



# Emotional Intelligence and Workplace Stress Among Afterschool Supervisors in Low-Income Communities

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Afterschool supervisors are responsible for managing their teams, building curricula, maintaining relationships with parents and community partners, solving crises, and implementing the latest trends in 21st century learning, all of which can create a high-stress work environment (Kremer et al., 2015).

High levels of stress among supervisors can diminish afterschool program quality and negatively affect the learning and development of children and youth (Geisinger, 2016). Highly stressed afterschool supervisors may not be able to effectively enhance underserved children's social and emotional development (Frazier et al., 2019). One solution may be training in emotional intelligence. In other fields, high emotional intelligence among leaders was

found to mitigate workplace stress and to increase job productivity, job satisfaction, and attainment of positive results (e.g., Lumpkin & Achen, 2018).

My study helps address the lack of scientific research on the role of emotional intelligence in afterschool supervisors' ability to manage stress at work. In this quantitative correlational study, I investigated the relationship between the emotional intelligence of afterschool supervisors serving low-income communities in New York City and their perceived workplace stress. I found a negative correlation—that is, supervisors with higher emotional intelligence tended to have lower workplace stress. The results can

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help afterschool supervisors and organization leaders understand the importance of emotional intelligence for effective program management. Equipped with that understanding, they can identify resources supervisors need to manage their workplace stress, facilitate 21st century learning, and mitigate the effects on youth of adverse environments.

## Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

Daniel Goleman's (1995) emotional intelligence theory provided the guiding conceptual framework for this study. Goleman's theory demonstrates the importance of managing emotional responses in any environment to benefit the individuals in any relationship (Anand, 2019). The five developmental skills of emotional intelligence in Goleman's formulation are self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and decision-making (Goleman, 1995). Emotional intelligence begins with the awareness of one's emotions (Patti et al., 2015); together, self-awareness and social awareness make up emotional awareness, according to Knights et al. (2020).

This study builds on literature showing that young people, particularly those growing up in disadvantaged environments, need emotional intelligence skills to grow and thrive. In order to foster emotional intelligence in children, the adults around them must themselves have strong emotional intelligence. Furthermore, emotional intelligence has been shown to help leaders manage workplace stress, an ability that can improve their effectiveness.

### Emotional Intelligence in Afterschool

Afterschool programs are vital for developing children's social and emotional competence and fostering positive developmental outcomes. By developing 21st century skills, they help to create opportunities for children and youth in low-income communities and low-performing schools (Wade, 2015). Young people who attend afterschool programs in economically vulnerable urban communities often exhibit emotional and social dysfunctions; youth practitioners may serve as the first line of defense (Farrell et al., 2019). O'Hare et al. (2015) found that developing children's social and emotional skills in afterschool helps mitigate socioeconomic disadvantages in low-income communities. However,

many afterschool programs struggle to provide youth with tools to help them thrive (Frazier et al., 2019).

An important element in the quality of afterschool programs is the capacity of afterschool practitioners to handle stress and deliver results in a fast-paced environment (Farrell et al., 2019; Larson, 2018). Staff members' inability to handle the stress that comes with the pressure of meeting developmental demands is a big concern in programs in disadvantaged communities (Pelcher & Rajan, 2016). To increase the quality of afterschool programs in vulnerable communities, supervisors need to focus on creating socially and emotionally safe environments where children can feel comfortable to express themselves, ask questions, and learn new things (Frazier et al., 2019). The stress of meeting developmental goals can be alleviated by

creating a supportive environment for children that facilitates social and emotional learning, helps them make decisions, and fosters opportunities for collaborative learning (St. Clair & Stone, 2016).

To develop emotional intelligence in children, educators and youth professionals need to

practice emotional intelligence themselves (Brackett et al., 2019; Pelcher & Rajan, 2016). They must have strong emotional foundations in order to meet the social and emotional needs of children and youth (Akiva et al., 2016; Hurd & Deutsch, 2017). When the emotional intelligence needs of supervisors are met, they can, in turn, train their staff to establish and maintain a healthy social and emotional culture among young people (Hurd & Deutsch, 2017). Developing emotional intelligence in youth practitioners does not happen by accident—it must be intentional (Geisinger, 2016). Supervisors must persistently develop staff members who work with children and youth directly to produce positive social and emotional outcomes (Geisinger, 2016).

### Emotional Intelligence in the Workplace

Research on emotional intelligence among supervisors in the afterschool field is so limited as to be almost nonexistent. Research in K–12 school settings has established a direct positive relationship between the emotional intelligence of teachers and their understanding of students' emotional needs (Zurita-Ortega et al., 2019).

Most research on emotional intelligence in the workplace has focused on business leaders. Various

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researchers have identified emotional intelligence as key to leadership development (Barreiro & Treglown, 2020; Dirican & Erdil, 2019; Lemisiou, 2018). Emotional intelligence has been included, along with technical, critical reasoning, and math skills, among the skills essential to the success of 21st century organizations (Knights et al., 2020). O'Connor et al. (2017) concluded that individuals with high emotional intelligence are positive and adaptable. Effective leaders with high emotional intelligence know how to mobilize their subordinates by building strong relationships (Edelman & van Knippenberg, 2018). They can solve problems and manage crises because they understand their own emotions and the emotions of others (Edelman & van Knippenberg, 2018).

Emotionally intelligent leaders not only control their own emotions but also teach others to do the same, encouraging them to be creative and work independently (Hoffmann et al., 2020; Nadler et al., 2020; Papoutsis et al., 2019). Leaders who are self-aware and socially aware use their emotional intelligence to build relationships, manage stress, and stay grounded when they encounter problems at work (Mateia, 2019). Effective leaders develop trusting relationships that cultivate a positive environment for everyone, giving them a sense of emotional safety, facilitating growth, and, ultimately, enabling achievement of common goals (Lumpkin & Achen, 2018; McCauley & Palus, 2020).

Bakker and de Vries (2020) emphasize the importance of providing emotional intelligence training to avoid employee burnout. Specifically, emotional intelligence has been associated with the ability to manage workplace stress (Carrillo et al., 2018). For example, Rakhshani et al. (2018) found that emotional intelligence training significantly reduced workplace stress among nurses. Many companies therefore prioritize emotional intelligence training for leaders and staff (Carrillo et al., 2018).

## Methodology and Design

I used a quantitative correlational methodology with a nonexperimental research design to investigate the relationship between afterschool supervisors' emotional intelligence and their perceived workplace stress.

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## Study Participants

I recruited study participants by contacting a convenience sample of 10 youth organizations funded by the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development. Most organizations that serve low-income communities in New York City operate their afterschool programs in public schools or in public housing community centers. A total of 92 afterschool supervisors between the ages of 25 and 65 were recruited for this study.

## Measures

The study participants responded to two self-assessment instruments: the Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire-Short Form and the Perceived Stress Scale.

### Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire

The Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue) has been extensively validated for academic research studying emotional intelligence (Petrides, 2020). I used the 30-question short form (TEIQue-SF) to assess overall emotional intelligence and four first-order factors:

- **Well-being.** Individuals with high well-being experience physical, mental, and emotional wellness. They can focus on their state of mind and know how to get back to being positive, happy, and fulfilled. Individuals with low scores tend to have low self-esteem, be easily disappointed, and lack confidence in communicating with people from diverse backgrounds (Petrides, 2020).
- **Self-control.** Individuals with good self-control can control their impulses and are good at regulating external pressures and stress. They are neither introverted nor excessively animated when they express themselves. People with low self-control tend to be impulsive and have difficulty managing stress (Petrides, 2020).
- **Emotionality.** Individuals with high emotionality can perceive and express emotions to develop and sustain quality relationships. Individuals with low emotionality find it difficult to regulate their internal emotional states and to express their feelings to others (Petrides, 2020).
- **Sociability.** Individuals with high sociability are aware of their social relationships and how they influence others. They take agency in social

environments by observing the social energy before they contribute. Individuals with low sociability may struggle with accepting differences and react toward anyone who has a difference of opinion (Petrides, 2020).

The four first-order factors of emotional intelligence measured by TEIQue-SF align with Goleman's (1995) five developmental skills of emotional intelligence:

- Well-being requires individuals to have *self-awareness* and understand their own needs.
- Self-control contributes to the ability to *self-regulate*, *self-motivate*, and *make decisions*.
- Emotionality requires individuals to know their own emotions and have *empathy* for others.
- Sociability supports individuals in building healthy relationships by influencing and *motivating* them to act toward a common goal.

TEIQue-SF participants respond to statements on a Likert scale from 1 to 7. The results also range from 1 to 7, with 1 indicating low levels of emotional intelligence and 7 indicating high levels (Petrides, 2020). Here are samples of TEIQue-SF statements:

- "Many times, I can't figure out what emotion I am feeling."
- "I am usually able to influence the way other people feel."
- "Generally, I am able to adapt to new environments."
- "I normally find it difficult to keep myself motivated."
- "I often find it difficult to adjust my life according to the circumstances."

### Perceived Stress Scale

Workplace stress was measured using the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), which was validated by Ezzati et al. (2014). Using a five-point Likert scale, participants indicated their level of agreement with each of 10 statements related to the stress they experienced at work during the previous month. For example, the PSS asks how often respondents felt that difficulties were piling up too high to overcome or that they were unable to control the important things in their life.

### Research Question

The following research question guided this study: To what extent, if any, does emotional intelligence or one of its four first-order factors (well-being, self-control, emotionality, and sociability) predict the perceived workplace stress of afterschool supervisors?

## Data Collection and Analysis

The emotional intelligence of supervisors, as measured by the TEIQue-SF, was treated as an independent variable and their perceived workplace stress, as measured by the PSS, as a dependent variable. The objective was not to determine causality but to look at the correlation between the variables (Privitera, 2020).

I used a statistical power analysis software package to calculate the minimum sample size needed to produce meaningful results, finding that I needed to recruit at least 81 supervisors. In March 2021, I administered the two surveys online to the 92 supervisors from 10 youth-serving organizations who agreed to participate. After the data were cleaned, 87 responses remained, more than enough to produce valid results.

## Findings

Correlating the TEIQue-SF data and the PSS data showed that supervisors who scored high in emotional intelligence tended to score low in perceived workplace stress. The negative correlation between the total TEIQue-SF emotional intelligence score and the PSS stress score was statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ). Furthermore, all first-order TEIQue-SF factors—well-being, self-control, emotionality, and sociability—also demonstrated negative correlation with perceived stress, though the correlation was statistically significant only for well-being and self-control.

The next level of analysis involved investigating possible cause-effect relationships—that is, whether participants' PSS scores could be predicted by the global emotional intelligence score or any of the four factor scores. The results show that one of the four factors, self-control, was indeed a predictor of the supervisors' perceived workplace stress.

## Implications

The findings that emotional intelligence correlated with lower stress and that self-control was a predictor of lower workplace stress could be a starting point for exploring how to support the development of afterschool supervisors' emotional intelligence and enhance their ability to manage their stress. The findings suggest that afterschool supervisors who were self-aware and able to regulate their emotions were able, as Knights et al. (2020) and Patti et al. (2015) suggest, to deal with the stress in their work environment.

This finding matters because a first step in improving outcomes for program participants is improving the emotional intelligence of supervisors.

Afterschool practitioners in disadvantaged communities need strong emotional intelligence to meet the social and emotional needs of the children in their programs (Brackett et al., 2019; Hurd & Deutsch, 2017). Afterschool supervisors, in turn, need emotional intelligence to foster employees' emotional intelligence while coping with their own stress (Carrillo et al., 2018; Hoffman et al., 2020). Research in other fields has shown that emotionally intelligent leaders can improve outcomes for themselves, their staff, and their work (Hoffman et al., 2020; Nadler et al., 2020; Papoutsi et al., 2019) and that training can improve emotional intelligence (Carrillo et al., 2018; Rakhshani et al., 2018).

The findings of this study are particularly timely in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. A return to the way things were done before the pandemic is not acceptable. No one will be well served by perpetuating the educational disparities that were in place before, and were exacerbated by, the pandemic and its restrictions. Policymakers and other leaders must act on many fronts to combat inequities in education. One such front is emotional intelligence training in afterschool programs. Educators who have not dealt with their own pandemic-induced trauma and emotional stress are not likely to be able to help program participants with their trauma and stress.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Decision-makers can incorporate the results of this study into long-term planning to improve the quality of afterschool programs in low-income communities. Improving afterschool supervisors' emotional intelligence and teaching them to develop emotional intelligence in staff members and program participants requires an intentional approach and significant resources. This study suggests that training focused on self-control may be a good first step to help supervisors cope with their workplace stress. Seminars and retreats that focus on emotional well-being for all employees who work with children should also be considered. In the longer term, practices to improve the emotional health of afterschool supervisors and staff may include extended vacations, mental health services, resources for continuous learning, and periodic check-ins for

general well-being. Policymakers and organizational leaders need to understand that investment in supervisors and line staff is critical to producing positive youth outcomes.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

There are myriad opportunities for future research on emotional intelligence in afterschool. A first step might be to replicate my study using larger samples of supervisors from various parts of the country to provide generalizable results. Such studies could identify the predictors of emotional intelligence and workplace stress among afterschool supervisors. The results could help policymakers and youth organization leaders decide how to support the development of emotional intelligence among afterschool supervisors and staff. Any evidence-based practices uncovered could be incorporated into new professional development initiatives and could guide future research.

In addition, qualitative studies could explore how afterschool supervisors think, what they feel, and what experiences they go through. Results, perhaps combined with findings from case studies, could guide development of training programs to improve supervisors' emotional intelligence and help them mentor frontline staff. Later studies could explore the impact on afterschool program quality. Further quantitative quasi-experimental studies could explore the impact of emotional intelligence resources on the capacity of afterschool supervisors to address program participants' social and emotional needs. All this work could benefit from attention to studies of emotional intelligence done in other fields, such as K-12 education and healthcare.

### **Emotional Intelligence and Program Quality**

The results of the study demonstrate that afterschool supervisors in low-income New York City communities who had higher emotional intelligence had lower perceived workplace stress. Self-control was a direct predictor of supervisors' perceived stress in the workplace. These findings can help the field craft strategies to support supervisors in developing emotional intelligence. By reducing workplace stress

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and enabling supervisors to mentor direct service staff, efforts to improve supervisors' emotional intelligence can be expected to enhance program quality.

The study is particularly relevant as the education system recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic. To help children in low-income communities recover from their pandemic-induced trauma and make up for their learning loss, afterschool practitioners need first to deal with their own trauma and then to develop skills to support children's social and emotional development. This need existed before the pandemic and is even more urgent now. Emotional intelligence training for supervisors is one step toward addressing the academic and social and emotional needs of children in disadvantaged communities.

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