

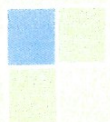
Draft

HEROES Pilot Project: Preliminary Findings



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INTRODUCTION

According to the Toronto District School Board's (TDSB) *2011 Student Census*, about 1 in 7 (14%) of Grade 7-8 students and 1 in 4 (26%) secondary school students were considered to be with low emotional well-being. They experienced such socio-emotional challenges as low self-esteem, anxiety, loneliness, sadness, and/or relationship problems. Resiliency Surveys conducted in recent years in over 100 elementary schools under the TDSB's Model Schools for Inner Cities (MSIC) program also indicate that students' resiliency level dropped when they entered into their middle-school years (Grade 7-8). These findings are concerning.

With external funding support, the MSIC piloted a program, called HEROES, in spring 2013 as a way to address the emotional and resiliency concerns of adolescents. In a nutshell, HEROES is a strength-based experiential learning program with a focus on the ongoing development of confidence, character, and integrity for adolescents. Teachers are provided with training and resource materials to implement the program as part of their class curriculum. Through stories and personal sharing, the intent of the program is to invite students to explore their unique strengths, gifts and abilities, to examine the implications of how they see themselves, and to navigate challenges in positive ways.

The pilot project was conducted in 12 MSIC Middle Schools for a number of weeks between late April and June 2013. This summary report highlights the outcome of this pilot program based on three sources of information.

1. feedback gathered by MSIC Lead Teachers from participating teachers of different pilot sites
2. focus group interviews with teachers at two pilot sites
3. pre- and post-Resiliency Surveys completed by the participating students

A few provisos should be borne in mind when reviewing the findings of this pilot project. Due to an elementary school teachers' contract issue last school year, the pilot project did not begin until late into the school year, resulting in limited time for full training, planning, and implementation of the program.

Nonetheless, teachers who had the opportunity to pilot the program were able to observe potential benefits of HEROES for students, for themselves as teachers, and for the school as a whole. At the same time, through the brief pilot, they identified areas for attention and improvement. The following summary highlights some of the observable benefits and areas for consideration. Recommendations are also proposed for the next steps.

OBSERVABLE BENEFITS

Although the HEROES program was piloted late in the school year for a brief period of time by some teachers in a dozen of Middle Schools, a number of observable benefits were noted by the teacher participants. These include benefits for students, teachers themselves, and the school as a whole.

For Students¹

Teachers observed an increased self-awareness among students, particularly with regard to their own strengths, choices, interactions with others, as well as personal connections with various themes of the program.

The stories [used in the program] were transformative and the students related in that way. It related to the reality of their lives because they came from difficult families.

- Students showed better articulation of their feelings from the vocabulary that was provided.
- The program encouraged introspection among students and contributed to more positive thinking.
- As a result of this exercise, many students enjoyed sharing personal stories and opened up in discussions on real life issues with others, resulting in greater levels of confidence and cohesion with peers.
- Some students showed appreciation for having their own copy of the student booklet for writing down their reflections, and for reading the stories on their own time.

For Teachers

At the professional level:

- Some teachers indicated that the program materials had offered them useful ideas and tools to develop around the curriculum and complemented their class initiatives.

There were days that ... I just don't know what to do anymore but I never gave up. That's something when you're dealing with a program that touches on self-esteem issues, and there are kids who find themselves in a rut... We also need the tools ... that we can try because there are days that we often feel like we've tried it all.

¹ Please note that the some of the comments were direct statements from students while others were speculations made by teachers.



- Teachers found the HEROES' manual comprehensive. It was presented unambiguously and provided ideas to use in the classroom. They also commented that the materials were nicely scaffolded and easy to incorporate into daily lessons, and found several activities concrete and effective (i.e., ripping up a \$20 bill). During the pilot, the program materials were extended to other subject areas, such as visual arts, and were fully incorporated into such subject areas as social skills and health.

At the personal level:

- A few teachers talked about how the program made them reflect on their own behaviours and approaches to teaching.

Sometimes, you get overwhelmed in this job and a program, like this, holds a mirror to your own behaviour, and makes you reflect. We forget that we're teaching a whole child, not necessarily just delivering curriculum.... Their personal problems ... become secondary to me and this program gives you an opportunity to think, wait a second, hit the brakes.

There was one section where you were to write down the negative things that other kids or adults had said to you ... and you realize you could be a negative influence.

- Some teachers mentioned how the program had encouraged them to share their personal experiences and had thus helped them develop a deeper connection with students.

It reminds me of my own upbringing and ... the stories are very similar to my own ... which I was able to share that with the kids too. Not in the heavy handed way but just being personal, being a human being.... These stories really resonated with the kids and it was quite invigorating, when you struggle to get through to such that wide diversity in my classroom, and every child liked this.

I wasn't as close 'cause I only taught them [students] 40 minutes. But now, I find that they're dropping in at lunch.... It's nice. I'm seeing some of those kids are really shy and I see the difference in them. Before, they wouldn't even say 'hi' to me, unless I got eye contact with them in the halls, and now ... they feel comfortable with me.



For the School as a Whole

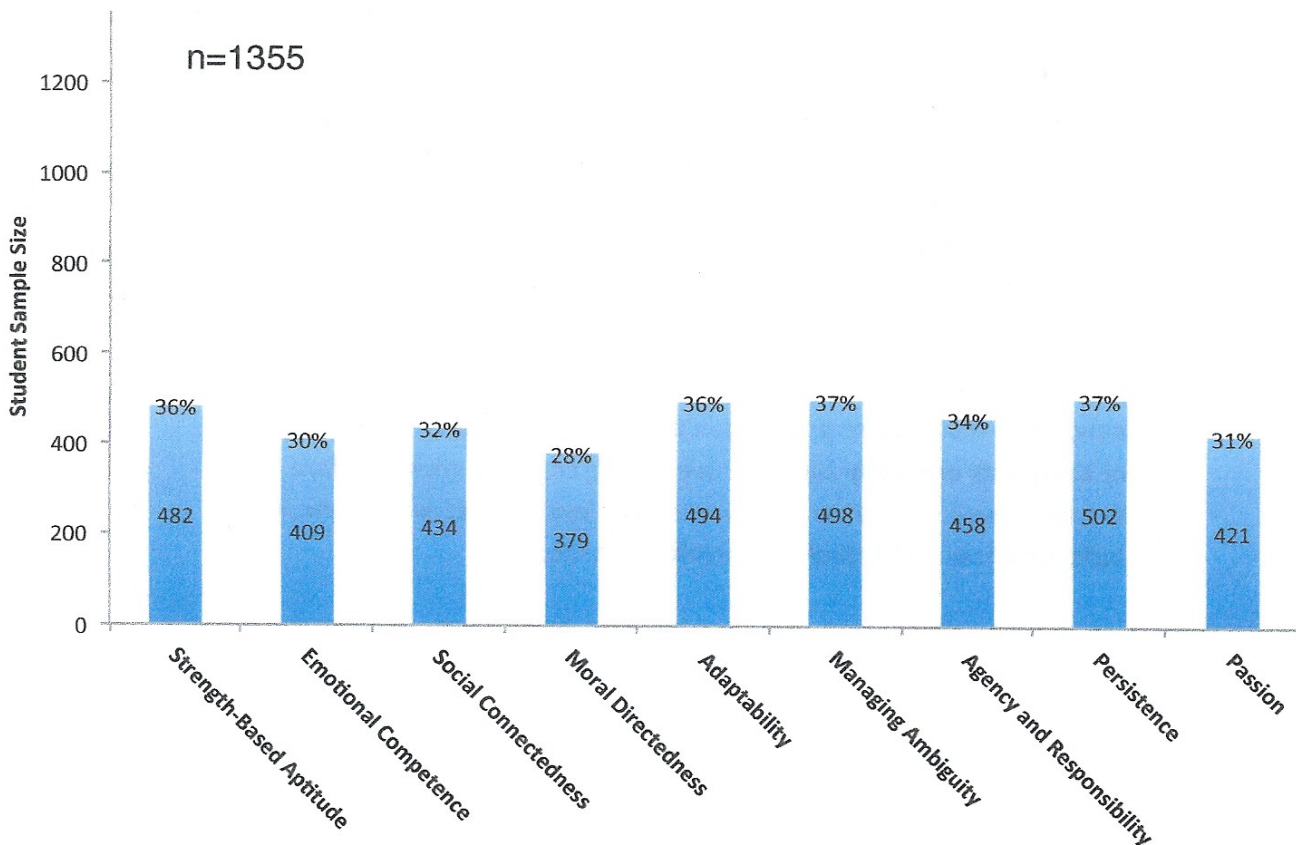
- Teachers generally believed that the program would have an impact on students and the school as a whole.

The program has potential for some moving in a deep way because I do believe that the deepest souls are going to go through dark tunnels and I feel like these stories really touched on that place because it's not all easy.

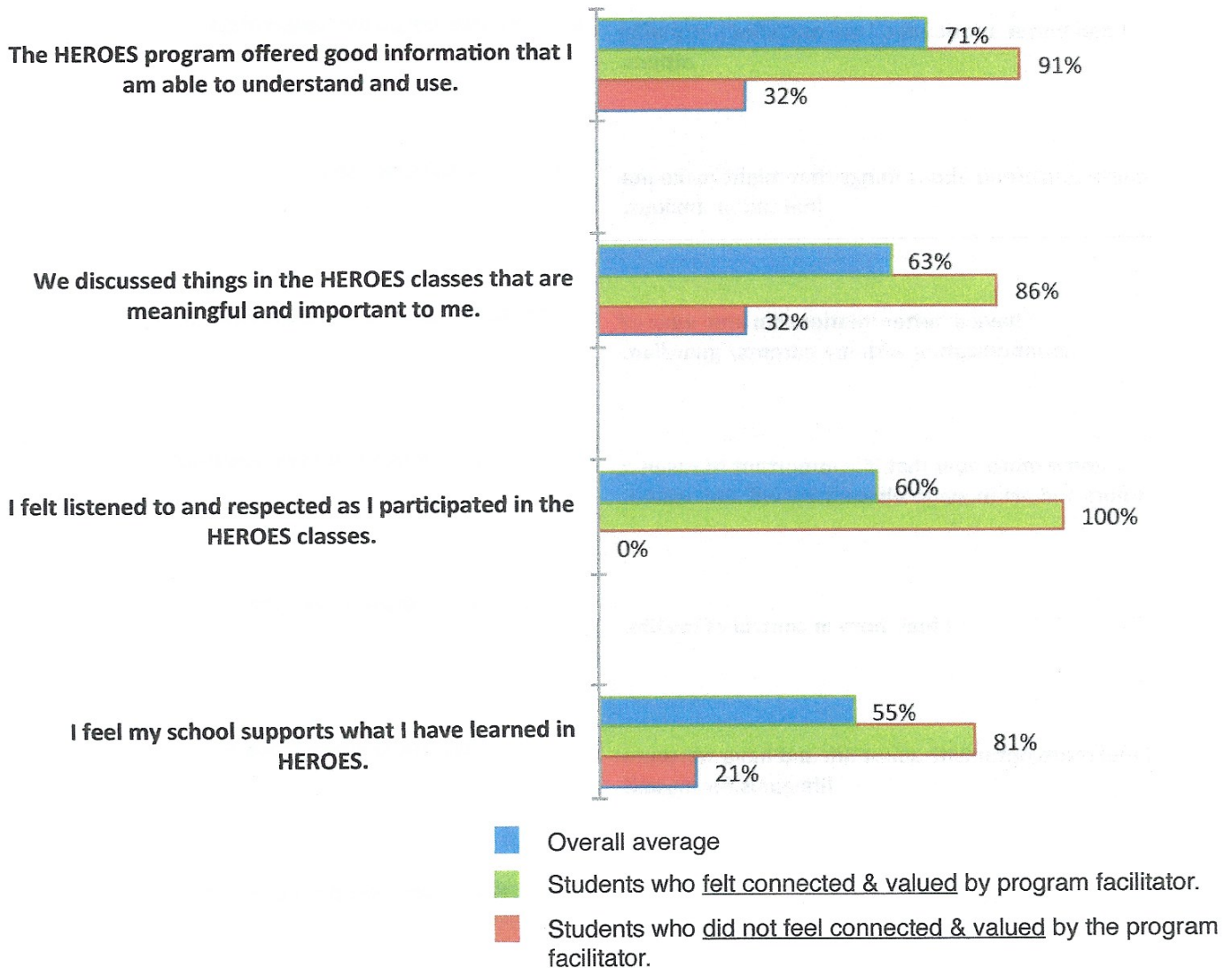
- According to some teachers, the program also helped staff members open up discussions on shifting the school culture, and become more reflective of the organizational structure and staffing.

Core Competency of Character Traits

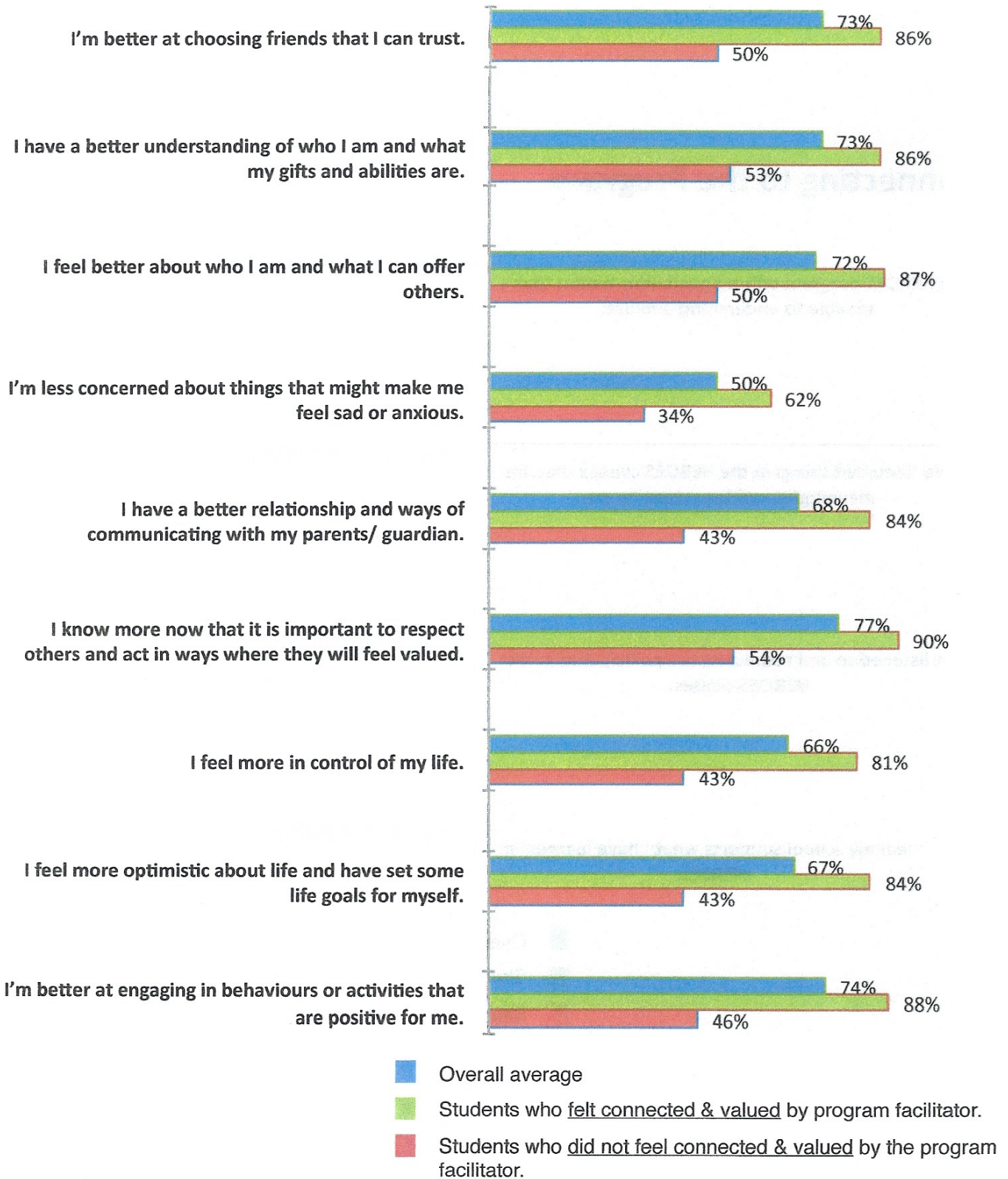
The chart below shows the number of HEROES® students who demonstrated an increase in each of the Core Character Traits upon completion of the program.



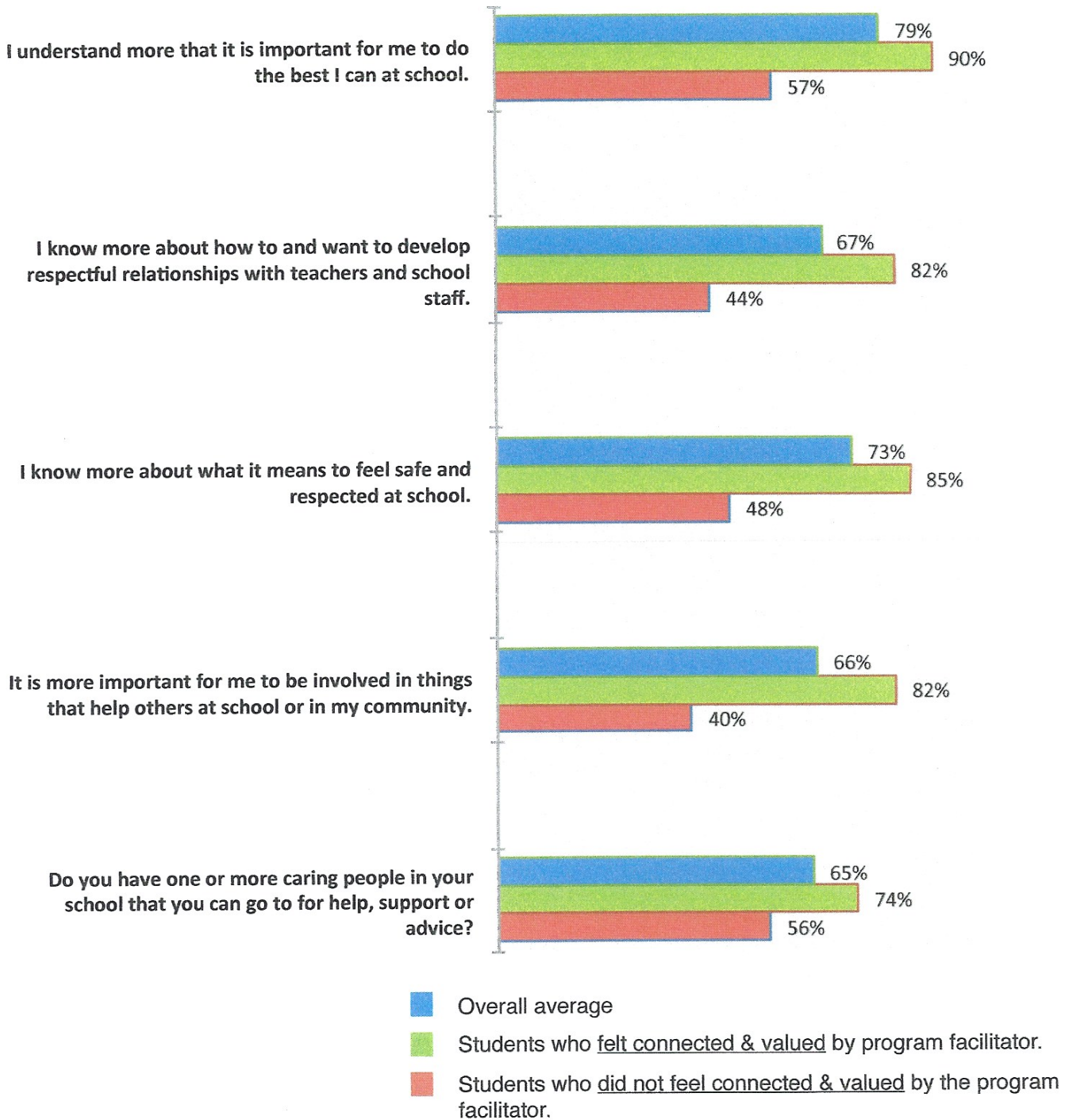
Connecting to the Program



Positive Personal Development



Connecting to the School



Aside from discussing the benefits, teachers were asked for other feedback and suggestions for improvement. As indicated in the following section, most of their comments had to do with how to make the program more effective in terms of implementation, professional development, and program contents and materials.

Implementation Timing and Frequency

- **Start time:** Begin the program early in the school year or school term. According to the participating teachers, the longer program period would allow them time to reinforce ideas and to provide students opportunities to apply what they have learned.
- **Planning time:** Provide teachers and/or school staff sufficient time to plan collectively for consistent and effective implementation of the program across the school. There was a suggestion to set aside half a year for planning and offer the program in the following half of the year.
- **Frequency:** Establish a consistent schedule of multiple sessions per week, as it takes some time for students to settle into a reflective state. Another suggestion is to integrate the lessons into the curriculum in order to optimize the exposure and impact of the program.

Other Implementation Details

- Invite the participation of homeroom/core teachers. Rotary teachers, who saw their students less often and had greater student bases, were less connected with students, and therefore found it harder for them to encourage students to talk about their personal experience.
- Encourage teachers to share their input by contributing their own stories, which can build closer connections with students.
- Create a safe environment for students to share, and for teachers themselves to open up through their own personal stories.
- Communicate to teachers the purpose of the pre- and post-Resiliency surveys, which would help ensure the surveys are conducted properly and timely. Also, provide teachers early on with the interim results of the pre-survey so that they can get a better picture of the students for them to cater the program accordingly.



- Adopt a whole school approach with the involvement of school administrators, other school staff, and/or parents, if the intention of the program is to reach the school community level. For instance, the concept and language used, such as ‘gifts and abilities’, will be more valuable if everyone uses them in conversations on a regular basis. Another suggestion is to create culminating tasks or an exposition-type activity that can draw different HEROES classes within the school together for sharing.

Professional Development (PD)

- Offer PD for all teachers who are interested in the program. The pilot results show that those who were trained at the PD workshop felt more confident with implementing the program. If it is not possible to provide PD to all, provide support and specific formats for trained teachers to train others at their own schools.
- Cater the workshop to the varying needs of the teachers. Some teachers found it helpful to walk through the lessons or needed more time to study certain sections, while others preferred selecting key shared group lessons and felt it was unnecessary to go through the whole manual step-by-step. It was also suggested that teachers could be asked at different moments throughout the training to reflect on their professional goals in order to gain their engagement during the workshop.
- During the PD workshop, model various scenarios such as the first lesson, or approaches on how to respond to students during lessons. Program designers can ask former student participants on what was helpful for them or what helped them relate to the program.
- Make more explicit connections between the program’s intentions and the goals expressed in the PD workshop. A transformative shift in school culture was emphasized in the workshop, but the program was seen by many teachers as more individualized, in terms of focusing on students’ strengths and abilities. Teachers noted the discrepancy between the intentions of targeting the personal level and the school level.
- Invite local speakers who are familiar with TDSB communities. While there were teachers who were inspired by the presentations, some felt the trainers lacked an awareness of the complexity within Toronto schools and communities. They further commented that the trainers exuded idealism, and that the program was conveyed “methodologically” as if it could provide easy fixes and meet all types of students’ needs. They felt uncomfortable that the approach seemed to imply that they were doing an inadequate job with their students; hence, there was a level of skepticism among some in the audience about embracing the program.

Program Content

Cultural relevancy:

- Ensure that the stories are appropriate according to the students' needs, backgrounds and personal experiences. Some teachers found certain stories not always culturally relevant to the diverse student population, and that the terminology was not inclusive enough to accommodate the wide array of family backgrounds and cultures. This sentiment extended to some of the stories "reflect(ing) a Judeo-Christian slant, as opposed to reflecting diverse cultures" and "were (not) expressive of the values of CRRP and TDSB equity". One teacher proposed to have the TDSB's Equitable and Inclusive Schools team vet the stories and phraseology of the program.
- Some students reacted positively to program's vocabulary, such as the water bottle analogy, the 'gifts and abilities' and the 'balcony versus basement friends.' Others critiqued and questioned some of these ideas. The 'gifts and abilities' received a few negative responses, as students associated it with being a part of a cult.

Availability of diverse materials:

- Create a selection of stories for teachers to choose for each lesson in order to cater to students of different backgrounds. This should include stories of varying degrees of intensity, as a few teachers noted that there were cases where students could not relate to the "extreme" scenarios depicted in some of the reading materials and had thus experienced hesitation, discomfort and/or confusion in exploring their emotions when the content might have been far off from their realities.

Have a bit more of a diversity, of more moderate issues that happen for kids, like divorced families or ... irritating brothers or sisters, irritating parents.... I'm just coming from my own family life...

- Provide background information of individuals mentioned in the book, as some students had expressed curiosity of their current conditions.
- Invite speakers to visit schools. It may make the program more realistic for students because they could engage with actual characters from the stories.
- Offer videos or audio recordings of various speakers to supplement the student booklet.

Student booklet:

- Convert the student booklet into a binder, which would have two advantages.
 - It will provide more space (extra pages) for students to write their reflections.



- It will allow teachers to hand out pertinent chapters or stories for students to insert to their binder on the day of the lessons. During the pilot, some students went ahead in the booklet, which a teacher perceived as 'ruining the lesson' and raised a concern on the lack of support for students, if s/he encountered a sensitive topic on her/his own.
- Offer suggested questions that engage students at a more personal level instead of just retelling the story.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this pilot project, the following recommendations are suggested.

1. Implement the program for three years starting in winter 2014.
2. Extend the program from the original 12 pilot sites to 25 MSIC Middle Schools.
3. Offer PD in the fall for participating teachers. The workshop(s) can be conducted by trained MSIC staff in consultation with HEROES staff.
4. After PD, allow time for school administrators to invite the participation of homeroom or core teachers, and to come up with an implementation plan with staff.
5. Compile a repository of additional content materials that are culturally and socially relevant for TDSB's diverse student population. (This can be co-ordinated by the MSIC Office.)
6. Conduct program evaluation by the Board's Research and Information Services in partnership with Resiliency Canada to measure the impact of the program and participants' resiliency.
7. Share and release evaluation findings with consultation and support of the Board's Communications Services.



