

# Healthy Relationships and Building Developmental Assets in Middle School Students

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## Abstract

This action research project was designed to have the majority of middle school students engage in healthy relationships with their peers and teachers as the data suggested the need for improved interactions with others. Students contributed to team building lessons; implemented school community service learning projects; participated in an advisory mentoring program on healthy relationships and conflict resolution; and wrote journal reflections. Analysis of the data indicated an increased rate of students demonstrating and acknowledging the need for positive attributes to build healthy relationships with their peers and teachers.

**Key words:** Social responsibility, community service learning, adolescent development, school relationships

## Résumé

Ce projet de recherche-action a été conçu pour que la majorité des élèves au collège aient des rapports sains entre eux et avec les enseignants au vu des données qui suggéraient la nécessité d'améliorer les interactions avec les autres. Les élèves ont contribué à construire collectivement des leçons, ont mis en place des projets scolaires d'apprentissage par le service communautaire, participé à un programme d'accompagnement d'aide et de conseil sur les relations saines et la résolution de conflit, et ont tenu un journal de réflexion. L'analyse des données indiquait une augmentation du nombre d'élèves qui manifestaient et admettaient le besoin d'attributs positifs pour construire des relations saines avec les autres élèves et les enseignants.

**Mots clés :** responsabilité sociale / apprentissage par le service communautaire / développement des adolescents / relations scolaires

## **Healthy Relationships and Building Developmental Assets in Middle School Students**

### **Introduction**

Fostering the development of healthy relationships in any school can help build a positive school community where teachers, students, and school staff can work with one another in a culture of learning and affirmation. This focus is especially profound for educators working with adolescent learners in a middle school setting, as many adolescents are turning away from adult role models and are turning solely to their peers for guidance and support (Wigfield, Lutz, & Wagner, 2005), which can undermine the importance of teacher and student relationships.

The purpose of this study was to encourage middle school students to demonstrate healthy relationship attributes with both their peers and teachers. The problem was that many middle school students did not demonstrate the positive attributes needed to engage in healthy relationships with their peers and teachers. The researcher implemented a strategy with a multi-faceted solution to increase the positive attributes — such as problem-solving, cooperation and service learning — in order for students to engage in healthy relationships with their teachers and peers. Students contributed to team-building activities and lessons, implemented community service learning projects in their school, participated in an advisory mentoring program on healthy relationships and conflict resolution, and reflected on their involvement in these activities in a journal.

Analysis of the data indicated that the combination of strategies implemented contributed to an increased rate of students demonstrating and acknowledging the need for positive attributes to build healthy relationships with their peers and teachers.

### **Problem Description**

The problem was that many middle school students did not demonstrate positive behaviours that would lead to stronger relationships with peers and educators in the school community. This led to difficulties with building a positive school environment for all members of the school, especially for those students who did not have positive peer relationships and have experienced negative personal relations with others. The problem became apparent with the observations of many middle school students who bullied, teased, or excluded others who were not a part of their social group. This was often demonstrated during transitional and unstructured times of the day, such as locker and lunch breaks, when there is movement between classes and interactions with others in the hallways. Furthermore, many of the relationships students had with their teachers were rarely sustained once they transitioned through the grades and entered high school, as many students leave to attend another school.

This issue affected every member of the school community, as positive relationships are essential to an inclusive and safe learning environment for all staff members and for all students. Students play a key role in creating a positive school tone and culture. Demonstrating healthy and affirmative relationships with their teachers and their peers is especially vital for middle school students during this time of adolescent development and transition, as adolescents need positive role models in their lives.

## **Literature Review**

Adolescence is a time of rapid change and development. As adolescents move from childhood to adulthood, their relationships with others, including peers and teachers, are a key component of this developmental stage. Adolescents experience changes and transitions socially, emotionally, morally, psychologically, physically, and cognitively (Scales, 2005). Adolescents' socio-emotional health and motivation is highly influenced by the relationships they have with their peers; their relationships with adult figures and parents often become secondary in this developmental stage. Personal and social goals may take precedence over cognitive goals and peer attachment becomes the main focus for social and emotional health. Physically, the onset of puberty and other body development changes may lead to insecurity and low self-esteem, which can also affect adolescents' socio-emotional health. Adolescents at this time are also developing metacognition, which allows them to analyze and think about their own thinking and learning, and moves them towards more abstract ideas. For these reasons, healthy relationships with peers and educators within a school setting can help adolescent students transition socially and emotionally through this developmental stage.

Relationships during this transitional stage are vital for adolescents. Adolescents are often making school movements from elementary schools to middle schools, from middle schools to high schools, or perhaps from elementary schools to high schools. School configurations often have adolescent learners transitioning to a variety of different school environments. Wigfield, Lutz, and Wagner (2005) argue that these transitions can disrupt relationships that adolescents have both with their peers and teachers, especially as peer pressure increases in the middle years. Relationships with teachers also change in this transitional period, as many students report quality time decreases with middle school teachers compared to elementary school teachers (Lynch & Ciocchetti, 1997, as cited by Wigfield et al., 2005). Elementary students may receive more one-on-one attention (Tackett, 2005). Middle school students no longer have one teacher with whom they spend the majority of their time; their day is divided into blocks with multiple teachers and new subjects. Middle school teachers teach a greater number of students compared to elementary school teachers and, therefore, may spend less time with individual students and thus have less of a connection with individual students. The transition from elementary to middle school may also decrease academic motivation as student goals become more socially oriented (Wigfield et al., 2005). The National Middle School Association (2003) states: "A successful school is an inviting, supportive, and safe place, a joyful community that promotes in-depth learning and enhances students' physical and emotional well-being. In such a school, human relationships are paramount" (para.4). Therefore, relationships adolescents have with both their peers and teachers play a significant role in the development of their socio-emotional health during this time of school transition.

Healthy teacher-student relationships involve the perceptions of high levels of support given to adolescent students by teachers within the school environment. Suldo, Friedrich, White, Farmer, and Michalowski (2009) found that adolescent well-being is associated with a variety of school-based experiences, especially adolescent students' perceptions of teacher support. In this study, there was a strong correlation found between emotional support from teachers and adolescent students' life satisfaction (Suldo, Friedrich, White, Farmer & Michalowski, 2009). Danielson, Samdal, and Hetland

(2009) argue that self-efficacy, academic competence and ability, and school-related social support from parents, teachers, and peers will affect adolescent life satisfaction due to the important role that educational and school complexities play in an adolescent's life. As cited by Doll, Zucker and Brehm (2004), "positive teacher-student relationships have been defined as the degree to which students feel respected, supported, and valued by their teachers" (Suldo et al. 2009, p.68). Danielson et al. (2009) state that educators must address adolescent student needs for school social support to improve life satisfaction of individual adolescent students. Adolescent students need positive teacher relationships at this critical stage of their personal development.

A positive sense of belonging is correlated with constructive peer relationships and a powerful sense of community within the school. Anderman and Leake (2007) argue that a sense of belonging is a universal human need and that for middle school students, the school and home are the contexts in which these connections can take place. In Goodenow's (1993) study, it was found that "positive peer relationships in school, teacher support and general sense of belonging in school were found to be associated with their academic expectancies for success" (as cited in Anderman & Leake, 2007, p.167). Peer relationships—namely, the prospect of having few or no friends, or acts of exclusion—can affect adolescent belonging and affiliation with school (San Antonio & Salzfass, 2007). Roeser, Midgley, and Urda (1996) also discovered that a sense of belonging and school community was highly influenced by perceived teacher-student relationships (as cited by Anderman & Leake, 2007). Teacher-student relationships can also be a vital source for adult support, as many adolescents are turning away from their parents as primary role models and are forging their own identity (Wigfield et al., 2005). Empathy, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and the quality of relationships that students have with their teachers all help to create a powerful sense of belonging in middle schools (Anderman & Leake, 2007). Therefore, students who have positive relationships with their peers and their teachers will experience a heightened sense of belonging to their school and can contribute to a positive school community.

Identity formation is a fundamental component of adolescent development. Wigfield et al. (2005) argue that the creation of self-identity is highly influenced by the activities within school and the relationships that adolescents have with others. The power inequalities that develop during adolescence—for instance, varying peer groups based on various interests and hobbies—are a key factor in identity formation and social dominance that develops in puberty (Nation, Vieno, Perkins, & Sanitello, 2008). Verbal teasing and intimidation are the most common forms of bullying (Meyer-Adams & Conner, 2008). This need for social dominance may lead to acts of exclusion and sustained mistreatment over time, and aggressive and bullying behavior.

Any form of social dominance or bullying within a school will harm the fragile relationships adolescent students may have with their peers. A form of social bullying that has risen within the technological world of adolescents is cyberbullying. According to Feinberg and Robey (2009) "cyberbullying involves sending harmful or cruel text or images using the Internet or other digital communication devices" (para.2). Individual adolescents may become a victim of cyberbullying by others that only adds to the power inequality based within adolescent peer groups. These adolescents may feel isolated and victimized by another group when the developmental need for the social attachment during adolescence is especially strong. Cyberbullying is especially difficult for parents

and educators to monitor as the bullying can occur in any place or at any time, by simply using a communication device. Feinberg and Robey (2009) argue that cyberbullying can negatively affect school climate by the victims' risks of emotional, mental, or physical damage. Furthermore, adolescents are not optimistic about being able to prevent cyberbullying (Feinberg & Robey, 2009). However, Mustacchi (2009) argues that to hinder or stop cyberbullying, peer involvement and united adolescent student voices are essential, as electronic bullying peaks in middle school. Teachers can help students understand the negative consequences of cyberbullying and allow them to see how certain behaviours may harm their peers.

Bullying and other forms of social domination are especially prevalent in middle schools and therefore the development of healthy relationships is essential. In Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine, and Constant's study (2004), more students were bullied in middle school than in elementary school (as cited by Wigfield et al. 2005). This may be linked to the sense of empowerment that decreases in adolescence (Nation et al., 2008). Self-efficacy, one's confidence to complete a task, also decreases in adolescence, as middle school students' sense of abilities and skills becomes more sharply defined (Wigfield et al., 2005). Students are highly influenced by their teachers' actions and behaviours; if they perceive themselves to be disempowered by their teachers, they may compensate by either oppressing others or becoming a victim themselves (Nation et al., 2008). Therefore, positive teacher and student relationships can have an effect on how these students interact with their peers.

Teachers can positively impact the students' social structure within their schools. As cited by Nation, Vieno, Perkins, and Santinello (2008), Bru et al. (2002) state that students showed the most positive behavior in environments where they had input and influence on their environments and had strong emotional support from their teachers. However, teachers may not always recognize bullying or bullies within their schools. Thunfors and Cornell (2008) argue that aggressive students, especially in middle and high schools, are popular and strong at manipulating others, including teachers. These bullies may be popular, but not always well-liked (Vaillancourt et al., 2003, as cited by Thunfors & Cornell, 2008). For example, these bullies may be part of a popular peer group, yet may be disliked by the majority of middle school students. Yet the popular peer group holds the social power thus resulting in a power inequality among the other peer groups within the school. There may be a correlation with aggressive students bullying others in order to attain popularity and social dominance over their peers (Thunfors & Cornell, 2008). During adolescence, where the need for attachment and inclusion is such a strong socio-emotional need, young adults may involve themselves in inappropriate or aggressive behavior in order to feel a sense of belonging. That is they may join in these behaviours in order to gain acceptance into a specific peer group.

There are several reasons why teachers may not be able to identify bullying behavior effectively. San Antonio and Salzfass (2007) discovered that bullying happens most frequently in school hallways and informing an adult was the last thing a victim would do to combat bullying. Bradshaw, Sawyer, and O'Brennan (2007) found that middle school staff and students often report immense concern about bullying, but that school staff members often underestimate the number of students involved in bullying. Social forms of bullying are often difficult to detect, and this form of aggression is most prevalent in middle schools, whereas in elementary school it may have been a physical

form of aggression (Craig & Pepler, 2003, as cited by Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007). Furthermore, educators may see social aggression as a part of growing up, or something that should be resolved by the students themselves. Students often believe that teachers make the situation worse when they do hear about bullying and attempt to intervene. Students are therefore less likely to report the conflict to a teacher, and more likely to confide in a friend (Rigby & Bagshaw, 2003; Rigby & Barnes, 2002, as cited by Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007). Furthermore, students who are not experiencing acts of bullying or aggression—either as a bully or a victim—are still strongly influenced by the presence of bullying within a school (Meyer-Adams & Conner, 2008). For victims, the environment of the school is seen as a negative force, and they may be aggressive or show acts of avoidance in order to cope with acts of exclusion.

### **Intervention Description and Methods**

The intervention took place in a middle school with a population of approximately 450 students. There are five divisions in each grade, each with approximately 30 students, in Grades 6, 7, and 8. These divisions are then grouped into teacher and student pods, with two pods of either 2 or 3 teachers and classes in each grade. The student population is incredibly diverse and multicultural.

I implemented the solution strategy in two Grade 8 classes, in one of the two Grade 8 pods. These 60 subjects were selected as I worked directly with these students on a daily basis. I teach English, Social Studies, French, and Health and Career Education and implemented the intervention in instructional activities throughout the Humanities curriculum.

The goal of this study was to have the majority of middle school students demonstrate the positive attributes needed to engage in healthy relationships with their peers and teachers. There were five specific outcomes that middle school students were expected to have achieved after the intervention:

1. The percentage of students not meeting expectations for social responsibility would decrease.
2. The percentage of students referred to the office for bullying would decrease.
3. The percentage of students referred to the office for defiance would decrease.
4. The percentage of students referred to the office for mistreatment of others (peers) would decrease.
5. The majority of the students demonstrating and expressing the need for healthy relationships in student survey data would increase.

The solution strategy began with introductory classroom activities to build healthy relationships, with a strong focus on building a positive classroom community. These activities included student introductory interviews with all the students in the class, writing descriptive paragraphs on a meaningful object that was representative of each student's personality, and a team-building field trip to a local amusement park where the students also engaged in scientific analysis on various park rides.

The intervention continued with the introduction of a community service learning project. I designed the project to help the students build healthy relationships with others by providing community service opportunities within the school; the students worked

together to provide a service twice weekly for one month. The students were responsible for designing, organizing, and implementing all facets of their community service projects with the only criteria being that it had to involve the school community in some way. Students often provided their community service during their free time, and worked with other school staff members who acted as sponsors and representatives, thus involving other teachers in the school building.

In order to analyze and reflect on the impact of their community service learning projects, the students also received notebooks to keep as reflective journals. In these journals, students reflected on the progress and implementation of their services, as well as challenges and struggles. I was able to give feedback and engage in the process of reflection by adding my own thoughts in their journals. By engaging in reflection, students were able to refine their services as well as acknowledge the impact that their service projects had made in the school. This process allowed students to engage in metacognitive thought processes and to see how their involvement within the project helped create a positive school environment.

At the end of the community service project, I held a fishbowl discussion activity where the students shared reflections from their journals, outlining their challenges and rewards of providing community service within the school. This opportunity allowed the students to see the variation of service projects in their class as well as celebrate their success together as a classroom community. Furthermore, as a celebratory lesson activity, the students created murals in their community service groups outlining the strengths and positive attributes of each member. Murals were placed in the classroom and the hallways to promote unity and community. These classroom activities allowed students to showcase their successes and to provide meaningful and positive feedback to their peers. The students also wrote a letter of thanks to someone in their school who helped sponsor them during their community service projects, illustrating that they understood how support from others was imperative in order for their projects to flourish and succeed.

Lastly, I began an advisory mentoring program on healthy relationships and conflict resolution. The focus of this program was to have students engage in discussion and reflection with one another on the role that they can play in the development of a positive school community. By participating in their community service projects before this program, the students understood how their actions could positively impact their peers and their school; therefore, by participating in these classroom lessons, they were able to see the correlation between their behaviours and the larger school community. During this time, the students also maintained reflections in the same journal notebooks from their community service learning project, again, engaging in reflection and dialogue about lesson activities.

## **Results**

The problem was that many middle school students did not demonstrate the positive attributes needed to engage in healthy relationships with their peers and teachers, and this was correlated with the research behind the study. The goal of this study was to have the majority of middle school students discover, develop, and demonstrate the positive attributes needed to engage in healthy relationships with their peers and teachers. There were a number of instruments and methods that were used to measure each outcome to show that middle school students were demonstrating the positive attributes needed to

engage in healthy relationships with their peers and teachers. The first outcome was measured using the Ministry of Education social responsibility performance standards (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2001). Homeroom teachers assessed student performance using this scale. For the office referral data used in outcomes two, three, and four, I tabulated office referral records from all the school staff. Finally, the questionnaire that was used as part of the intervention was designed by myself to measure the student beliefs about healthy relationships within the school. I compared the measurement outcomes from data collected from September 2009 (pre-intervention) to data collected in December 2009 (post-intervention).

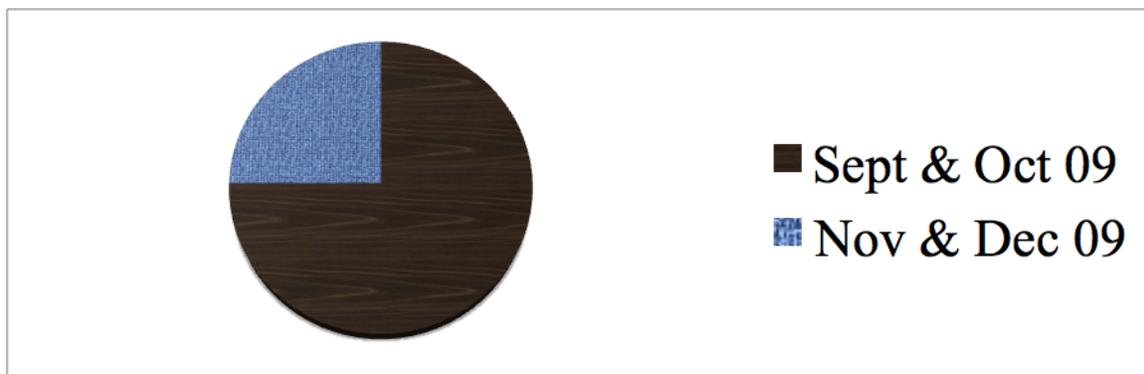
There were five specific outcomes that middle school students were expected to have achieved after the intervention: social responsibility would increase; bullying, acts of defiance, and mistreatment of peers would decrease; and more students would express and demonstrate the need for healthy relationships.

The first expected outcome was that the percentage of students not meeting expectations for social responsibility would decrease. This outcome was met as the number decreased from 25% (15 of 60) of the students in September 2009 to 13.6% (8 of 59) of the students in December 2009. Many facets of the action research plan targeted student social responsibility for the Grade 8 students. For example, as a result of their service learning projects, the students were able to positively impact their peers within their school community.

The second expected outcome was that the percentage of students referred to the office for bullying would decrease. This outcome was met as the number decreased from 8% of the students in September and October 2009 to 5% of the students in November and December 2009 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.

*Office Referrals for Bullying*



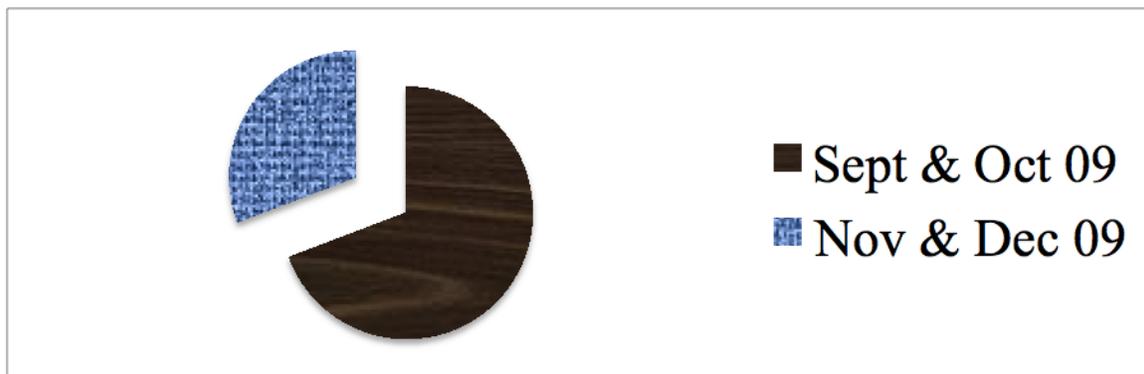
The third expected outcome was that the percentage of students referred to the office for defiance would decrease. This outcome was met as the number decreased from 33% of the students in September and October 2009 to 19% of the students in November and December 2009 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2.

*Office Referrals for Defiance*

The fourth expected outcome was that the percentage of students referred to the office for mistreatment of their peers would decrease. This outcome was met as the number decreased from 46% of the students in September and October 2009 to 38% of the students in November and December 2009 (see Figure 3).

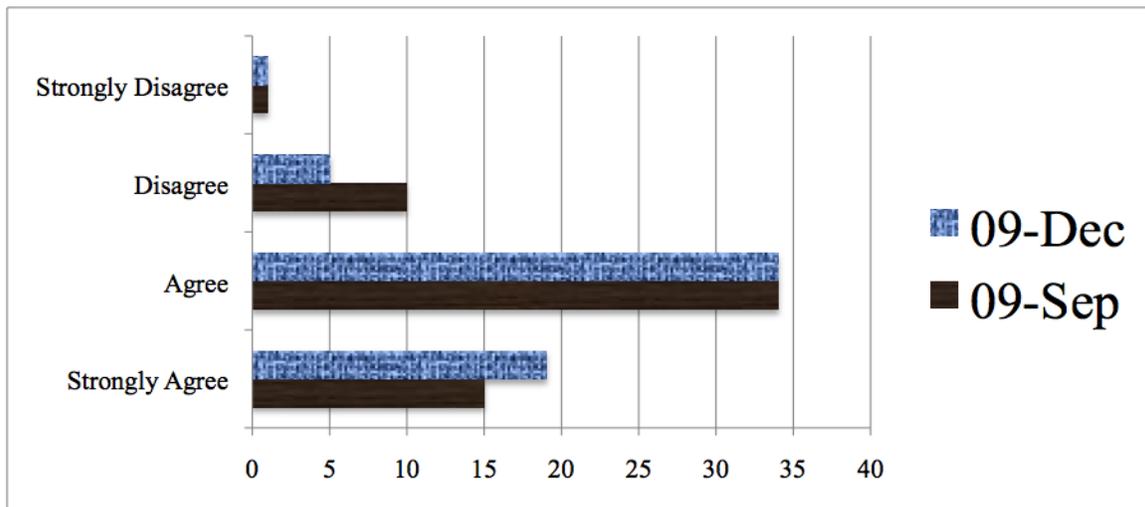
Figure 3.

*Office Referrals for Mistreatment of Others (Peers)*

The last expected outcome was that the majority of the students demonstrating and expressing the need for healthy relationships would increase on an anonymous student questionnaire. This outcome was met as 83% of the students strongly agreed or agreed that they had a healthy relationship with their peers at the end of the intervention, an increase of 10% of the students prior to the intervention. Furthermore, 90% of the students strongly agreed or agreed that they had a healthy relationship with their teachers at the end of the intervention, an increase of 7% of the students prior to the intervention (see Figure 4).

Figure 4.

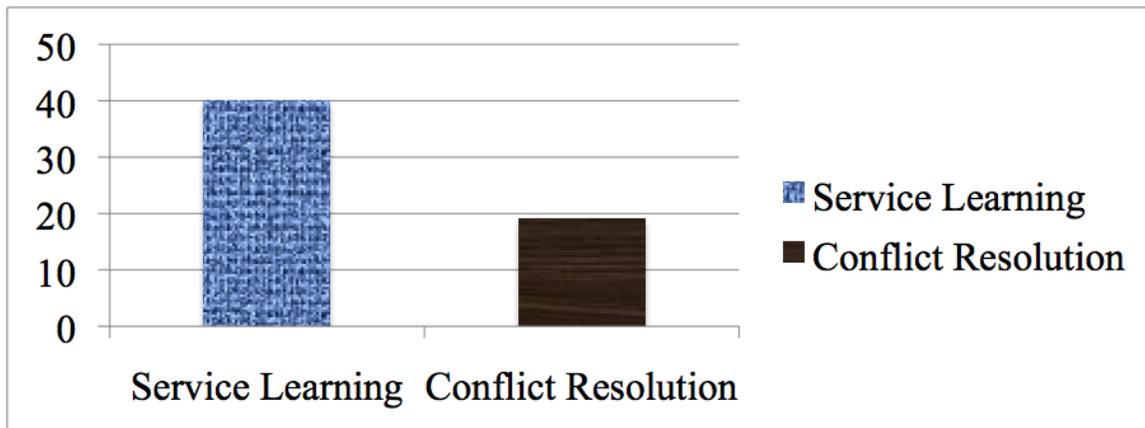
*Survey Question: I feel like I have a healthy relationship with my teachers.*



Furthermore, 68% of the surveyed students (40 students) felt that their community service learning projects helped them build and maintain healthy relationships, while 32% (19 students) felt that it was their classroom mini-lessons and reflections on conflict resolution that helped them build and maintain healthy relationships (see Figure 5).

Figure 5.

*Survey Question: This lesson or activity helped me build and maintain healthy relationships.*



By engaging in reflection and discussions throughout the action research plan, the students were able to make connections between their own behaviors and observe how these actions, both positive and negative, can affect the relationships with both their peers and teachers within their school community. After collecting, tabulating, and analyzing the data, I found that all expected outcomes were achieved in this action research project.

## Discussion

Healthy relationships with peers and teachers can allow students to flourish in all aspects of school life. Relationships are key to the fundamental success of adolescents (Scales & Taccogna, 2001). Building developmental assets—positive behaviours and actions—and healthy human development may help to reduce high-risk behaviors and increase thriving behaviors (Marines, Roehlkepartain, & Benson, 2005). Moreover, building developmental assets helps build positive and sustained relationships in school communities (Scales & Taccogna, 2001). The developmental assets approach helps to increase student success in both school and life through relationships, values, opportunities, and skills that help foster thriving behaviors (Scales & Taccogna, 2001). The more developmental assets that youth report, the more likely they are to exhibit thriving behaviors, like school success, physical health, and overcoming adversity (Scales et al., 2000, as cited by Rose, 2006). Through the asset-building approach to strengthen relationships, increase student engagement, and identify those students who are at-risk, the percentage of students failing one or more subjects decreased by half in a three-year study (Marines et al., 2005). The foundation of building developmental assets is to help adolescents build more assets as they age and mature in this period of transition, and allow for multiple contexts for this development to flourish: in schools, workplaces, and the community (Marines et al., 2005). Building developmental assets affects not only social and emotional growth, but also academic growth in the transition of adolescents.

As middle school students are transitioning through the stage of adolescent development, the progress of developmental assets will ensure that they are experiencing healthy socio-emotional growth. Positive human development with the application of developmental assets helps to ensure that young people are experiencing healthy progress as they age (Marines et al., 2005). Developmental assets may naturally decrease over the middle school years, and the power of assets is connected to the developmental characteristics of adolescence (Scales, 2005). As young people experience fewer of these assets as they age, with the decline the sharpest in the middle school years, adolescents may be missing opportunities for healthy growth and development (Scales, 2005). Adolescents need increased connections and opportunities to play meaningful roles in their environments (National Middle School Association, 2003, as cited by Scales, 2005). The role of teachers should be to foster positive opportunities and focus on the skills of adolescents (Rose, 2006). Unfortunately, many adolescents may not feel valued in school and local communities, and may have limited access to adult role models, or a lack of connection to the adults with whom they do have contact (Tackett, 2005). Tackett (2005) argues, “Adults directly involved in youth programming have the opportunity to greatly impact the youth with whom they work” (p. 11). Helping to build developmental assets and positive relationships with others can affect the development of adolescents in their middle school years.

Middle school students also need to express and develop their leadership capabilities as part of developing their adolescent identity with the help and guidance of their teachers. Scales (2005) reasons, “Young adolescents need to contribute more to the decisions that affect them and to increase their role in regulating themselves” (para. 8). Through helping students to build their developmental assets, teachers can help students make a smooth transition in their adolescent development and help to influence school climate in a positive way (Scales, 2005). Teachers can help to build relationships through

school policies and practices, curriculum and instruction, and school organization (Scales & Taccogna, 2001). To build relationships and developmental assets, avenues for change include service learning projects, community learning, team-teaching, advisory programs with student input, co-curricular programs, and community partnerships (Scales & Taccogna, 2001). By creating these opportunities, educators can help prevent high-risk adolescent behavior, promote thriving behaviors, and help strengthen resilience (Scales, 2005). Children with peer problems may increase their self-esteem and self-efficacy, and decrease social anxiety by working to build relationships with others (DeRosier, 2004). Middle school students will be twice as likely to have higher grades as they transition to high school under these programs (Scales, 2005). These opportunities and assets should be promoted in multiple contexts to reflect the intertwined nature of adolescent development, and should focus on increased responsibility for adolescent students (Scales, 2005). Teachers who guide and facilitate these opportunities for students, while allowing students to have some input and decision-making in their own projects, should allow students to have confidence in their own abilities and assets as well as have support from their teachers.

Community service learning allows adolescents to develop responsibility while working with others, using critical thinking and problem-solving skills, and to make a difference in their school communities. Service learning is a structured teaching and learning process that meets the needs in the community (Reynolds, 2009). Service learning creates meaningful learning experiences and helps strengthen communities while connecting students with their peers in significant and meaningful ways. Community service learning also strengthens democratic and participatory practice in schools (Ohn & Wade, 2009). This method of learning also helps prepare students to thrive in an increasingly complex, modern world, as they acquire innovative skills to deal with real world issues (Mierke, 2009). Furthermore, service learning “brings the community to the classroom and provides students an opportunity to grapple with real-life problems” (Lambright & Lu, 2009, p. 440). By participating in these projects, students understand all aspects of carrying out a project through the development and implementation of their services.

Self-reflection and the development of critical synthesis on the process of service learning is a monumental piece in the development of assets and student self-efficacy. By engaging in reflection about their projects, students can develop thoughtfulness about their role in their projects as well as the positive impact that they have made within the school, thus developing confidence in their abilities and actions. Lambright and Lu (2009) argue that reflection helps students make connections and develop the positive impact on the educational outcomes of service learning. Ohn and Wade (2009) state that while reflecting on their experiences in relation to themselves, others, and the community, students can develop their own beliefs and opinions about the interactions and developments of relationships with others. Discussion helps students challenge their beliefs and develop a sense of belonging in the community (Ohn & Wade, 2009). Moreover, by participating in community service learning with their peers, students can reflect on the process of working with others, which will encourage mutual respect between students who initiated and contributed to service activities (Ohn & Wade, 2009). Therefore, students can work together to create and initiate healthy change in their school community.

### **Recommendations**

I have four recommendations for other researchers and educators who are interested in investigating how healthy relationships can be developed in a school community: inform the school community and gain support from colleagues for the research project, collaborate with all members of the school community to help build positive relationships, understand the stages of adolescent development as they connect to relationship-building with others, and support students at all times during the intervention, especially during their community service projects.

By explaining all aspects of the action research project to all the stakeholders within the school community, educators are able to support and provide guidance for the activities of the intervention. These stakeholders include the administration, all members of the school staff, the parent community, and the student population. These community members are more likely to become involved in the support of the intervention if they fully understand all facets of the research project. Likewise, the support of the administration is especially vital as they can give guidance and direction to the individual researcher as he or she moves forward throughout the project. Furthermore, cooperating with all members of the school community allows educators to build healthy relationships with other stakeholders by demonstrating the positive attributes that the student community should model for their own behaviors. Fostering a collaborative approach to the process of the research allows as many people as possible to become involved in acts of social responsibility.

Additionally, educators should understand the role of adolescent development as it relates to these students building relationships with their peers and teachers. It is imperative that educators understand why some adolescent students may behave the way they do, and how to challenge them in their way of thinking so that they can become more inclusive and collaborative, especially with those outside of their peer group.

Lastly, educators should be strong supports for the students who are not only reflecting on the process of social responsibility, but are also providing acts of service in their school communities. Many students may become disappointed if they feel that their service was not successful, or need guidance in the design, development, and implementation of their projects. It is imperative that they feel supported throughout this process.

By fostering the development of activities that allow teachers and students to work together to build healthy relationships, educators can help students to develop assets that will contribute to personal social responsibility growth, as well as strengthen their school community. Students who are engaging and participating in team-building lessons, community service projects, advisory mentoring programs, and writing journal reflections are more likely to become active participants and leaders in their own school communities. Adolescent students can provide leadership within their schools and become connected to their school community in meaningful, pro-active, and positive ways by creating and participating in projects that they themselves develop. Facilitating this growth and development of asset-building in middle schools allows adolescent students to become active participants in their own growth and development, and helps create healthy relationships within the school.

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