

ABSTRACT

Middle school is a time where students start to figure out who they are and how they want to present themselves to the world. They begin to learn that being different can set them apart and can sometimes lead to intolerance and bullying from their peers. In navigating these changes, 11-14-year-olds often experience social-emotional distress. For this project I will implement a monthly bulletin board series with corresponding homeroom activities to highlight and embrace students' differences. The project will focus on topics such as bullying prevention, diversity, self-esteem, and kindness to shift mindsets and promote a community of understanding and acceptance at a small suburban middle school. Students will be surveyed at the beginning and end of the year to measure the changing levels of acceptance among peers to determine the program's effectiveness and the impact on overall school climate.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

A positive school climate is a safe, accepting and welcoming environment where students are set up for academic, social and emotional success. In middle school, students are going through many changes making these years particularly vulnerable. The CDC states that optimal child development, health, and well-being depend on a foundation of safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments, which have important implications for future learning, behavior, health and quality of life outcomes (Robinson, et. al., 2016). School and peer relationships also impact psychosocial characteristics such as social-emotional competencies, behavior, and identity development (Robinson, et. al, 2016). With the amount of time children spend in school and the long-term impacts of school related outcomes, school climate is a critical developmental context affecting not only academic outcomes, but also overall health and mortality (Robinson, Leeb, Merrick, & Forbes, 2016).

PROCEDURE

All students at the middle school (378) were selected to participate and sent an email asking them to fill out a school climate survey during their homeroom period. Of the 378 emailed, 262 completed the pre-test survey without incentive. After receiving the results of the survey, a series of monthly school counseling themes were put into place with the goal of improving school climate. These themes were presented to all 378 students through the creation of a monthly bulletin board, intercom announcements and classroom activities. Students were provided with definitions of terms, statistics regarding prevalence, as well as tips and strategies regarding the monthly theme. This project was designed to reach all students at the middle school in order to increase awareness and knowledge of different topics to improve school climate. Of the 378 students asked to complete the post-test survey, 274 participated.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants for this research included the student body at a suburban middle school, totaling 378 students. Students ranged in age from 11 to 14, with a mean age of 12. Students varied in grade level with 31% 6th graders, 35% 7th graders and 34% 8th graders. There was a nearly even distribution of gender with 53% female and 47% male.

Enrollment by Gender (2021-22)				
	School	District	State	
Female	197	867	442,783	
Male	182	817	467,772	
Non-Binary	0	0	984	
Total	379	1,684	911,529	

Enrollment by Race/Ethnicity (2021-22)				
Race	% of School	% of District	% of State	
African American	0.3	0.5	9.3	
Asian	2.9	4.2	7.2	
Hispanic	2.6	4.8	23.1	
Native American	0.0	0.0	0.2	
White	90.0	87.6	55.7	
Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander	0.8	0.2	0.1	
Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic	3.4	2.7	4.3	

Of the 378 students included in the study, 262 of them filled out a school climate survey during homeroom. Participants in the survey ranged in age from 11 to 14, 38% of which were in 6th grade, 42% in 7th grade, and 21% in 8th grade. Survey participants were not asked to identify their gender, socio-economic status, race or ethnicity on the survey.

MATERIALS

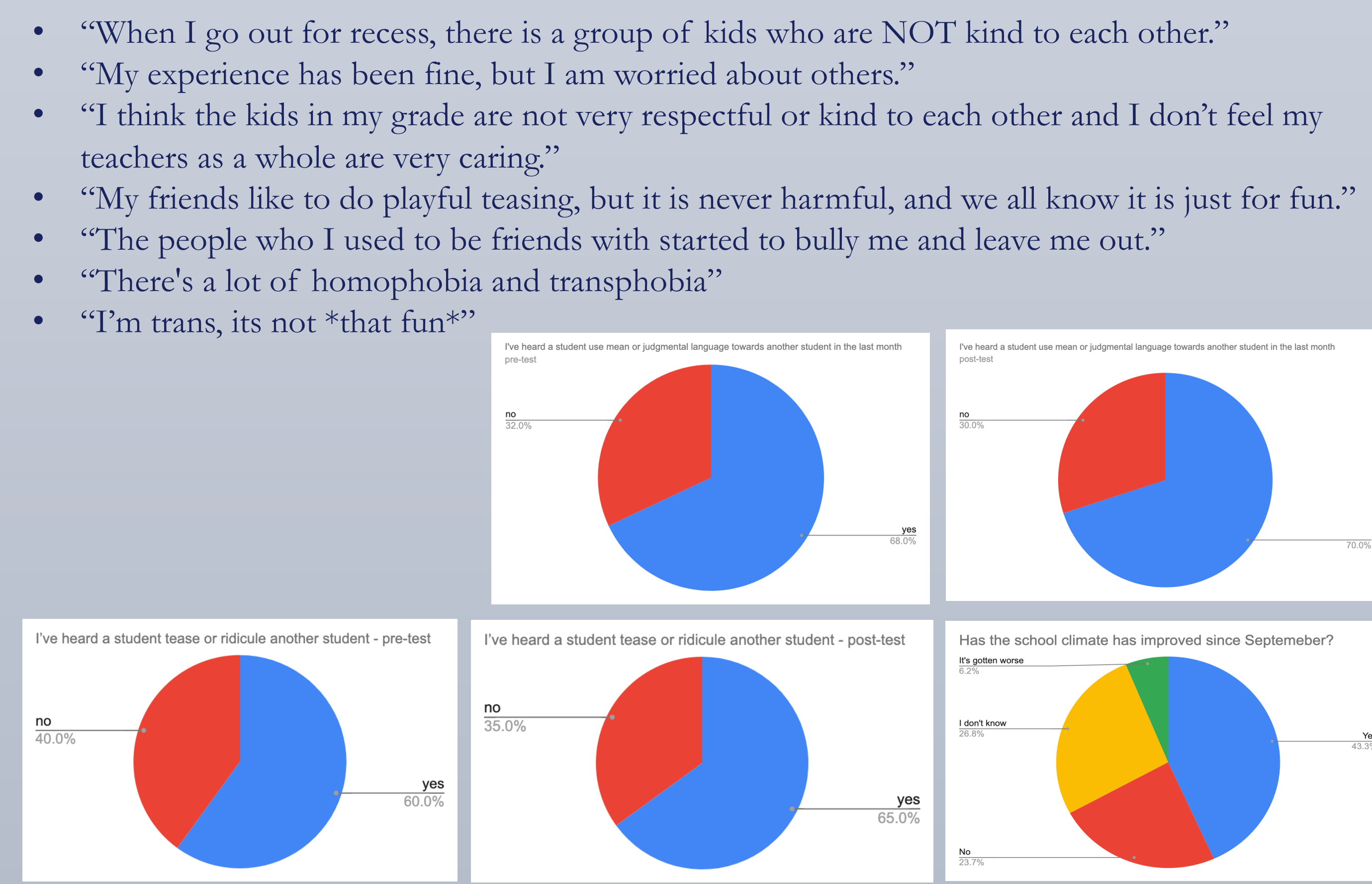
- Google forms for pre and post intervention survey
- School Climate Questionnaire from the Teaching Tolerance website
- Monthly bulletin boards with different counseling themes to address student well-being to improve overall school climate

MEASURES



School Climate Survey 1	
What grade are you in?	1 2 3 4 5
Students in my school get along well	Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree
Students choose to interact primarily with people most like themselves at my school	Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree
Every student in my school feels like they belong here	Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree
At my school, teachers, staff, and students listen to one other	Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree
I like coming to school	Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree
I feel safe at school	Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree
I have friends at school	Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree
Students treat each other with kindness and respect at school	Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree
My teacher likes and cares about me	Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree
Adults treat students kindly and fairly at this school	Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree
I know how to be a good partner and friend	Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree
If I have a problem, I can solve it or find someone who can help me solve it	Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree
When I make mistakes I learn from them	Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree
I am able to understand other people's perspectives and how they feel	Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree
I can work well with anyone in my class	Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree
I work well and get along with other people who are different from me	Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree
I learn about different cultures, perspectives, and points of view at school	Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree
I'm interested in learning more about people who are different from me	Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree
I've heard a student use mean or judgmental language towards another student in the last month	Strongly Agree 1 2 3 4 5 Strongly Disagree
I've heard a student tease or ridicule another student	YES NO
I feel like I belong in and am accepted by my classroom and school community	YES NO
Would you like to share anything about your experience at school or your feelings about our school climate?	
If you would like to check in with a School Counselor, please write your name below.	

RESULTS



DISCUSSION

This study aimed to assess students' opinions on the school climate at their middle school. Questions asked were designed to gauge how students treat one another, if students feel safe at school and to gain insight into areas of focus for improving school climate. Using pre and post test surveys, the study was meant to help determine whether monthly counseling themes relating to mental health would improve the school climate over the course of 6 months.

The survey used was developed by the researcher with select questions from the Teaching Tolerance School Climate Questionnaire (Dillard, 2019). The survey was not previously tested for reliability or validity, and almost all questions did not have a statistically significant difference between the pre and post test results.

LIMITATIONS

Because the surveys were administered to a total of 378 students but were not required and did not offer incentive for completion, the number of participants in the pre and post test surveys were not the same. The distribution of students by grade was not the same between the pre and post test surveys either, and there is no way to determine which students responded to both surveys, and which only responded to one. The intervention to improve school climate was a bulletin board outside of the counseling office, with some accompanying brief activities in home room periods. While the bulletin is central to all students walking through the hallway, most students do not stop to read its contents. Likewise, while all homeroom teachers received communication regarding the activities, they were to lead in their classrooms relating to the monthly topic, there was no method of holding teachers accountable for sharing these topics with their students. There was no way to measure the consistency of approach to these conversations among teachers. With these changing variables between tests and procedure, it is difficult to determine whether the intervention was effective.

IMPLICATIONS

The main responsibility of school counselors is to support the social and emotional wellbeing of the students at their school. It is crucial to make the school a safe and welcoming place by promoting an environment and expectation of acceptance and respect to all students. School counselors work towards creating an equitable and inclusive environment every day, making this project incredibly relevant to the work of school counselors.

Research and experience demonstrate that key components in preparing all students for success include a safe and supportive school climate and culture, as outlined by DESE's "heart strategy" (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2021). DESE is committed to building out supports and policies in partnership with practitioners in the field and other state agencies to advance this work both in and out of school (DESE, 2021). It is their goal to promote systems and strategies that foster safe, positive, healthy, culturally competent, and inclusive learning environments that address students' varied needs and improve educational outcomes for all (DESE, 2021).

CONCLUSION

In reviewing the research, it's clear that a positive school climate is crucial to the social, emotional and academic well-being of students in middle school. A positive school climate depends on the understanding and acceptance of many different perspectives, and the representation and inclusion of all students. In order to ensure a positive school climate, we need to teach students about the differences that make each of us unique, and hold both students and staff accountable to having difficult conversations. The research also shows that we need to set clear rules and expectations surrounding the behaviors at school and set in place restorative justice practices for students who do not abide by those rules in order to prevent bullying in our schools and create an environment of acceptance. We need complete buy in from all stakeholders in order to make a change.

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