**USING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING TO INCREASE EMPATHY IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL EDUCATORS**

**An Evidence-Based Project**

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### SETTING AND BACKGROUND

**Setting**
- **Location:** local elementary school
- **Time:** 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).

### 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)
- 1/4 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 compelling 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, & Tangey, 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**
- “I understand students better”
- “Great insight into what children go through”
- “I now know what they go through”

**Impact**
- “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.

### REFERENCES

- Avramidis, E., & Minnaert, M. (2010). Regular primary schoolteachers’ attitudes towards inclusion after inservice training. Teaching and Teacher Education, 58, 91.7%
- Polk, D. M. (2013). Cultivating self awareness with team inservice for Nurse Practitioners, 11(7), 91.7%