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Fostering Social-Emotional Competence In Preschoolers

Celina Waddy

A Capstone project for the Bachelor of Arts in Human Development and Family Studies

Fostering Social-Emotional Competence In Preschoolers

Introduction

In order to form and maintain healthy relationships with peers and adults, preschool-age children must develop the skills needed to manage and express their emotions appropriately. Without these social-emotional competence skills, young children's success in current and future relationships may be hindered. In order to address preschoolers' social-emotional competence, I created a 3-day lesson plan, which covers emotion identification, expression, and regulation, and delivered it to a group of preschoolers at the Hartnell Community College Child Development Center in Salinas, California.

Needs Statement

The early childhood years build the foundation for developing social-emotional competence (Halle et al., 2014). Parents and educators can facilitate growth in helping preschoolers learn to cooperate and empathize with their peers through building social-emotional competence. Social-emotional competence is the process of gaining skills that guide in the recognition and regulation of emotions and effective decision-making (Domitrovich, Greenberg, & Rhoades, 2009). Social-emotional competence impacts the quality of young children's relationships and this, in turn, impacts their success in school.

Research suggests that social-emotional competence affects the quality of children's relationships. As young children develop social-emotional skills, they acquire the capability and confidence to build strong bonds, cope with their own emotions, and learn how to problem-solve. (Darling-Churchill & Lippman, 2016). Young children need to understand their own emotions and those of the people around them in order to optimally develop and attain future well-being

(Auerbach–Major et al., 2003). Highly developed social-emotional competence is a predictor of preschool children having the ability to conduct successful social interactions with adults and peers (Duncan et al., 2017). Accordingly, the success in interacting socially with others guides children into learning more about how to form healthy relationships (as cited in Auerbach–Major et al., 2003). When continually poured into, these healthy relationships form the foundation of the support systems that children carry with them as they develop. Further, through exploring the concept of emotions in relationships to themselves and others, children are also given the task of inhibiting behaviors.

Nakamichi (2017) found that children with high inhibitory control—the ability to control and restrain impulses in response to stimuli—and emotion regulation were more popular among peers. The higher level of popularity is due to the fact that children who are skilled in self-regulation and inhibiting behaviors have better social skills and fewer behavioral problems, making them easier with which to get along (Domitrovich et al., 2009). These skills in navigating social interactions and inhibiting any emotional outbursts in social settings equip young children to form healthy relationships with their peers. Positive and effective social skills learned and mastered at a young age can then be carried into adulthood (Auerbach–Major et al., 2003). In further regard to the immediate effects of the development of social-emotional competence, children with the discussed interpersonal skills are also benefited academically.

The acquisition of the skills needed for positive interactions with others allows preschool children to have an easier time with school adjustment and academic success (Duncan et al., 2017). Children with developing social-emotional competence are often well-liked by school peers and have an easier time forming meaningful relationships than young children who lack

these skills (Auerback-Makor et al., 2003). In turn, children with social-emotional competence have positive feelings toward school, engage more in the classroom, and achieve more than children who lack these social-emotional skills (Auerback-Makor et al., 2003). Social-emotional competence also predicts school readiness (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004). Social-emotional competence is vital in preparing children for the expectations placed on them to focus and engage in the school environment from Kindergarten and beyond (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004). Further, the capacity to regulate behaviors and emotions with the expectations of the settings in which preschoolers are placed is a major factor in developing social-emotional competence, which affects school adjustment and achievement in kindergarten (Dimitrovich et al., 2009).

My project will involve working with preschool-aged children to increase their developing social-emotional skills. Given that relationship quality and school success are positive outcomes of developing social-emotional competence, I have created a three-day lesson on social-emotional competence for the preschoolers at the Hartnell Community College Child Development Center in Salinas, California.

Development Application

In addition to physical and cognitive development, preschool-aged children develop within the social-emotional domain. Around the age of 2 or 3, children begin to reflect on the concept of emotions. According to Bretherton, Frtiz, Zahn-Waxler, and Sinclair (1999), around the emerging preschool stage of development, young children begin to talk about their emotions, the emotional experiences of others, and understand that emotions are connected to other's desires (as cited in McDevitt & Ormrod, 2004). For example, a preschooler may recognize that

another child got angry and that is the reason that the angry child pushed someone else. As well as expressing emotions, children in the preschool ages of 3 to 5 are learning how to regulate emotions (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2004). During the first two years of life, infants and toddlers are able to exhibit anger, fear, and happiness through facial expressions, laughter, crying, and simple speech in toddlerhood (Caulfield, 1996). As they enter into the preschool years and with the expansion of emotions, coping and emotion regulation are tasks that they are learning to grasp as they face stressful situations. While infants may learn to self soothe by sucking their thumb, preschoolers may use the modeling of important caregivers in their lives to learn how to cope with emotionally-charged situations between themselves and peers or adults (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2004). During the preschool ages, children are beginning to understand other people's perspectives in situations and this is when empathy (i.e. consideration of another's experiences and feelings) gradually develops (Decety, Meidenbauer, & Cowell, 2018). The development of empathy requires high levels of emotional regulation. According to Panfile & Laible (2012), regulation refers to the ability of a person to monitor the intensity of a specific emotion within a distressing situation in order to achieve a goal or cope. Because preschool-aged children are just beginning to explore and discuss their emotions, empathizing with another while simultaneously trying to sort through their own feelings can be a challenge. Children must first be able to identify an emotion and then find healthy ways to express that emotion before they can practice the complex process of adding the emotions of another into their own thinking (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2004). However, because they are in the process of developing empathy, with support from adults, children's empathetic responses towards others can be further developed (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2004).

Consideration of Diversity

My project will be conducted at the Hartnell Community College Child Development Center in Salinas, California. According to the Hartnell College Child Development Center (2019), the ethnic composition of the preschoolers in the center is 79.7% Hispanic, 5% Caucasian, 1.7% Filipino, and 13.6% two or more races. The Child Development Center's ethnic diversity is fairly representative of the entire Hartnell Community College population as the ethnic composition of currently enrolled students is as follows: 64.4% Hispanic, 21.4% White, 4.79% Asian, 1.97% African American, 1.52% Two or More Races, 0.4% American Indian, and 0.28% Pacific Islander (DATAUSA, n.d.). My lesson will be taught completely in English, which could potentially be a barrier to learning if English is not the primary spoken language for my participants. I will be working directly with a small group of seven preschool boys from the center; other children in the center could benefit from participating in my lessons. The ethnic makeup of the group of boys is 50% Hispanic, 25% two or more races (Caucasian and Hispanic), and 25% Caucasian. Because I will only be working with young boys, the gender differences in the ways in which boys are reared may impact the children's current emotional development levels and engrained attitudes. For instance, according to Malatesta and Haviland (1995), anger expression in girls is typically followed by a harsh reaction from a parent, whereas anger expression for boys is received with more grace (as cited in Garner, Robertson, & Smith, 1997). The parents of young girls are more likely to expect higher levels of emotional regulation than parents of boys (Garner, Robertson, & Smith, 1997). Given that my lesson focuses on emotional regulation, boys may have a harder time with the content because of expectations for them to not regulate their emotional expression. Because I am lacking in gender diversity, I will

not be able to see and document these potential differences first hand. There is also the potential that the boys that I work with have been raised with less prompting to regulate the expression of their strong emotions.

According to Saarni, cultural differences can shape how different people deal with and express emotions (as cited in McDevitt & Ormrod, 2004). The children who participate in my activity may have cultural beliefs around emotional expression and regulation than the ones that my culture has engraved in me. My cultural background and beliefs regarding emotional expression that come from my upbringing are also aspects to be aware of as I am relaying potentially sensitive information to the preschoolers of the Hartnell Community College Child Development Center. Further, according to McDevitt and Ormrod (2004), children who come from lower-income households tend to be prone to more emotional challenges than that of children who come from middle-class families. Because of the location of Hartnell College, I expect that a portion of my participants will come from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. Therefore, my participants may be experiencing emotional difficulties that may make the activities of the lesson challenging, yet hopefully still effective.

Learning Outcomes

I intend to provide three, 20-minute lessons to a group of preschool children enrolled in the Hartnell Community College Child Development Center in Salinas, California.

By the end of the project, students will:

1. identify and visually represent an emotion.
2. demonstrate one controlled way to express their emotions.
3. demonstrate one technique for coping with anger.

Method

Day 1

When I first arrived in the classroom, I told my seven male preschoolers the purpose of me being there. I then read a book to the children titled *The Color Monster: A Pop-Up Book of Feelings* (Llenas, 2015). Throughout the reading, I asked the children questions regarding the color monster's described emotions. After about 5 minutes of the story reading, I explained to the children that just like the color monster put each of his feelings into separate jars in order to identify and control each one in the story, they would also put one emotion into a cut-out paper jar. I asked them to choose what emotion out of the five in the story (i.e., anger, sadness, happiness, calm, fear) they wanted to put in their paper jar. As they chose an emotion, I labeled each of their jars and prompted them to decorate their jar with the emotional representation of their choosing. See Appendix A.

Day 2

On the second day, I asked the class a few follow up questions from the reading of *The Color Monster: A Pop-Up Book of Feelings* (Llenas, 2015) from the previous day to refresh their memories of the previously discussed emotions. After a few minutes of a refresher, I explained to the class that we would be expressing our emotions through dance. First, I sang the the song "How Are You Feeling Today?" (Mullet, 2018) to the children and demonstrated possible ways to move in happiness while singing the rhyme. Then, I repeated the song and the children sang with me. Next, I had the children all stand up and again explained that they would be singing the song they learned and moving in a way of their choosing to express each of the five emotions (i.e. anger, happiness, sadness, fear, and calm).

Day 3

On the third day, I started the activity by reminding the children that this would be our last activity together. Then I explained to the class that we would be talking about anger. I asked the children to explain the emotion of anger briefly in their own words and then asked them all to make their angry bodies and faces. Next, I told them that we would be discussing ways to help them feel better when they enter into situations that make them feel angry, such as conflict with a peer. I then read the story *Tucker Turtle Takes Time to Tuck and Think* (Letini, 2007), which can be accessed from the link: <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/scriptedstories/tuckerturtle.ppt>. In the story, a preschool-aged Turtle named Tucker hits, kicks, and yells at his friends. Through the story, he learns that when he gets mad he can perform the tucking technique instead of lashing out at his peers. The story then goes through the four steps of acknowledging his anger, taking a moment to stop instead of reacting, tucking inside his turtle shell and taking 3 deep breaths, and then thinking of a solution to his problem. After a combined total of about 10 minutes of reading and discussing the story, I had the children stand up and we practiced the Turtle Tuck technique to remain calm in anger- or stress-inducing situations. I told the children to once again make their angry bodies and faces and together, acknowledge out loud that they were feeling angry. Then I prompted them to stop, tuck into their turtle shells with their arms, take three deep breaths, and then stand up straight and examine how they felt after tucking. I ended the activity by explaining to the children that anytime they feel angry, one technique to cope with the emotion is to practice the turtle tuck and then decide how to react in the situation. To conclude the activity, I thanked the children for participating and gave them each a sticker to commemorate our time together and the emotional concepts that the children had learned.

Results

Learning outcome 1 was that participants would identify and visually represent an emotion (i.e. anger, sadness, fear, happiness, and calm). I believe that this learning outcome was met. During our reading of *The Color Monster: A Pop-Up Book of Feelings* (Llenas, 2012), the children commented on the color monster's portrayals of the five emotions (i.e. anger, sadness, happiness, fear, and calm), and made faces and sounds to represent the different emotions throughout the story. See Appendix B. In the story, the main character put all of his emotions into a jar, and I gave the children the task to do the same with an emotion of their choice. After the story reading, the children chose the emotion that they wanted to put in their paper jar, and they were able to represent their emotion through their drawings in their paper jar. All of the six participants accurately identified and visually represented one of the five designated emotions. See Appendix C.

Learning outcome 2 was that participants would demonstrate one controlled way to express their emotions. After I taught the children the words to the Mullet's (2018) rhyme, "How Are You Feeling Today?", I encouraged them to sing with me and practice showing me what each emotion looked like before they stood and expressed the emotions through dance and movement. Only 3 of the students participated and expressed the specific emotion that we sang about (i.e. anger, sadness, happiness) while they were sitting. See Appendix D. Moreover, when I prompted the students to stand and move to each emotion that I sang with their whole bodies, they began to get distracted and follow my movements instead of expressing each emotion in their own way. There were two students who expressed the majority of the emotions through dance, but the other few students seemed distracted and didn't clearly express the emotions

through movement. See Appendix E. Nonetheless, because the majority of the students expressed a couple of emotions in song form and movement while we remained sitting, I believe that this outcome was partially met.

Learning outcome 3 was that participants would demonstrate one technique for coping with anger. I believe that this outcome was not met. After I read the students *Tucker Turtle Takes Time to Tuck and Think* (Letini, 2007) and explained to them that we would be practicing the turtle tuck, I proceeded to teach them the tuck sequence. See Appendix F. Although the boys did follow my prompting and go through the motions of stopping, thinking, and tucking, I do not believe that they fully comprehended that the technique should be used when they are in situations that cause them to be angry. The students were quite antsy during the story reading, and when I asked them questions about what they could do when they were angry, I was not given any clear answers. That was the moment when I realized that the concept was not getting through to them as I had intended. Although they were able to perform the steps of the Turtle Tuck technique, I believe that they did not entirely grasp the purpose behind the technique. Therefore, I identify learning outcome 3 as not being met.

Discussion

Overall, I believe that my project was a success. Throughout my three days working with the children from the Hartnell Child Development Center, my participants learned a lot about emotions. Because the group of preschool boys that I worked with are in the process developing their emotional awareness, expression, and regulation, I believe that my project helped the participants to explore the issues revolving around social-emotional competence. The entertaining and emotionally descriptive books and activities allowed for the participants to

explore emotions through the perspective of others (i.e. the Color Monster character) and themselves when expressing emotions through song and dance. Because they are just beginning to develop empathy for others as they work on their own emotional expression, the emotion dance and the emotion jar representation allowed for the participants to gain a deeper understanding of the concept of their own emotional experiences. I hope that their teachers will continue to nurture their social-emotional development so that their development of empathy can be scaffolded and continue to grow.

If I had the opportunity to complete this project again, I would have completed my two final lesson plans in a different area. The children and I were sitting at a table as I taught them the “How Are You Feeling Today?” (Mullet, 2018) song, and I had them stand around the table to dance to the song. By having the table in front of them, I feel as though this limited their ability to move freely. I believe that moving into an area that was more open, such as a circle time area, would have encouraged more movement and emotional expression. I believe that allowing for this freedom of movement and expression would have allowed the children to fully meet learning outcome 2 of demonstrating one controlled way to express emotions. I also think that if I had spent more time reviewing each emotion specifically and teaching them the song, then they would have had a better concept of what I was specifically asking them to do in terms of emotional expression through dance. I do not believe that learning outcome 2 was too advanced; however, I think that changing the environment and spending extra time on the lesson would have improved the results. As far as the Tucker the Turtle Tuck Technique, I would have to have like to have had more time to explain the concept. If I had time for a more extensive lesson plan over a longer period of time, I would have liked to use appealing tools, such as

puppets and other props. I think that more discussion, story time, and visual representation of the concept of tucking in anger-inducing situations would have been more easily absorbed for the preschool age. Nevertheless, I feel that my participants had fun during the lessons, gained more awareness of emotions, and learned how to express emotions, which was the overall goal of my project.

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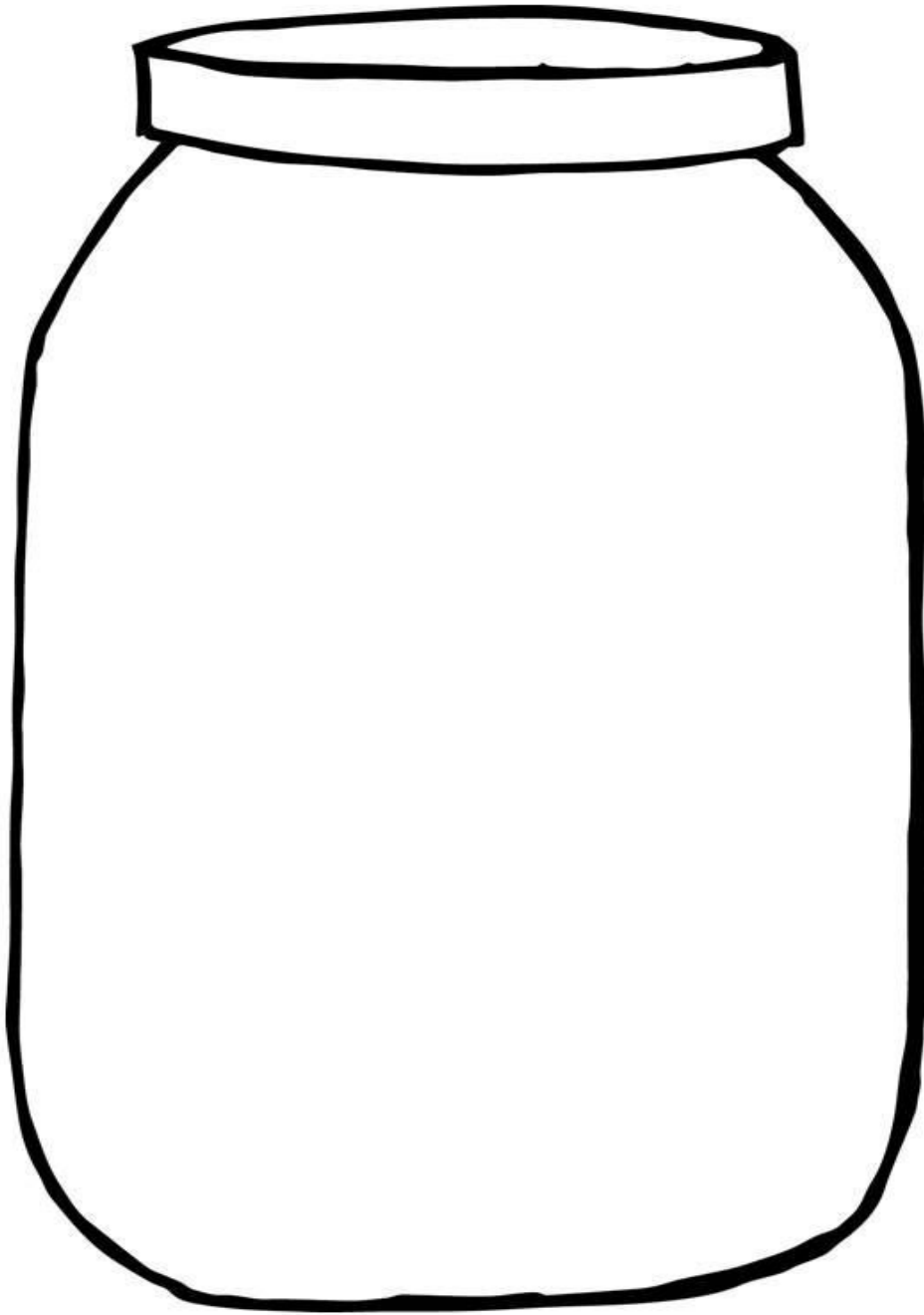
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Appendix A

Picture of Blank Feeling Jar



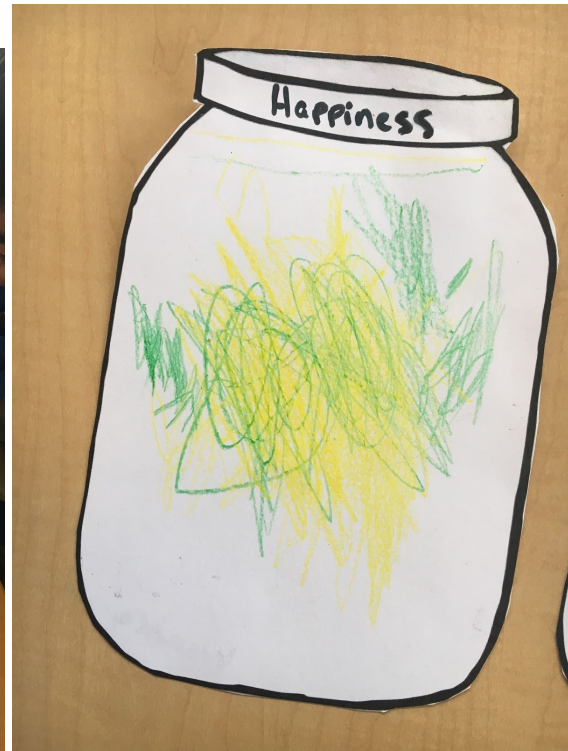
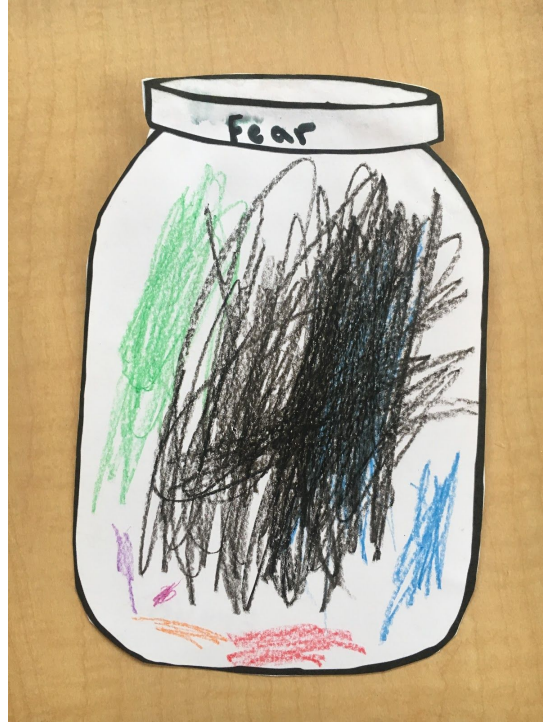
Appendix B

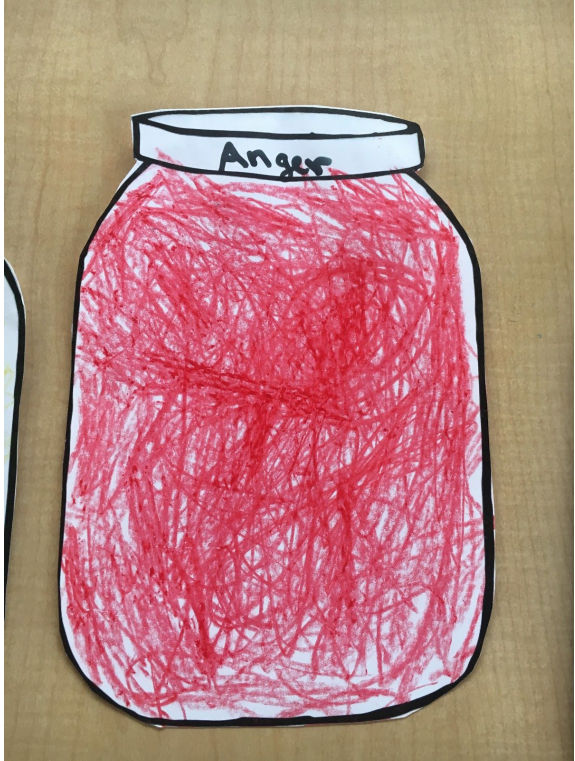
Reading of The Color Monster: A Pop-Up Book of Feelings and a student expressing anger



Appendix C

Examples of labeling and students creating emotion jars





*Appendix D**Emotions Song: How Are You Feeling Today? By Sarah Mullet**Teaching the emotion song (Examples: Sad and Excited)*

How are you feeling today?

Oh how are you feeling today?

I'm happy, happy and happy.

That's how I'm feeling today.

*

How are you feeling today?

Oh how are you feeling today?

I'm (inserted a different emotion each repetition, i.e. sad, angry, scared, calm, excited)

That's how I'm feeling today..



Appendix E

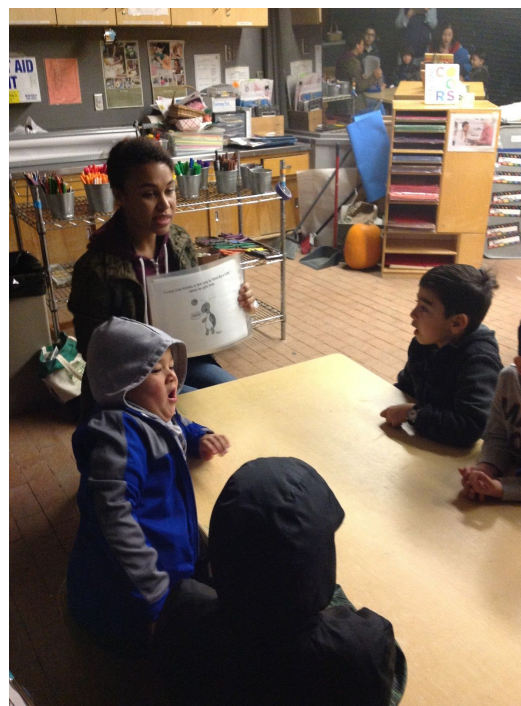
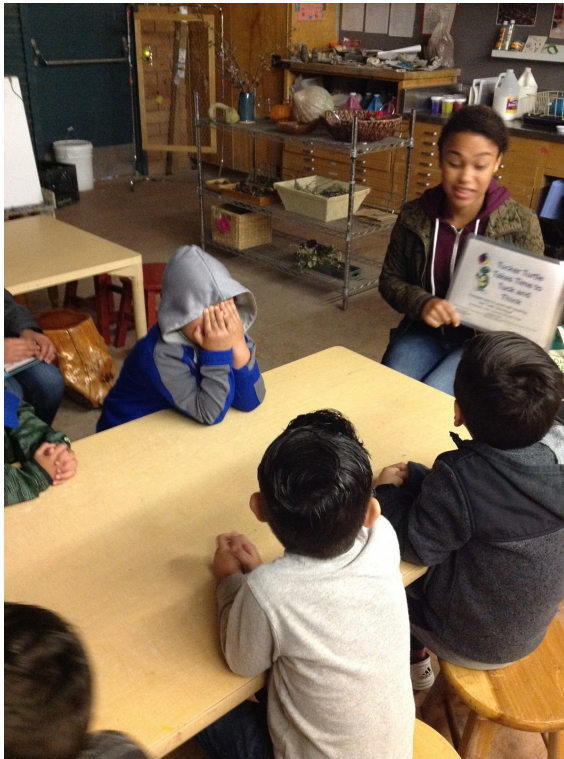
Video of emotions dance

https://drive.google.com/file/d/12pMqxidM0_UmOFz1bgyADIGSK36oTRwz/view?usp=sharing

Appendix F

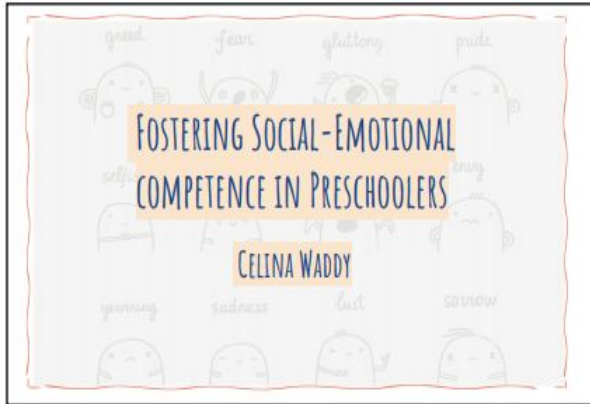
Video and pictures of the turtle tuck technique

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1upNhP-RG_GN6nZGCGIE9SF326HbjRoha/view?usp=sharing



Appendix G

Final Capstone Presentation



NEED

Social-emotional competence consists of skills that guide in the recognition and regulation of emotions and effective decision-making (Dimitrovich, Greenberg, & Rhoades, 2009) .

Social-emotional competence is needed in order for young children to empathize and cooperate with others.

- Relational Skills
- Quality of Relationships
- School Success

DEVELOPMENT

Preschool Age (3-5 years old)

- Emotional awareness and expression
- Emotion Regulation
- Empathy


LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of the project, students will:

1. identify and visually represent an emotion.
2. demonstrate one controlled way to express their emotions.
3. demonstrate one technique for coping with anger.

METHOD

- Seven preschool boys from the Hartnell College Child Development Center in Salinas, Ca
- 20 minute lessons over three days



**HARTNELL
COLLEGE**



METHOD

Day 1:

The Color Monster: A Pop-Up Book of Feelings (Llenas, 2015)

- Activity: Emotion jars

Learning outcome 1: Students will identify and visually represent an emotion.

METHOD

Day 2:

"How Are You Feeling Today?" (Mullett, 2018)

- Activity: Emotions Dance

Learning Outcome 2: Students will demonstrate one controlled way to express their emotions.

"How are you feeling today? Oh, how are you feeling today? I'm happy, happy, happy, happy. That's how I'm feeling today."


METHOD

Day 3:

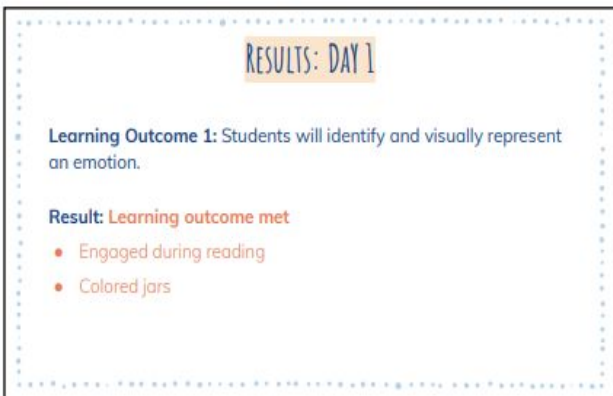
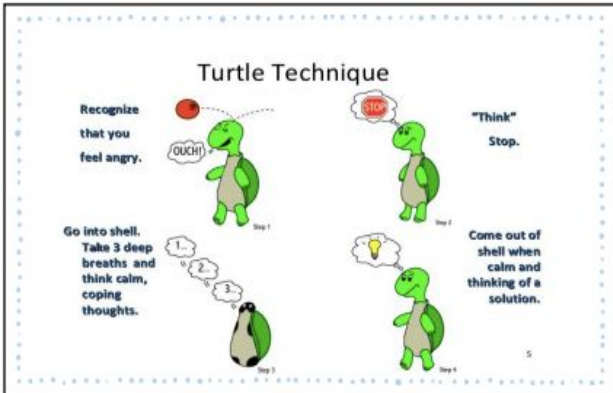
Tucker the Turtle Learns to Tuck and Think (Lentini, 2007)

- Activity: Tucker the Turtle tuck practice

Learning Outcome 3: Students will demonstrate one technique for coping with anger



A scripted story to assist with teaching the "Turtle Technique" by Nicholas Lentini, University of South Florida, 1998/2007



RESULTS: DAY 2

Learning Outcome 2: Students will demonstrate one controlled way to express their emotions.

Result: Learning outcome partially met

- Performed minimal movement
- Distracted by surroundings

EVIDENCE



RESULTS: DAY 3

Learning Outcome 3: Students will demonstrate one technique for coping with anger.

Result: Learning outcome not met

- Performed the Turtle Tuck Technique
- Lack of concept comprehension



DISCUSSION

Overall, a successful and positive learning experience!

Improvements

- Change of environment for movement activities
- Extend and restructure the lesson of the Turtle Technique

THANK YOU! & QUESTIONS?

FOSTERING SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE IN PRESCHOOLERS

CELLINA WADDY