident do you feel...)	Maximum (After implementing the RedRover Readers program, how confident do you feel...)	Standard Deviation (After implementing the RedRover Readers program, how confident do you feel...)	Count
Engaging and motivating students	4.41	2.00	5.00	0.83	27
Designing questions that foster students' higher order thinking skills	4.37	2.00	5.00	0.82	27
Implementing storytelling as an instructional method	4.63	2.00	5.00	0.73	27
Redirecting students' behavior to foster an environment conducive to learning	4.30	2.00	5.00	0.97	27



Q4: In a sentence or two, please explain what you think the word "empathy" means to you before the RedRover Reader training. 46

In a sentence or two, please explain what you think the word "empathy" mean...

Being kind, compassionate and understanding to other people and animals.

Relating to someone and respecting their own personal journey.

Having an understanding of someone other than yourself

I think the word empathy means understanding how other people feel and feeling it with them.

The ability to understand and share feelings with others.

Q6: What did you learn or experience in the RedRover Readers program that may help you become a better teacher? 33

What did you learn or experience in the RedRover Readers program that may h...

The RedRover Readers program proved how effective it is to teach empathy. I discovered that structured read-alouds combined with guided discussions can help students connect literature to real-life emotions such as kindness, responsibility, and respect, for people as well as for animals. I also observed how students' engagement increases significantly when they see themselves as helpers and problem solvers. The instruction highlighted the importance of asking open-ended questions, demonstrating compassion, and allowing children to talk out their ideas rather than rushing to the "right" response. This experience will help me build a classroom culture in which empathy, participation, and unity are valued equally with academic skills, because children learn best when they feel seen, heard, and understood.

I think just the way we should ask the questions during the reading in really letting the students think in what they believe is right or wrong. Also, making sure that I carry some the books I read in this program, and bring them over to the classroom.

I learned how important it is to slow down and really guide students through emotional understanding.

Q7: What did you learn or experience in the RedRover Readers program that may help you grow as a person? 33

What did you learn or experience in the RedRover Readers program that may h...

I was able to slow down and truly observe empathy in action, both in myself and in others which was thanks to the RedRover Readers program. I discovered that compassion is developed by little acts of listening, thinking, and choosing kindness even when it's difficult. It's not just a big, significant gesture. I also learned how stories can open your heart without judging you. I became more aware of how my actions affect other people after participating in discussions on responsibility, kindness, and empathy, particularly as they relate to animals. The activity served as a reminder to me that practicing empathy on a daily basis rather than only teaching it is what leads to personal progress.

Definitely being able to have the opportunity in volunteering as much as I can especially around my community and spreading awareness over the importance of literacy.

I learned how to consider different viewpoints especially through the stories of animals and children.





CONCLUSIONS

The health education reading program assists children in treating and caring for animals in a humane method. The stories were very realistic, and the children could make connections to the stories. Humane literacy is necessary to help children develop good citizenship skills. It helps with character education in a child, as well as social and emotional learning. Since it is an informal setting, children seem more at ease. The health education reading program assists children in understanding how important it is to treat not only animals but humans with kindness. Perhaps a program such as this would decrease the bullying occurring on school campuses. In addition, the health education reading program is an excellent method of allowing teacher candidates to exercise reading comprehension strategies learned through their education courses, and gives them a brief glimpse into how important it is to have student engagement in their future classrooms.