

Findings from an arts-based social-emotional intervention for young children in Mexico City

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Background & Context

Children in poverty and high stress contexts have more difficulty understanding and coping with emotions, which in turn can affect later social and academic milestones (Izard et al, 2008). School-based programs focused on improving children's social-emotional learning have been found to improve development in this area, as well as in general behavior and general academic performance (Durlak et al, 2011). However, much of the global research is focused on interventions targeted at youth or children in primary school, and less is known about how to meaningfully engage younger children in social-emotional learning activities. This issue is becoming increasingly relevant as enrollment in preprimary and early childhood education programs is growing around the world.

Research from the United States has shown that arts-based programs can be an effective way to engage young children in social-emotional learning. Specifically, arts-based programs have been shown to reduce young children's stress and disruptive behaviors, as well as improve social skills (Lobo & Winsler, 2006; Brown & Sax, 2013; Brown et al, 2016). Little is known about how arts-based social-emotional programs can influence children's development in other contexts. Further, limited research exists on how teachers outside the United States perceive and engage with these types of interventions.

Research Question

What are the perceived effects of an arts-based social-emotional learning program on emotional processing for young children and their teachers?

Setting

The Healing and Education through Art (HEART) intervention was implemented in 40 early childhood education (ECE) centers across Mexico City during the 2018-2019 school year. Communities that experience high levels of community violence were targeted. HEART has been implemented in over 120 schools in Mexico City at different times, but this study focused on the most recent cohort of teachers and parents receiving the training.

Intervention & Research Design

Teachers trained in HEART through a week-long participatory workshop, followed by shorter (day-long) refresher trainings during the school year. The art activities use multiple types of media and have three focus areas: healing, learning and fun. The "healing" activities involve using arts activities to help children understand, express and communicate feelings and emotions related to stressful experiences in their lives. The "learning" activities engage children in broader academic learning concepts and topics through the arts. The "fun" activities that are simply

intended to foster children's joy and happiness. Activities are designed to be delivered at least twice per week.

This study is a qualitative evaluation of the perceived changes in social-emotional development experienced by teachers and children participating in the HEART program. Previous studies of HEART have focused primarily on changes in child development and learning, but this evaluation broadened the scope to include teachers as well. Teachers were incorporated as the primary stakeholders in this study because previous research and experiences with HEART implementation in Mexico and elsewhere have identified that not only children, but also their teachers may be benefitting substantially from the art activities. We wanted to gain a better understand of this relationship as a pathway to improving children's development and learning.

Data Collection & Measures

This study conducted key interview informant interviews (KIIs) with 12 teachers implementing the HEART program. The questions in the interview guide focused on program implementation, changes teachers observed in children after participating in HEART activities, changes teachers perceived in themselves after participating in HEART activities, and any challenges experienced while implementing the program.

Analysis

Interview transcripts were collected using audio recorders and then transcribed into Spanish and English. The codebook to analyze the interview data was jointly created by the Principle Investigator (PI) and a MEAL officer from the Save the Children Mexico office. The PI and MEAL office coded two of the 12 transcripts separately, and then came together to review their codes. After discussion and revision to the codebook, the two coders analyzed the rest of the transcripts independently using Dedoose software.

Results

Teachers overwhelmingly described positive changes for themselves and for children. Teachers mentioned effects for themselves in three main areas: their personal development, changes to their teaching practices, and relationships with their family. All respondents also described positive changes in children's emotional processing or regulation. Some teachers gave specific examples of an individual child whose behavior changed over the course of the program, and others described changes in the overall classroom environment. Common responses that related to group changes were around ability to calm down and follow directions, and generally improved cohesion of the children in their class. Teachers reported that they felt that the breathing exercises helped children better regulate emotions and deal with stressful situations. In addition, one teacher mentioned that she felt that the HEART activities helped to reduce absenteeism.

Conclusions

The results of this study suggest that HEART is perceived as an effective intervention for improving emotional regulation and processing for both teachers and children in Mexico City. Respondents reported that the emotional regulation techniques taught in the program improved the learning environment in the classroom, and also helped individuals learn to regulate their emotions more productively. Better mastery of skills like reducing aggression in high-violence contexts like Mexico City may also support other positive life outcomes.

References

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