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The Impact of Empathy Skills Training on Middle School Children

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Running head: EMPATHY SKILLS

The Impact of Empathy Skills Training on Middle School Children

Melissa J. Sakofsky

The College at Brockport, State University of New York

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Abstract

This Master's thesis explored the subject of empathy in adolescents. The purpose of this research project was to examine if empathy skills training has a positive effect on empathy skill development in middle school children. This study was an outcome-based program evaluation with a pre/post test design. In this quantitative study, a pre/post test scale was developed by the researcher to assess students' experiences with empathy within the school context before and after an eight session intervention including activities. Fourteen eighth grade students from a middle school in Western New York participated after consent was requested from 30 parents or guardians. The researcher shared a descriptive analysis of the study and results based on data from surveys administered by the researcher prior to the program intervention and then a post-survey following the eight sessions together. The results of the study indicated a heightened awareness of bullying as well as implications of actions by self and others. Follow-up programs are suggested for future research.

The Impact of Empathy Skills Training on Middle School Children

It is common knowledge adolescence is a difficult time (Reisman, 1985). Reisman (1985) posited poor relationships among peers in adolescence lead to poor social skills and maladjustment in adulthood. Donahue and Bryan (1984) and Reisman and Shorr (1978) concurred with Reisman that the ability to show empathy and communicate in an empathic way was important for positive relationships among adolescents. Children who have shown lower levels of empathic behaviors have been associated with delinquent and sometimes violent behaviors in schools. Bullying for example, which has taken many forms (i.e. verbal, physical, emotional), has been shown to be associated with violent and delinquent behavior in school settings (Funk, Fox, Chan, & Curtiss, 2008). Funk et.al. (2008) also argued that bullying behaviors are associated with deficient empathy in youth which could also contribute to aggression, sexual delinquency, and even serious violent crimes (Funk et. al., 2008; Guerra, Nucci, & Huesmann, 1994; Joliffe & Farrington, 2004; Loper & Hoffschmidt, 2001; Richarson, Hammock, Smith, Gardner, & Signo, 1994; Sams & Truscott, 2004). Ashton (2007) also contributed to this argument saying people or children are motivated by a “good or healthy society as one that allows humans’ highest purpose to emerge by satisfying their basic needs for physiological wellbeing, safety, love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization” (p.1). Prescott and Simpson (2004) referred to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943) and the learning environment, stating that children’s stressors can overwhelm them and subsequently leave their higher level needs unmet.

The focus of this research is centered on the need for more training or interventions for school children of a personal/social aspect, more specifically empathy. The pages that follow are a review of the literature concerning the issues surrounding low levels of empathy in school age

children. This study and the review of the literature will examine the impact of an empathy skills training group experience on the level of empathy skills of middle school children. The writer hopes to demonstrate the positive value of an empathy intervention and show the importance of such a study on a whole school scale.

Review of the Literature

The purpose of this exploratory research was to assess if an empathy skills training group experience affected empathy skills in middle school children. This review of the literature consisted of research from subject areas of several disciplines including Psychology, Counseling, Education, and Human Development among others. The following review will discuss empathy and related topics including the development and measurement of empathy, benefits of empathy, bullying and empathy, social emotional learning (SEL), and methods and effectiveness of empathy programs.

Definitions of Empathy

Decety and Meyer (2008) argued that empathy was defined as the “natural tendency to share and understand the emotions and feelings of others in relations to oneself” (p. 1053). Caselman (2007) also defined empathy as an ability to understand another’s feelings, but added that empathy also is “the ability to understand what others feel and express that understanding in a caring way” (p.5). Vreeke and van der Mark (2003) expressed “empathy is a response to a specific demand occurring in a specific context” (p.177), and further observed empathy as a social emotion which allows people to connect on an emotional level. Decety and Meyer’s (2008) point begs the question that empathy may be natural in everyone, on the contrast, Caselman (2007) referred to empathy as an ability which could mean empathy could be learned.

If people, or in the case of this research, children, were able to experience empathy for another person, it affects their altruism, kindness, and peace, allowing them to relate to others and understand how other people are affected by life. In the end, children grow with this ability and are able to continue to develop into more successful people. Having the ability to experience things from the point of view of another person is an essential social skill (Barr & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2007; Davis & Franzoi, 1991; Feshbach, 1978; Staub, 1971). For the purposes of this study, empathy will be referred to as the ability to have feelings of understanding, sensitivity, and feelings towards another's experience.

Development and Measurement of Empathy

Decety, Michalska, and Akitsuki (2008) performed a study at the University of Chicago using Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) scans to evaluate children's empathic responses, and found empathy is an innate tendency that developed in the brain of normal children. They also claimed the brain played more of a role in empathy than the influence of parents. Empathy was key in moral and prosocial development in children (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988). Empathy creates social initiation among children and positive play. These develop into social competencies, (Hastings, Zahn-Waxler, & McShane, 2006) including being friendly, engaged, and assertive without using aggression (Hastings, McShane, Parker, & Ladha, 2007). Development of helping behaviors began in children as young as two years old. At that point they were better able to recognize different emotional states (Zahn-Waxler & Radke-Yarrow, 1982; 1990). These behaviors may include helping, sharing, and providing comfort. A child of two may start to show the beginning of coming to the aid of someone in distress (Zahn-Waxler, Radke-Yarrow, Wagner, & Chapman, 1992).

Researchers also noted empathy can be measured in several ways (Decety, et. al., 2008; Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987; Feshbach, 1997; Holmgren, Eisenberg, Fabes, 1998). Decety et al. (2008) showed physiological indicators could be measured via the MRI. Their University of Chicago study showed brain responses to stimuli such as a pictorial scenes or stories. The children were presented with “short animated visual stimuli depicting painful and non-painful situations” (p. 2607), which included scenarios that may or may not have been inflicted purposefully (Decety et al., 2008). Other methods included qualitative study or observations of subjects, and lastly self reporting by subjects (Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987; Feshbach, 1997; Holmgren, Eisenberg, Fabes, 1998).

Benefits of Empathy

While Caselman (2007) stated empathy is an important life skill which in children improves engagement and motivation, the amount of research in to the significance of empathy towards other people and empathy among adolescents is very limited (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1990). Lappe and DuBois (1994) discussed empathy and emotional literacy, and included the importance the ability to recognize and express one’s feelings. Gerry (2000) discussed emotional literacy as “key to help young people develop self-esteem, self-control, and so become socially and educationally successful” (<http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/Pubs/gerry.html>). High levels of empathy allow children to become better friends, students, sons, and daughters. Eventually this helps children develop into better husbands, wives, workers, bosses, parents, and citizens. The ability to set aside a self-centered focus allows for the development of a person who is empathic; able to be an active listener, and understand someone else’s perspective. Empathy skills help to break down biases, stereotypes, and generate an atmosphere of acceptance

and tolerance of difference. Empathy allows people to live together with mutual respect (Lappe & DuBois, 1994).

Based on the literature, empathy skills and effective communication are essential for peer relationships (Donahue & Bryan, 1984; Henry, Reed, & McAllister, 1995; Reisman & Shorr, 1978). Researchers have discussed that several different educational areas were necessary for whole person development including academic skills, and social skills (Elias, 2003; Schonert-Reichl & Hymel, 2007; Taylor & Larson, 1999). These attributes discussed incorporated being a good problem solver, making responsible decisions, developing effective relationships by having the ability to relate to people from other cultures and backgrounds, and the ability to show empathy and respect for others.

Empathy creates an atmosphere of caring, altruism, and compassion, which are prosocial behaviors in nature (Honig & Wittmer, 1996). Kidron and Fleischman (2006) discussed prosocial behaviors as helpful measures which benefited others and were driven by empathy, moral ideals, “and a sense of personal responsibility rather than a desire for personal gain” (p. 90). Prosocial behaviors are best promoted by schools through school wide programs which teach and model these skills (Kidron & Fleischman, 2006). Prosocial and empathic behaviors among adolescents were most often demonstrated when adolescents were among peers that did the same (Barry & Wentzel, 2006).

Bullying and Empathy

Research has shown there may be a connection with lack of empathy and anti-social/aggressive behaviors (Cohen & Strayer, 1996; Feshbach, 1975). An example of these behaviors is bullying. Bullying or name-calling, aggressive verbal intimidation, or physical abuse without provocation, can have a deep seeded effect on an adolescent. Bullying can lead to

declining grades, low self-esteem, and in some extreme cases suicide (Hazler, Hoover, & Oliver, 1992; Lane, 1989).

The incidents of school shootings in recent years have brought to the forefront the serious consequences of what some may consider harmless teasing (Hernandez & Seem, 2004).

Having a program in place as intervention for bullying and name-calling of students can create a safe place for education (Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 1999). Providing students with a safe school environment or haven gives them the opportunity for learning and growth (Hernandez & Seem, 2004). In a study done at the University of Minnesota Department of Educational Psychology, Pellegrini, Bartini, and Brooks (1999) defined bullies as:

Youngsters who repeatedly use negative actions, such as physical or verbal aggression against victims. Bullies are also more aggressive physically stronger, and bigger than their peers. They represent 7-15 % of sampled school-age populations and are more frequently boys than girls. Both perpetrators and targets of school aggression are, respectively, at risk for incarceration and depression-suicide and problems in school functioning (p. 216).

The research conducted by Besag's (1989), and Smith and Sharp's (1994) maintained this point by considering bullying to consist of repeated assaults by someone in a position of power of a physical, psychological, social, or verbal nature to someone of lesser power.

Bullying has been shown to be the result of a vicious cycle. According to Perren and Hornung (2005), "studies have shown that aggressive and bullying behavior in school are predictors of later gang membership and of criminality in adulthood...Children who bully others are also bullied by others" (p. 51-52). This concept is also supported by Olweus (1993) and Olweus, Limber, and Mihalic (1999).

Due to the seriousness of the problem of bullying, victims, bullies and bystanders are all affected. Targets of bullying can be caught in a cycle of hurtful behavior and labeling. These behaviors can lead to poor grades, bad behavior, and in some extreme cases suicide or violence. The bystanders suffer from feelings of helplessness and stress that they too may become victimized. Another serious issue is the adults who do not take children seriously and think they're just going through a normal phase of growing up.

The need for bullying interventions to provide a sense of safety and security are supported by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943). Without a safe and secure environment in which to learn, children will be unable to focus on other things such as grades and psychosocial skills (Prescott & Simpson, 2004). In other words, if a student has to deal with constant harassment and instability in school, focusing on their academic and social goals will be impossible. Therefore bullying interventions are key to long term success in school and life.

Social Emotional Learning

Social-emotional learning is defined as "the process through which children and adults develop the skills, attitudes, and values necessary to acquire social and emotional competence" (Elias, Zins, Weissberg, Frey, Greenberg, Haynes, Kessler, Schwab-Stone, & Schriver, 1997, p. 2). Part of teaching children empathy skills is entwined with focusing on positive youth development and building positive social relationships (Nail, 2007). The idea that learning empathy is part of growing one's emotional intelligence along the lines of understanding one's own and other's feelings, listening and communication skills and respect of other's differences (Elias, Lantieri, Patti, Walberg, & Zins, 1999; Gardner, 1983, Goleman, 1995). Social emotional learning (SEL) focuses on the use and understanding of emotional intelligence (Payton, Weissberg, Durlak, Dymnieki, Taylor, Schellinger, & Pachan, 2008).

The facets or competencies involved in SEL include emotional self-awareness, self-management of emotions, social awareness, productive relationship skills, empathy and responsible decision making (Goleman, 1995; Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning; 2005; Devaney, O'Brien, Keister, Resnik, & Weissberg, 2006). Students able to obtain competence in these areas will thrive in their academics, improve test scores, be socially adjusted among their peers, as well as have a productive adult life (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2005; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). In her discussion of SEL, Maholmes (2008) stated that SEL and education are enmeshed in their development. Maholmes (2008) continued to say, "school success and social and emotional development are linked in such a way that it is virtually impossible to isolate the effects of either on the children's educational outcome" (<http://www.cfchildren.org/issuessel/school/index.cfm>).

Research over the past 30 years has indicated SEL programming for elementary and middle-school students is an approach with great potential to deplete problem behaviors, promote positive adjustment, and enhance academic performance (Diekstra, 2008; Greenberg, Weissberg, O'Brien, Zins, Fredericks, Resnik, & Elias, 2003; Wilson, Gottfredson, & Najaka, 2001; Weissberg, Kumpfer, & Seligman, 2003; Zins et. al., 2004). Significant to this current study, Payton et al (2008) found that school day and after school programs showed improvements in the following areas: "attitudes toward self and others; positive social behaviors; reduced conduct problems; emotional distress; and improved academic performance" (p.16). Having school programs in place that promote positive behaviors amongst teachers and students are essential to the learning process (Lickona, 1997).

Methods and Effectiveness of Empathy Programs

Research has found the introduction of conflict resolution and interpersonal skills training, including empathy, was affirmatively interconnected with improved academic achievement (Laird & Syropoulos, 1996; Seligman, 2007; Stevahn, 2004; & Stevahn, Johnson, Johnson, & Schultz, 2002). The whole-school approach was originated by Daniel Olweus (1993, 1999). “The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (2003) (OBPP) was the first comprehensive whole-school intervention on a large scale and systemically evaluated” (Ananiadou, Schneider, Smith, & Smith, 2004, p. 548). Olweus’s program encompasses school policy on bullying, student/parent/teacher communication, prosocial conflict resolution, and individualized interventions or counseling for students involved in bullying either as the victim or the perpetrator. All school community personnel, parents and students are involved in the OBPP program. Using these theories, and putting them into practice, could be a foundation for reducing bullying with young people today.

Daniel Olweus (1993) suggested that the best way of attending to kids base-level needs is to work not just on the individual but the whole system to foster a safe environment for students. The whole system in this case includes all members of the school community, including school staff, pupils, and parents. The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program aims to reduce and prevent the problem of bullying, improve the social climate of classrooms, “and reduce related antisocial behaviors, such as vandalism and truancy among all school age children” (<http://www.clemson.edu/olweus/>). In the event of bullying incidents, if a school were to only target the individuals involved, the influencers that perpetuated the problem may not be addressed at the root. By taking a systemic approach as Olweus (1993) suggested, the root of the problem can be addressed at the same time as the behavior in question.

Ananiadou et al. (2004) conducted a comparison study that evaluated the effectiveness of 14 different program studies on whole-school programs that had been implemented in primary and secondary schools. Some of the studies described bullying/victimization scales, some were narrative studies while others focused on percentages of bullying incidents reported. Results of the studies were small however the most significant result that was produced by Ananiadou et al.'s (2004) study was an increase of bullying awareness. Associated with an awareness of the problem of bullying, comes higher instances of reporting by students and adults alike. More specifically, trainings which may bring the problem of bullying to the forefront of attention, creates an atmosphere of heightened awareness which leads to a higher likelihood of the reporting of problems by students and adults (Ananiadou et al, 2004).

A whole-school study done in a middle school by Menesini (2000) was performed after four years of curricular intervention. The data from Menesini's study "showed a relative decrease of 59% for victimization and of 66.5% for bullying after six years of intervention" (Gini, 2004, p.109). Though this study was very long, it showed that consistency and persistence proved positive in having an effect on the crisis of bullying.

Peer counseling has also shown immense support for victimized children (Salmivalli, 1999). When peers take on roles such as a leader or counselor, students are able to thrive as learners as well as in social settings. This system works because peer-concept has a large impact on self-concept. In other words when children are treated poorly by other children, their self-concept is negative and vice versa (Salmivalli, 1999).

A program called "Challenge Day" was created to generate awareness and empathy around bullying and name-calling (St. John-Dutra & St. John-Dutra, 2007). The goals of the Challenge Day program include but are not limited to:

- Giving students a safe and non-judgmental environment for sharing.
- Helping students understand one another and how they feel about name-calling and bullying.
- Helping students understand why name-calling or bullying happens.
- Helping students understand the impact of their words on their peers.
- Learning strategies or coping mechanisms for when they feel bullied or attacked (verbally or even physically in some cases).
- Understanding how speaking up in a safe manner can help others more than hinder a situation.

Programs such as this help make students and staff accountable for the sense of safety and security in a school. Stephens (1994) articulated this point quite clearly:

Create a climate of ownership and school pride. Every student and staff member should be made to feel like a key part of the school community. This is accomplished by involving every person in the safe school planning process, including students, parents, teachers and community leaders (p. 5).

Method

The purpose of this research was to explore if an empathy skills training intervention had an effect on the empathy skills of middle school students. An additional objective of this research was to explore middle school student's experiences with empathy and how it affects their school experience. This intervention was intended to show improvement in empathy skills and thus have a positive longitudinal effect on the whole school culture.

Setting

The research in this study was conducted in a middle school in Western New York. According to the 2006-2007 New York State District Report Card, (2008) the district serves 8,841 students K-12, specifically 1,045 students in the middle school where the study took place. The average class size in the district was 22 students. Ten percent of the students are eligible for free lunch, and 4% receive reduced-priced lunch. Two percent of the students are limited English proficient, 3% are Black/African American, 2% are Hispanic/Latino, 3% are Asian or Native American/Other Pacific Islander, and 92% are White/Caucasian (<https://www.nystart.gov/publicweb-rc/2007/87/AOR-2007-261901060000.pdf>). The median household income in this school district is \$45,000 (http://www.muninetguide.com/states/new_york/municipality/Webster.php). The ethnic demographics of the school district were consistent with those of the community.

Participants

A maximum of 30 eighth grade students, were selected by the Assistant Principal at a middle school in the Northeastern region of the United States from an after school program. Permission for the researcher to conduct this research was granted by the Assistant Principal of the middle school. All of the students were 13 or 14 years old. Students chosen for the study were already participants in an after school program that served students who, for a variety of reasons, struggled with the demands of school. The program focused on becoming connected to school and increasing self motivation and achievement. Students were invited to participate in the program based on their current low performance academically and/or current low level of effort in classwork. Approximately 30 students from each of the grade levels were invited to the after school program. It was an enrichment program that included intensive study time with

teachers from all subject areas, as well as personal/social activities with teachers and counselors. The researcher of this study was a counselor in this after school program, and was granted permission to ask the students to participate in this study.

Of the 30 letters (Appendix A) and informed consent forms (Appendix B) sent to the parents of the eighth grade after school program participants, 18 forms were received back with consent. Of that 18, 14 students signed informed consent (Appendix D) to take part in the study. Three of the students were female, and 11 of them were male. After the pretest (Appendix E) was given, one of the students dropped out of the study because he no longer attended the after school program due to improved grades. Consistent with the ethnic demographics of the community, 86% of the participants were White/Caucasian, 7% were Black/African American, and 7% were Hispanic/Latino (see Table 1).

Table 1. Study Participant Ethnic Demographics

Ethnicity	Participants	Percentage of Students
Black or African American	1	7%
Hispanic or Latino	1	7%
White/Caucasian	12	86%

Students were asked to describe what their grade range was over the past year. One student indicated their grades ranged from 90%-85%, three students indicated from 84%-78%, six students chose 77%-65%, one student said below 65%, and lastly two students indicated “none of these grades” (see Table 2).

Table 2. Study Participants Grade Perceptions

Grade Point Average	Participants	Percentage of Students
90%- 85%	1	8%
84%-78%	3	23%
77%-65%	6	46%
Below 65%	1	8%
None of these grades	2	15%

Procedure

Consent to participate was given to the researcher by the student's parents. The statement of informed consent and cover letter was distributed by mail to the parents/guardians of 30 eighth grade students from an after school program, by. A self-addressed stamped envelope was also included for return of the signed form. The parents also received a follow up call (Appendix C) by the researcher. Signed informed consent for minors (Appendix D) was also given to the students. The students' consent sheets were distributed in a classroom setting and returned to the researcher. Participants were not asked to put their names or any other identifying information on their pre/post tests. This was to guard against pairing clients survey responses with their name by anyone other than the researcher, thus protecting confidentiality. Except for the consent forms, all pre/post tests were given a code number and names were not on them. The consent forms were numbered in the top right hand side of each page for the purposes of confidential research. There was a number placed in the top right side of each page to correlate with their consent forms, for data collection purposes and to make sure the forms do not get separated.

The students were asked to complete a pre/post test (Appendix E) created by the researcher, and participate in a group experience that included a maximum of eight sessions. The pretest was given prior to the group experience. The pretest contained 17 multiple choice and/or write in questions measuring basic demographics and students' experiences with empathy. Four of the eight sessions were activities. The first, What Is Empathy (Caselman, 2007), discussed the definition of empathy and allowed the students in small groups to create a poster for a simulated "Empathy Day" for school. The second activity, Empathy Continuum (Caselman, 2007), involved students hearing different scenarios and evaluating for themselves, how much empathy they felt for that scenario by standing on a line drawn on the floor in which one end displayed a lot of empathy and the other end displayed no empathy. The third activity, Crossing the Line (Adapted from St. John-Dutra & St. John-Dutra, 2007), allowed students to cross a line in the middle of a large room, if a statement read out loud applied to them. Crossing the line gave the individual and the group to observe how much students were more alike than they were different based on the visual of crossing the line. Finally, the fourth activity was, If You Really Knew Me (Adapted from St. John-Dutra & St. John-Dutra, 2007). The students took turns around a circle, and told the group something personal about themselves that they are willing to share. They began by saying "If you knew me..." Students were encouraged to go deeper and take more risks as they went around the circle several times. Description and details of the activities and discussion sessions to follow are included in the attached appendices (Appendix G). Lastly the post test (Appendix E) was given after the group sessions took place. The post test contained 13 multiple choice and/or write in questions measuring any changes in empathic skills as a result of the lesson/activity experiences. The participants took the pretest and post test questionnaire designed to measure levels of empathy and any potential changes

after participation in the group experience pertaining to empathy. Once data was collected and analyzed, all instruments, consent forms and demographics were stored in a locked filing cabinet by the researcher until the completion. After that time all information was destroyed and disposed of.

Some risks were possible included students feeling uncomfortable with sharing, and some students not have adhering to confidentiality. To mitigate the risks the researcher informed students of these risks, set up ground rules with the students' involvement, reinforced policy of confidentiality, gave the students the right to pass on speaking, and the option to not attend or withdraw from the study. If in the course of sessions a participant shared self injurious thoughts or actions or suicidal ideation, the following would have taken place; the counselor/researcher would have assessed for safety, and done a lethality assessment which includes asking the participant if they feel safe here or at home. If in the case of self harm, they would be asked if they had a plan. If the student(s) indicated they did, the counselor/researcher would have involved another counselor, an administrator, and contacted home. Parents could have brought the child to the hospital immediately or the school could have called Life Line to do an assessment and possible mental health arrest. If the case arose that it was a home safety issue, the counselor/researcher would have involved another counselor, an administrator, and contacted Child Protective Services (CPS). There would have been paper work provided by the school district to be documented both before and after CPS was contacted. Follow-up counseling or outside referrals were also available. Participants also did not come into contact with any mechanical, electrical, or other equipment during this study.

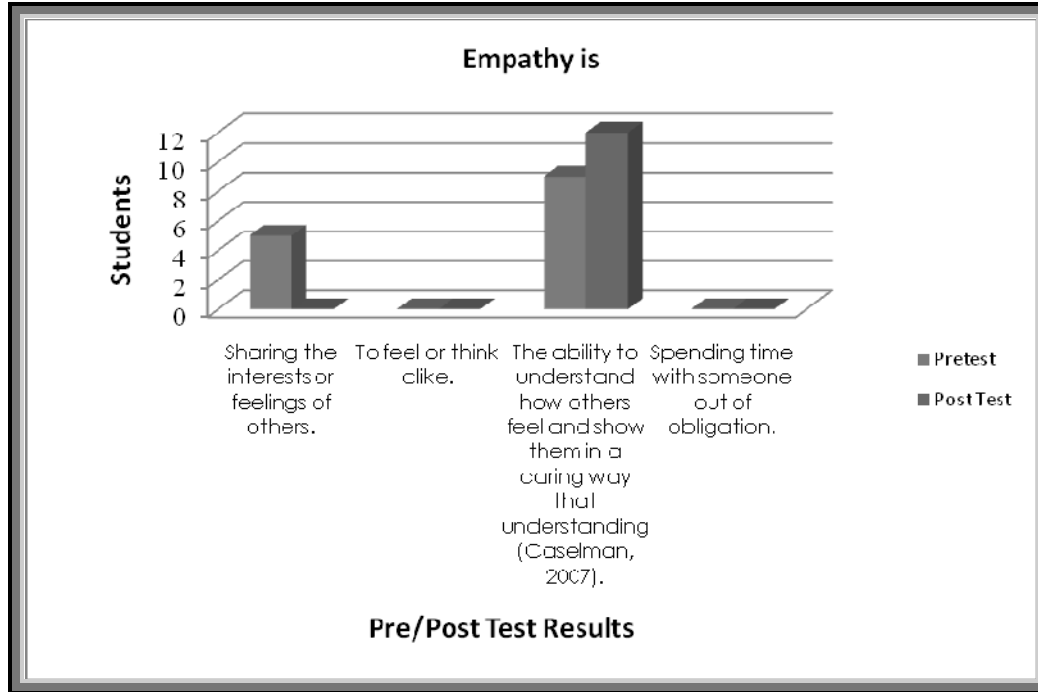
Results

In the analysis of the data in this mixed quantitative and qualitative study, 12 questions were asked of students in a pretest and post test to assess their feelings about empathy and situations involving empathy. The questions included both multiple choice likert scale questions as well as narrative answer questions. Based on the answers of 14 students from the pretest, several of the students had encountered some form of bullying or victimization, either from the standpoint of a victim, bully, or bystander. Thirteen students responded after the sessions in the post test, because one student left the study after taking the pretest. Specific results of each of the pretest post test questions are described.

Question #1

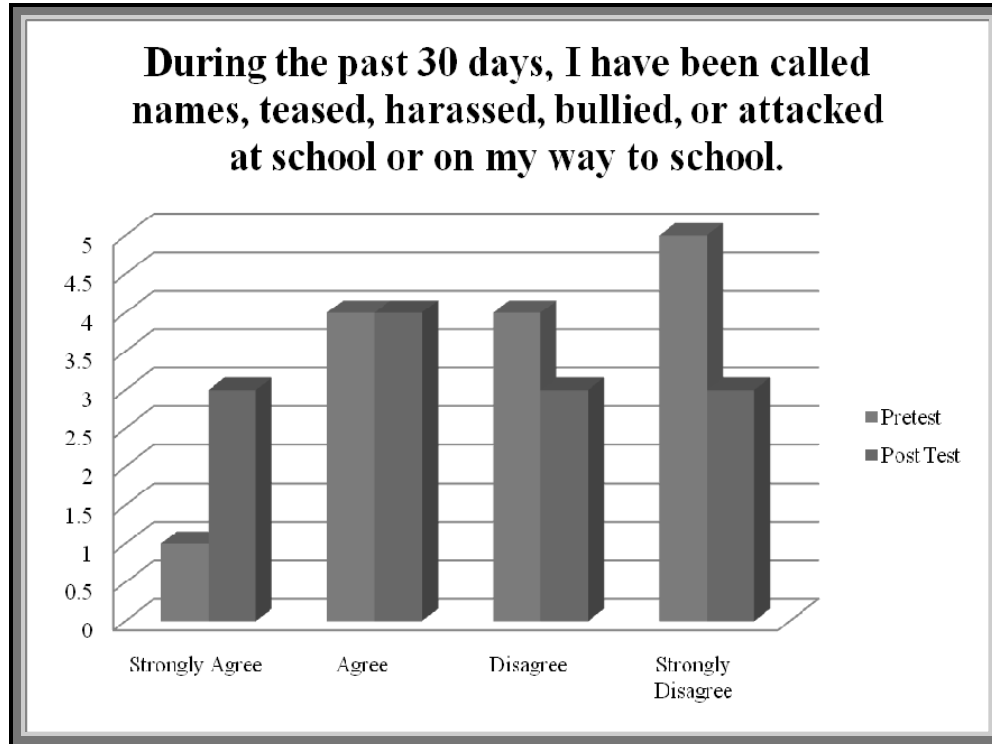
Question #1 of the pre and post test asked the students to identify the definition of empathy from a range of four similar options. Of the 14 students surveyed during the pretest 5 answered incorrectly having chosen “sharing the interests or feelings of others.” The 9 remaining students answered correctly with the answer of “the ability to understand how others feel and show them in a caring way that understanding” (Caselman, 2007, p. 5). After the empathy skills training sessions, of the 13 students that took the post test, 12 students correctly identified the definition, while one student did not answer the question at all (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Students Understanding of the Definition of Empathy Pre/Post Test

*Question #2*

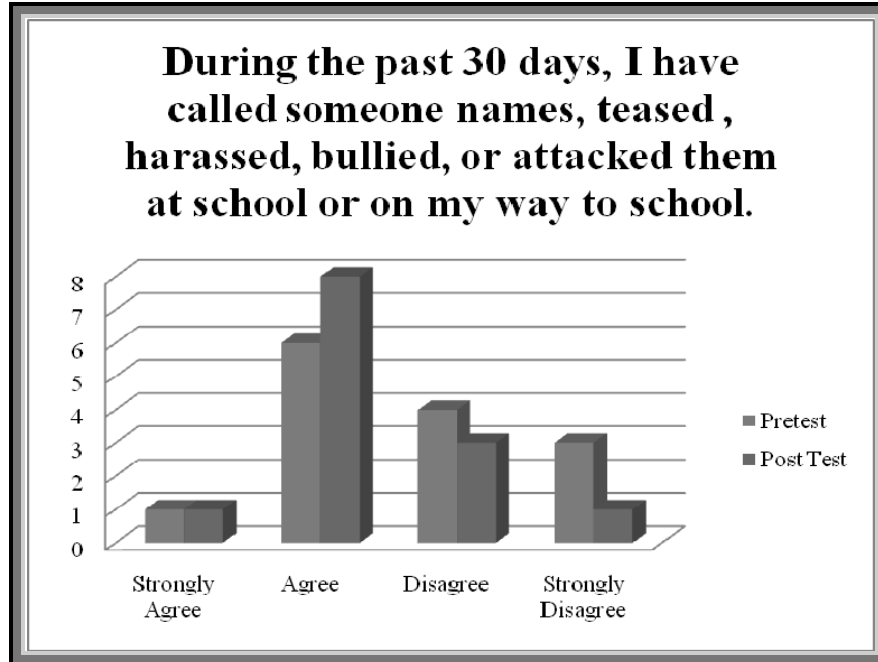
In question #2 students were asked if within the past 30 days they had been called names, teased, harassed, bullied, or attacked at school or on the way to school. Fourteen students responded in the pretest as one strongly agreed, four agreed, four disagreed, and five strongly disagreed. After completing the intervention, the post test answers showed an increase to three strongly agreed, the same number of students agreed, and there was one less student for each disagreed, and strongly disagreed (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Pre/Post Test Question 2

*Question #3*

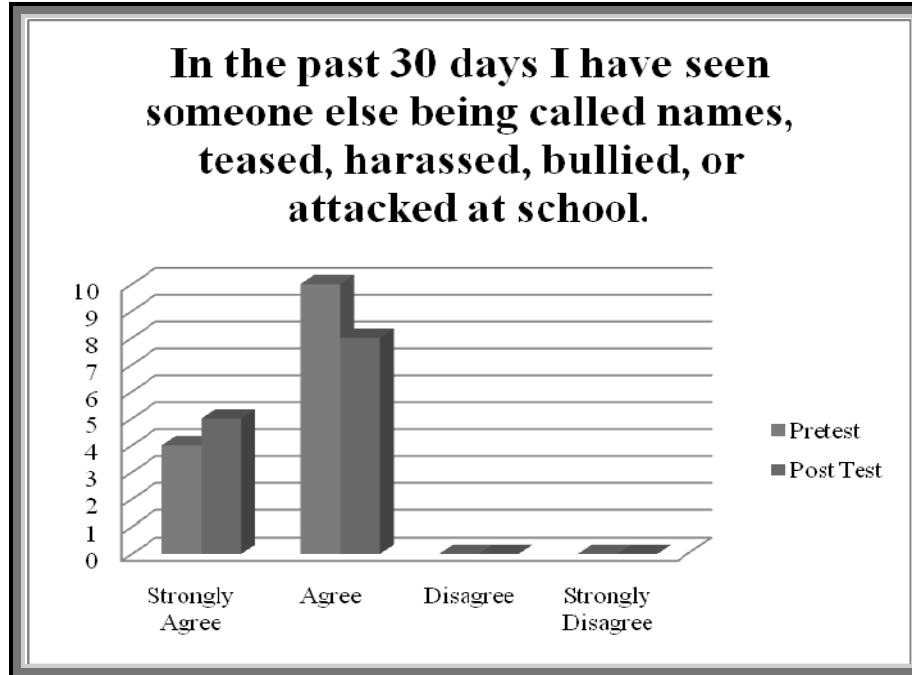
Similarly question #3 asked if the students themselves had been the perpetrators of name calling, teasing, harrasing, bullying, or attacking someone at school or on the way to school. Pretest results showed that one student strongly agreed, six students disagreed, four disagreed, and three strongly disagreed. Post test results differed where one student still strongly agreed, eight agreed, three disagreed, and one strongly disagreed (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Pre/Post Test Question 3

*Question #4*

Much like the previous two questions, question #4 asked about students experiences with being a spectator of other students being called names, teased, harassed, bullied or attacked at school within the last 30 days. Responses for the pretest and post test only differed by one student. The pretest showed that four students strongly agreed while 10 agreed, and the post test showed that five students strongly agreed and eight students agreed (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Pre/Post Test Question 4

*Question #5*

Question #5 asked the students, in both the pre/post tests, if they were witness to any of the afore mentioned incidents were they prompted to do “nothing” or “something”. They were then asked to describe what they did and why. On both the pretest and post test, the split was even for both. For the students that said “nothing” their responses were very similar. The pretest answers included; “none of my business”, “had nothing to do with me”, “because I don’t want to get involved”, and “because I didn’t know the person”. Post test answers for doing “nothing” were on par with the pretest. For the students that stated “something”, their pretest answers included; “cause they’re my friend”, “if it’s someone that I like or know I would help them”, “it depends who was being bullied. If it was someone I don’t like I wouldn’t not help them”, “I speak up for them and try to get them to stop. I don’t like being made fun of”, and “I hate seeing my friends get bullied”. Post test answers for doing “something” included; “told them to stop

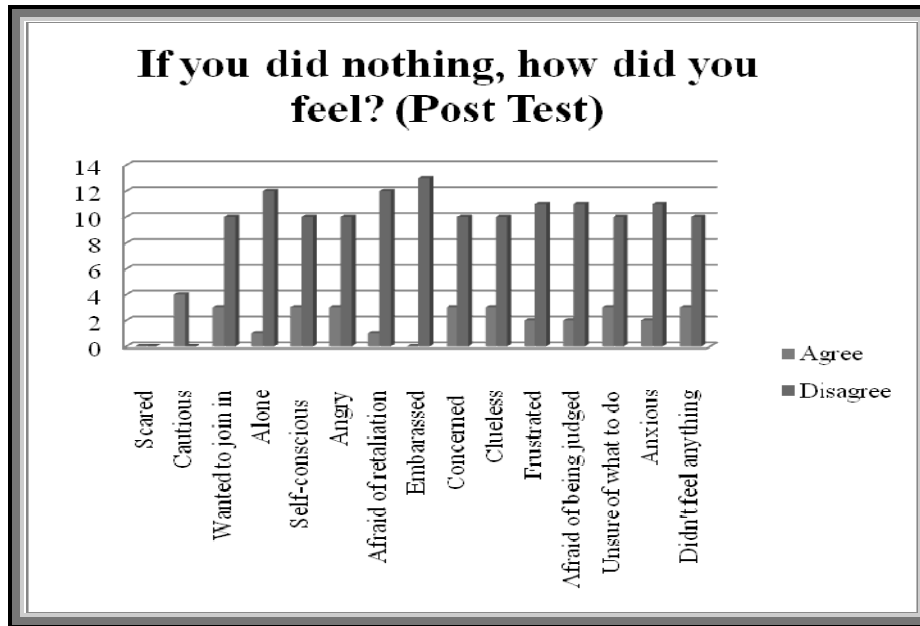
because I know how it feels”, I do something because I know how they feel and I don’t like it”, and “I would help or step in because I know the person”.

Question #6

Question #6 asked students to indicate that if they did “nothing” how did they feel about it. On both the pretest and post test they could mark any of the following words that described how they felt if they did nothing while seeing another student being victimized. The words included; scared, cautious, wanted to join in, alone, self-conscious, angry, afraid of retaliation, embarrassed, concerned, clueless, frustrated, afraid of being judged, unsure of what to do, anxious, and didn’t feel anything. Responses on both tests, were very similar (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Did Nothing Pre/Post Test Question 6

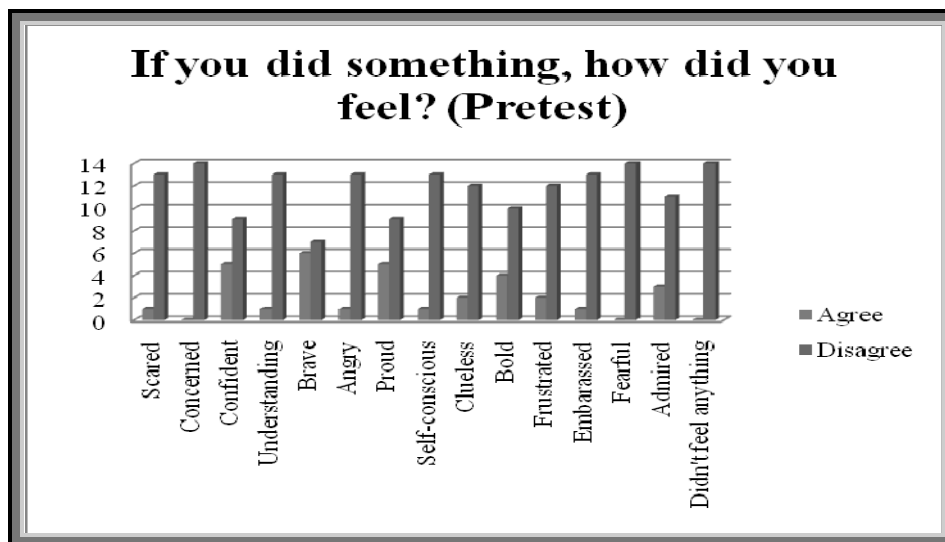


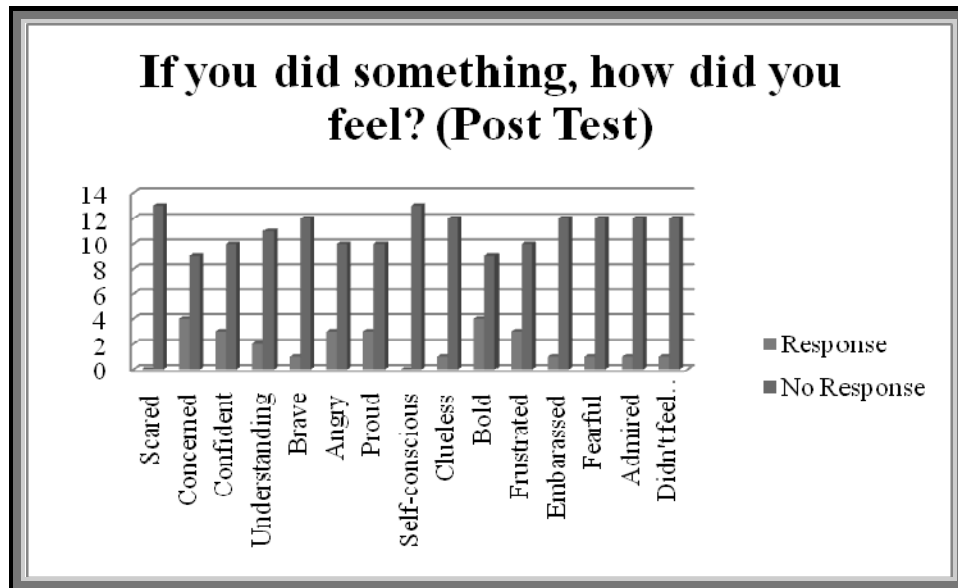


Question #7

Following up on question #6, question #7 asked students how they felt if they did “something” to intervene when another student was being victimized. Their responses on the pretest and post test were also similar. The feelings they indicated were; scared, concerned, confident, understanding, brave, angry, proud, self-conscious, clueless, bold, frustrated, embarrassed, fearful, admired, and didn’t feel anything (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Did Something Pre/Post Test Question 7

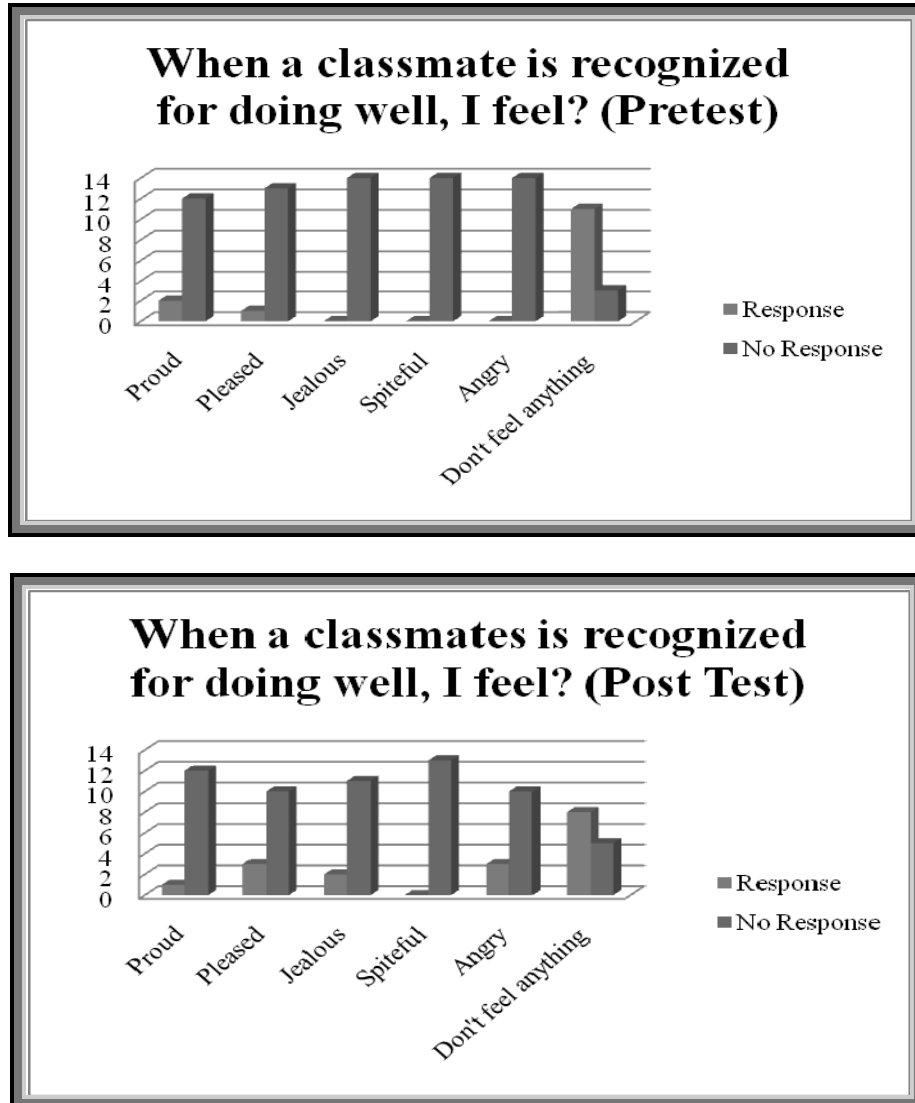




Question #8

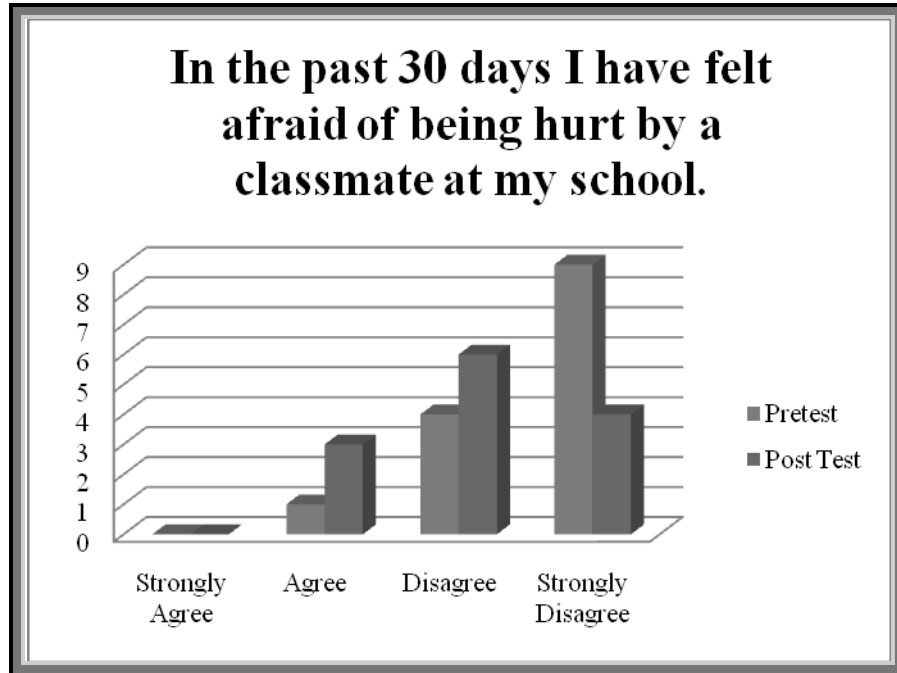
Question #8 was asked to indicate how the student participants felt when their peers were in a positive situation, such as being recognized for doing well in class. The feeling words they chose from included; proud, pleased, jealous, spiteful, angry, and didn't feel anything. The most significant changes from the pretest to the post test were one student indicated they would be "pleased" in the pretest and then three indicated "pleased" on the post test. Also significant was on the pretest zero students said "angry" but on the post test three chose "angry", and one student wrote in next to it "at myself" (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Recognition Pre/Post Test Question 8

*Question #9*

Question #9 asked students if in the past 30 days they had felt afraid of being hurt by a classmate at their school. The pretest showed that one student agreed, four students disagreed, and nine students strongly disagreed. The post test showed a shift towards this question. Three students agreed after the intervention, while six students disagreed, and four students strongly disagreed (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Afraid Pre/Post Test Question 9

*Question #10*

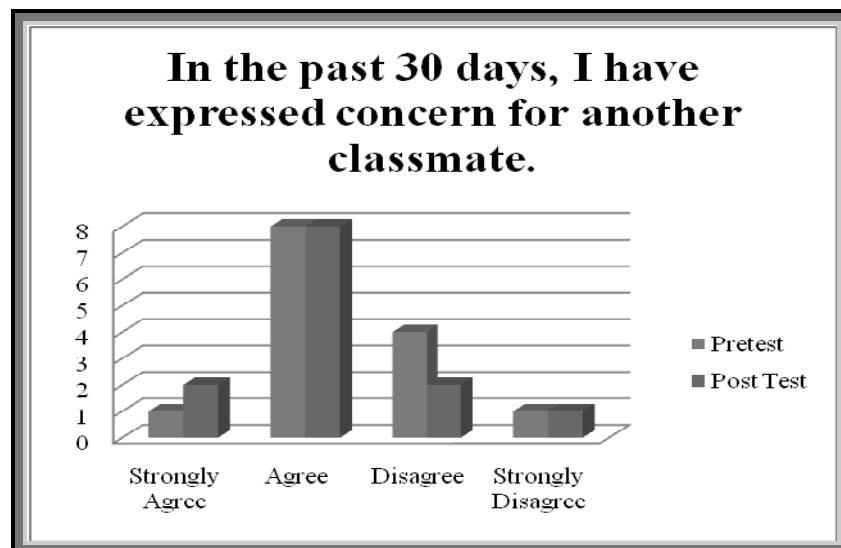
Question #10 on the pretest and post test asked students their perspective on how their peers perceived level of empathy. The question inquired if people who knew them [the student] would say that they care about other's feelings. The results of the pretest were that one student strongly agreed, ten students agreed, and three students disagreed. Following the empathy skills training, one student still strongly agreed, seven students agreed, four students disagreed, and one student strongly disagreed (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: Caring Pre/Post Test Question 10

*Question #11*

This question poisted in the past 30 days I have expressed concern for another classmate. On the pretest, one student strongly agreed, eight agreed, four disagreed and one strongly disagreed. Only one student changed his/her answer from the pretest to the post test from disagree to strongly agree (see Figure 10).

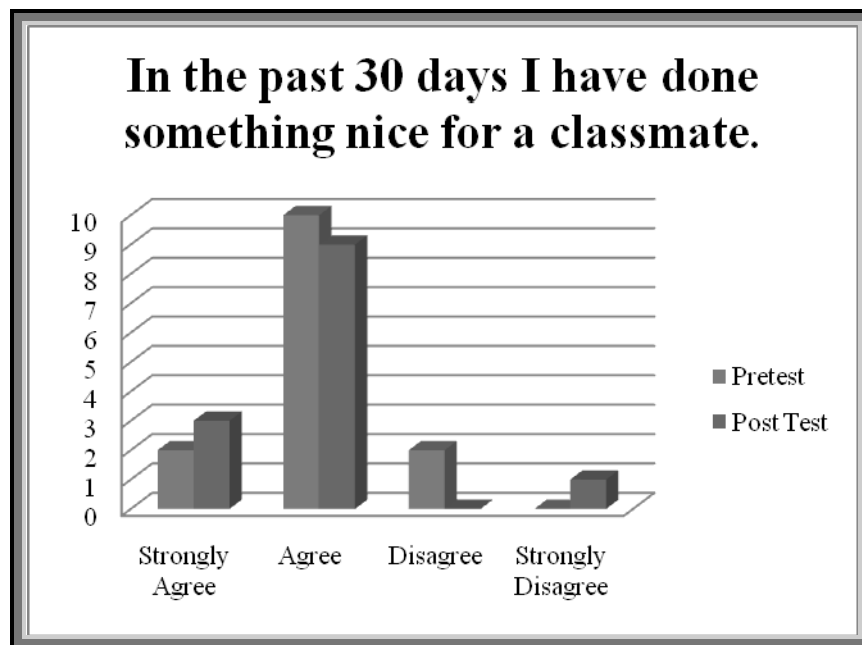
Figure 10: Expressed Concern Pre/Post Test Question 11



Question #12

The final question asked on both the pretest and post test asked if in the past 30 days the student had done something nice for a classmate. Before the empathy skills training began, two students strongly agreed, ten agreed, and two disagreed. The post test results showed a change of three students strongly agreed, nine students agreed, and one student strongly disagreed (see Figure 11).

Figure 11: Something Nice Pre/Post Question 12



Discussion

The current study aimed to explore middle school students' experience with empathy, and the impact of an empathy skills training on their school experience. The researcher hypothesized the intervention would have a positive effect on the students' empathy skills and in the long run, a positive effect on the whole school environment. According to the results compiled in this study from the pretest and post test, students seemed to have acquired a stronger sense of what empathy was. On the pretest, five out of fourteen students answered the definition

of empathy incorrectly. All twelve of the students who answered the same question on the post test were able to identify the correct definition at the conclusion of the sessions.

In addition to understanding the definition of empathy, more students agreed with having been the victim of bullying after the intervention. The researcher considered that this increase may have been due to having a more heightened awareness of what bullying consisted of, or were more comfortable with sharing the information with the researcher. Likewise, in the post test, more students indicated being the perpetrators of bullying behaviors as well as observers of such behaviors towards their peers. Similarly, more students implied fear of being hurt by someone at school in the post test results. When students were asked if they thought other's perceived if they cared for other's feelings, more students revealed they did not agree as evidenced by the change from ten to seven students saying they agreed with the statement. And even demonstrated more-so in the post test results indicated by one more student disagreed and one student strongly disagreed with being perceived as a caring person. Conversely, students showed an increase in expressing concern for another classmate after the intervention with an increase of one more student strongly agreed on the post test.

Prior studies based on similar, yet larger scale interventions indicated positive outcomes. The results of a study done of The Challenge Day program (St. John-Dutra & St, John-Dutra, 2007) consisted of a survey given to 7th and 8th graders of which 2,476 students had not attended their program, and 1,009 students had. Their survey included 37 questions, and indicated positive differences that included but were not limited to; students found it easier to share feelings, students felt less lonely at school, and students teased each other less. Ananiadou et. al.'s (2004) longitudinal study demonstrated an increase of self-reports of victimization and bullying and an increase in awareness of such occurrences. The current study was conducted on

a much smaller scale, however, according to post test results, an increase of one student reported seeing instances of bullying type behaviors, as well as an increase of two students reported being a victim, and an increase of two students being the perpetrator of such activities. Based on observations made during the study activities, this is congruent with other similar studies done. For example, during the “if you really knew me” (St. John-Dutra & St, John-Dutra, 2007) exercise, students became more open and deeper with things they shared about themselves. Some students went as far as sharing experiences with depression. During group discussion they further shared how hearing similar experiences from their peers was surprising to them. The researcher considered if more time were allowed, even deeper and more honest experiences could have come to the surface.

Because the pre test and post test were created by the researcher of this current study, the reliability and validity of this study cannot be justly established. In order to determine the true reliability and validity of this instrument, more studies of this kind need to be performed. In addition to more studies, follow up programs and studies should also take place. The small scale of this current study did not allow for follow up to take place. Programs such as Challenge Day (St. John-Dutra & St, John-Dutra, 2007) performed a follow up visit to one of the schools where their anti-bullying program took place. They found that the culture of the whole school had changed. More students were friends, and the school had less incidences of bullying. According to other follow up studies the Challenge Day organization had done, there were an increase in students’ skills in noticing oppression and isolation, students practiced safer and effective intervention tools in the midst of conflict, and students performed more acts of change in their schools and communities (Nail, 2007; St. John-Dutra & St, John-Dutra, 2007). The researcher of the current study would have preferred more pronounced results and would have liked to have

had the opportunity to see any longer term results of this intervention. Overall, when looking at the results as a whole, the early results of the current study seemed to be in agreement with the researcher's original hypothesis that the intervention could have been the start of a change to the whole school culture for the better had there been more time and more individuals involved.

Limitations

There were a number of limitations throughout the course of this study. Control conditions were absent throughout sessions. Attendance was inconsistent, as was faculty availability for assistance. Faculty members were not trained on materials before each session, thus leaving all instruction and explanation solely on the hands of the researcher. The particular group of students in the study sample included students with some behavior problems, who often became disruptions during the sessions, thus limiting time to proceed. Likewise, the time periods allowed for each session were only 30 minutes. It seemed that just as students began to open up during session discussions, the sessions were cut off by the end time. Having a longer session time would be of benefit to future studies and interventions. This will allow for some warm up time for students to become comfortable with the topics of discussion, and increase their comfort level as more students begin to share. The sample size of students was very small, thus gave low variation of answers on the pretest and post test. Having a larger sample size would including peer leaders, students from across the grades spectrum, as well as faculty and parents would provide a more significant effect on the school culture. Lastly, students were not monitored while answering the pretest and post tests. There were no rules established to prevent answer sharing. For future attempts at such programs as this study, more strict procedures such as separating students during administration of the pretests and post tests may allow for clearer or truer results.

Future Research and Implications for Counselors and Other Helping Professionals

Replication of this study or studies like it on a much larger scale over a longer period of time or with more time allotted for each session will add to the depth of discussion and perhaps variation of results. Involvement of more students, as well as faculty, parents and perhaps community members would allow for a more considerable impact on a whole school scale. Future research including interventions will also depend on support from schools which would involve investment from administration, and related stakeholders. Furthermore, follow-up sessions some time after interventions would be a more appropriate time for a post test survey, to determine any longer term effects of such a program.

Conclusion

“Research in social and emotional learning theory and emotional intelligence studies confirm that programs effective in helping young people in developing social competence and developing caring relationships serve as a foundation for learning” (Nail, 2007, p. 107). Research supports that SEL programs and those similar to the interventions used in the current study support students and improve academic performance, therefore allowing for well-roundedness (Elias, 2003; Goleman, 1995). Programs such as the one investigated in this current study help to create a more supportive learning environment. It is the hope of the researcher that students will benefit from their experience in this program and become agents of positive change in their schools and communities.

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Appendix A

Parent Cover Letter

Dear Parent or Guardian,

I want to take the opportunity to introduce myself to you. My name is Melissa Sakofsky. I am in the final phase of my Masters program at The College at Brockport State University of New York. I am working as a School Counselor Intern at Spry Middle School, under the supervision of Mrs. Dickinson, School Counselor (A-D).

I am seeking permission from you to include your child as a participant in my research study. Your child's information will remain confidential; their name will not be indicated in my thesis. The results of this study will be included in my thesis. Attached is a statement of informed consent detailing my project and the work which will be completed with your child.

To protect your child and ensure their safety and ethical treatment in research, I am required to obtain your permission before I can begin. I appreciate your assistance with the research project. If you have any questions you may contact me, my faculty advisor, or The College at Brockport Institutional Review Board. Our contact information is included. For your convenience I have included a self addressed/stamped envelope. Please return this to me by _____ to allow your child to participate.

Thank you in advance for your support!

Sincerely,

Melissa Sakofsky
Graduate Student at The College at Brockport State University of New York
Counseling Intern, Webster Spry Middle School
melissa_sakofsky@websterschools.org
(585)216-0045

Appendix B

Statement of Informed Consent

The purpose of this research project is to examine if empathy skills training affects empathy skills in middle school children. This research project is also being conducted in order for me to complete my Master's thesis for the Department of Counselor Education at The College at Brockport State University of New York.

In order for your child to participate in this study, your informed consent is required. You are being asked to make a decision whether or not to allow your child to participate in the project. If you want your child to participate in the project, and agree with statements below, your signature and printed name of your child signifies your consent. You may change your mind at any time and your child may leave the study without penalty, even after the study has begun.

I understand that:

1. My child's participation is voluntary and they have the right to refuse to answer any questions.
2. My child's name will not be written on the surveys. There will be no way to connect my child to their written survey by anyone except for the researcher. Each survey will receive a code number correlating with my child's name for data entry purposes only, and will only be known by the researcher and kept under lock and key. If any publication results from this research, my child would not be identified by name.
3. Based on the time taken to complete this study there is minimal risk or benefits due to my child. Some risks that may be possible are students feeling uncomfortable with sharing, and that some students may not adhere to confidentiality. To mitigate the risks the researcher will inform students of these risks, set up ground rules with the students involvement, reinforce policy of confidentiality, give the students the right to pass on speaking, and the option to not attend or withdraw from the study. If in the course of sessions a participant shares self injurious thoughts or actions or suicidal ideation, the following would take place; the counselor/researcher will assess for safety, and do a lethality assessment which includes asking the participant if they feel safe here or at home. If in the case of self harm, ask them if they have a plan. The counselor/researcher would involve another counselor, an administrator, and contact home. Parents can bring the child to the hospital immediately or the school can call life-line to do an assessment and possible mental health arrest. If the case arises that it is a home safety issue, the counselor/researcher would involve another counselor, an administrator, and contact Child Protective Services (CPS). There is paper work provided by the school district to be documented both before and after CPS is contacted. Follow-up counseling or outside referrals are also available.

4. My child's participation involves taking two surveys (a pre and post test) and participation in a maximum of 8 group activities and group discussions. The pretest survey will be given prior to the group experience. The pretest has 17 questions. The post test will be given after the group sessions have taken place. The post test has 13 questions. My child will be asked to answer these surveys by placing an X next to the answer that best corresponds with his/her opinion, circling an answer, or by writing in the answer. It is estimated that it will take 10-15 minutes to complete these surveys. Each of the group activities and discussions is estimated to take a maximum of 30 minutes to complete. Both the surveys and the group experiences will take place during the Excel After School Program after they have completed their academic portion of that program.
5. A maximum of 30 students from the eighth grade in Webster Spry Middle School who also participates in the Excel After School Program will take part in this study. The results will be used for the completion of a Master's thesis by Melissa Sakofsky, counseling student intern.
6. Data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet by the researcher, Melissa Sakofsky. Data and consent forms will be destroyed by shredding when the research has been accepted and approved.

I am 18 years of age or older. I have read and understand the above statements. All my questions about my child's participation in this study have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to allow my child to participate in the study realizing I may withdraw him/her or they may withdraw themselves without penalty at any time during the study process. Returning the consent form indicates my consent for my child to participate. If you have any questions you may contact Melissa Sakofsky or Thomas Hernandez, Faculty Advisor, The College at Brockport State University of New York.

Please print your child's name

Please print your name

Please sign your name

Date

Melissa Sakofsky
 Graduate Student at The College at Brockport State University of New York
 Counselor Intern at Webster Spry Middle School
 melissa_sakofsky@websterschools.org
 (585)216-0045

Thomas Hernandez, Ed.D., LMHC
 Faculty Advisor, The College at Brockport State University of New York

thernandez@brockport.edu
(585)395-2258

The College at Brockport Institutional Review Board
Kristin Dauenhauer
IRB Coordinator
irboffice@brockport.edu
(585) 395-2779

Appendix C

Statement of Informed Consent Parent Follow-up Call Script

Hello Mr./Ms. _____, this is Melissa Sakofsky, Counselor Intern from Webster Spry Middle School. I am working with your son/daughter at the Excel After School Program. I following up on the letter I sent you last week regarding my research study. Did you receive my letter? Do you have any questions or concerns?

Would you be willing to allow your son/daughter to participate?

(If yes) I need to have the letter by ____ so I can include your child (use name) in the study.

Thank you for your time, and I look forward to working with you throughout the year.

(If no) Your child will not be included in the research in terms of data collection, however your child will continue to participate and receive the same services as the other eighth grade Excel students.

Appendix D

INFORMED CONSENT FOR STUDENTS

I am doing a research project that is required for graduation from my graduate school program at The College at Brockport State University of New York. I am interested in learning about how empathy skills training group experience affects empathy in middle school students.

I am asking about 30, 8th grade students in the Excel After School Program here at Spry Middle School to help me learn about this. If you agree, this is what I will ask you to do:

- A 17 question survey at our first official meeting during the Excel After School Program, that will take about 10-15 minutes.
- Attend a maximum of 8 sessions for about $\frac{1}{2}$ hour each during the Excel After School Program, where we will do some activities and talk about them.
- We will be talking about experiences you have had, how you feel about them, and how to handle new situations.
- Another 13 question survey when we are done meeting that will take about 10-15 minutes during the Excel After School Program.

Your grades will not be affected by your participation in this project. You will not have any homework from this project, and you will not receive a grade for your participation in this project. You do not have to participate if you don't want to, even if you're parents gave their permission. If you don't want to be a part of my project, just tell me, and you won't have to participate. It is OK if you don't want to. If you ever have any questions you can ask me. You can find me in the counseling office or during the Excel after school program. If you agree to do this project with me, please sign this paper. Your parents also gave permission to do this project.

The project has been explained to me and any questions I had have been answered. I would like to participate in this study project.

Please print your name

Please sign your name

Date

Appendix E

Empathy Skills Study Survey (Pretest)

1. Empathy is:

- A. Sharing the interests or feelings of others.
- B. To feel or think alike.
- C. The ability to understand how others feel and show them in a caring way that understanding.
- D. Spending time with someone out of obligation.

2. During the past 30 days, I have been called names, teased, harassed, bullied, or attacked at school or on my way to school? (Circle one)

- A. Strongly Agree
- B. Agree
- C. Disagree
- D. Strongly Disagree

3. During the past 30 days, I have called someone names, teased, harassed, bullied, or attacked them at school or on my way to school? (Circle one)

- A. Strongly Agree
- B. Agree
- C. Disagree
- D. Strongly Disagree

4. In the past 30 days I have seen someone else being called names, teased, harassed, bullied, or attacked at school. (Circle one)

- A. Strongly Agree
- B. Agree
- C. Disagree
- D. Strongly Disagree

5. If you did see someone else being called names, teased harassed, bullied or attacked at school, what did you do? (Circle one and explain)

- A. Nothing.....Why? _____

OR

- B. Something....What did you do? _____

Why? _____

6. If you did nothing, how did you feel? (Check all that apply)

- | | | |
|--|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> scared | <input type="checkbox"/> angry | <input type="checkbox"/> frustrated |
| <input type="checkbox"/> cautious | <input type="checkbox"/> afraid of retaliation | <input type="checkbox"/> afraid of being judged |
| <input type="checkbox"/> wanted to join in | <input type="checkbox"/> embarrassed | <input type="checkbox"/> unsure of what to do |
| <input type="checkbox"/> alone | <input type="checkbox"/> concerned | <input type="checkbox"/> anxious |
| <input type="checkbox"/> self-conscious | <input type="checkbox"/> clueless | <input type="checkbox"/> didn't feel anything |

7. If you did something, how did you feel? (Check all that apply)

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> scared | <input type="checkbox"/> angry | <input type="checkbox"/> frustrated |
| <input type="checkbox"/> concerned | <input type="checkbox"/> proud | <input type="checkbox"/> embarrassed |
| <input type="checkbox"/> confident | <input type="checkbox"/> self-conscious | <input type="checkbox"/> fearful |
| <input type="checkbox"/> understanding | <input type="checkbox"/> clueless | <input type="checkbox"/> admired |
| <input type="checkbox"/> brave | <input type="checkbox"/> bold | <input type="checkbox"/> didn't feel anything |

8. When a classmate is recognized for doing well, I feel? (Check all that apply)

- | | | |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> proud | <input type="checkbox"/> jealous | <input type="checkbox"/> angry |
| <input type="checkbox"/> pleased | <input type="checkbox"/> spiteful | <input type="checkbox"/> don't feel anything |

9. In the past 30 days I have felt afraid of being hurt by a classmate at my school?
(Circle one)

- | | |
|-------------------|----------------------|
| A. Strongly Agree | C. Disagree |
| B. Agree | D. Strongly Disagree |

10. People who know me would say that I care about other's feelings. (Circle one)

- | | |
|-------------------|----------------------|
| A. Strongly Agree | C. Disagree |
| B. Agree | D. Strongly Disagree |

11. In the past 30 days, I have expressed concern for another classmate. (Circle one)

- | | |
|-------------------|----------------------|
| A. Strongly Agree | C. Disagree |
| B. Agree | D. Strongly Disagree |

12. In the past 30 days I have done something nice for a classmate. (Circle one)

- | | |
|-------------------|----------------------|
| A. Strongly Agree | C. Disagree |
| B. Agree | D. Strongly Disagree |

13. How old are you? _____

14. What is your gender? (Circle one) Male or Female

15. What grade are you in? (Circle one) 6 7 8

16. How do you describe yourself? (Circle **ALL** that apply)

- A. American Indian or Alaska Native
- B. Asian
- C. Black or African American
- D. Hispanic or Latino
- E. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- F. White/Caucasian

17. During the past 12 months, how would you describe your average grades in school?
(Circle one)

- A. 100% - 91%
- B. 90% - 85%
- C. 84% - 78%
- D. 77% - 65%

- E. Below 65%
- F. None of these grades
- G. Not sure

Appendix F

Empathy Skills Study Survey (Post Test)

1. Empathy is:

- A. Sharing the interests or feelings of others.
- B. To feel or think alike.
- C. The ability to understand how others feel and show them in a caring way that understanding.
- D. Spending time with someone out of obligation.

2. During the past 30 days, I have been called names, teased, harassed, bullied, or attacked at school or on my way to school? (Circle one)

- A. Strongly Agree
- B. Agree
- C. Disagree
- D. Strongly Disagree

3. During the past 30 days, I have called someone names, teased, harassed, bullied, or attacked them at school or on my way to school? (Circle one)

- A. Strongly Agree
- B. Agree
- C. Disagree
- D. Strongly Disagree

4. In the past 30 days I have seen someone else being called names, teased, harassed, bullied, or attacked at school. (Circle one)

- A. Strongly Agree
- B. Agree
- C. Disagree
- D. Strongly Disagree

5. If you did see someone else being called names, teased harassed, bullied or attacked at school, what did you do? (Circle one and explain)

- A. Nothing.....Why? _____

OR

- B. Something....What did you do? _____

Why? _____

6. If you did nothing, how did you feel? (Check all that apply)

- | | | |
|--|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> scared | <input type="checkbox"/> angry | <input type="checkbox"/> frustrated |
| <input type="checkbox"/> cautious | <input type="checkbox"/> afraid of retaliation | <input type="checkbox"/> afraid of being judged |
| <input type="checkbox"/> wanted to join in | <input type="checkbox"/> embarrassed | <input type="checkbox"/> unsure of what to do |
| <input type="checkbox"/> alone | <input type="checkbox"/> concerned | <input type="checkbox"/> anxious |

self-conscious clueless didn't feel anything

7. If you did something, how did you feel? (Check all that apply)

scared angry frustrated
 concerned proud embarrassed
 confident self-conscious fearful
 understanding clueless admired
 brave bold didn't feel anything

8. When a classmate is recognized for doing well, I feel? (Check all that apply)

proud jealous angry
 pleased spiteful don't feel anything

9. In the past 30 days I have felt afraid of being hurt by a classmate at my school?
(Circle one)

A. Strongly Agree C. Disagree
 B. Agree D. Strongly Disagree

10. People who know me would say that I care about other's feelings. (Circle one)

A. Strongly Agree C. Disagree
 B. Agree D. Strongly Disagree

11. In the past 30 days, I have shown concern for another classmate. (Circle one)

A. Strongly Agree C. Disagree
 B. Agree D. Strongly Disagree

12. In the past 30 days I have done something nice for a classmate. (Circle one)

A. Strongly Agree C. Disagree
 B. Agree D. Strongly Disagree

13. Please describe something you learned that was important to you from our sessions together?

Appendix G

Day 1, Activity 1, What is Empathy. (Adapted from Caselman, T., (2007))

Purpose: Define and describe the concept of empathy. Differentiate empathic responses from non-empathic responses. Identify the benefits of empathy.

Materials Needed:

- Chairs arranged in circle.
- News print paper
- Markers

Introduction

- As a group, establish group rules. (Ex. Listen when others are speaking. What is said in the group stays in the group.)
- With the large group discuss “what is empathy?” Ask if anyone can define it... Write down different ideas on paper/board.
- Have students get into groups of 3-5 persons. Give each group a poster board or large piece of paper and some markers. Tell the groups to pretend that their school will be having an Empathy Week and that they have been selected by the principal to create a poster to advertise it. Have each group share their poster; ask the other students to say what they like about it. Ask about how it feels to share your work with others and how it feels to receive complements/encouragement for your work

Assessment/Evaluation:

- During the next lesson, discuss 3 things the students learned from the previous lesson.

Day 2, Activity 1, Discussion on What is Empathy. (Adapted from Caselman, T., (2007))

- Have entire group of students sit in a circle.
- Review what is empathy?
- Review the posters they made in the last session.
- Ask again about how it feels to share their work with others and how it feels to receive complements/encouragement for their work.
- What did they like about the activity?

Day 3, Activity 2, Empathy Continuum. (Adapted from Caselman, T., (2007))

Purpose: Define and describe the concept of empathy. Differentiate empathic responses from non-empathic responses. Identify the benefits of empathy.

Materials Needed:

- Chairs arranged in circle.
- 6-8 feet of masking tape on the floor in a straight line

Introduction:

- Review with the group what is empathy and what they learned during the previous activity.
- Place a 6-8 foot piece of masking tape in a straight line on the floor. Explain to the students that one end represents extremely strong feelings of empathy (e.g. you can really understand what this person felt) and other end represents no feelings of empathy at all (e.g. you really can't understand how this person felt); the middle of the line represents an average amount of empathy. Then read the following brief scenarios (feel free to think of others!) and ask the students to place themselves on the line based on how much they feel the feelings of the person in the scenario (empathy).

Scenario 1. Paul is new at summer camp. He doesn't speak much English and no one is sitting with him at lunch.

Scenario 2. Jessica is giving an oral book report in front of the class. She is getting mixed up and has a red face.

Scenario 3. Tomomi is getting teased about being Japanese. The kids are saying that she only eats raw fish and sleeps on the floor.

Scenario 4. Joe forgot his math homework and now the teacher is giving him a 0 for it. He looks like he might cry.

Scenario 5. Maria's favorite uncle is in the military and he is getting ready to be stationed overseas in a dangerous location. She asked to go see the counselor to talk about it.

- After the students have finished placing themselves on the empathy line for all of the scenarios, discuss their thoughts/reactions to the exercise. Ask questions such as: What do you think was the reason you felt more empathy for some of the children and less for others? Did it make a difference if the person in the situation was a boy or a girl? Did it make a difference if s/he was of a different culture? Did it make a difference if any of the situations had ever happened to you?

Assessment/Evaluation:

- During the next lesson, discuss 3 things the students learned from the previous lesson.

Day 4, Activity 2 Discussion on Empathy Continuum. (Adapted from Caselman, T., (2007))

- Have the student sit in a circle
- Review the activity from the last session.
- What did you feel to decide where to stand?
- How did it feel to see where other people stood in different places than you?
- What did they like about the activity?
- What didn't they like about the activity?

Day 5, Activity 3, Crossing the Line. (Adapted from St. John-Dutra & St. John-Dutra, 2007)**Materials Needed:**

- A large room or gym so all the students can stand along one side of it
- Masking tape or rope
- A line drawn down the middle of the room with the tape or rope to walk across to the other side of the room

Introduction:

- Quickly review what was discussed during the last activity.
- Instruct students to line up side by side on one side of the room.
- Tell the students there will be no talking during this exercise. They should listen carefully and respect one another. Please nod if you agree with these rules.
- Tell them when a statement is read that applies to them, they should cross the line in the center of the room all the way to the opposite wall and turn around. They should face the rest of the group on the other side of the room and wait several seconds until the facilitator tells them to return to the original side of the room.
- Tell the students to notice how it feels to cross the line. Say to them, “every time you cross the line you will step into a group that has less privilege, less power, can sometimes be abused physically or emotionally simply for being who you are”.

Activity: (statements to read to cross)

- Please cross the line if you are male.
- Please cross the line if you are female.
- Please cross the line if you have brothers or sisters.
- Please cross the line if you have ever felt afraid.
- Please cross the line if you have ever felt lonely.
- Please cross the line if your parents are divorced or separated.
- Please cross the line if you don't live with your parents.
- Please cross the line if you have ever lost someone you love.
- (read statement) This is how easy it is for us all to be connected. There is no reason for us to do this alone.
- Please cross the line if you have cried at least once this year.
- Please cross the line if you have ever felt hurt or judged for the color of your skin.
- Please cross the line if you have ever been teased or hurt because somebody thought you were fat or too big.
- (read this to get them thinking) Where did we learn to judge people's bodies? Where did we learn to be so mean?
- Please cross the line if you have ever been humiliated in a classroom by a teacher or a student.
- Please cross the line if you have ever done anything you are ashamed of.
- Questions become deeper and more personal, like asking if they have ever been hurt physically or emotionally.

- Cross the line if you have ever been teased or hurt for wearing glasses, braces, a hearing aid, for the way that you talked, for the clothes that you wore, or for the shape, size or the appearance of your body, (will probably be the whole room).
- (read statement) That is how easy it is for us all to come together. Today we want you to see you are never really alone.

Conclusion:

- Ask students to come together sitting in a circle. Ask them to look around the room and think about anything they had ever thought about people in this room when they first walked into the room. And then ask them to stand up if anything they had thought had changed for them.
- Ask the students the following questions
 - How did it feel to cross the line?
 - How did it feel to see others cross the line when you did not?
 - How do you think this activity helped you to understand others that may or may not be like you?

Assessment/Evaluation:

- During the next lesson, discuss 3 things the students learned from the previous activity.

Day 6, Activity 3 Discussion on Crossing the Line. (Adapted from St. John-Dutra & St. John-Dutra, 2007)

- What three things did you learn from the previous activity?
- How did it feel to cross the line?
- How did it feel to see others cross the line when you did not?
- How do you think this activity helped you to understand others that ay or may not be like you?
- What did you like about this activity?
- What didn't you like about this activity?

Day 7, Activity 4, If You Really Knew Me... (Adapted from St. John-Dutra & St. John-Dutra, 2007)

Materials Needed:

- Chairs arranged in small group circles

Introduction:

- Quickly review the rules created in the previous sessions and have students write down something they learned about themselves as they reflect on this activity.
- Have the students break into small groups of three or four assigned by the teacher/counselor.

Activity:

- Students will break into the small groups previously assigned.
- The students will go around the circle, one at a time and tell the group something personal about themselves that they are willing to share. They begin by saying “If you knew me...”
 - Example: “My name is ____ and if you really knew me you would know that I am good at playing the drums.”
- Students are encouraged to go deeper and take more risks as they go around the circle a few times.
 - Example: “My name is ____ and if you really knew me you would know that my grandmother lives in a nursing home.”
 - Example: “My name is ____ and if you really knew me you would know I am afraid of.....”

Conclusion:

- Ask the students the following questions
 - How did it feel to share your own experiences?
 - How did it feel to hear others share?
 - How do you think this activity helped you to understand others that may or may not be like you?

Day 8, Discussion on Activity 4, If You Really Knew Me... (Adapted from St. John-Dutra & St. John-Dutra, 2007)

- What three things did you learn from the last activity?
- How did it feel to share your own experiences?
- How did it feel to hear others share?
- How do you think this activity helped you to understand others that may or may not be like you?

Assessment/Evaluation: Fill out post test survey

Follow-up: Based on observation or request of teachers/parents/students further one on one or group counseling will be made available.