USING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING TO INCREASE EMPATHY IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL EDUCATORS
An Evidence-Based Project

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SETTING AND BACKGROUND

Setting
- <u>Location</u>: local elementary school
- <u>Time</u>: professional development inservice

Background
School-aged children with sensory processing impairments can have difficulties with maintaining attention, interacting with friends, and learning in their academic environments (Critz, Blake, & Nogueira, 2015). A majority of primary school educators hold neutral or negative attitudes towards the inclusion of children with special needs in regular education classrooms (de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2010). These attitudes are related to several variables, including experience with inclusive education and working with children with special needs (de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2010). Educators' attitudes could increase in positivity if they have more resources and support (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002).

PREVIOUS EXPERIENCE/TRAINING WORKING WITH CHILDREN WITH SENSORY PROCESSING IMPAIRMENTS
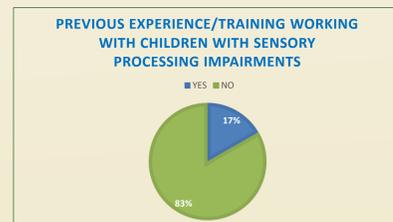
PIO QUESTION

Does experiential learning in professional development inservices increase empathy in and provide positive learning experiences for elementary educators?

SIGNIFICANCE

- Supports the *OT Practice Framework's* statement that occupational therapists are responsible for providing learning experiences that equip professionals with knowledge and skills (AOTA, 2002)

- Supports occupational therapy's distinct value of improving health and quality of life for children and youth through facilitating participation and engagement in occupations (AOTA, 2016)

- Increases awareness of and sensitivity towards children with special needs by coaching educational staff (AOTA, 2016)

- Improves various aspects of occupational performance by increasing knowledge of various impairments, increasing confidence in abilities to provide and care for individuals with these impairments, and increasing empathy

LITERATURE REVIEW

Inclusion and the Elementary Classroom Environment
- Modern classrooms are complex sensory environments; people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) exhibit atypical responses to complex sensory input; are more likely to underachieve academically as a result of sensory challenges (Ashburner, Ziviani, & Rodger (2008)
- ¼ of teachers perceived that children with sensory impairments could be integrated in mainstream classes/ regular education teachers revealed more favorable attitudes towards inclusion after training (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002)

Experiential Learning
- Active experimentation followed by reflection, discussion, analysis, and evaluation; goals include impelling people to show compassion (Polk, 2013)
- Teachers are more likely to reflect on experiences which focused on classroom teaching; more likely to report a change. Results include transitions from teacher- to learner-centered approaches to education and instruction (Girven, Conneely, & Tangney, 2016)

METHODS

Participants
- 12 elementary school educators (selected by the school's principal) teaching mainstream Kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grade students at an elementary school in El Paso, TX

Design
- Client-centered, evidence-based project
- Implemented by the occupational therapist during a professional development inservice at the local elementary school

Implementation
- Participants completed 5 elementary school activities or tasks while simulating a sensory processing impairment
- Participants were given 5 minutes to complete each activity.
- Each activity was followed up with group reflection on experience and debriefings on classroom interventions

Outcome Measure
- A homegrown, Kirkpatrick Level I Likert-scaled training evaluation (Kirkpatrick, 1994) was used to collect data on the participants' reactions to the experiential learning inservice.

RESULTS

Inservice Implementation
(% strongly agree)
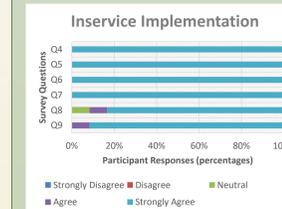
- Objectives/agenda clearly communicated: **100%**
- Activities in line with objectives: **100%**
- Activities delivered clearly: **100%**
- Room size/atmosphere suitable: **100%**
- Began/ended on time: **83.3%**
- Time sufficient for learning: **91.7%**

Inservice Experience
(% strongly agree)

- Activities met learning style, expectations: **91.7%**
- Activities relevant to educator needs: **91.7%**
- Enhanced my knowledge of sensory processing impairments: **91.7%**
- Increased empathy: **91.7%**
- Can apply what I learned in my class: **91.7%**
- Satisfaction with inservice: **91.7%**
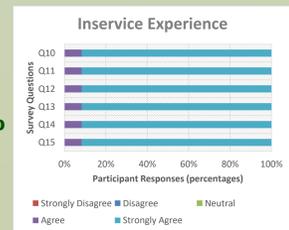
Qualitative Themes

Empathy	Impact
- "I understand students better" - "Great insight into what children go through" - "I now know what they go through"	- "Hands-on activities were effective" - "I can use these in my classroom" - "Hands-on activities with debriefings was fantastic!"

SUMMARY

Use of Experiential Learning
Results supported the use of experiential learning to increase empathy and provide positive learning experiences for elementary educators. Results were consistent with prior findings supporting the benefits of experiential learning, indicating a high likelihood of success for future school-based experiential learning inservices. Through experiential learning, educators could experience increased empathy for children with various impairments and increased support for inclusion in mainstream classrooms. Results provide opportunity for future research and expansion of experiential learning trainings.

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