
Impact of Mediator Mentors Service-Learning on College Student Social-Emotional Expertise and Cultural Competence

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Abstract

Mentorship in the field of service-learning has many variations. The utilization of peace circles has been on the rise as a way of bringing inclusion and cultural awareness when interacting with diverse perspectives in a group setting. Research on the impact of service-learning experiences on college students reflects that participant in these high-impact practices in higher education lead to positive outcomes through engagement in active learning practices that will impact their future careers. The purpose of this study was to investigate the potential factors that impact college students' own growth and development within mentorship service learning experiences in virtual settings with school-aged students. Using Likert-style retrospective survey questions with open-ended responses, this mixed-methods research explored the impact of participating in mentorship service learning on college students' development of social-emotional and cultural competence. The findings of the study are presented in a descriptive approach which led to conclusions and recommendations to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the Mediator Mentors program at Fresno State University to positively impact the growth and development of college students in the areas of social-emotional expertise and cultural competence.

Keywords: Peer Mentoring, Peace Circles, Service Learning, Social-Emotional Expertise, Cultural Competence

1. Introduction

Mentorship is classified as a service-learning experience which is categorized as a high-impact practice universities utilize to increase engagement and build lifelong skills while providing a hands-on learning experience that is both beneficial to the mentor, the mentee, and the overall community culture (Allen et al., 2006). Mentorship in the field of service learning has taken on many forms; one of which is mentoring in the form of peace circles. This is a way to bring inclusion, strengthen

social-emotional skills and bring about cultural change to those involved in the practice (Ragins and Kram, 2007). Likewise, in this study, college participants of service-learning through mentoring school-aged children using peace circles reported growth in social-emotional skills related to communication as well as in cultural competence, specifically underscoring the ability to better understand and communicate with people from different cultures.

Peace circles are defined as a restorative practice derived as an alternative to zero-tolerance policies which were in effect in schools across the country (Kervick et al., 2019). As a result of implementing this restorative talk approach, schools have looked into effective ways of adapting such practices. This approach resulted in schools working collaboratively with college campuses to provide mentorship peace circles to benefit both the p12 students and the college mentors who are engaging in a service-learning experience through their campus (Osterman, 2000). Fresno State has developed a mentorship service-learning experience for college students within Peace and Conflict Studies classes (PAX 100). College students taking these courses can embark on a service-learning experience in partnership with high-risk and low-socioeconomic schools to gain valuable skills and experience in the field.

This study is designed to understand how the Mediator Mentors program at Fresno State has benefited college students throughout their service learning. The study is specifically looking into the impact of their mentorship role on the development of stronger social-emotional expertise and cultural competence. By fostering these skills, college students can access a deeper level of learning that spans beyond the course content and develop into more adaptable and understanding adults.

1.1. Background

The Mediator Mentors program at Fresno State is designed to support the communication and conflict-resolution development of school-aged students through a mentorship program involving college students (Lane-Garon and Richardson, 2003). The Mediator Mentors program was designed for a face-to-face setting. Due to the pandemic, college students worked remotely with school representatives to offer virtual peace circles. These peace circles were aimed to target the growth of school-aged students' ability to manage conflicts between their peers and foster their social-emotional skills by building virtual relationships during the COVID-19. During this global pandemic, research of Grover et al., (2020) highlighted that all students, higher ed included, needed additional support with their social-emotional needs due to heightened anxiety and stress (Grover et al., 2020) and feelings of isolation (Urbina-Garcia, 2020).

The college students who usually are a part of the Mediator Mentors service-learning are undergraduate students studying Child Development, Liberal Studies, Communication, or Social Science. These fields are connected to the key goals of the program (US Congress, 1993). This service-learning experience strives to meet the needs of the community while providing hands-on opportunities for college students. The experience allows them to further reflect on their own growth in the areas of cultural competence and social-emotional skills (Parker and Bickmore, 2020). The program's goal is to provide 10-12 hours of structured conflict resolution support to students from various low socio-economic schools and districts in the area (Cassinero et al., 2018).

1.2. Purpose of the Study

The aim of this single-phase mixed-methods survey research project is to understand how college students' cultural competence and social-emotional expertise changed as a result of their participation in the Mediator Mentors program. Previous research has been conducted regarding the Mediator Mentors program at Fresno State as part of the Peace and Conflict Studies coursework. The partnership between the Mediator Mentors program and local schools has been beneficial to both the college mentor and the school-aged student mentee in the area of cultural awareness and relationship building (Lane-Garon et al., 2007). By engaging in deep reflection about their transformative service-learning experience, college students strengthened their social-emotional expertise and cultural mindset (Bickmore, 2004). This study aims to bring initial insight on how college mentors involved in the mentoring service-learning experience, in the form of virtual peace circles, will develop more social-emotional skills and cultural competence.

While there is a body of knowledge on the impact of peer mediation and mentoring programs on school-aged students, research available on the impact of service learning in this context is limited. In order to fully understand the complete impact Mediator Mentors had on the college students involved, we must conduct research involving human subjects to gain insight through college students' perspectives. Many insights can be learned from students' self-reflection, self-rating, and thorough responses to the open-ended questions on this survey. The results of this study will help strengthen the positive impact the Mediator Mentors program has had on college students to strengthen their communication skills and cultural competence.

1.3. Research Questions

1. What is the impact of the Mediator Mentors service-learning experience on the cultural competence of college students?
 - a. Is there a significant difference between the cultural competence of college students before and after the Mediator Mentors service-learning experience?
2. What is the impact of the Mediator Mentors service-learning experience on the social-emotional expertise of college students?
 - b. Is there a significant difference between the social-emotional expertise of college students before and after the Mediator Mentors service-learning experience?

2. Literature Review

The literature examines the high-impact practices seen throughout higher education and how these active learning approaches assist students in solving complex problems, engage in the curriculum in a meaningful way, and apply their knowledge to real-world situations (Kinzie, 2012; Kuh and Schneider, 2008). College students are found to have a stronger sense of purpose and motivation in school when provided opportunities for hands-on learning experiences beyond the classroom walls (Lanning and Brown, 2019). Furthermore, college students who have a vested interest in the subject matter or academic goals show enhanced critical thinking, interpersonal, and leadership skills (Astin et al., 2000) which leads to overall social-emotional growth (Correia and Bleicher, 2008), heightened social awareness of complex social problems (Parks, 2000) and cultivating a holistic perspective proven to benefit personal development (Rhodes et al., 2006).

There are also significant benefits for school-aged students participating in mentoring partnerships, especially in low socio-economic contexts and with at-risk youth (Freedman and Jaffe, 1993). Early research supports that children who have an at-risk classification are more likely to be positively impacted by mentoring partnerships through their school (Galbo, 1986). Findings from Freedman and Jaffe (1993) on effective mentoring programs show that in order to obtain positive traits and developmental process outcomes for both the college student mentors and the student mentees, programs should provide ongoing dedicated mentoring time in a welcoming, comfortable, and structured setting that also allows for adaptable mentor practice based on the mentee's needs.

More specifically, school-aged students facing a myriad of challenges have been positively impacted by mentoring programs that target developing social-emotional skills and their cultural competence (Thompson and Kelly-Vance, 2001). According to a Tierney et al. (1995), students who had a mentor reported 3% higher grades and had a higher self-efficacy due to participation in mentorship with college students. Bruce and Bridgeland's (2014) research also indicates that youth who participate in long-term mentoring relationships also exhibit higher levels of resilience to external and internal risk factors.

2.1. Mentoring using Peace Circles

Mentoring has taken on many forms, one of which is the restorative practice of peace circles. Peace circles are a way to resolve conflict and eliminate the need for zero-tolerance policies and allow for multiple viewpoints and perspectives during the conflict mediation and social-emotional learning processes (Estes, 2017). The primary goal of peace circles is to mitigate barriers and stereotypes through the facilitation of honest dialogue to restore relationships (Kervick et al., 2019). Peace circles provide a safe space for the mentor and the school-aged mentee to expand their social-emotional intelligence and cultural competencies through mediation and ongoing facilitated dialogue (Greenberg et al., 2003).

Research shows college students also experience gains in academic, social-emotional, and career development skills through mentoring in peace circles (Bruce and Bridgeland, 2014). Additionally, being part of the immersive peace circle mentoring experience, college students have ample opportunities for self-reflection which is found to foster an improved mindset (Hogan, 2013; Latham et al., 2020), reduce bias, and increase insight into cultural competence across lines of difference (Hardy et al., 2016). Thus, this study on the impact of service learning through mentoring using virtual peace circles on college student social-emotional expertise and cultural competence is centered in the literature findings while also framed by experiential learning theory (Kolb, 2014) and social-emotional learning (Oberle et al., 2016).

2.2. Theoretical Frameworks

Kolb's (1986; 2014) experiential learning theory espouses that when new abstract knowledge is tied to concrete experiences with reflective practices, deeper long-term learning will occur. Thus, through hands-on and active experiences, experiential learning models offer differentiated opportunities that, in contrast to traditional lecture methods, allow for transformative life-long learning (Zijdemans-Boudreau et al., 2013). Whereas traditional lectures focus primarily on content delivery through instructor led presentation, experiential learning optimizes on student involvement in and practice of new learning in context. More engaged learning opportunities promise today's college students to a greater extent than traditional classroom-based instruction alone (Tinto, 2010). They lead to more peer and faculty interaction, higher levels of student engagement in and outside of the classroom.

In addition to Kolb's experiential learning theory, the Social-Emotional Learning Framework (Oberle et al., 2016) was used as a foundation for understanding how mentoring in peace circles can also impact the development of social-emotional and cultural expertise (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2011) of participating college students. In alignment with Kolb (2014) Oberle et al., (2016) purport that true development of social-emotional intelligence, and personal growth and well-being requires learning and teaching experiences beyond the classroom. In addition, deep social-emotional development requires particular attention to the cultural and contextual factors within and beyond the learning environment as these impacts when, how, and which newly acquired skills might be used by the learner. While Oberle et al. (2016) center on the social-emotional learning of school-aged children in school environments, the context of the study regarding the participation of college students in elementary and secondary schools along with the alignment to experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; 2014) and the overlap of the literature findings regarding the benefits of mentoring on social-emotional learning and areas of cultural competence for college students provided a strong fit for this framework.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants and Selection

Fresno State undergraduate students taking Peace and Conflict Studies with the Director of the Mediator Mentors Project were purposely sampled for this study. Criteria for inclusion is participation as a Mediator Mentors within the 2020-21 academic year who facilitated virtual peace circles with secondary students in local school districts. Participants will be 18 or older in order to be included in the research study. The researchers contacted 15 participants once the study was approved through departmental level IRB. Purposively sampled college students were asked for voluntary participation in this research study with a recruitment email distributed through the cooperating instructor via a Canvas announcement on their Peace and Conflict course. Willing participants proceeded to the survey only after electronic acknowledgement of informed consent within the first question of the survey.

3.2. Data Collection

This survey research design incorporated 15 Likert-type retrospective questions from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) and the following were open-ended responses that were distributed via an electronic Qualtrics survey. The questionnaire had questions regarding the participants' prior and current social-emotional expertise, cultural competence, and overall experience with the Mediator Mentors program derived from two separate open-access surveys: Social-Emotional Expertise Scale (SEES; McBrien et al., 2020) and Cultural Competence Inventory for Pre-service Teachers (CCI-PT). The SEES (McBrien et al., 2020) measures cognitive abilities related to social interactions in adults that emphasize timing and synchrony of behaviors that contribute to overall social-emotional ability. The CCI-PT, which aligns with the service-learning experience of these participants working with school-aged students, was originally adapted from the Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy (Wang et al., 2003), the Cultural Awareness Scale (Rew et al., 2003), and the Modern Racism Scale (McConahay, 1986). The CCI-PT inventory is a comprehensive survey that measures the three dimensions of cultural competence – emotional-cultural, cognitive-cultural, and behavioral-cultural – constructs (Yang et al., 2020). The emotional-cultural construct was specifically included for this study design in alignment with the theoretical frameworks to answer the research questions. Survey content may be reproduced and used for educational purposes without seeking written permission (Yang et al., 2020). The last three questions were open-ended so that participants could deliver a personal narrative on these dimensions as well as an opportunity to provide a general reflection on program impact. The duration of the electronic Qualtrics survey for participants was approximately 20-25 minutes. Reminders were sent every three working days over a two-week period by the course instructor to increase the participation rate.

3.3. Data Analysis

This study used a descriptive analysis (Christensen, Burke, & Turner, 2014) approach to the Likert-style data and inductive analysis to uncover emergent themes within the qualitative data (Given, 2008). First, response frequency by scale score along with overall means and standards deviations by item were reported for trend analysis of the quantitative data. Next, the qualitative responses were reviewed for initial coding and then, analyzed for emergent themes (Given, 2008).

3.4. Validity/Reliability

In order to create the questionnaire and data analysis of responses, the Social-Emotional Expertise Scale (McBrien et al., 2020) was used to measure the specific cognitive abilities related to social interactions in adults. Results for reliability, validity and factor analysis were reported for the SEE Scale (PsycTests Database Record, 2020). The Cultural Competence Inventory (2020) for Preservice Teachers was used in this study and provided validity and reliability by adopting the Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy (SEE; Wang et al., 2003), Cultural Awareness Scale (CAS; Rew et al., 2003), and the Modern Racism Scale (MRS; McConahay, 1986) as a way of refining the analysis method (Yang et al., 2020). Results for reliability, validity and factor analysis were reported for the CCI-PT on the PsycTests Database Record, 2021). The open-ended questions were included to allow an opportunity for the participants to further explain their experiences in the Mediator Mentors program that may not have all been covered in the previous Likert-style questions. There was a high response rate (80.9%) from a small eligible population (12/15) and a total of 8 out of 12 usable responses for data analysis.

4. Results

Two sections below are based on the constructs of social-emotional expertise and cultural competence from the survey. Retrospective responses in both sections where respondents indicated their perceived level of skill prior to Mediator Mentors service-learning experience (Pre) and after the experience (Post).

4.1. Social-Emotional Expertise

Social-Emotional Expertise Scale (SEE Scale; McBrien et al., 2020) measures cognitive abilities related to social interactions in adults that emphasize timing and synchrony of behaviors that contribute to overall social-emotional ability. Combining SEES (McBrien et al., 2020) scores from all items of the questionnaire created the social-emotional expertise score. The purpose for utilizing the SEES scale was to determine the impact the Mediator Mentors program service-learning experience had on college students' social-emotional expertise that will answer research question #2. Table 1 presents the frequencies and percentages of scaled responses by survey construct and the overall mean score based on the average of the scaled responses by item. All of the items are measured on a 5-point Likert scale of 1-strongly disagree; 2-disagree; 3-neither/nor; 4-agree; 5-strongly agree).

Table 1. Frequencies, Means and Standard Deviations for Social-Emotional Expertise by Item

Social-Emotional Expertise	Time	N	(1) Strongly Disagree	(2) Disagree	(3) Neither/ Nor	(4) Agree	(5) Strongly Agree	Mean Score	Std Dev
Effectively use body language and non-verbal	Pre	8	0 (0%)	2 (25%)	1 (12.5%)	5 (62.5%)	0 (0%)	3.38	.916
	Post	8	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	6 (75%)	2 (25%)	4.25	.463
Appropriately use facial expressions	Pre	8	0 (0%)	1 (12.5%)	2 (25%)	5 (62.5%)	0 (0%)	3.50	.756
	Post	8	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	6 (75%)	2 (25%)	4.25	.463
Carefully coordinate responses to others' emotions	Pre	8	0 (0%)	2 (25%)	0 (0%)	4 (50%)	2 (25%)	3.75	1.165
	Post	8	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (12.5%)	4 (50%)	3 (37.5%)	4.25	.707
Effectively use tone of voice	Pre	8	0 (0%)	1 (12.5%)	1 (12.5%)	2 (25%)	4 (50%)	4.13	1.126
	Post	8	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	5 (62.5%)	3 (37.5%)	4.38	.518
Able to calm people in tense situations	Pre	8	0 (0%)	2 (25%)	0 (0%)	4 (50%)	2 (25%)	3.75	1.165
	Post	8	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	5 (62.5%)	3 (37.5%)	4.38	.518
Utilize appropriate social skills	Pre	8	0 (0%)	1 (12.5%)	1 (12.5%)	2 (50%)	4 (50%)	4.13	1.126
	Post	8	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (50%)	4 (50%)	4.50	.535
Effectively self-regulate emotions	Pre	8	0 (0%)	1 (12.5%)	1 (12.5%)	2 (50%)	4 (50%)	3.63	1.061
	Post	8	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (12.5%)	4 (50%)	3 (37.5%)	4.25	.707
Overall SEE	Pre	8	0 (0%)	10 (17.9%)	6 (10.7%)	24 (42.9%)	16 (28.6%)	3.75	.980
	Post	8	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (3.6%)	34 (60.7%)	20 (35.7%)	4.32	.481

When considering aspects of social-emotional expertise prior to the Mediator Mentors service-learning experience, the highest positive mean response was *utilizing appropriate social skills as different situations warrant*. On average four students also expressed that they were able to strongly agree with being able to use *tone of voice* and *self-regulate their emotions effectively*. Four students reported agreeing and two students agreed strongly about being able to *carefully coordinate their responses to others* and the *ability to calm others' intense situations*. Both of these aspects of SEE received the same standard deviation score of 1.165 and mean ($M=3.75$). In some of the same areas, two participants responded disagreeing with being *able to effectively use body language to communicate with others*, *the ability to calm people's intense situations*, and the skill *to coordinate responses to others carefully*.

Following the service-learning experience in the Mediator Mentors program, participants perceived higher effectiveness in their use of body language and non-verbal cues when communicating with others in various social situations. This area had the highest mean increase ($M=3.38$ (yesterday) and $M=4.25$ (today)) as a result of participation in the program. 75% of participants stated they agreed and 25% stated they strongly agreed with this increase in social skills. The second highest mean percentage increase was in the area of being able to use appropriate facial expressions in social situations ($M=3.5$ (yesterday) and $M=4.25$ (today)).

Being able to self-regulate emotions as social situations warrant was reflective of 50% responding that they agree and 37.5% responding that they strongly agree. There were 25% of participants who stated they disagreed with being able to calm people in tense situations and being able to carefully coordinate responses to others' emotions prior to the service-learning experience, but 100% of the participants reflected either agreement or strong agreement when asked this question at the time of the survey; thus, a notable increase in the social-emotional skills gained by engaging with the program. The area that obtained the highest mean score overall was the *utilization of appropriate social skills in various situations* ($M=4.5$) in which 100% of the participants selected either agree or strongly agree at the time of the survey.

4.2. Overall Social-Emotional Expertise

Observed differences in Overall SEE by frequency of response show that the mean score grew positively to average a response of agreeing with the increase in social-emotional expertise. To find a significant difference, a paired T-test was run for the retrospective responses. Table 2 (next page) presents the means, standard deviations, sample sizes, and percentages of scaled responses by survey construct and the overall mean score based on the average of the scaled responses by item.

There is no significant difference ($t(8) = -1.486$, $p=.181$) in mean Overall Social-Emotional Expertise of participating students before the program (pre, $M=3.75$) to the time of the survey (post, $M=4.32$), although an observed increase in Overall SEE is noted. There also was a decrease in standard deviation from (.980) to (.481), which indicates that participants overall became more centered in agreement regarding overall Social-Emotional Expertise where they perceived more neutral in their ability prior to the service-learning experience. For validity and participant confidentiality, sample sizes were too small to run or report statistical analyses by demographics.

Table 2. Means, standard deviations, sample sizes and p values for yesterday and today for Overall Social-Emotional Expertise

Variable	Time	N	Mean Score	Std Deviation	p(sig.)
Overall Social-Emotional Expertise	Pre	8	3.75	.980	.181
	Post	8	4.32	.481	

4.3. Cultural Competence

The online survey utilized the CCI-PT inventory method and was adapted from the Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy (Wang et al., 2003), the Cultural Awareness Scale (Rew et al., 2003), and the Modern Racism Scale (McConahay, 1986). There are 3 subsets of cultural competence measured; emotional-cultural, cognitive cultural, and behavioral culture (Yang et al., 2020). Combining scores from all items of the questionnaire created the cultural competence composite score. The purpose for utilizing the CCI-PT inventory was to determine the impact of the Mediator Mentors service-learning experience on college students' cultural competence to answer research question #1. Table 3 presents the frequencies and percentages of scaled responses by survey construct and the overall mean score based on the average of the scaled responses by item. All of the items are measured on a 5-point Likert scale of 1-strongly disagree; 2-disagree; 3-neither/nor; 4-agree; 5-strongly agree).

Table 3. Frequencies, Means and Standard Deviations for Cultural Competence by Item

Cultural Competence	Time	N	(1) Strongly Disagree	(2) Disagree	(3) Neither/ Nor	(4) Agree	(5) Strongly Agree	Mean Score	Std Dev
Patient and understanding when communicating	Pre	8	0 (0%)	1 (12.5%)	0 (0%)	3 (37.5%)	4 (50%)	4.25	1.035
	Post	8	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (25%)	6 (75%)	4.75	.463
Understanding others' backgrounds helps assess their needs	Pre	8	0 (0%)	1 (12.5%)	0 (0%)	2 (25%)	5 (62.5%)	4.38	1.061
	Post	8	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (25%)	6 (75%)	4.75	.463
Increased self-awareness by understanding others	Pre	8	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (12.5%)	1 (12.5%)	6 (75%)	4.63	.744
	Post	8	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (25%)	6 (75%)	4.75	.463
Helping others overcome stereotypes	Pre	8	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (50%)	3 (37.5%)	1 (12.5%)	3.63	.744
	Post	8	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (37.5%)	2 (25%)	3 (37.5%)	4.00	.926
Help create acceptance of multiple ethnic perspectives	Pre	8	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (25%)	4 (50%)	2 (25%)	4.00	.756
	Post	8	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (12.5%)	3 (37.5%)	4 (50%)	4.38	.744
Positively communicate and encourage diversity	Pre	8	0 (0%)	1 (12.5%)	0 (0%)	2 (25%)	5 (62.5%)	4.38	1.061
	Post	8	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (12.5%)	7 (87.5%)	4.88	.354
Self-reflection from others' diverse experiences	Pre	8	0 (0%)	1 (12.5%)	0 (0%)	3 (37.5%)	4 (50%)	4.25	1.035
	Post	8	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3 (37.5%)	5 (62.5%)	4.63	.518
Working with culturally diverse increased learning	Pre	8	0 (0%)	1 (12.5%)	0 (0%)	3 (37.5%)	4 (50%)	4.25	1.035
	Post	8	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (12.5%)	7 (87.5%)	4.88	.354
Overall CC	Pre	8	0 (0%)	5 (7.8%)	7 (10.9%)	21 (32.8%)	31 (48.4%)	4.22	.804
	Post	8	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	4 (6.3%)	16 (25.0%)	44 (68.8%)	4.63	.378

When considering aspects of cultural competence prior to the Mediator Mentors service-learning experience, the item that had the highest mean ($M = 4.63$) was an *increase of self-awareness by understanding others*. The second highest means were *understanding others' backgrounds to assess their needs* ($M = 4.38$) and *being able to positively communicate and encourage diversity* ($M = 4.38$) with a high degree of variability ($SD = 1.061$). When asked about the cultural competence area of *helping others overcome stereotypes*, 50% of participants ($n = 4$) indicated that they were neutral while 37.5% ($n = 3$) agreed.

The item with the highest mean and lowest standard deviation after the completion of the service-learning experience included *working with culturally diverse individuals helped them increase their learning* where 87.5% ($n = 7$) of participants reflected strong agreement with the statement. The area that signified the highest growth between pre and post mean scores was *patience level and understanding when communicating with others of diverse backgrounds* (pre, $M = 4.25$; post, $M = 4.75$) with 100% of participant responses illustrating agreement in this area after completion of the service-learning experience. An area with little evidence of growth was participant feelings regarding the ability to *help others overcome stereotypes* (pre, $M = 3.63$; post, $M = 4.00$).

4.3.1. Overall Cultural Competence

Observed differences in Overall CC by frequency of answer show that the responses increased slightly from a ($M = 4.22$) to ($M = 4.63$) that indicate the participants felt they agreed with the statements regarding their cultural competence skills. To find a significant difference, a paired T-test was run for the retrospective responses. Table 4 presents the means, standard deviations, sample sizes and percentages of scaled responses by survey construct and the overall mean score based on the average of the scaled responses by item.

Table 4. Means, standard deviations, sample sizes and p values for yesterday and today for Overall Cultural Competence

Variable	Time	N	Mean Score	Std Deviation	p(sig.)
Overall Cultural Competence	Pre	8	4.22	.804	.279
	Post	8	4.63	.378	

There is no significant difference ($t(8) = -1.174$, $p = .279$) in mean Overall CC of participating students before Mediator Mentors ($M = 4.22$) and after ($M = 4.63$), although an observed slight increase in Overall CC is noted. In comparison from pre to post perceptions, the standard deviation decreased exponentially from a (.804) to a (.378) highlighting participant feelings become more centered after the service-learning experience. For validity and participant confidentiality, sample sizes were too small to run or report statistical analyses by demographics.

4.4. Open-Ended Responses

Four participants completed their responses which were analyzed further to identify common emerging themes. Of those four responses, three of the participants were declared as criminology majors and the other was studying human resources. From this response data it is apparent that college students who are pursuing careers involving working with others were more likely to respond to the open-ended questions that implies their level of commitment to the service-learning experience as a whole. The three open-ended questions invited the participants to explain further the impact they perceived on their social-emotional expertise, cultural competence, and overall experience from the Mediator Mentors service-learning program. The researcher acknowledges the limitations of finding emergent themes from such a small sample; however, the responses do highlight areas for consideration in light of the scaled response results.

4.4.1. Positive Impact

Each of the participants expressed making a lasting positive impact in the lives of others as a result of the service-learning experience. One of the participants shared that they found a new way to be a leader due to the mentoring experience they had not considered before. Gaining a deeper understanding of others' perspectives and cultures, as well as having a newfound patience was a common theme among the responses.

4.4.2. Perspective-taking in the Field of Criminology

Participants in criminology fields stated they grew in their understanding of others from different cultures than themselves. An increased sense of direction and willingness to reach a common ground came from the restorative practice according to the participants' responses. One participant stated, "I am able to understand how kids think now and it has also helped my social-emotional skills by making sure I am able to understand where others are coming from." The empathy learned from the service-learning experience was also hand in hand with learning about how bias is important in the field of mentoring. Participants expressed learning skills to use their social-emotional expertise to regulate their implicit bias and ensure it didn't impede the mediation experience. When asked how the Mediator Mentors program impacted their cultural competence, a participant stated that the program "emphasized the importance of understanding others' struggles and taking them into consideration while meditating."

4.5. Limitations

The main limitations of this study is the participant size and the minimal responses to the open-ended questions for comparative analysis. Since this was a new program, the population size was already small and due to virtual learning across the university, the ability for the researchers to request participation from those involved in the Mediator Mentors was limited to electronic communications. The lack of open-ended response may have been due to discomfort based on misconceptions about results being associated with course grades. While this was mitigated with approved informed consent with explicit clarification that participation in this study was completely voluntary and would not be evaluated or taken into consideration in their coursework with the Peace and Conflict Studies at Fresno State, there still may have been hesitation to participate in responding in ways that could have identified the student. Furthermore, student motivation around electronic formats for participant engagement may have been hindered due to the COVID-19 virtual context. Furthermore, the authors recognize the inherent limitations that exist with the use of a retrospective survey design (Tofthagen, 2012) around the comparison of the control group in the study results. Another consideration of using a retrospective survey is that participants may not accurately portray their social-emotional expertise or cultural competencies before participation in the Mediator Mentors program.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The restorative nature of peace circles can be impactful to college student development of empathy and social skills when responding to conflict situations with individuals from various backgrounds. As such, this study aimed to explore the following research questions:

1. What is the impact of the Mediator Mentors service-learning experience on the cultural competence of college students?
 - a. Is there a significant difference between the cultural competence of college students before and after the Mediator Mentors service-learning experience?
2. What is the impact of the Mediator Mentors service-learning experience on the social-emotional expertise of college students?
 - b. Is there a significant difference between the social-emotional expertise of college students before and after the Mediator Mentors service-learning experience?

In response to the first research question of this study, college students who participated as college mentors in the Mediator Mentors program at Fresno State responded to have higher perceived levels of social-emotional expertise in various areas. The areas which showed the most growth were in the effective use of body language, non-verbal cues, facial expressions, and tone of voice when communicating with others. As supported by the framework from Oberle et al. (2016), these non-verbal communication skills are foundational to fostering ongoing learning towards social-emotional expertise. Based on the findings, students who were involved as mentors, learned how to de-escalate conflict situations while coordinating their responses to others' emotions. These participating college students indicated that, after their participation in mentoring peace circles, they were more adept at navigating interpersonal and cross-cultural communications by utilizing appropriate social skills. In the context of mentoring using peace circles, works of Bruce and Bridgeland (2014), Estes (2017) and Kervick et al. (2011) highlight how these experiences cultivate perspective-taking through honest dialogue and self-reflection, which was at the center of the Mediator Mentor's model used by the participating college students. The peace circles help promote respect, inclusion, and common bonds among participants. They generate a sense of belonging and unity, a prerequisite to conflict management and healing. As such, peace circles provide a fertile ground for cultural competence through social-emotional expertise.

In response to the second research question of this study, students who participated in the Mediator Mentors service-learning increased their perceived cultural competence when working with others from different cultures. Students that were involved in the mentoring experience felt a stronger sense of direction and had more patience with individuals from various backgrounds. Furthermore, the participating college students became more aware of the impact of understanding others' backgrounds has on a needs assessment within peace circles. Similarly, studies such as Latham et al. (2020) and Greenberg et al. (2003) have shown that mentorship service learning in peace circles allows students to gain communication skills that foster cultural understanding to meet the needs of their mentee. According to Hogan (2013) students who work closely with others understand the benefits of implementing an inclusive mindset that will strengthen their cultural awareness and perspective-taking towards others. Likewise, participating college students felt that working with school-aged students from culturally diverse backgrounds provided an opportunity to grow in ways they might not have in a traditional classroom setting. Thus, as central to experiential learning theory (Kolb, 2014), service-learning in the context of this study allowed for transformative learning (Zijdemans-Boudreau et al., 2013) related to overall cultural competence and awareness.

6. Limitations

A constraint on this research were the factors related to COVID-19, such as emergency shelter-in-place protocols and rapid adjustments to virtual programming at the college level and in school districts. These realities impacted participating college student overall engagement and interaction with the school-aged student mentees due to restrictive protocols, technical barriers, and decline in school district attendance.

Another limitation is the small population due to the contextualized nature of the study. While results are not generalizable, they provide insight into the ways in which service-learning through mentoring in peace circles can be considered.

7. Future Research

Lastly, as the shift back to in-person programming with the onset of vaccines for all age groups becomes a reality, future research on the overall impact the mentoring program has on the social-emotional skills and cultural competence across a larger set of participants by demographics and college majors should be considered. Further exploration into the relationship between declared major career paths and involvement in service-learning experiences is also warranted.

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