PROJECT TRUST:
BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS
BETWEEN MIDDLE SCHOOL CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the success of a camp retreat weekend called Project Trust involving middle school students and teachers. The goal of the camp is to break down barriers between cliques identified as active in the school. The camp focuses on building team relationships across clique membership and incorporates elements of peace education and conflict resolution. A treatment group (campers) and comparison group (noncampers) were administered an adaptation of the Bogardus Social Distance Test and the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale before and after the camp. Attendance was found to lower social distance scores for nine of the ten groups/cliques. Campers also had higher self-concept scores after the retreat.

The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative indicates that from 1993 to 1997, the “odds that a child in grades 9–12 would be threatened or injured with a weapon in school were 8 percent, or 1 in 13 or 14; the odds of getting into a physical fight at school were 15 percent, or 1 in 7” (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002, p. 12). Such widespread experiences of school violence have led to what McLaren, Leonardo, and Allen (2000) call a “bunker mentality” on many school campuses. As Tompkins (2000) points out, “increased levels of security suggest to students and teachers that they learn and teach in a violent environment where students cannot be trusted and are under suspicion” (p. 65). This is doubly unfortunate, not only because positive school climates promote learning, but that they have been found to be strong predictors of the absence of school violence (Welsh, 2000).

Further, one of the ten key findings of the analysis of the Safe School Initiative is that “many attackers felt bullied, persecuted or injured by others prior to the attack” (Vossekuil et al., 2002, p. 18). In a word,

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attackers felt excluded. Kramer (2000) has established that patterns of individual exclusion in school settings contribute to violence among students because exclusion separates them from the informal social control networks provided by parents, schools, and communities. This lack of informal social control has been linked to diminishing social and cultural capital (Hagen, 1985) and ultimately delinquency (Cullen, 1994; Currie, 1998; Sampson & Laub, 1993). Exclusion also preempts the kind of dialogue that can resolve conflicts (Aronowitz, 2003).

As a result, many educators have called for curricular changes incorporating programs in peace education (Caulfield, 2000; Harris, 1996; Pepinsky, 2000) and conflict resolution (Bretherton, 1996; Children’s Defense Fund, 1998). For example, ten years ago, Wilmington College collaborated with a local middle school to provide programming aimed at eliminating patterns of mistrust and exclusion fostered by student cliques. The collaboration was a natural one since Wilmington College offers extensive teacher education programs and maintains a strong tradition of conflict resolution and peacemaking tied to its Quaker heritage.

The training emphasized a mutual and reflexive process of problem solving and conflict resolution in which involved parties actively frame the understanding of both the problem and its solution. Teachers and students at the middle school overwhelmingly pointed to the ongoing problem of conflicts arising from student cliques. As a response, teachers and students designed activities that would help break down barriers among the cliques. From this collaboration emerged Project Trust—a weekend camp retreat in which student opinion/clique leaders engaged in discussions, role-playing, and noncompetitive risk-taking tasks.

The present paper focuses on a program for middle school children that incorporates principles of peace education and conflict resolution techniques to address the pervasive sources of these conflicts within networks of student cliques. It was hypothesized that by engaging student leaders in activities focused on cooperation and breaking down barriers, these same students would become more receptive to interacting with members of other cliques. It was also hypothesized that participation in the retreat weekend would lead to increased self-esteem in the participants.

METHOD

Project Trust

In the fall of 1990, middle school teachers and students were asked to brainstorm about the kinds of cliques that were active in the school.
A list of twenty-four groups, active within the school, emerged from these initial brainstorming sessions. Discussions with both students and teachers allowed project managers to hone the list to eight, and these groups became the focal point for Project Trust. The groups included: (1) preps—smart and well dressed, well to do or at least giving the perception that they are, doing what they are told to do; (2) alternatives—baggy clothes, various colors of hair, might be skaters, long hair; (3) jocks—athletes or individuals whose lives are dominated by sports interests, wearing NBA and NFL jerseys; (4) hoods/gangsters/thugs—rule-breakers, tough, like to fight, might be in a gang, wearing black; (5) dorks—geeks, socially awkward, nonathletic; (6) cheerleaders—attractive and active girls; (7) hicks/hillbillies—rural kids, possibly live in trailer parks, like country music; and (8) dirties—poor kids, dirty and cannot help it, poor hygiene.

The names of the cliques came directly from the students and teachers. Ethnic groups were not mentioned by the students but were added by the project managers after discussions with the teachers (i.e., whites and African-Americans).

**Treatment and Comparison Groups**

Project Trust camp retreats include student opinion/clique leaders who are identified by teachers and invited to spend the weekend at a local camp that regularly provides team-building exercises to local civic groups and businesses. Middle school teachers receive training from Wilmington College project managers in group process and team building. Both teachers and Wilmington College professors lead the retreats. Once at the camp, students and teachers are placed into Family Groups of 8–10 members designed to cut across clique memberships. Students are encouraged to take ownership of the weekend agenda by developing contracts with retreat leaders. Contracting processes involve eliciting from students what they hope to “get” from the weekend (everything from food to fun activities) and what they are willing to “give” to get those things. During the course of the weekend (Friday evening through Sunday afternoon), student family groups take part in discussions, cooperative tasks, and team building and survival exercises.

One team-building activity, entitled Toxic Waste, involves blindfolded team members “dumping” a cupful of sludge into another cup inside of a $4 \times 4$ square. Unsighted family team members cannot cross into the square, have access only to 4 bungee cords, the cup of sludge and a rubber band, and are given directions by their sighted team members. Another activity, called Plane Crash, involves the comple-
ation of various tasks by team members who have received several handicaps (broken bones, loss of sight) and limited supplies (food, water, blankets). Also included in the retreat are an extended outdoor trust walk and a structured discussion about the harmful effects of put-downs and techniques for resolving conflicts around them. Students and teachers discuss the case study of a young girl who committed suicide, leaving a note explaining the exclusion she felt because of being called a "fat hog" by her classmates.

Family groups are brought together regularly to assess how the retreat is progressing. Plenty of snacks, pizza, and pop are provided to foster an environment of fun and relaxation during the time that students and teachers spend together.

In addition to this treatment group, fellow students who did not attend the camp were selected on the basis of availability and assessed using the same instrument, for the purposes of comparison. Treatment group students were identified by teachers on the basis of being "opinion leaders."

Assessments

Assessment of Project Trust weekends relies primarily on an adaptation of the Bogardus (1933) Social Distance Scale to measure the social distances between the students and identified groups before and after the camp experience. The scale was chosen because of its ease of scoring and high reliability (Miller, 1991; Owen et al., 1981). In addition, the scale has also been successfully and widely adapted for use with school-age children (Cover, 2001; Lee, Sapp, & Ray, 1996; Mielenz, 1979; Payne, 1976; Williams, 1992). On this modified scale, students were asked to rate all ten groups on a scale of 0–7, with 7 representing the greatest degree of social distance: 0—be best friends with; 1—invite over to my house; 3—choose to eat lunch with; 4—say “hi” to only; 5—as a member of my homeroom only; 6—as a member of my school only; 7—exclude them from my school. Both treatment and comparison groups completed this scale immediately before the retreat weekend and within one month after the camp.

In addition, treatment and nontreatment groups completed the Piers-Harris Children’s Self-Concept Scale (Piers, 1984). This self-report scale measures self-concept using 80 yes/no questions and is intended for use with youths aged 8–18. The scale was administered to the treatment group before and after the camp experience, and to the comparison group before the camp experience.
Camps have been held from 1998 through 2002 in both the fall and spring. An independent-samples $t$ test (equal variances not assumed) comparing the pretest mean scores of the treatment group ($n = 298$) and comparison group ($n = 215$) found significant differences between only two groups: preps ($t = 5.058$, $df = 405$, $p < .01$) and jocks ($t = 2.654$, $df = 378$, $p < .01$). In both cases the means of the treatment group social distance scores were lower than for the comparison group: preps ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 2.06$, for campers, vs. $M = 3.34$, $SD = 2.24$, for noncampers), jocks ($M = 2.07$, $SD = 2.14$, for campers, vs. $M = 2.66$, $SD = 2.43$, for noncampers). Thus, treatment and comparison students were roughly equivalent in their perceptions of social distance from their classmates with the exception of the preps and the jocks. In these two instances the campers reported statistically significant lower social distance scores when compared to noncampers.

A paired-samples $t$ test was calculated for both the treatment group ($n = 216$) and comparison group ($n = 80$). Table 1 reports the results for the treatment group. For all eight cliques, attendance at the camp significantly reduced perceptions of social distance. In addition, perceptions of social distance were significantly reduced for African-Americans but not whites. Mean scores for whites were already low (pretest $M = .54$, $SD = 1.00$) and did fall (posttest $M = .47$, $SD = .86$), though not to a statistically significant degree. The greatest change for campers was in their perceptions of dirties, moving an average of 1.55 points on the 7-point scale (pretest $M = 5.55$, $SD = 1.40$; posttest $M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.71$); dorks, moving an average of 1.37 points (pretest $M = 4.60$, $SD = 2.10$; posttest $M = 3.23$, $SD = 1.65$); and hicks, moving an average of 1.23 points (pretest $M = 4.38$, $SD = 2.07$; posttest $M = 3.15$, $SD = 1.96$).

Table 2 reports the results for the comparison group (noncampers). The only statistically significant shift was for preps (pretest $M = 3.18$, $SD = 2.23$; posttest $M = 2.74$, $SD = 2.37$). In all other instances, there were no statistically significant changes. However, there were two instances, for dorks and African-Americans, in which social distance scores actually regressed.

On the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, self-concept scores also shifted for the treatment (camper) group. The mean score on the pretest was 61.37 ($SD = 12.6$) and the mean on the posttest was 66.13 ($SD = 11.32$). The difference was statistically significant ($p < .01$).
Table 1
Paired-Samples Two-Tailed $t$ Test for the Treatment Group ($n = 216$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Campers</th>
<th>$t$</th>
<th>$df$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>alternatives</td>
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<td>jocks</td>
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<td>hoods</td>
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<td>dorks</td>
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<tr>
<td>cheerleaders</td>
<td>3.282</td>
<td>213</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>hicks</td>
<td>8.608</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dirties</td>
<td>11.751</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-Americans</td>
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<tr>
<td>whites</td>
<td>1.141</td>
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<td>.255</td>
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Table 2
Paired-Samples Two-Tailed $t$ Test for the Comparison Group ($n = 80$)

<table>
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<td>African-Americans</td>
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<tr>
<td>whites</td>
<td>0.090</td>
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CONCLUSIONS

The results suggest that educational programs for middle school children that incorporate peace education and conflict resolution hold potential for reducing divisive student cliques built around difference, mistrust, and exclusion, that often result in the violence found in schools today. While this is only one study in a rural area of a mid-Atlantic state with a unique subculture, it does offer hope of greater validity and reliability with its longitudinal character. Obviously, the study needs to be replicated in a variety of cultural and institutional contexts and across different age groups. However, there is much to be gained by such replication in a society struggling to understand the attitudes of the "other."

REFERENCES


