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Research Article

Cultivating Emotional Intelligence: The Impact of Engaging in Expressive Arts for Higher Education Students

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Emotional intelligence (EI) stands as a crucial factor in promoting mental well-being, and the malleability of intelligence opens avenues for diverse educational interventions. This paper delves into the transformative potential of expressive arts in augmenting EI among higher education students. The study focused on the social work department of a college in Kerala, India, where 164 students were randomly selected from the total departmental enrollment. Among these, 122 actively engaged in expressive arts, while 42 did not participate in such activities. To gauge EI levels, the study employed Schutt's Self-Report Emotional Intelligence Test, comparing scores between students engaged in expressive arts and those who were not. The statistical analysis utilized an independent sample t-test, revealing a significant difference in EI measures between the two groups. These findings underscore the impactful role of expressive arts in cultivating emotional intelligence. Based on these outcomes, this paper advocates for the integration of expressive arts into higher education curricula. Such inclusion is proposed not only to foster elevated emotional intelligence but also to fortify students' mental health and enhance academic performance. The study suggests that incorporating expressive arts can contribute substantially to the holistic development of students in higher education settings.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of intelligence is multifaceted (Gardner, 2000), diverse, dynamic, and idiosyncratic (Robinson & Aronica, 2009). It includes various skills that individuals learn beyond their genetic makeup to overcome new challenges (Lucas & Claxton, 2010). Therefore, intelligence is the "ability of our brain to make effective connections to apply them within the right context, for the appropriate purpose, taking into account our sociocultural and historical values" (Devis-Rozental, 2018, p. 31). This social work research explored college students' emotional intelligence (EI), considering the multidisciplinary nature of intelligence.

EI is a measurable mental ability (Mayer et al., 2016). Salovey and Mayer (1990) defined it as a subset of social intelligence. According to their definition, EI is "the ability to monitor one's own and other's feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions" (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p. 89). Apart from the ability model, other models of EI are the mixed models (Bar-On, 2000; Goleman, 2001) and the trait model (Petrides, 2010). This research adopted the ability model of EI.

Education is one of EI's most extensive practical areas (Keefer et al., 2018). In the higher education context, EI has a positive effect on students' optimal performance (Zhoc et al., 2020). Leadership quality in higher education students is also linked to EI (Reshetnikov et al., 2020). Moreover, EI is associated with resilience among youth and self-perceived employability, contributing to adaptive career progression (Di Fabio & Kenny, 2014). Therefore, maintaining a higher education environment that supports students' social and emotional intelligence development positively impacts student experience through retention, achievement, and success (Devis-Rozental, 2018; Halimi et al., 2021). Different educational possibilities can be

envisioned if intelligence is seen as learnable (Lucas & Claxton, 2010). Therefore, this study examined whether expressive arts (ExA) enhance EI in higher education students.

People feel overwhelmed, irritable, tired, depressed or euphoric because they have no choice but to hold on to their emotions, and frustrated feelings can lead to behavioural problems. A fundamental principle in ExA is that allowing emotions to be felt, expressed and properly understood promotes mental health (Pearson & Wilson, 2009). They can open the door to images and sensations relevant to a person's pre-verbal world (Pearson & Wilson, 2009). Creating an artwork or symbolic representation of inner tension facilitates communication, expression, and stress relief by supporting the expression of conscious and unconscious feelings and thoughts (Proulx, 2002). In 2001, Holian found that ExA provided secondary school students with tools to express strong emotions safely and enhanced their EI. The modalities of ExA that Holian introduced to students were symbol work, journal writing and creative visualisation (Pearson & Wilson, 2009). Later, Hartley (2003) stated that effective schools involve emotions and creativity. Nursing education also recognised the role of art in developing EI in students (Freshwater & Stickley, 2004).

In addition, recent research linked different modalities of ExA with EI. Dance is an art form favouring the development of EI (Lara-Aparicio et al., 2021; San-Juan-Ferrer & Hípola, 2020). Adolescents and young adults practising drama demonstrated a higher level of EI (Alfonso-Benlliure et al., 2021). Adolescents receiving music training also showed higher EI (Jarmani, 2021). In addition, adults writing about their positive emotional experiences significantly increased EI (Wing et al., 2006). Against this background, this study investigated whether there is any difference between the EI levels of college students who engage in ExA and those who do not.

METHOD

This study adopted a descriptive quantitative design to examine whether college students gain EI with ExA engagement. Due to the diversity of cultures across India and the effect of culture on EI (Emmerling et al., 2008; Gunkel et al., 2014), this study selected one particular state using the criteria that the most literate state in India (Literacy Rate Of India 2021 || State Wise Literacy Rate (censusofindia2021.com) which is Kerala. From the 14 districts of Kerala, we selected one district using the lottery method. We then selected the college in the list of top colleges in the National Institute Ranking Framework (NIRF) ranking (NIRF College Rankings 2022 (Released): List of Top Colleges in India | CollegeDekho). From the eight departments of the selected college, we further selected a department with the best national-level ranking (Outlook-ICARE Rankings 2022: Top 35 Social Work Colleges In India (outlookindia.com)), which was the social work (SW) department. Researchers collected the list of students in the SW department and their email IDs. There were 284 students, and the sample size calculated was 164 (Sample Size Calculator). Figure 1 shows the sampling strategy of the study.

Researchers developed a questionnaire with questions to understand the student demographic profile, along with Schutte's Self Report Emotional Intelligence Test (SSEIT) (Schutte et al., 1998). SSEIT is also known as The Assessing Emotions Scale (Schutte et al., 2009). The SSEIT includes a 33-item self-report using a 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) scale for responses. The SSEIT is based on Salovey and Mayer's (1990) ability model. Therefore, researchers developed a theoretical framework for the study (Figure 2).

This four-branch model (Mayer et al., 2016) depicts the problem-solving areas of EI. Emotional perception is the ability to understand emotions in others and to express emotions appropriately according to culture and context. It is the fundamental aspect of EI because it must complement other processes in the ability model. The second aspect, facilitating thought using emotions, describes how one's current emotional state can promote cognition. The third aspect involves understanding complex and mixed emotions in specific cultural contexts and making emotional appraisals and forecasts. Finally, managing emotions relates to a person's ability to manage their and others' emotions to achieve a desired result.

The researchers prepared a Google Form of the questionnaire with an informed consent form detailing voluntary participation and the consent to use data for academic purposes. It included guidelines to fill out the Form. The tool was piloted with five students and confirmed reliability. Then we emailed the Google Form to SW students by choosing every second student from the list until the number reached 164. With repeated reminders, we received all 164 duly filled responses.

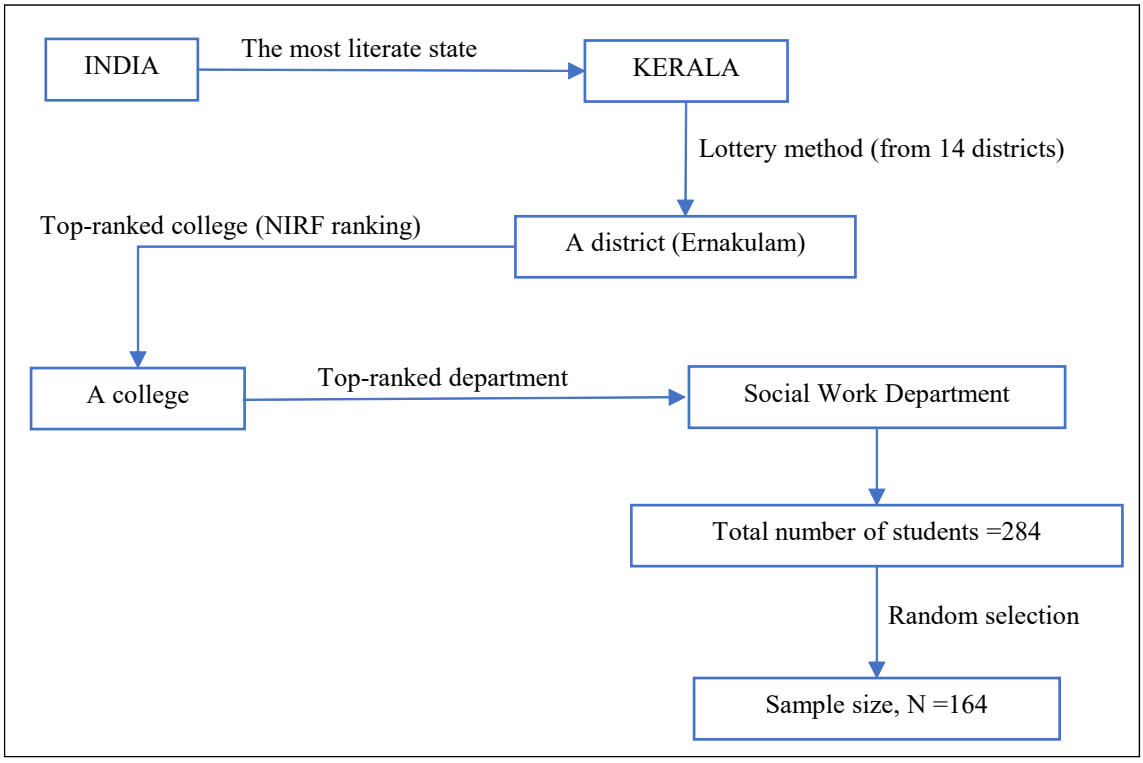


Figure 1: Sampling Strategy

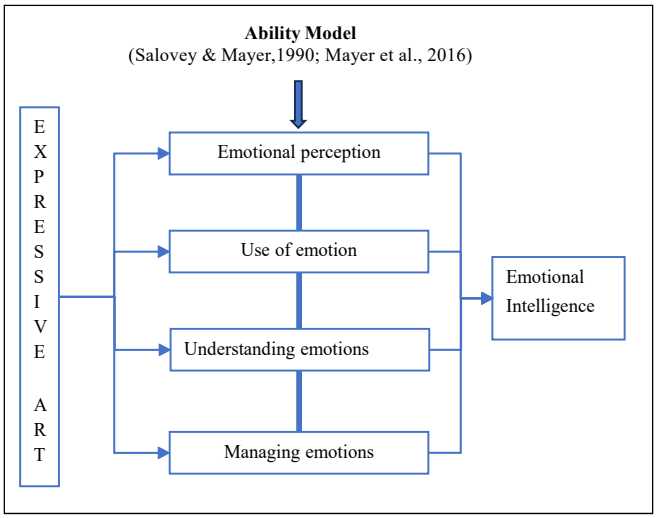


Figure 2: Theoretical Framework

Researchers analysed data in SPSS using descriptive and inferential statistics. We imported data from Google Forms to SPSS and coded the variables. In SSEIT, items 5, 28, and 33 are negatively stated; therefore, we reverse-coded these items.

We used the one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test to confirm that the variable EI measured was normally distributed. Therefore, this study used the Independent sample t-test to test the hypothesis. The null hypothesis framed was H(0): The difference between the EI levels of college students who engage in ExA and those who do not is insignificant.

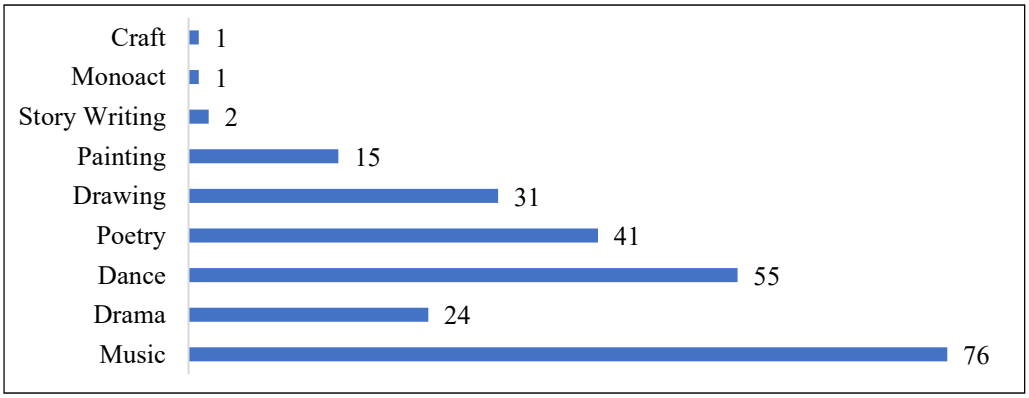
This study was part of the postgraduation of the first author, registered under Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, India (Reg. No.: 2125054). The ethical committee at Rajagiri College of Social Sciences (Autonomous), Kochi, India, approved the study.

RESULT

Of the 164 participants, 122 (74.4%) were engaging in ExA. Among the male students, 27 out of 51 (53%), and among female students, 95 of 113 (84%) used different ExA modalities to express their feelings. The ExA modalities they used were music, drama, dance, poetry, drawing, painting, story writing, mono-act, and craft. Figure 3 shows the details of the ExA engagement of college students. Of the 122 college students engaged in ExA, 87 (71%) used multiple modalities.

Figure 3 illustrates that 76 students who participated in this study engaged in music and 55 in dance. The most popular modality of ExA was music, followed by dance. Poetry was in the third position and drawing in the fourth,

Figure 3: ExA Modalities SW Students Used



while 24 and 15 students engaged in drama and painting, respectively.

The mean score for the total EI of college students was nearly 126, and the standard deviation was 14. Therefore, this study considered a value below 114 low and above 140 high. Figure 4 shows SW students' EI levels.

Figure 4 illustrates that of the 164 college students, 65.2 per cent demonstrated medium, 18.9 per cent low, and 15.9 per cent high EI levels.

This study used One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test to confirm the normal distribution of data. Table 1 shows the normality test statistics.

Asymp. Sig.>0.05; therefore, we confirmed that the data distribution was normal. Therefore, this study used a parametric Independent sample t-test to test the hypothesis. Table 2 shows the hypothesis test statistics.

Table 2 indicates that p-value < 0.05 when equal variance was assumed and not assumed. Therefore, this study refuted the null hypothesis and accepted the alternative hypothesis that the difference between the EI of college students who engage in ExA and those who do not is significant.

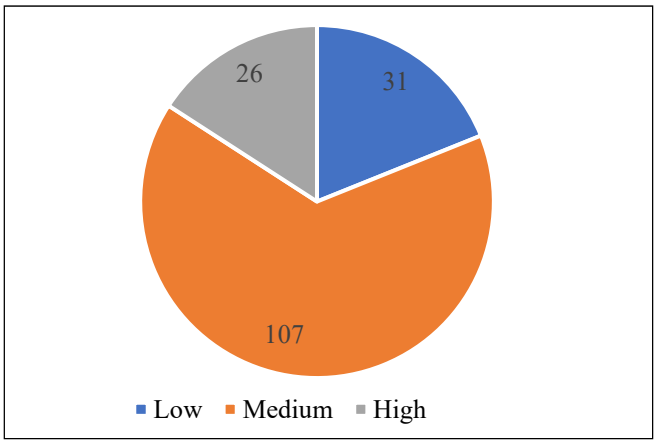


Figure 4: EI Levels of SW Students

DISCUSSION

EI has been established as a fundamental element in promoting mental health (Kaufhold & Johnson, 2005). It serves as a protective factor against stress and violence in the context of youth mental health (Nyarko et al., 2020).

Table 1: One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test Statistics

		Emotional Intelligence (EI)
N		164
Normal Parameters[a,b]	Mean	126.6037
	Std. Deviation	14.53518
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.063
	Positive	.033
	Negative	-.063
Test Statistic		.063
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.200[c,d]

[a]Test distribution is Normal.; [b]Calculated from data.
[c]Lilliefors Significance Correction.; [d]This is a lower bound of the true significance.

Table 2: Independent Sample t-test Statistics

		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	95% confidence interval of the difference	
					Lower	Upper
Emotional Intelligence	Equal variances assumed	2.992	162	.003	2.58261	12.61098
	Equal variances not assumed	2.766	62.692	.007	2.10772	13.08588

The development of EI entails the utilization of emotions as a guiding force rather than succumbing to emotional addiction (Greenberg, 2004). In higher education, the confirmed association between EI and learning outcomes has been substantiated by various studies (Shafait et al., 2021; Zhoc et al., 2018). Additionally, tailored interventions and training have been demonstrated as effective means to enhance EI (Herpertz et al., 2016; Nelis et al., 2009). The global recognition of EI training programs in higher education reflects an increasing acknowledgement of their importance (Gilar-Corbí et al., 2018; Gomes da Costa et al., 2021; Machera & Machera, 2017; Montalvo-García et al., 2022). This study, conducted among college students in Kerala, emphasises the role of ExA in enhancing their EI.

In the Indian context, the social worlds of male and female youth are distinct due to the gendered nature of their socialization experiences (Ram et al., 2014). The study's findings align with this perspective, indicating that fewer male students engage in ExA compared to their female counterparts. Despite this, suicide, a significant concern as the second leading cause of youth death, is more prevalent among males than females (Rhodes et al., 2014). Additionally, substance abuse among Indian college students is reported to be notably higher among males. This underscores the necessity for a gender-neutral promotion of ExA among college students.

Furthermore, the National Mental Health Survey of India 2015–2016 highlights the urgent need for attention from political leaders, policymakers, and opinion makers due to the high burden of mental, behavioural, and substance use disorders in the country (Gururaj et al., 2016). In this context, integrating ExA into higher education curricula becomes imperative to ensure the mental health of college students. Beyond elevating individual EI, the transformative potential of ExA in instigating social change is well-documented (Levine & Levine, 2011). Originating as a distinct discipline in the 1970s (Levine, 2011), the multidisciplinary nature of higher education courses prompts a recommendation for the inclusion of ExA in all classes. This inclusive approach is envisioned as a means to foster the EI of students, nurturing their mental health and facilitating their overall success.

Moreover, this study paves the way for future research endeavours. There is a need for extensive studies among students in various disciplines within higher education, acknowledging that stressors may vary across ecosystem types and disciplines. Investigating the specific impact of ExA on each branch of EI according to the ability model is recommended. Qualitative designs exploring individual variations of EI with engagement in ExA can provide deeper insights. Finally, this research acknowledges ExA as an effective tool for EI and mental health interventions, encouraging further exploration and application in diverse contexts.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study illuminates the pivotal role of ExA in enhancing EI among college students, specifically within the higher education context in Kerala, India. The findings underscore the significance of integrating ExA into higher education curricula to fortify the mental health and overall well-being of students. Recognizing EI as vital for mental health and its confirmed association with positive learning outcomes, this research aligns with existing literature. The study reveals the gendered nature of socialization experiences among Indian youth, emphasizing the need for a gender-neutral promotion of ExA. Despite fewer male students engaging in ExA, the higher prevalence of issues like suicide and substance abuse among males underscores the urgency of inclusive interventions. The broader societal implications are evident, given the pressing mental health concerns highlighted by the National Mental Health Survey of India. Integrating ExA into higher education emerges as a vital strategy, fostering individual EI and contributing to broader societal change. As a recommendation, this study advocates for the inclusive incorporation of ExA across all disciplines within higher education courses, aiming to nurture students' emotional intelligence, promote mental health, and enhance their overall success. The research also opens avenues for future studies, encouraging in-depth exploration of ExA's impact on different branches of EI and individual variations, ultimately recognizing ExA as a powerful tool for EI and mental health interventions with valuable implications for educators, policymakers, and practitioners in the field of higher education.

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