Spring 2022

Social And Emotional Learning In An Open Space

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SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING IN AN OPEN SPACE

by

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Education: Natural Science and Environmental Education.

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

May 2022

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Chris Wandell, Danielle Metzger, Dr. Nathan Stein, Tom and Karen Stein, Logan Rosenberg, Emma Chapman, Jeremy Lloyd, Southland Books and Café, and The Public House on High. I couldn't have done it without you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Overview

In recent years, the importance of social and emotional learning (SEL) has become more and more pronounced as educators have realized its benefits not only in the learning space, but societally as well (Tate, 2019). Social and emotional learning lies at the foundation of a comprehensive education (CASEL, 2020). Some methods of education lend themselves more to the incorporation of SEL than others, while some methods cannot be extricated from SEL. Experiential education is one such model. Also characterized as discovery-based, inquiry-based, and/or student-driven learning, experiential education develops learner agency in education by requiring learners to draw from their own experiences to create active and authentic learning (Carver, 1996).

Such inquiries tend to be open-ended and directed by the learner's own interests and curiosity, creating a positively reinforcing loop with self-awareness and -management skills. Similarly, the collaborative nature of experiential education promotes social awareness and relationship skills also central to comprehensive SEL. In this capstone project, I will address the question *Can the open space technology (OST) method be used to promote experiential social and emotional learning (SEL) in older elementary students?* The OST model will allow learners self-direction in what they choose to pursue in their curiosity-directed experience. This introductory chapter will provide contextual information on SEL and inquiry-based education as well as my own personal experiences that led me to pursue this question.

Background

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL] cites five proficiency areas for SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible

decision-making (CASEL, 2020). Through practicing these five proficiency areas, learners are able 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, 2020). The benefits are numerous and well-documented: Intentional incorporation of SEL into academic learning has shown improvement in classroom behavior, an "increased ability to manage stress and depression," and increased academic abilities based on test scores. On average, the return on investment for SEL is eleven dollars for every one spent (CASEL, 2020). The emphasis on cooperative skills, self- and social awareness, and decision-making in SEL are of equal importance in the methods of experiential education.

In an inquiry-based education model, educators focus on developing the inquiry skills that allow learners to cultivate their own understanding based on their observations and subsequent questioning of themselves, others, and the world around them. Practitioners of experiential education regularly rely on the natural world to supply learners with realia and phenomena to explore and observe. These observations inspire questions, at which point learners begin searching for evidence to help answer their questions. In this way, "inquiry is treated as a primary tool for education and learning" (Feyzioğlu, 2019, p. 367). Experiential, inquiry-based education also requires the learner to draw on their own experience, as lessons provide real-world connections and are personally relevant to their lives (Carver, 1996).

Context

While my professional interests are what led me to pursue this question, it is my personal interests that began my journey. When I was in the third grade, I read Craighead George's (1972) Julie of the Wolves for the first time. I was captivated. The story of a young girl surviving far from home was interesting enough, but what I found truly compelling was the story of the wolves. Through Julie's eyes, I observed the wolves, their habits, their personalities, their interactions, and their environment. Julie made me curious about a world unfamiliar to me, and I dove into it. When I finished the book, I started

reading about wolves on my own. I checked out books from the library and made notes, I had my teachers photocopy anatomy diagrams and territory maps, and I started an animal research club in my classroom with some friends who had been gripped by their own curiosities. At one point, I remember giving a presentation in costume as Doug Smith, project leader for the Yellowstone wolf reintroduction project, replete with fake mustache.

In the fifth grade, my teacher gave me an opportunity to share my interests with my classmates in a lesson of my own making. I had been saving up my tickets for good behavior, knowing that once I hit forty, my teacher would let me teach a lesson about anything I wanted for an hour. When the day of the lesson came, I brought all my "research materials," now a collection of books and folders filled with notes, diagrams, laminated maps, and more, and set them up throughout the classroom. Each pod of desks had a theme—diet, family structure, anatomy—that my classmates rotated through over the course of the hour. I remember being so excited to share a topic I loved learning about with my friends and classmates. That was my first experience teaching.

The first time I was paid to teach was as a Summer Experiential Education Intern at Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont in 2014. One of the expectations of the position is that all interns will develop a three-hour outdoor activity to lead with campers ages nine through twelve. The duration and location were the only criteria; other than that, the activities could be whatever we wanted. Even more exciting, we would be pitching our activities to the campers for them to choose from. It was another opportunity to take something I was excited about and share it. I called my activity Reptile Rampage, and the campers and I played games to learn about reptilian adaptations before going on our "rampage;" that is, exploring field, forest, riverbank, and the river itself to find wild reptiles. We also agreed as a group that, while we were focusing on reptiles, we certainly wouldn't ignore any cool non-reptilians we found. At the time, I just thought I was encouraging curiosity for curiosity's sake. It wasn't

long before I would come to know curiosity as a tool for inquiry-based education in my work as an experiential educator.

The inspiration for this project comes from my recent position as Youth Programs Coordinator at the Tremont Institute, where I served full time from 2016 to 2021. Most days, I communicated with classroom teachers to plan their three- to five-day trip to the park. Together, we worked to create learner-centered, curiosity-driven experiences based on the teachers' goals for their students, be they academic, emotional, social, or, more realistically, a combination of the three. My responsibility was to coordinate trip logistics in a way that promoted the best learning conditions. This included suggesting classes and activities, matching staff with learning groups, and organizing any additional support that participants may need. My favorite days, though, were spent teaching in the forests and streams of the national park, leading outdoor lessons focused on science, language arts, history, and math in an experiential context, especially with older elementary students. There is nothing I love more than watching a child make a discovery, regardless of whether someone else has made the same one. The never-ending curiosity and excitement of a young person exploring and creating meaning from the world around them is what drew me to education in the first place. It was a search for providing engagement with real-world discoveries that inspired the topic for my capstone project.

In the summer of 2019, my coworkers and I were looking to develop an activity that would provide our campers—many of whom we had known for years—with the ability to pursue what they were interested in by taking charge of the process in a way they never had: by creating and facilitating their own activities for their peers. We decided to follow a modified open space technology model to create an opportunity for campers to develop their own activities without needing to prepare anything beforehand. We called these camper-directed open-space activities *Camper Clubs*.

In pitching the idea of Camper Clubs to the campers, we explained that we as the staff had left open space in our camp schedule to give them the opportunity to create and take charge of their own

activities based on what they were excited about doing. Just like an open space conference, we gathered the entire group and gave them time to consider their session topics—that is, the activities—that they wanted to do during Camper Clubs. Because we were at camp, these activities were pretty wide open and did not need to be academic or even structured. The only requirements were that each camper or group pitching an activity needed to have a title for their Camper Club, a staff sponsor to make sure everyone was staying safe, and a couple of prepared sentences sharing what would happen in their Camper Club. Each Camper Club would be forty-five minutes long, and campers were welcome to borrow any camp supplies they needed, including craft materials, field guides, bug boxes, nets, snorkels, sports equipment, and more.

The campers took ten minutes to brainstorm activities, confer with friends, find staff sponsors, and prepare their pitches. What a whirlwind! After those ten minutes of brainstorming and planning, we had a slate of campers ready to propose their activities to the rest of their group. Some campers wanted more time to do their favorite camp activities, like swimming and playing field games. Others wanted to gather field guides and explore the natural area in search of bugs and mushrooms. They proposed fort-building, hiking, a crafting club, and more. Ultimately, everyone wanted to take something they enjoyed and share it with their friends and fellow campers. After the campers pitched their sessions, we wrote all the options on a chalkboard and had the campers leave their initials under every session they were interested in to allow the staff to create a schedule of activities for campers to choose from.

I could never have imagined that Camper Clubs would be the success they were. The Camper Clubs that they created were phenomenal. I remember watching kids encourage one another's curiosity and even try to incorporate it into their Camper Clubs, like the nine-year-old leading an arts and crafts session who, when part of her group got distracted by a cool spider, suggested using the craft materials to create their own spider modeled on the one they found. Campers asked one another for input on the

decisions they made in their activities. I even witnessed many of the kids counting their group members unprompted!

Giving campers agency over the activities they did by providing a space for them to create their own did more than just allow them to have more fun—and it wasn't just to fill space in the schedule that the staff forgot about, as one camper suggested. Camper Clubs were, in fact, a practicum in social and emotional learning. All five framework areas from CASEL (2020) were practiced in the process of creating, sharing, facilitating, and participating in Camper Clubs. Campers practiced self-awareness while recognizing and drawing from their own strengths and self-confidence to create an activity. Self-management allowed campers to practice self-motivation and organizational skills as they considered what they would need for the activity they would be facilitating—or what they wanted to get out of their experience as they chose other sessions to attend. Responsible decision-making played a major role as campers made constructive choices about their behavior in the context of peer interactions. Most noticeable were the social awareness and relationship skills that campers used throughout the open space process, as they practiced respect for others, taking other perspectives, working in teams, building relationships, and communicating with one another.

Project Goals

My goal for this project is to develop a curriculum to promote social and emotional learning through open-ended learner- and curiosity-directed experiences for summer campers ages 9-12 based on an open space model. The benefits of learners taking on responsibility in and for their own learning are clear: The combination of experiential education and intentional SEL promote lifelong social, emotional, and inquiry skills. When it comes to supporting social and emotional learning in the summer camp community, following an open space model for curiosity-based learning can provide lasting benefits. Even though the students are the ones developing the activities for these sessions, the teacher or facilitator still must play a major and active role in shaping the experience.

An inquiry-based, student-driven open space activity requires a compassionate learning community to be shaped around it. The facilitator must nurture a learning space that creates a platform for all student voices. Facilitators must be conscious of their own biases as they validate and celebrate learner interests and give students an opportunity to strengthen their relationships through learning from one another. Creating safe space for sharing stories and experiences will be paramount in facilitating an open-ended, learner-driven experience.

Summary

This project seeks to address the question *Can the open space technology (OST) method be used to promote experiential social and emotional learning (SEL) in older elementary students?* Social and emotional learning find a perfect pairing in experiential education. Combining the two allows for a curiosity-based, learner-driven lesson that promotes learner agency. Such a lesson not only empowers learners to play an active role in their education, but also provides them with an opportunity to practice the self-management and interpersonal skills required of them in present and future interactions. Offering a curiosity-driven, learner-led curriculum to promote SEL via an open space format will provide authentic and engaging experiences with both short- and long-term benefits.

In the following chapter, I will provide an overview of the pertinent literature, including the background, current relevance, and capstone significance of each subtopic.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

This capstone project seeks to answer the question *Can the open space technology (OST) method be used to promote experiential social and emotional learning (SEL) in older elementary students?* In the following chapter, I will explore four major topics relevant to the question: social and emotional learning (SEL), experiential learning, student-centered learning, and open space technology (OST). For each topic, I will present relevant literature covering the topic's background and current relevance. Additionally, I will provide connections between each major topic and the question this capstone project seeks to answer.

Social and emotional learning (SEL)

Background

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is an approach through which people develop and apply personal and interpersonal skills, including understanding the self, creating and maintaining positive relationships with others, and making responsible decisions for personal and collective well-being (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2020). SEL instruction that succeeds in nurturing the growth of these skills exists alongside academic learning as a "commitment to the whole child" and is generally implemented not by an outside education specialist, but by the learner's classroom teacher (Durlak et al., 2011; Martínez, 2016, p. 20). Effective SEL provides an intentional framework for students both to cultivate emotional skills individually and to practice them in social interaction alongside their peers (Durlak et al., 2011). This intentional cultivation of personal knowledge and empowerment as a way of interacting with the experiences of learners promotes a focus on addressing inequity in the classroom and beyond (CASEL, 2020).

Current Relevance

CASEL (2020) breaks down the broad spectrum of effective SEL into five competencies and their related areas of knowledge and skills. These competencies are self-awareness, including self-confidence and identifying emotion; self-management, including organizational skills and stress-management; social awareness, including empathy and appreciating diversity; relationship skills, including communication and relationship-building; and responsible decision-making, including ethical responsibility and problem solving (p. 2). At its most effective, SEL addresses and connects multiple competencies and is interwoven with academic learning in order to "engage children on all levels—cognitive, emotional and behavioral" (Shechtman & Yaman, 2012, p. 562).

Engaging the whole child also means engaging that child's experiences and allowing those experiences to inform their learning (Medin & Jutengren, 2020). This may take the form of practicing and sharing the social and emotional competencies they are learning about. In one study assessing the efficacy of intentional SEL programming as compared to traditional instruction methods, Shechtman and Yaman (2012) incorporated SEL into fifth and sixth grade literature classes by having students interact with the academic material, which was a series of stories, on both an "informational" and "conceptual" level (p. 551). The informational level focused on the material of a story, such as the characters and order of events, while the conceptual level focused on the ways the students related to the characters and events of the story. At the conceptual level, students also explored questions about their emotions and experiences surrounding the concepts they were reading about through exploring open-ended questions and placing their thoughts and feelings along a continuum. In doing so, students moved "from understanding to feeling, from observation to self-inquiry" (Shechtman & Yaman, 2012, p. 551).

As a result of the SEL incorporated into literature classes, students in the Shechtman and Yaman (2012) study improved in their "motivation to learn, perceived classroom climate, and group cohesion" according to both self-reported student data and observations by teachers (p. 561). Teachers also

reported improved observed student behavior (Shechtman & Yaman, 2012). These findings are well supported by the literature, as successful SEL initiatives have been shown to improve both the learning environment and the student experience by increasing academic performance, reducing anxiety, and improving student attitudes and relationships (CASEL, 2020; Martínez, 2016). These benefits are not only short term. A meta-analysis of SEL programs across 213 schools, including kindergarten through high school, found that benefits of SEL "remained statistically significant for a minimum of six months after the intervention" across all education levels and school locations (Durlak et al., 2011, p. 13).

Effective SEL benefits students not only in their work as children; that is, in developing a sense of self, cultivating relationships with others, and learning about the world; but it also prepares them with necessary lifelong skills, as students need to be prepared with more than academic knowledge and technical skills in order to succeed in the modern world (Martínez, 2016). Martínez (2016) suggests that the priority of SEL should be "teaching children how to navigate emotions or solve conflicts (p.7). In her study of SEL implementation, teachers identified the ability to work in groups; solve problems; and be assertive, independent, and resourceful as the main skills required for their students to be successful in the future (Martínez, 2016). All social and emotional skills, these fit neatly under CASEL (2020) competencies self-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (p. 2).

When designing SEL instruction, the identities and backgrounds of students themselves must be taken into account from the start (Medin & Jutengren, 2020). Effective SEL, based in student experience, provides a framework for supporting multiple intelligences which themselves are rooted in "cross-cultural studies of intelligence" (Katz & Porath, 2011, p. 29). As the racial and ethnic diversity in America grows and awareness of diverse identities and experiences is rising, SEL also promotes the empathy and connection required to address issues of inequity (CASEL, 2020; U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). In one study of grades kindergarten through seventh in Canadian public schools with 60% English-language-learner students, intentional SEL increased students' awareness of the strengths of their peers and the

challenges they experience (Katz & Porath, 2011). Students in the study self-reported feeling greater empathy toward fellow learners described as “diverse” (Katz & Porath, 2011, p. 37). This newfound empathy not only decreased negative behavior in the learning environment, but also increased positive support from peers and resulted in a noticeable decline in racist statements and attitudes (Katz & Porath, 2011). Using SEL as a framework for incorporating multiple intelligences allowed students to reframe what it means to be intelligent in order to build “an inclusive, respectful learning community” (Katz & Porath, 2011, p. 38).

The incorporation of SEL into existing curricula is not without its challenges. Because most SEL programs are implemented and facilitated by existing school personnel, incorporating these initiatives can be a strain on the existing responsibilities of educators (Durlak et al., 2011). Martínez (2016) points out that success in implementing SEL relies on a commitment from teachers, especially when teachers are shown to embrace changes more positively when they “are involved and participate in the design and development of such change” (p. 9). She notes that taking on a major role in the creation and implementation of such programs requires teachers to weave SEL initiatives into lessons and curricula that are likely already in use. For teachers whose classroom success is primarily measured by academic metrics such as test scores, time limits in the classroom may in turn limit the amount of SEL incorporated if any portion of a lesson must be omitted to keep content learning on track. Teachers implementing SEL must also constantly reflect upon the success of the programming in order to maintain the feedback loop of an emotionally supportive learning environment with social and emotional growth (Martínez, 2016). The most successful practitioners of SEL regularly reflect on their program and its impacts on the students and classroom, then adjust programming as necessary (Martínez, 2016).

SEL faces another challenge in its ability to hold students’ attention. A study of SEL programming as a behavioral intervention in an elementary school found that children reacted negatively to SEL

initiatives that were predictable and followed the same instructional procedure with each lesson (Medin & Jutengren, 2020). Students in this study were also hesitant to endorse SEL initiatives because the initiatives were viewed as a punishment for or criticism of student behavior (Medin & Jutengren, 2020). Much like Martínez (2016) asserted that SEL interventions were more likely to be adopted by teachers who were involved in the design of the program, Medin and Jutengren (2020) suggests a collaborative implementation that incorporates student feedback during the design process in order to promote student engagement.

Capstone Significance

Social and emotional learning is the foundation of this literature review. Implementing SEL in education promotes short- and long-term benefits to students and their learning journey during and beyond the formative years (CASEL, 2020). It is critical that students learn the social and emotional skills that prepare them for a diverse and ever-changing world. The research question *Can the open space technology (OST) method be used to promote experiential social and emotional learning (SEL) in older elementary students?* seeks to find new ways to support SEL in education, especially to provide a framework for students to take on ownership of the learning process as recommended by Medin and Jutengren (2020). To take on greater agency in their learning, students must practice responsible decision-making and self-awareness to direct their interests and must collaborate with their fellow learners (Carver, 1996, p. 11; CASEL, 2020).

Experiential learning

Background

To learn experientially is to have a significant and personal interaction with the subject during the learning process (Joplin, 2016). In the practice of experiential learning, students focus on the "nature of inquiry," learning through observation, questioning, and evidence-gathering (Capps & Crawford, 2017, p. 498; Feyzioğlu, 2019). Carver (1996) provides four principal features of experiential learning,

that it is authentic, active and engaging, built upon student experience, and connected to opportunity (p. 10). Experiential learning that is authentic requires learners to use the practice of inquiry as described by those who do inquiry-based work (Ellwood & Abrams, 2017). Experiential learning may engage any dimension of knowledge, including mental, emotional, and physical (Joplin, 2016). Building upon student experience promotes a holistic understanding of concepts as opposed to traditional teaching that often presents abilities and skills as isolated from one another and the process of inquiry (Capps & Crawford, 2017; Joplin, 2016). More than providing an answer to the frequent question *When will I ever use this?*, learning built upon experience allows learners to connect skills and concepts for real-world use. The opportunity highlighted by experiential learning may be short term, such as ideas for further investigation of ideas in the learning space, or long-term, such as developing interests and skills that influence their career paths (Carver, 1996; Ives & Obenchain, 2006). In either case, learners are developing applicable skills and an understanding of how they connect to the real world (Ives & Obenchain, 2006).

Effective experiential learning implementation requires dedicated feedback, support, and a debrief (Joplin, 2016). This support often takes the form of scaffolding implemented by the instructor; that is, some aspect of support that can be gradually removed as learners take on more responsibility (van Umm et al., 2017). Feedback and debrief often happen simultaneously, and both are tools that assist the learner in processing newly acquired content in order to construct understanding (Joplin, 2016). In other words, it is the process of communicating, supporting, and reflecting upon ideas that allows one to learn from experience. Debriefs can begin internally but must be made external in some form—group discussions, journal entries, or presentations, for example—in order to be complete (Joplin, 2016). This helps the learner place their understanding among the collected knowledge of a body of both peers and experts, often allowing for immediate feedback.

Effective experiential learning both promotes and develops student agency and competence, as students are constantly building the knowledge and skills to face new challenges as they learn (Carver, 1996; Ellwood & Abrams, 2017). Learners focus on collaborative problem solving in order to construct understanding through their own experience (Feyzioğlu, 2019). By engaging themselves in the process of developing knowledge on a subject, learners are able not only to repeat a particular concept, but also to rationalize it, providing a foundation on which to build further understanding (Capps & Crawford, 2017; Joplin, 2016). In practice, this requires an educator to focus on the process a learner uses to arrive at an answer in addition to the correctness of the answer itself (Joplin, 2016).

The process of inquiry utilized in experiential learning has no required arrangement (Holmeier et al., 2017). The steps may happen in any order and may be recursive; that is, any step of the inquiry process may have other steps nested within (Holmeier et al., 2017). While there is a variety of phases of inquiry and experiential learning cycles, all center around a handful of main concepts: exploration, questioning, creating, reflecting, and sharing (van Umm et al., 2017). This process allows learners to authentically interact with their material and one another just as any real-world experiential learner, like a scientist, would do (Ellwood & Abrams, 2017). Concepts and skills should always be tied back to the features of inquiry to support learner understanding of the process of developing and acquiring knowledge (Capps & Crawford, 2017). Similarly, students should learn the factors, such as subjectivity and culture, that influence knowledge in all its domains, including procedural, conceptual, social, and epistemic (Capps & Crawford, 2017; van Umm et al., 2017).

The implementation of experiential learning requires scaffolding in each stage of the inquiry process in order to gradually shift responsibility for learning from the teacher to the student (van Umm et al., 2017). An example of scaffolding during the questioning stage might be starting with an educator-provided research question and later offering the opportunity to modify provided research questions, as students prepare to make a habit of developing and pursuing research questions of their own.

Scaffolding provides a pathway from teacher-directed to open inquiry (Ellwood & Abrams, 2017). Even after all scaffolds have been removed and learners are effectively pursuing open inquiry, the interaction of ideas provided by regular reflections and debriefs remain integral part of the inquiry process (Capps & Crawford, 2017).

Current relevance

Effective implementation of experiential learning has led to benefits in both learner engagement and conceptual understanding (Ellwood & Abrams, 2017; Joplin, 2016). The personal nature of experiential learning allows the learner to place their own value on different aspects of their learning, promoting engagement (Joplin, 2016). This experience-driven process of directing exploration and inquiry requires learners to develop their own interests as they concurrently construct knowledge (Feyzioğlu, 2019). Inquiry-based science education has been shown effective for ages elementary through college in narrowing achievement gaps and increasing academic performance across gender, ethnic background, and socioeconomic status (Ellwood & Abrams, 2017). At a high school level, presumably with more content knowledge and experience with the inquiry process, benefits include more positive attitudes about science, higher exam scores, and a greater understanding of concepts and connections based on written exams (Ellwood & Abrams, 2017). These findings were supported in another study from Ives & Obenchain (2006) in which experiential learning led to an increase of higher order thinking skills (e.g., questioning, problem solving, reasoning, argumentation, holistic thinking) with no loss in lower order skills (e.g., rote memorization, content knowledge) (p. 72).

Practitioners of experiential learning face a number of challenges in its implementation. Though it is the experience of the learner that is the focus, teachers still must have a high degree of involvement as they facilitate and shape learning to varying degrees based on the success of their students (Holmeier et al., 2017). This requires a great deal of assessment of both prior and acquired knowledge. During facilitation, teachers must judiciously provide information and activities that engage learners in

developing and pursuing their own inquiries (van Umm et al., 2017). Facilitators of experiential learning must both help their learners embrace the flexible nature of inquiry and embrace it themselves, allowing for collaboration and discourse (Ellwood & Abrams, 2017). Too often, the traditionally taught methods of inquiry are at odds with the values of experiential learning as an experience-driven, collaborative process (Ellwood & Abrams, 2017). Instead, educators conflate the process of inquiry, or "acting like a scientist," with the static procedure of the scientific method, disregarding the social interactions of peer discourse, debate, and review that characterize a real-world community of inquiry (Ellwood & Abrams, 2017).

Capstone significance

Experiential education focuses on using experience, typically inquiry-based, to both construct knowledge and help empower students in their own learning (Capps & Crawford, 2017). Social and emotional learning, the focus of this capstone project, relies upon experience-based growth, and successful SEL is by its very nature experiential. In turn, competency in SEL is essential in experiential learning because of the necessary collaboration, debriefs, and reflections. As students engage in the practices and skills that are essential to experiential learning, they are also nurturing an abundance of social and emotional skills, including self-efficacy, self-discipline, perspective-taking, appreciating diversity, communication, relationship building, identifying and analyzing problems, problem-solving, reflecting, and ethical responsibility.

Student-centered learning

Background

In student-centered learning, also called student-directed learning, students are the ones who generate opportunities for learning and knowledge construction in an open-ended environment rather than simply memorizing content (Lee & Hannifan, 2016). The learner takes on increased responsibility for their learning as they reflect upon the information obtained from their educational experiences,

processing and organizing it into their own understanding of the world (Estes, 2004; Lee & Hannifan, 2016). Student-centered instruction must be personally meaningful for the learners in order for them to "actively construct knowledge and skills" based on their learning experience (Lee & Hannifan, 2016, p. 709; Turner, 2011). Because student-centered learning is so heavily connected to learner experiences, it allows more flexibility in addressing different needs for learners at different points in their learning journey (Garrett & Shortall, 2016). In order to be successful, students must feel valued and supported motivationally, cognitively, and socially (Turner, 2011; Lee & Hannifan, 2016).

Among the main goals of student-centered learning is to promote interaction among students as they collaboratively construct understanding (Estes, 2004). At its most basic, this requires students to share with one another as both active talkers and listeners. In a learning environment where students typically turn to their teacher and not one another for understanding and affirmation, peer-to-peer sharing takes some practice (Estes, 2004). In the early stages of peer interaction, the teacher may encourage equal sharing by removing themselves from a location of focus, such as the front of the room, and have the students face one another instead (Estes, 2004). When communicating ideas and understanding with one another, students must be allowed and encouraged to do so without being held to external learning goals; that is, teachers should not prescribe responses and students should not feel limited by whether they have the "right" answer when sharing ideas (Estes, 2004). Restating their own ideas may help students formulate, understand, and communicate their ideas.

The increased responsibility placed on students in student-centered learning does not correspond to a decreased responsibility for the teacher. To facilitate the development and sharing of understanding and ideas among students, teachers must be ready to help students connect their existing understanding of the world to newly acquired information and concepts (Turner, 2011). This requires teachers to genuinely and actively listen to their students in order to support these connections, as teacher reinforcement of connections between classroom concepts and student-

centered science activities has been shown to promote better recall of science activities and the information learned during them (Volet et al., 2019, p. 1).

To be proactive in supporting student-centered learning, teachers must have a knowledge not only of their content area and how to teach it, but also the different ways students learn (Turner, 2011). A facilitator of student-centered learning must be proactive in providing student support for different learning styles, using varied and creative techniques to support student reflection (Lee & Hannifan, 2016, Estes, 2004). These reflections must make minimal use of "teacher talk" and rely instead upon "learner talk" as students construct and reorganize their knowledge both individually and collaboratively (Garrett & Shortall, 2016, p. 27).

Facilitating a student-centered learning space requires teachers to develop and maintain positive learning environments with clear expectations for behavior and quality of work (Turner, 2011). Students unfamiliar with the praxis of student-centered learning will require support incorporating prior knowledge as well as an initial framework for engaging with the content, relying on the teacher to scaffold their learning with guiding questions that lead to connections and the construction of knowledge. Creating opportunities for students to develop personal learning goals can promote engagement, as students who have a personal stake in their learning place more value on it (Lee & Hannifan, 2016). Making these goals specific will help students perceive them as more attainable, encouraging engagement. Teachers can allow further autonomy among student learners by encouraging students to seek out and select their own tools and resources for learning, placing emphasis on diverse student experience to create understanding (Lee & Hannifan, 2016).

Implementing clear expectations and promoting engagement in student-centered learning requires the facilitator to set clear expectations for not only for student work, but for their own as well. Teachers should "focus on what should be taught and frequently articulate why," explaining why the activity is important and how it helps connect to the overarching learning goal (Lee & Hannifan, 2016;

Turner, 2011, p. 124). When students understand the rationale of an activity, they are more likely to endorse it (Lee & Hannifan, 2016). This is the case even when the rationale does not line up with their personal goals. In classrooms where students are constantly asking when they will ever need to use certain information or a given skill, creating connections between their experiences and target concepts and skills promotes participation (Volet et al., 2019).

To reinforce these developing connections, teachers should model using evidence to support understanding and focus on "real instead of contrived issues" (Lee & Hannifan, 2016; Estes, 2004, p. 155). These *real issues* should be the kind of work that students would conceivably do in the future, asking questions and developing problems to tackle in what math educator Meyer (2014) calls "real work" (para. 5). In *real work*, the realness of the challenges students face in their learning is based on the tasks they are engaging in, not the world those tasks exist in; for example, instead of having students do the narrow, formal *fake work* using an equation to graph cell phone payments over time, *real work* asks students to involve themselves in asking the questions their work will seek to answer (Meyer, 2014).

Current Relevance

Even at the onset of student-centered learning, learners identify significant benefits to their education, with learners new to the concept perceiving the most benefits (Garrett & Shortall, 2016). Student-centered learning helps students develop adaptive skills that they will be expected to use later in life, such as critical problem-solving and collaborative work in the face of new challenges (Lee & Hannifan, 2016). In the classroom, student-centered learning allows students to feel less anxiety surrounding mistakes, as they are more comfortable getting feedback from peers (Garrett & Shortall, 2016). Student-centered learning promotes student autonomy, allowing students to feel more control over the outcomes of their actions and how their decisions affect their lives. Teachers who support

student autonomy have learners who show an increase in self-regulation, engagement, and academic performance (Lee & Hannifan, 2016).

Practitioners of student-centered learning do face significant challenges in implementation. Teachers can fall into the trap of expecting intrinsically motivated learning to come from externally motivated goals; that is, teachers err when they expect their own goals for their classroom to necessarily line up with those the students have, if any (Estes, 2004). Traditionally, the values of teaching tend to be centered on the teacher rather than being driven by learners and their reflections. Facilitators of student-centered learning must take on the daunting task of aligning the goals of the lesson or class with the goals of the learner (Turner, 2011). Instead of learning in pursuit of external affirmation or avoidance of negative consequences (such as being praised for a test grade or participating at a minimum to avoid disciplinary action), students who direct their own learning via their own goals show increased engagement (Lee & Hannifan, 2016).

For students and teachers unfamiliar with student-centered learning, establishing new communication norms for the learning space can be a challenge as well (Turner, 2011). Because students are typically accustomed to seeking the approval of their teacher in learning, a praxis that depends upon students learning from one another can be a difficult transition (Estes, 2004). Even when explicitly instructed to address one another rather than the instructor, many students initially struggle to engage in discussion with peers. Encouraging personal reflection and collaborative learning requires facilitators to emphasize the value of student experience and interaction over teacher approval. To validate and support learner experience and connections, teachers must be aware of their own biases and allow students to take the lead on making connections that are relevant to them (Medin & Jutengren, 2020).

Capstone Significance

The capstone project seeks to promote social and emotional learning through methods that prioritize student-centered learning. The praxis of student-centered learning aligns directly with multiple SEL competencies. These include self-management (goal-setting, discipline), self-awareness (recognizing strengths, self-confidence, self-efficacy), relationship skills (communication, teamwork), and responsible decision-making (identifying problems, analyzing solutions, reflecting). This requires a learning environment supportive of both learner collaboration and learner agency, both of which are qualities of environments with intentional social and emotional learning.

Open space technology (OST)

Background

Open space technology (OST), also called *unconferencing*, is a method of group organization used typically for conferences and other formal group settings (Carpenter & MacFarlane, 2018). In the implementation of OST, participants develop a collective agenda based on their own needs (Owen, 2008). All are expected and encouraged to place issues significant to them on the agenda. These participants self-organize into groups based on the proposed agenda, thus creating a participant-developed schedule of events. The method is especially useful for structuring groups of people to address especially complicated topics without a clear answer (Owen, 2008). The genesis of OST as a method of organizing conferences has its roots in the equitable communication and planning among the residents of the West African village Balamah when planning large-scale cultural events (Owen, 2008).

OST seeks to achieve two main goals: to promote effective communication and to make more effective use of time in both the planning and execution of the event (Owen, 2008). In the words of Owen, coiner of the term *open space technology*, the method should “combine the level of synergy and excitement present in a good coffee break with the substantive activity and results characteristic of a good meeting” (Owen, 2008, p. 3). OST is characterized by a high degree of flexibility as participants are

welcome and encouraged to move freely among sessions and, in doing so, take greater ownership over their experience (Carpenter & MacFarlane, 2018). This shared responsibility minimizes the time needed to plan and execute the event in comparison to traditional conference planning that requires huge amounts of front-end work, including developing and planning sessions, creating a schedule, sourcing facilitators, managing signups, etc. (Owen, 2008). The agenda produced using OST is developed, from brainstorming relevant topics to a schedule complete with session facilitators and participants, in under an hour (Owen, 2008). Moreover, these sessions are highly relevant as they come from the very participants they are meant to benefit (Owen, 2008).

The process of implementing OST is relatively straightforward. First, any and all participants are called to identify an issue of meaning to them related to the overarching question or theme, write it on a piece of paper, and post it on a—usually literal and physical—message board (Owen, 2008). Proposing a topic comes with the added responsibility of facilitating a session on the issue as well as submitting a report of the session afterward. Once all sessions have been proposed to the group, all participants immediately move to sign up for the sessions they plan to attend. The experience is meant to have the feel of a free for all marketplace as everyone signs up at the message board simultaneously, expanding and combining sessions as necessary. OST requires a "participatory mindset" as the creation of a group agenda will fail without participant engagement (Carpenter & MacFarlane, 2018, p. 72). To support OST requires providing a degree of autonomy to participants and providing a climate that promotes respectful feedback, collaboration, self-improvement, and "unconditional positive regard" (Carpenter & MacFarlane, 2018; Van Woezik et al., 2019, p. 4). Further support during the implementation process includes additional learning materials and access to experts, which should be provided upon request (Van Woezik et al., 2019).

Current relevance

Open space technology has been used successfully to organize conferences around professional development, community planning, product design, and more (Owen, 2008). More recently, educators have begun to experiment with OST in their curriculum, primarily in higher education (Van Woezik et al., 2019). In one study, OST was used as a curricular method with medical students in an ethics class (Van Woezik et al., 2019). While the students were self-selected high achievers and already intrinsically motivated to succeed in their learning, their complete lack of experience with OST left many frustrated and unsure. After an initial struggle, students began to explore their topical interests in voluntary meetings, then divided themselves into groups and structured their own learning. Over the duration of the course, students seemed to think more critically without having information sources given and at their fingertips. In what the authors called a "need for reciprocity," students took on responsibility in contributing to collaborative sessions which resulted in time being used more effectively (p. 16). At the end of the course, students in the OST group showed no statistical difference in test scores but did show improved motivation.

The study from Van Woezik et al. (2019), and the prospect of OST as an educational method in general, does come with its challenges. Because OST is primarily internally directed by the interests and needs of the group, it may not be the best method for achieving an external goal, such as a specific content outcome or skill. Of course, if the internal goals of the group are aligned with an existing external goal, such as in the Van Woezik et al. (2019) study, this issue can be minimized. The implementation of OST, especially with younger students, will require additional work from the teacher in the form of scaffolding the experience, helping students self-monitor their learning by providing guidelines for what successful learning looks like. The process of OST will also take greater time and effort on the part of the learners (Van Woezik et al., 2019).

Teachers can prepare students for success in OST by creating a learning space that affords students some amount of autonomy, necessary for them to feel a true sense of responsibility in their learning (Van Woezik et al., 2019). In an instructional setting, students obviously understand that they are being held to external goals of academic performance and behavior, and so educators must draw a distinction between self-direction in general and self-direction in the pursuit of personal goals for students to feel genuine levels of autonomy (Van Woezik et al., 2019). At the same time, the student-directed nature of OST in education does not mean that educators should feel powerless to make the case for their own agendas (Van Woezik et al., 2019). Students must remain in control but experience "productive levels of control" (Van Woezik et al., 2019, p. 4). This careful balance requires constant attention and reflection from the facilitator of OST: in this case, the teacher.

Capstone significance

Open space technology is the secondary focal point of this capstone project, as the project asks whether OST can be used to promote experiential social and emotional learning (SEL). As a form of student-centered learning, OST can help students develop their goals and processes of learning and is thought to promote a sense of responsibility and leadership in one's own learning (Van Woezik et al., 2019). The very structure of OST both necessitates and promotes SEL competencies, often regardless of the topics or issues explored during the process. Participants practice self-confidence and self-efficacy (competency: self-awareness) as they self-direct to present ideas for sessions and activities to a body of peers. Self-discipline, self-motivation, and goal setting (competency: self-management) are required to take on responsibility for one's experience, act on personal needs and interests, and make decisions about how to spend one's time (CASEL, 2020). Respect for others and perspective-taking (competency: social awareness) are at the root of OST, as each participant stands on equal footing and has the same right and obligation to meaningfully participate (Carpenter & MacFarlane, 2018). During all steps of the OST process, communication, relationship building, and teamwork (competency: relationship skills)

allow for the development and facilitation of relevant learning experiences. Finally, the goals of OST; identifying problems, analyzing solutions, and evaluating and reflecting; lie at the core of responsible decision-making as OST can help learners navigate difficult concepts by exploring them within a group of peers (Owen, 2008).

Summary

This literature review provides the basic understanding of major topics; social and emotional learning (SEL), experiential learning, student centered learning, and open space technology (OST); required to address the research question *Can the open space technology (OST) method be used to promote experiential social and emotional learning (SEL) in older elementary students?* An overview, expansion of current relevance, and significance to the capstone project are explored for each subtopic. In Chapter Three, I will provide a detailed overview of the project developed to address the research question, including supporting frameworks, audience and setting, and project goals and design.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

This chapter addresses the research question *Can the open space technology (OST) method be used to promote experiential social and emotional learning (SEL) in older elementary students?* The following sections will present an outline of the methods used to address the question as well as the curriculum project developed in response and its goals, design, intended audience and setting, implementation, and assessment.

Rationale

Intentional SEL provides numerous personal and intrapersonal benefits in both the short- and long-term by providing learners with skills they will need during their learning journeys and throughout their lives, such as effective collaboration, independence, and empathy and support for diverse identities and experiences (CASEL, 2020; Katz & Porath, 2011; Martínez, 2016). OST provides a framework for learners to practice and strengthen these necessary social and emotional skills in a way that is authentic, active and engaging, built on participant experience, and connected to future opportunity; that is to say, the framework that SEL is experiential (Carver, 1996). The experiential nature of OST further benefits learners by increasing engagement in learning and promoting higher-order thinking skills (Ellwood & Abrams, 2017; Joplin, 2016; Ives & Obenchain, 2006). The curriculum created in response to the research question also addresses a gap in the literature when it comes to OST in education, which is typically used by post-graduate students or by educators themselves and not by younger learners (Carpenter & MacFarlane, 2018; Van Woezik et al., 2019).

Curriculum Overview

This curriculum seeks to provide a framework for experience-driven social and emotional learning based upon the methods of OST. The curriculum is designed for use with summer campers ages

9-12 during an overnight summer camp at a residential environmental learning center in Tennessee. Though attendees of this camp historically identify primarily as White/Caucasian (76.65%) and reside in-state or regionally in the Southeast (89.85%), the participant- and experience-driven nature of OST makes it well-suited for adaptation to a wide range of identities and cultural backgrounds (Owen, 2008). Despite being currently used primarily with adult audiences, OST is shown in this curriculum to be adaptable to a variety of age groups. The curriculum is designed to be implemented in separate sessions to accommodate both planning and implementation, with the initial planning session lasting one hour and the resulting activities themselves lasting one hour each. There will also be an intermediate planning period for the staff facilitator to fit proposed activities into a staffed schedule and for activity leaders to prepare. Ideally, the planning and implementation sessions will take place on separate days of the six-day residential camp.

The core social and emotional competencies that this curriculum seeks to develop are laid out by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL]. These five core competencies; self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making; are presented in detail in the literature review (CASEL, 2020). The framework and implementation of the curriculum are based on the method of OST as also outlined in the literature review. This method was selected because it bears many of the hallmarks of experiential education, also discussed in the literature review, by providing a framework for experiences that are authentic, active and engaging, built upon a foundation of learner (participant) experience, and externally debriefed (Carver, 1996; Joplin 2016).

Setting

This curriculum takes place at an overnight summer camp for ages 9-12 at a nonprofit residential environmental learning center in Tennessee with three six-day camp sessions taking place annually in June and July. These camp sessions are run in addition and sometimes simultaneous to other

overnight camps, including multi-age family camps and science and adventure camps for teens. During their camp sessions, 9-12-year-olds participate in a variety of traditional summer camp activities, such as evening campfires and daily swim time, as well as camper-chosen outdoor activity sessions. These sessions may be based in natural history, cultural history, or other interest areas, and are developed and led by seasonal summer staff. Past sessions have included explorations of the surrounding river and forest in search of wild reptiles, a hands-on introduction to homestead wood crafting, and a whodunit-style investigation of the area's invasive species. Campers also take part in a culminating hike of either four or eight miles depending on their age and comfort level.

The variety of activities and level of autonomy afforded to campers as they direct much of their own experience are reflected in the camp goals. Those goals are for campers to:

1. Cultivate and pursue curiosity of self, others, and the natural world;
2. Be challenged to grow in their confidence and ability to make responsible decisions, thereby developing their role in a social and ecological community;
3. Experience the natural world as a place of play, wonder, fun, and a source for deeper levels of meaning; and
4. Experience the "addictive rush of discovery" and have heightened positive feelings about learning (Internal document, 2018).

Meeting the above goals requires a development of social and emotional skills described by the five CASEL competencies and promoted by the OST framework. The first two goals are especially reliant upon the development of social and emotional skills. Competencies addressed by the first two goals are listed respectively below with specific examples taken from the CASEL 5 framework (2020) that are directly promoted or addressed by the process of the OST framework.

1. Self-awareness *(Linking feelings, values, and thoughts; experiencing self-efficacy; developing interests and a sense of purpose*); social awareness (*Recognizing strengths in others*; *showing*

concern for the feelings of others); relationship skills (*Communicating effectively, developing positive relationships*); and responsible decision-making (*Demonstrating curiosity and open-mindedness, reflecting on one's role*); and

2 Self-awareness (*Having a growth mindset*, *experiencing self-efficacy*); self-management (*Showing courage to take initiative, demonstrating personal and collective agency*); and responsible decision-making (*Anticipating and evaluating the consequences of one's actions; reflecting on one's own role to promote personal, family, and community well-being; evaluating personal, interpersonal, community, and institutional impacts*) (CASEL, 2020).

The curriculum will be delivered by camp staff, which includes both full-time educators and seasonal summer staff. As the activity sessions during the OST curriculum are facilitated primarily by the participants, the role of staff will be focused mainly on ensuring group safety and aiding with group management as necessary.

Audience

The target audience for this curriculum is summer campers ages 9-12 attending a six-day overnight camp at a particular residential environmental learning center. In years 2018 and 2019, each of the three annual sessions (two in June and one in July) averaged 40.5 campers of a total of 197 campers (Internal document). 83 of these campers attended sessions in 2018 only, 67 attended

Table 1

Home States of Target Campers 2018-2019

Home state	Number of campers	Percentage of campers
In-State		
Tennessee	138	70.05
Out of State – Southern Region		
Alabama	3	1.52
Florida	5	2.54
Georgia	11	5.58
Kentucky	4	2.03
Louisiana	1	0.51
Mississippi	3	1.52
North Carolina	8	4.06
South Carolina	1	0.51
Texas	2	1.02
Virginia	1	0.51
Total	39	19.80
Non-Southern US		
California	2	1.02
Illinois	2	1.02
Indiana	2	1.02
Missouri	9	4.57
Ohio	4	2.03
Wisconsin	1	0.51
Total	20	10.17

in 2019 only, and 44 attended in both 2018 and 2019. Of the 197 total campers, 50.25% were reported female, 49.24% were reported male, and 0.51% were unreported. Campers hail primarily from within the state of Tennessee (70.05%) or the southern US (19.8%), with only 10.17% of campers coming from outside the South (see Table 1, percentages rounded to nearest tenth). Regions are classified by the United States Census Bureau (1995).

Campers who identify primarily as White/Caucasian make up the majority of camp attendees at 76.65%, with campers of color primarily identifying as Hispanic or Latino (6.09%) or White/Hispanic (4.06%). Table 2 shows a breakdown of the guardian-reported race/ethnicity of campers who attended the target camp with percentages rounded to the nearest tenth. Attendance of campers who identify primarily as either White/Hispanic or Hispanic or Latino is clustered primarily in 2018, as a partnership between the nonprofit and a local elementary school offered a reduced rate to students of that school, who were primarily from Hispanic and Latino communities. Only four of the campers in 2019 who identify primarily as White/Hispanic or Hispanic or Latino were new campers, i.e., they had not attended the previous summer. Campers represented by the heading “Multiple identities chosen” attended in both 2018 and 2019, selecting a different racial/ethnic identity each year, with two campers selecting Bi-Racial in 2018 and White/Hispanic in 2019 and one camper selecting White/Hispanic in 2018 and Hispanic or Latino in 2019.

Table 2

Reported Race/Ethnicity of Target Campers 2018-2019

Reported race/ethnicity	Number of Campers	Percentage
White/Caucasian	151	76.65
Hispanic or Latino	12	6.09
White/Hispanic	8	4.06
Bi-Racial	7	3.55
Black/African American	5	2.54
Asian	2	1.02
Other	1	0.51
Unreported	8	4.06
Multiple identities*	3	1.52
Total	197	100

Though the geographic and racial/ethnic makeup of the target camp is largely homogenous, the presented curriculum is naturally adapted to campers with a wide variety of identities, backgrounds, and experiences due to the participant-driven nature of the OST framework. Because OST relies on the interests and experiences of its participants in order to provide relevant and authentic learning, the method is necessarily adaptable to a wide and diverse audience. As the reach and relevance of the target camp grows over time, so too will this curriculum grow to support its participants.

Curriculum frameworks

In order to reach the curriculum goal of promoting experiential SEL, the framework used must provide learning experiences that are authentic, active and engaging, built and building upon learner (participant) experience, and externally debriefed (Carver, 1996; Joplin 2016). The OST model was chosen because it already bears many of the hallmarks of experiential learning by providing a participant-centered and -driven process for engaging experiences that are relevant to participants' lives in terms of both process and content (Owen, 2008). In this summer camp curriculum, campers follow the OST framework by developing, facilitating, participating in, and debriefing their own summer camp activities, thereby engaging in practicing social and emotional competencies alongside their peers in activity sessions that they develop largely autonomously.

Target outcomes for SEL are provided by the CASEL 5 competencies; self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making; and their sub competencies, which are discussed in detail in the literature review (CASEL, 2020). The design of the curriculum will be done in the Canva platform using an internal curriculum template and based on an internally developed experiential learning model. This cycle utilizes six phases—Invite, Explore, Wonder, Create, Reflect, and Share—in a flexible order that may recur at any point in the process. A learner assessment of curriculum activities will be embedded to provide the debriefing required by the

experiential education method (Joplin, 2016). More information about experiential learning cycles and phases of inquiry can be found in the literature review.

Summary

This chapter of the capstone project paper presents an overview of the curriculum created to address the question, *Can the open space technology (OST) method be used to promote experiential social and emotional learning (SEL) in older elementary students?* This chapter has further outlined audience and setting of the curriculum, the theoretical and curricular frameworks used, and the reasoning behind the frameworks and formats selected for the project. In chapter four, I will share what I have learned over the course of the project, from initial interest to investigations of the literature to completion of the curriculum itself.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

Introduction

My capstone project explores the question *Can the open space technology (OST) method be used to promote experiential social and emotional learning (SEL) in older elementary students?* To address this question, I developed a curriculum based on the OST method that provides a framework for summer campers to develop and strengthen social and emotional skills through the process of brainstorming, developing, and facilitating peer-led camp activities (Owen, 2008).

I have experienced significant personal and professional changes since beginning my project. In the time between writing the first three chapters of this paper and drafting my curriculum, I left my position at Great Smoky Mountains Institute at Tremont after five years to move closer to family. For the first time in as many years, I will not be coordinating any summer youth programs, and my project is no longer directly relevant to my professional life. Currently, I coordinate environmental education programs for Pennsylvania Resources Council and, as an education department of one, have no existing framework to support any summer camp programming. However, I will have the opportunity to develop camp programming in the future.

General reflections

I had the opportunity to test parts of my curriculum with summer campers of the target age group during June and July 2021, which allowed me the ability to incorporate camper feedback into my finished curriculum. I was reassured to find that campers overwhelmingly enjoyed the experience of creating and leading their own camp activities, and I was impressed by the depth of creativity and compassion that campers showed throughout the process. As suggested by Medin & Jutengren (2020), seeking out and implementing learner feedback during the design process did seem to promote engagement among campers.

One major point of improvement suggested by campers was more dedicated time to prepare for activities they were leading, and a lengthier preparation period with an included planning template was added to the curriculum. Additionally, staff noted that campers (and some fellow staff) were disgruntled by the idea of off-limits activities, locations, and materials in a curriculum intended to support camper-led activities. This valid concern was addressed by sharing with campers the reasons for any off-limits activity elements; for example, a popular camp-wide game was deemed off limits because the amount of support staff required even for a smaller group of campers could not be accommodated with concurrent activities.

There were times that I struggled as a writer to know where specificity was needed and where it would be unhelpful, especially in terms of the curriculum. One of my goals was to create a curriculum that could be easily modified for different camps, but because materials and methodology may be totally different from camp to camp (ex. A nature camp vs. a computer camp), I chose to err on the side of under-prescribing in the hopes that it would leave more room for creativity. Just as sessions developed using the OST method are dependent upon their participants, so too should the Camper Clubs curriculum change to support each camp group. While the curriculum is intentionally camper-driven, it is also designed to leave room for modifications by staff, as SEL interventions are more likely to be adopted by educators who had a hand in developing them (Martínez, 2016).

Revisiting the literature review

Open space technology

It is no surprise that open space technology (OST) played an enormous role over the course of this capstone project, as it was the model for the finished curriculum (Owen, 2008). Structural similarities between Owen's (2008) OST and the Camper Clubs curriculum include dedicated time to brainstorm and propose sessions, express interest in peer proposals, sign up for sessions, and ultimately participate in them alongside their peers. In the time between proposing and leading sessions, learning

materials and staff expertise are made available for Camper Club leaders (Van Woezik et al., 2019).

At the same time, there are substantial differences between OST and the Camper Clubs curriculum. First and foremost is the necessity of the staff sponsor. This staff member fills two roles: During the process of brainstorming and proposing Camper Club activities, staff sponsors add their signature to all proposals that are safe and feasible for the time frame, and during the Camper Club activities themselves, staff are present throughout each to ensure safety and behavior management.

The Camper Clubs curriculum also does away with the "Rule of Two Feet," a guiding principle of OST that encourages participants to move freely among sessions to maximize relevancy in session attendance (Owen, 2008). In the Camper Clubs curriculum, campers are required to remain with the activity they sign up for due to their status as minors and the staff acting as *in loco parentis*. However, the Rule of Two Feet could easily be incorporated into a modified version of this curriculum for older campers.

Another significant departure from the traditional OST method is that the Camper Club schedule is created by camp staff instead of the participant group. This decision was made largely because of additional scheduling considerations that the young participants simply do not have the background information to support. While the curriculum can certainly be modified to support more participant input in scheduling, at the very least, a scheduling staff member needs to have a say in who is available to act as staff sponsor in order to accommodate time that staff have off or dedicated to other duties. There may be other considerations as well that influence the sessions staff are able to support, such as the number of lifeguards available for water-based activities.

Additionally, the staff-created schedule was incorporated as a scaffold for supporting emotional growth of young participants. It can be a big emotional ask for young campers to ultimately be responsible for deciding—and justifying—which activity sessions make it onto the Camp Club schedule and which do not. At the target age of 9-12 years old, it is also expected that not every camper is already

an expert at dealing with tough emotions like perceived rejection from their peers. Of course, this is not a shortcoming of the campers, but a feature of growth, and this scaffolding contributes directly to the goal of intentional SEL (van Umm et al., 2017).

Social and emotional learning

Among the most helpful resources featured in the literature review was the CASEL Five, a set of five well laid out social and emotional competency areas with multiple examples of each (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2020). Because SEL as a concept is so pervasive and has so many opportunities for relevance and implementation, it can be easy to get overwhelmed by the question "Does this support SEL?" The CASEL Five provided an easily accessible framework for matching specific SEL skills to points in the curriculum to determine whether the activity promotes competency.

The CASEL Five also supported the development of a chart featured in the curriculum that showcases which elements of the Camper Clubs curriculum best support which SEL competency areas. This chart is intended to be a useful tool for anyone hoping to modify the curriculum with the goal of maximizing the attention paid to specific competency areas. The competencies practiced during the Camper Club process create a positive feedback loop, as many of the competencies describe a quality or skill identified as necessary to promote a successful environment for OST, including "honest and open feedback, respect for the ideas and opinions of others, …[and] collaboration rather than competition" (Van Woezik et al., 2019, p. 4).

Another critical component of the literature review was research detailing how successful SEL initiatives are introduced. In a study of SEL implementation among schoolchildren, Medin & Jutengren (2020) point out that young learners are reluctant to participate in SEL instruction they believe to be a result of their own perceived behavioral shortcomings. To present Camper Clubs as an exciting opportunity rather than a commentary on camper self-improvement, the introduction of the curriculum

focuses on the similarities between staff-led camp activities and the peer-led activities they are about to plan. Challenging campers to take on many of the same responsibilities as the camp staff gives them greater autonomy and frames Camper Clubs as an activity that campers are already responsible enough to take on.

The research in hindsight

Beginning the research phase of the project, I had yet to decide on a setting for the modified OST curriculum I hoped to create. This led me to broadly research experiential education and student-centered learning to explore implementation strategies and successes of activities that rely on greater autonomy from learners. In hindsight, these topics would have been a more helpful focus if I had chosen a classroom or other formal education setting in which I would need to justify the amount of time and level of student agency necessary for OST for, say, school administration.

During the research process, I decided on summer camp as a curriculum setting for several reasons. First, my professional background is in residential experiential education, a field whose learning centers traditionally turn to residential camps in the summer as a way of continuing programming outside of the school year. Summer camps are also generally unhampered by the constraints typically found in formal education settings, such as regimented schedules and content requirements, and allow a larger variety of options for materials, locations, and activities. The greater ratio of learners to adults also offers greater staff support throughout the entire process of brainstorming, planning, attending, and leading Camper Clubs. This is especially helpful given that the Camper Clubs curriculum requires far more facilitation staff than the single facilitator in traditional OST due to the need for adult supervision for young campers. While the summer camp setting was an easy decision for me to make due to my background, I do now wish that I had included a section I the literature review on summer camp in general to make a stronger case for its fitness as a natural setting for intentional SEL.

Additions to the literature

I quickly discovered in my research that there is a dearth of OST being used in educational settings and/or with young people. I found one instance of OST being used in an educational setting: as an organizational model given to students to organize their own learning in a medical school ethics class (Van Woezik et al., 2019). In this setting, the group participants were high-achieving adults who were intrinsically motivated to provide themselves with a collaborative and successful learning experience. Though OST was used in this study by a very different group for very different reasons, it was exciting to find an instance of OST being used in an educational setting in the literature.

I was unsurprised not to find anything in the literature about OST being used with learners below college age. While OST is becoming more popular in the education field as an organizational method for conferences of teachers and administrators, my experience at such conferences has suggested that most adult educators are quick to dismiss OST as a viable method for use with young people—even in informal settings—because of the amount of autonomy required.

I hope to have added to the literature an awareness that OST provides a phenomenal framework for supporting SEL growth in young people. The process achieves instantaneous buy-in by focusing on the interests of the participants, cultivating relevant and personal growth. Regardless of whether a participant ends up leading or even proposing an OST session, OST requires the practice of all five CASEL (2020) competencies as all participants have a say in shaping the sessions available to them.

Project implications

As it stands now, the Camper Clubs curriculum is unlikely to be supported in a formal education setting because it has no metrics or scaffolding to guarantee the meeting of specific content topics, especially regarding academic standards. Though the OST method used for medical students in the Van Woezik et al. (2019) study was successful in a formal graduate school setting, participants had the advantage not only of being adults who are presumably socially and emotionally fluent, but they were

intrinsically motivated with the preexisting knowledge and academic flexibility of those pursuing graduate-level education.

I do hope, however, that the curriculum supports the need for intentional SEL by providing an opportunity for young people to learn even in the "off months" of summertime. Many of the SEL competencies practiced in the Camper Clubs curriculum directly overlap with the main skills identified by teachers as those students need to be successful in the future, including collaborative problem-solving (Martínez, 2016, p. 11). As adult educators realize that preparing young people for "the real world" involves far more than teaching facts and figures, the Camper Clubs curriculum provides an opportunity for young people to practice social and emotional skills in a way that is relevant, accessible, personal, and, perhaps most importantly, fun. Through Camper Clubs, young learners take on greater agency in their learning by cultivating their own interests and strengths while celebrating those of others, empowering them to take on collaborative responsibility in their learning and their future.

Project limitations

The Camper Clubs curriculum is somewhat limited in that it relies on a setting in which youth are already experiencing greater degrees of autonomy as preparation for the activity. The activity could be successful in any setting in which intentional SEL is regularly incorporated, including a formal classroom setting. The curriculum does, however, require a greater degree of staff input than the typical activity due simply to the need for adult supervision in each small group. This is atypical of traditional OST in which participants are adults and can self-direct. Of course, there is also a financial barrier to the setting featured in the curriculum, residential summer camp, as program cost can be prohibitive for many families.

Future research

By design, the Camper Clubs curriculum is easily modified to accommodate a range of ages, materials, locations, available time, etc. Several modifications immediately spring to mind as areas for

future research. Giving campers more agency in creating the Camper Club activity schedule would promote further SEL practice and would be well suited to an older group. The target group of 9-12-year-old campers may be ready to take on greater responsibility in scheduling during an additional round of Camper Clubs once they have experienced the process from start to finish and can more easily envision the schedule they would be tasked with creating. The Camper Clubs curriculum could also be expanded for older groups to fill multiple days of camp activities. With enough support, a modified OST method could be used for high school-aged campers to plan an entire week of overnight camp!

A wonderful challenge would be creating an opportunity for OST to be used with young people in a formal education setting. The high amount of participant agency required in the process would allow students a unique opportunity for self-direction, a skill supported by the literature review as being important in learning (Lee & Hannafin, 2016). Regardless of the age group or setting, a critical element of the curriculum that cannot be omitted is the debrief, as learning must be informed by experiences and participants must process educational experiences for greatest success (Estes, 2004; Medin & Jutengren, 2020).

Summary

I am thrilled to contribute to social and emotional learning in the field of experiential education through a curriculum that gives young learners greater freedom to explore their own interests and their relationships with their peers. It is my hope that the Camper Clubs curriculum will open further opportunities for educators and learners alike to cultivate social and emotional growth, especially in ways that promote learner agency. I believe such SEL that celebrates the curiosity and collaborative spirit of young learners will contribute to a society of thoughtful, community-minded adults in whose hands the world will soon be.

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