

CULTURALLY AFFIRMING YOUTH PROGRAMS

Culturally Affirming Youth Programs: Students Taking Action Together (STAT) Program

Assessment and Feedback Analysis

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CULTURALLY AFFIRMING YOUTH PROGRAMS

In recent years, urban school districts in the United States have become populated with diverse students with various socialization experiences. Our schools are with the current standard, "one size fits all," curriculum. Educators and students face issues negatively affecting student engagement and understanding, such as poverty, domestic and gun violence, food insecurity, family interpersonal conflict, and racial and ethnic discrimination and bias (Bethel et al., 2014; Dotterer et al., 2009). Researchers using an action-based research approach have suggested that a focus on Social-Emotional and Character Development (SECD) in schools can reduce the adverse effects of outside forces on the development of children and adolescents ("National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development," 2018). SECD draws on two traditions, social-emotional learning (SEL) and character education.

The SEL framework identifies five competencies [self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making] that strategies and programs related to Social-Emotional Learning focus on building. SEL curriculum can be incredibly impactful in populated urban school districts with students belonging to groups who have been systematically oppressed and silenced (Durlak et al., 2015). However, recently scholars, such as Dr. Dena Simmons, Dr. Monique Morris, and Dr. Shawn Ginwright, have emphasized the need for Social Emotional Learning education to focus on healing when introducing new curriculums and programs into marginalized communities (Fund, 2020). A focus on healing-centered perspectives for youth who identify as Black, Indigenous, and Persons of Color (BIPOC) allows for open conversation and confrontation about social injustices that have affected their lives, including their education. When children have their experience validated it builds trust and safety, enhancing their learning capacity (Tobin, 2016).

CULTURALLY AFFIRMING YOUTH PROGRAMS

To address the needs of a whole child, particularly BIPOC children, SEL education needs to promote culturally affirming practices that "relates students back to their ancestry while addressing and recognizing trauma" (Fund, 2020, para. 5). Culturally affirming practices focus on healing and empowering students to reflect and speak on the history, information, and ideas presented. Therefore, this project is framed through a lens of healing centered engagement, and proportioning SECD focused programs. The following paper aims to analyze feedback data from the Students Taking Action Together (STAT) project, started at the SECD Laboratory at Rutgers University, one of the revolutionary SEL programs. The STAT project helps teachers by providing strategies to create and facilitate such spaces that promote SEL competencies. To date, feedback about STAT has yet to be systematically analyzed to inform future program development, and it has not been considered from a culturally- affirming perspective such as healing centered engagement.

Healing Centered Engagement

Healing centered engagement is an approach used to address blind spots in recently adopted trauma-informed care. A healing centered approach promotes holistic intentions "involving culture, spirituality, civic action, and collective healing" (Ginwright, 2018). Although trauma-informed care acknowledges the specific needs of individuals who have been exposed to trauma, it has limitations that keep individuals stagnant in their trauma rather than fostering the possibility for holistic well-being. Even more, trauma-informed care only addresses the symptoms of trauma in youth, not the root causes (i.e. environmental context) of the trauma. Only using trauma-informed care approaches leaves "toxic systems, policies, and practices neatly intact" (Ginwright, 2018). Healing centered engagement shifts the language being used when discussing what it means to restore youth exposed to trauma. Healing centered practices

CULTURALLY AFFIRMING YOUTH PROGRAMS

encourage individuals exposed to trauma to become “agents in the creation of their own well-being rather than victims of traumatic events” (Ginwright, 2018).

There are four key elements of healing centered engagement that offer new outlooks and several distinctions from trauma-informed practices. First, healing centered engagement is explicitly political, which means it focuses on building awareness on justice and inequality. Researchers have found that promoting youth voice in their schools and communities encourages well-being (Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007). Programs such as STAT are beneficial because it is intended to build youth voice and civic action but need to work on building an awareness of justice and inequality to become provide more healing centered engagement for youth. Second, healing centered practices are culturally affirming and focus on identity restoration. Fostering a sense of identity and belonging for youth, particularly BIPOC youth, looks like providing students with “historically grounded and contemporarily relevant” (Ginwright, 2018) resources and experiences. Thirdly, building youth purpose among individuals exposed to trauma acknowledges that these young people are more than their trauma and can build upon their experiences. Finally, healing centered engagement encourages and requires support towards educators in sustaining their own well-being and healing. Taking steps towards healing the healer allows for educators and young people to have more holistic experiences within and beyond the school community. It is important to acknowledge that healing and well-being are at the center of learning and action, utilizing healing centered engagement in youth programs, such STAT, will increase the educational experiences and outcomes of BIPOC youth.

STAT Youth Program Background

STAT is a program for middle school-aged students that uses SECD pedagogies to integrate social justice education and social action in urban classrooms. SEL curricula introduce

CULTURALLY AFFIRMING YOUTH PROGRAMS

programs and strategies to build the social, civic, and academic skills of students; the character education approach (www.character.org) adds a focus on youth purpose, giving young people direction and purpose for learning and skills to accomplish valued goals.

STAT began as a monthly component of the MOSAIC (Mastering Our Skills and Inspiring Character) curriculum that prompts students to develop and facilitate social action projects meaningful to them, their school, and the community (Linsky et al., 2018). The STAT project aims to increase students' empathy, perspective-taking, emotion regulation, communication, and civic engagement. STAT lesson plans derived from the MOSAIC model can be implemented into all social studies, history, and current event curricula. Teachers are provided with four strategies that can be implemented into the existing curriculum, including Norms, Yes-No-Maybe, Respectful Debate, and PLAN Problem Solving.

The SECD Lab suggests introducing these research-informed strategies in sequential order because they build on the previous skills each activity addressed more directly. Norms is a strategy used to create classroom appropriate behavior guidelines. It is a straightforward strategy to make the learning environment safe and respectful for all students and teachers. Norms are essential for fostering student trust and participation. The Yes-No-Maybe and Respectful Debate activities are both used to strengthen a students' perspective-taking skills; however, the respectful debate takes deliberate preparation on the teachers' part and benefits from being integrated into a classroom lesson. Reflective listening skills were considered when creating these two strategies (Katz & McNulty, 2018). Problem Description, List of Options, Action Plan, and Notice Success, or PLAN, is a problem-solving and social action framework that encourages youth voice and action by having students address issues directly that affect them as adolescents in the

CULTURALLY AFFIRMING YOUTH PROGRAMS

school community and beyond. Behavioral therapy skills inspire PLAN characteristics to problem-solving and responsible citizenship (Elias, 1994; Nezu, 2004).

Benefits of the STAT project include its ability to exist within the current social studies curriculum and be used during the instruction of history, current events, and/or issues or problems specific to any school (Elias & Nayman, 2019). That STAT can be integrated into current lessons removes the pressure for teachers to choose whether they should focus on social justice education or academic skills and knowledge due to lack of time and resources.

The reassessment, improvement, and success of STAT programs depend on the suggestions and comments from students, teachers, and administrators. For this reason, "a crucial part of STAT is seeking and responding to feedback provided by an individual outside of the classroom, which elevates STAT from a one-dimensional classroom discussion to an impactful school-level conversation" (Linsky et al., 2018 p.12). This study focused on analyzing the effectiveness of the STAT curricula in participating in middle schools and high schools, to reassess and improve strategy introduction and use in classrooms.

Methods

Participants

This study used already collected data from the 2019-2020 school year. Across all four marking periods, a total of 176 K-12 educators and administrators have recorded responses for the STAT feedback survey; however, there was a low response rate and no participant was consistent in responding to the surveys all four collection rounds. An incentive for completion of the survey was only offered to participants during marking period two. There was no increase in the number of respondents; therefore, incentives were discontinued for the last two collection rounds. Additionally, participant responses that did not state the school role and respondents'

CULTURALLY AFFIRMING YOUTH PROGRAMS

grade level were excluded from data analysis. A total of fifty-four participant responses were collected for this study. The roles of participants included teachers, administrators, school counselors/social workers, and educational consultants. Across the four collection rounds, 44% of participants worked directly or indirectly with 9th-12th grade students, 53% of participants with 6th-8th graders, and 31% of participants worked with 4th and 5th graders. Table 1 below demonstrates the breakdown of participant role and grade level across all four marking periods. Fifty-eight school districts were represented across all participating educators and administrators; districts such as New Brunswick, Metuchen, and Cranford, NJ were represented a minimum of three times.

Table 1: Roles and Grades Levels

Field	4th Grade	5th grade	6th Grade	7th Grade	8th Grade	9th Grade	10th Grade	11th Grade	12th Grade
Teacher	3	5	7	11	6	7	7	9	10
Administrator	5	2	4	5	5	4	3	2	1
School Counselor/Social Worker	3	3	1	0	1	3	3	3	3
School Psychologist	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other School Support Staff Member	0	0	1	3	1	1	1	1	1
Other	3	1	4	2	2	4	4	4	4
	13	10	16	21	15	19	18	19	19

Procedure & Materials

The current study utilizes a mixed-methods approach to analyze the effectiveness of the STAT program. The collected data were provided in spreadsheets by the Social-Emotional Character Development Laboratory at Rutgers University-New Brunswick. The STAT feedback survey was created on Qualtrics and distributed at the end of each marking period span through email blasts to a collected contact list established through conferencing. The survey (Appendix A) includes a multitude of questions assessing the effectiveness of the STAT program.

CULTURALLY AFFIRMING YOUTH PROGRAMS

Participants were asked to complete the multiple-choice and short open-ended questions. The aggregated data were used to analyze the multiple-choice responses of the participants.

Responses to the short open-ended questions in the aggregated data were analyzed using the ground-theory method. Using grounded theory involves inductive coding, which allows for organic themes (i.e., focused codes) to be found in the collected data. Inductive coding first involves coding open-ended statements 'line by line.' This process essentially means breaking down the data and identifying them found within individual statements. As line by line coding continues, recurring concepts among the units will reveal 'focused codes' (Saldaña, 2008; Wasserman, Clair & Wilson, 2009). Therefore, the results of the data are more authentic to the challenges faced by urban school districts and can be addressed without standardization.

The researcher initially coded the current aggregated data and underwent three trials of reliability coding by undergraduate college students. First, participant open-ended responses were broken down line by line into 1st order concepts or units; a unit is considered a phrase. Units were categorized into groups based on a general theme or topic of the phrases, these 2nd order concepts were then categorized into umbrella terms or focused codes that addressed a specific aspect of the STAT program. When categorizing units into focused codes, the researcher determined the content of the unit in relation to programs practicality, content, and design.

Results

The current findings aid in assessing the effectiveness of STAT strategies in middle and high school classrooms. These results give a better understanding of what STAT strategies are more comfortable to implement in everyday classroom environments and whether STAT can be understood as presented to educators and administrators. Even more, these results help to

CULTURALLY AFFIRMING YOUTH PROGRAMS

understand what teachers and administrators believe will make the program practical and useful with their students.

Figure 1 illustrates the average frequency of use for each strategy throughout all four marking period data collections. The strategies Norms, Respectful Debate, and Yes-No-Maybe (Current Event Lessons) were more consistently used an average of 2-3 times each marking period. Yes-No-Maybe (Current History Lessons) were used a bit more frequently at 4-5 times each marking period. The PLAN strategies, history lessons, and current events were used least often throughout the marking periods. These data relate to assessing the effectiveness of STAT strategies because how frequently a strategy is used gives insight to how easy or difficult it is to integrate into current curriculums and how students are responding to the new method of instruction (i.e., if students are not understanding, educators will use the strategy less).

Figure 2 illustrates the use of each strategy per grade level. Strategies such as Respectful Debate and PLAN (History and Current Events Lessons) were used more frequently in upper-level grades, 9th through 11th. However, the use of all STAT strategies is shown to significantly decrease in grade 12. Additionally, the bar graph above shows the use of Yes-No-Maybe (History and Current Events Lessons) strategies distributed equally among all grade levels, more than any other strategy. Figure 3 illustrates the use of each STAT strategy broken down per role of participants. The results show that teachers were most often using STAT strategies than any other participant role; teachers showed a preference of using the Respectful Debate strategy most often. The bar graph above also shows school psychologists rarely using STAT strategies when working with students. Finally, social workers, school counselors, administrators and other school support staff are shown to use these strategies at similar frequencies throughout the 2019-2020 school year.

CULTURALLY AFFIRMING YOUTH PROGRAMS

When organizing participant phrases into categories it became clear that educators and administrators were focusing on three program components for the Students Taking Action Together program. First, program design, or what was considered when creating the cohesiveness and approach of the STAT strategies, proved to be important when considering the effectiveness of the overall STAT program. Second, the program content, or what topics and examples were included in this current version of the STAT program, was also emphasized throughout the participant phrases. Finally, program practicality, or how the activities of the program would be integrated into classroom lessons and student activities, was also high on the priority list of educators.

Figure 4 demonstrates the overall attributes of STAT strategies that educators and administrators appreciate and find useful when working with students. In this case, participant phrases more often include comments in favor of the design and content of the program. Figure 5 presents the less practical STAT strategies that educators and administrators found challenging to work with and suggestions to improve STAT. The coded data demonstrate educators and administrators commenting towards the lack of practicality of the program, stating that there is often teacher resistance with implementation of new programs. Out of all participants, 14% of educators and administrators did not use any STAT strategies during the data collection periods.

CULTURALLY AFFIRMING YOUTH PROGRAMS

Figure 1: STAT Strategy Frequency of Usage

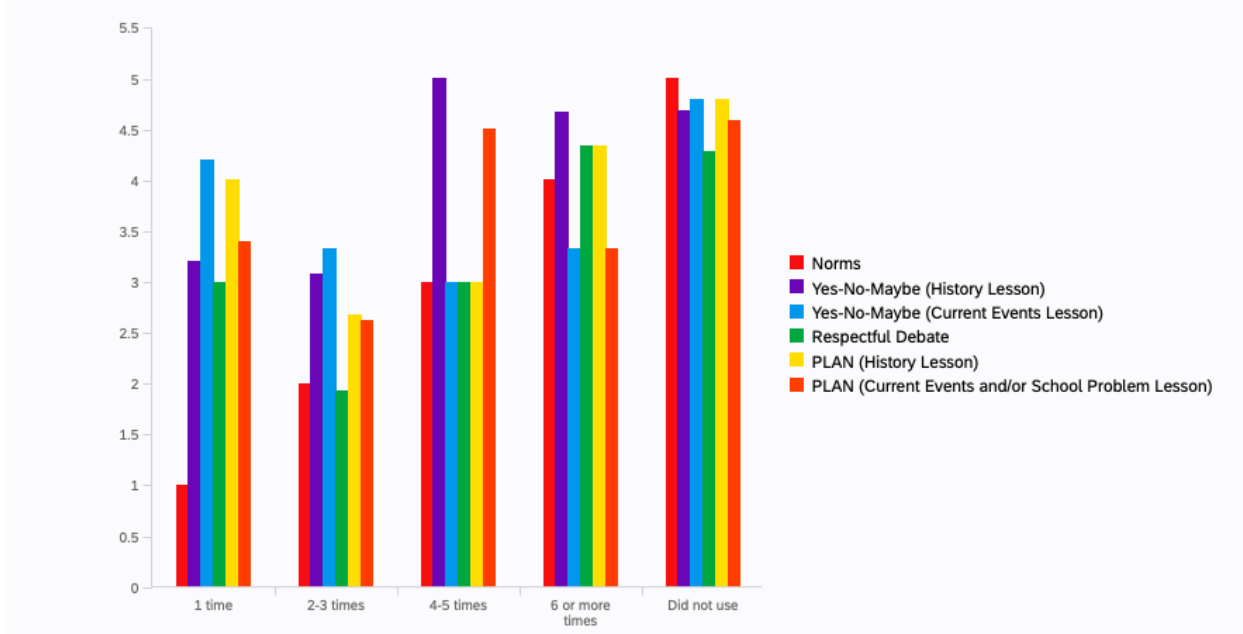
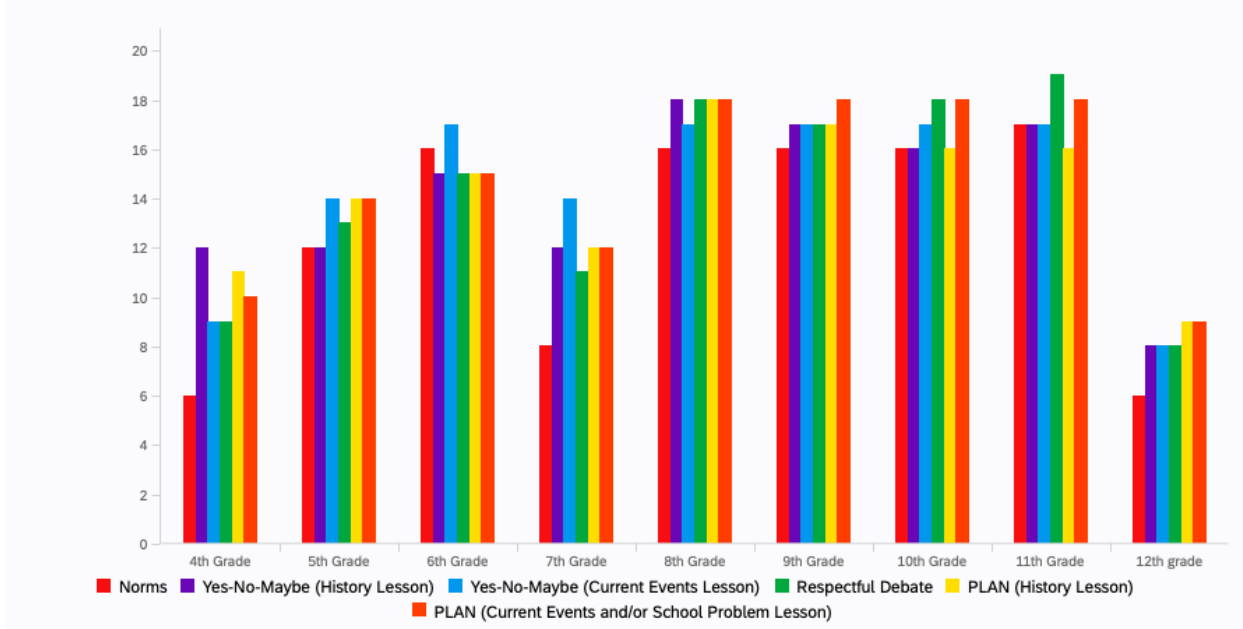


Figure 2: STAT Strategy Usage Per Grade Level



CULTURALLY AFFIRMING YOUTH PROGRAMS

Figure 3: STAT Strategy Usage Per Participant Role

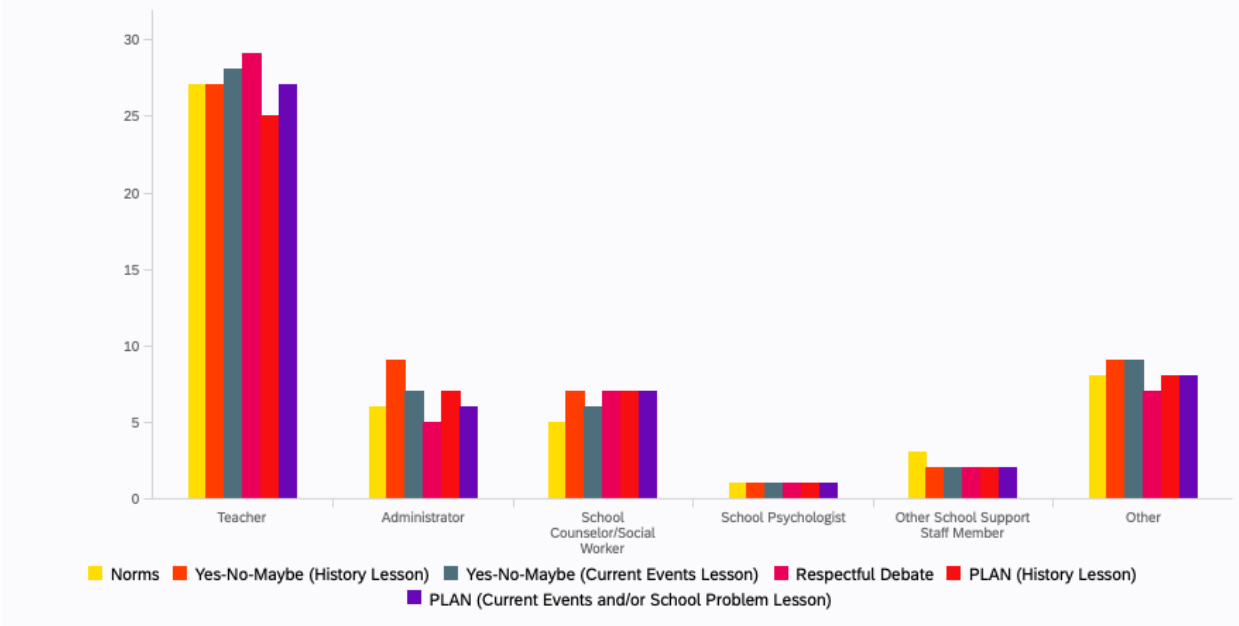
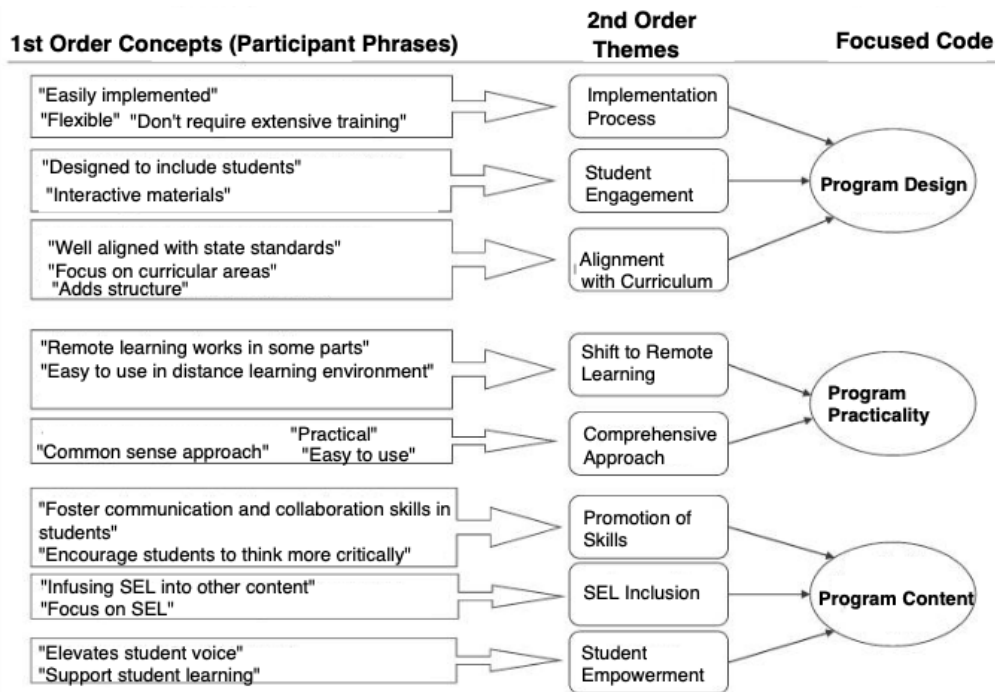
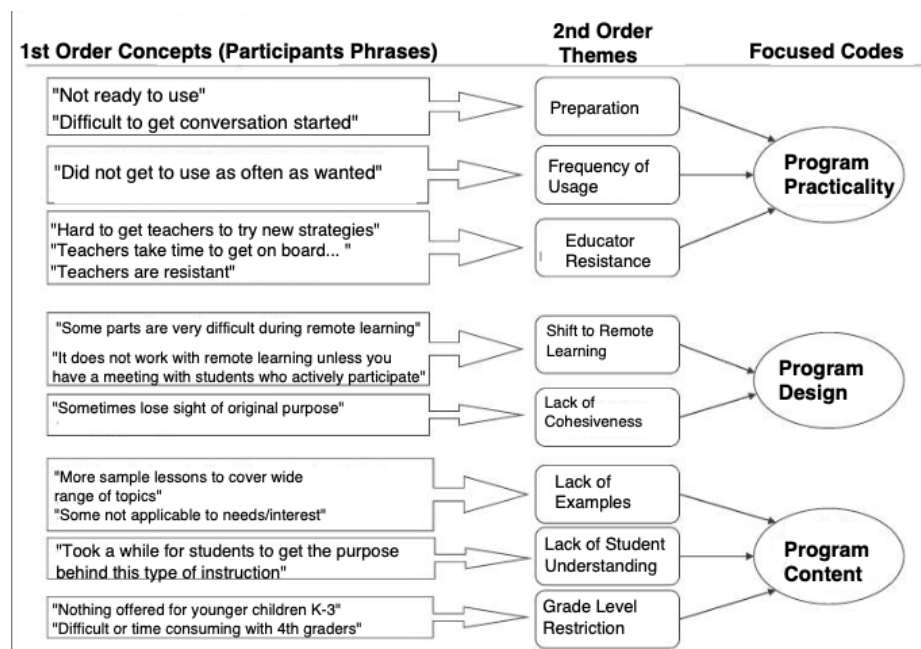


Figure 4. Positive Attributes of STAT Strategies



CULTURALLY AFFIRMING YOUTH PROGRAMS

Figure 5. Negative Attributes and Suggestions for STAT strategies



When asked the likelihood of recommending the use of STAT to other educators and administrators on a scale of 1-10, 76% of participants rated a seven or higher, while 24% rated 6 or lower. To gain more insight on said recommendation, participants were also asked to determine whether they were detractors, passive, or promoters when discussing STAT with colleagues; results determined 24% detractors, 42% passive, and 34% promoters. Promoters are participants who would advocate for the implementation of STAT to colleagues more often than they would negate it, detractors are considered to be more hesitant and would be less likely to advocate for STAT implementation, and passive participants were neutral in STAT advocacy. Overall, these findings suggest that a meaningful percentage of participants found it difficult to *continue* use of STAT throughout marking periods.

CULTURALLY AFFIRMING YOUTH PROGRAMS

Discussion

This study's findings present information to improve the effectiveness of STAT strategies in middle school and high school classrooms. The data was analyzed to address challenges for STAT continuation and consider three areas of improvement (i.e., Program Design, Program Practicality, and Program Content) for the overall STAT program's effectiveness. Any suggestions offered in this paper to address challenges will be from a culturally affirming perspective.

First, it is beneficial to understand what educators and administrators find compelling about the Students Taking Action Together program. Findings suggest that teachers found the program design to be the most helpful when implementing in their classrooms; educators specifically appreciated the alignment with the current K-12 curriculum. Findings also suggest that the practicality of a program like STAT is incredibly essential, especially during a time of a global pandemic in which all systems, including K-12, had to make a shift to remote learning.

However, educators did emphasize several challenges that should be addressed. The quantitative data in Figure 1 indicate which strategies educators and administrators most frequently used when working with their students. These findings suggest that specific strategies are more comfortable to follow and work better with particular age groups, later confirmed by qualitative data responses discussing the lack of student understanding and grade level restrictions in the program content. Addressing these challenges with culturally affirming teaching means creating lesson plans that allow teachers to consider the various perspectives and experiences students bring into a classroom (Ginwright, 2018). For example, lesson plans should suggest that new concepts be introduced using student relevant vocabulary, historically grounded activities, or gamify some elements of a lesson for younger students. Adjusting lesson

CULTURALLY AFFIRMING YOUTH PROGRAMS

plans to become more detail specific and approaching challenges with student identity restoration can be beneficial when moving these strategies from theory to practice.

Additionally, the qualitative data revealed that educators and administrators struggle with the lack of examples presented when using some of the strategies. Culturally affirming suggestions include giving more current events and historical examples from different points of view, examples that do not limit history and current affairs to one perspective and experience (Fund, 2020). For example, when including examples referring to the Civil War during the Yes-No-Maybe activity, it would be more beneficial to help students understand systemic and systematic reasons of the war, using specific statements like “Many consider President Abraham Lincoln to have freed the slaves. In reality, enslaved people freed themselves” rather than consider that "All through history, countries have had slaves. What the South was doing was no different" (<https://www.secdlab.org/demo-page>). The current discussion dismisses BIPOC history being that slaves were often marginalized groups, particularly poor Black people; even more, it perpetuates the idea that slavery could somehow be justified. This interaction is an example of the "spirit murdering" of BIPOC students because it creates the idea that history is centered around White success at the cost of BIPOC lives (Fund, 2020). The suggested example instead prompts students to consider events leading to the end of Civil War and what happened to those who most impacted. Adjusting examples to include different points of view, or context for BIPOC students, of historical events would help build the perspective-taking and critical thinking skills of students by encouraging questions such as Who? What? and Why? The consideration of BIPOC students' realities is essential when creating youth programs being diverse school districts, particularly urban school districts. That said, it is worth considering the

CULTURALLY AFFIRMING YOUTH PROGRAMS

pedagogical implications of how the initial Y-N-M statement is framed. For example, which would lead to more meaningful conversations and learning:

“Many consider President Abraham Lincoln to have freed the slaves. In reality, enslaved people freed themselves” or “Many believe that enslaved people freed themselves, rather than believe that President Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves.”

Future research should compare different framings of Yes-No-Maybe questions and how Respectful Debates are claimed, to see the nature of discussion stimulated and whether perspectives are shared, or changed, accordingly.

The results also suggest that educators are concerned with colleagues showing resistance to STAT integration. Many respondents mention “teachers being resistant” or “teachers having a hard time with new strategies”. Healing centered practices can be beneficial to address these challenges by acknowledging that educators need resources and spaces for their own healing and well-being. Including resources for teachers to acknowledge and question their resistance and build their healing coping skills could possibly lower teacher resistance rate. When educator well-being is addressed, student well-being and learning is optimal.

In conclusion, it is crucial to reassess youth empowerment programs as time passes. Providing educators and administrators the space to give feedback on these programs allows youth programs to be more effective and empowering, not only for students but also for teachers. It is essential to consider culturally affirming practices when addressing challenges because school districts are becoming increasingly diverse. BIPOC students, whether in majority-minority or other districts, deserve to feel empowered through learning, especially when outside circumstances often marginalize them.

CULTURALLY AFFIRMING YOUTH PROGRAMS

Future research should consider assessing each strategy of the STAT program to enhance culturally affirming qualities. Research should consider that each strategy has been created to build specific skills in students and should assess whether these skills are being taught and build in culturally affirming.

Limitations

This study's sample size was relatively small per collection period, and not all participants were consistent in responding throughout all four collection periods. Even more, very few of the participants were educators or administrators in an urban school district, which means that the challenges stated could look very different for a data set of all urban school educators and administrators.

CULTURALLY AFFIRMING YOUTH PROGRAMS

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Appendix A

CULTURALLY AFFIRMING YOUTH PROGRAMS

Students Taking Action Together Feedback Survey

Question	Answer Choices
1. What is your role in school?	1. Teacher 2. Administrator 3. School Counselor/Social Worker 4. School Psychologist 5. Other School Support Staff Member 6. Other: _____
2. With what grade level(s) did you STAT materials? Check all that apply.	1. 4th Grade 2. 5th Grade 3. 6th Grade 4. 7th Grade 5. 8th Grade 6. 9th Grade 7. 10th Grade 8. 11th Grade 9. 12th Grade
3. School District	1. _____
4. School Name	1. _____
5. How did you hear about STAT?	1. Conference 2. Publication/Article 3. School Administrator 4. Colleague who's implementing STAT 5. Other (please describe) _____

CULTURALLY AFFIRMING YOUTH PROGRAMS

<p>6. Indicate your use of each strategy during this marking period:</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Yes-No-Maybe (History Lesson) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 1 time 2. 2-3 times 3. 4-5 times 4. 6 or more times 5. Did not use 2. Yes-No-Maybe (Current Events Lesson) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 1 time 2. 2-3 times 3. 4-5 times 4. 6 or more times 5. Did not use 3. Respectful Debate <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 1 time 2. 2-3 times 3. 4-5 times 4. 6 or more times 5. Did not use 4. PLAN (History Lesson) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 1 time 2. 2-3 times 3. 4-5 times 4. 6 or more times 5. Did not use 5. PLAN (Current Events and/or School Problem Lesson) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 1 time 2. 2-3 times 3. 4-5 times 4. 6 or more times 5. Did not use
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CULTURALLY AFFIRMING YOUTH PROGRAMS

<p>7. How likely would you be to recommend the STAT teaching strategies to a colleague?</p>	<p>1. 0 2. 1 3. 2 4. 3 5. 4 6. 5 7. 6 8. 7 9. 8 10. 9 11. 10</p>
<p>8. What did you like about the STAT teaching strategies?</p>	<p>1. _____ _____</p>
<p>9. What did you NOT like about the STAT teaching strategies?</p>	<p>1. _____ _____</p>
<p>10. What ideas would you have for us to improve STAT for you and for other educators?</p>	<p>1. _____ _____</p>