

Reciprocal trust and student voice: lessons from adapting an intervention for middle schools

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Abstract

Purpose – We describe qualitative findings from formative work focused on adapting a connection-strengthening intervention originally developed for high schools to middle school contexts. The intervention consisted of a digital tool for students to post information about their school experiences, a student curriculum introducing core concepts of advocacy and socioemotional skills and professional development materials introducing school personnel to restorative and community-building practices.

Design/methodology/approach – Following an iterative development process, our research team solicited feedback on the intervention components from a Design Team consisting of middle school personnel and from a focus group of middle school students on their daily school experiences. We used an iterative line-by-line approach to establish initial codes, Dedoose to establish inter-rater reliability and thematic analysis to identify subcodes.

Findings – We identified three overarching themes: honoring context, supporting teachers and building connections. Subthemes included the lingering impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the developmental stage of middle school students, trust, safety, choice, teacher readiness and support needs. Based on these findings, we identified needed adaptations to the intervention components and potential implementation plans.

Originality/value – The intervention focuses on simultaneously supporting students and teachers. Teachers' ability to use restorative practices and model positive relationship building appears to be a necessary prerequisite for students to develop the trust necessary to make their voices heard. Students' willingness to advocate helps teachers to promote authentic contexts for building and rebuilding supportive relationships with and among students. This reciprocity can provide a new lens for social-emotional learning in middle schools.

Keywords Middle school, Student voice, Social emotional learning, Intervention adaptation

Paper type Research article

Integrating a connection-strengthening intervention into middle school classrooms takes careful examination of the complex web of social, emotional and behavioral interactions among students and teachers. Our research team spent nine months in discussion with a group of educators to explore how to adapt an existing high school intervention with multiple components to effectively engage middle school teachers and students in relationship-building activities with a focus on student voice. The existing intervention consisted of a web-based tool for students (the Advocatr) to share concerns and celebrations, a student curriculum focused on advocacy and staff training in restorative practices to promote classrooms encouraging student agency, ownership and accountability. Not only did the guidance from the educators create strong recommendations impacting the individual components, but the results yielded a view of middle school classrooms and the challenges and opportunities for integrating a relationship-building



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intervention into a post-COVID environment. The purpose of this study was to describe the process of adapting an intervention previously developed for high school students and staff to middle school contexts.

Existing intervention

The intervention consisted of the following components: (1) web-based tool allowing students to share celebrations and concerns about their school experiences with school adults; (2) 10-week student curriculum introducing students to concepts of advocacy, relationship building, ownership, accountability and conflict resolution, with each lesson consisting of multiple activities, including games, classroom circles, journaling and videos; and (3) staff training in restorative practices along a multi-tiered continuum. The first two student-focused components were tested in a previous study. Implementation in high schools was associated with improvements in student-perceptions of personal safety and belonging to school and a decrease in student perceptions of classroom disruptions (Vincent *et al.*, 2021, 2022). However, overall usage rates of the tool were low due to a deeply ingrained anti-snitch culture (Espelage *et al.*, 2022) and social media overload. Many students use multiple apps to communicate with friends (Anderson & Jiang, 2018), and some schools offer department-specific apps that students are expected to check for daily updates and announcements. Within this crowded field, a reporting app might quickly be forgotten. Limited use might also have been associated with the fact that the tool was not designed to provide instant gratification present in other social media (Mohr & Mohr, 2017). As such, students might have perceived the tool as insufficiently engaging.

Although changes in staff behavior did not reach statistical significance, staff participation in the training was associated with higher self-reported use of restorative practices, reductions in staff perceptions of student victimization and overall perceived improvement of school-wide discipline and student-support systems. Given the substantive shift away from a teacher-managed classroom to shared decision-making, implementation of restorative practices requires gradual, incremental and steady buy-in from staff (Vincent *et al.*, 2022).

Based on these promising outcomes and identified challenges, and the literature's recommendation that middle school students are particularly vulnerable to peer victimization that can lead to school disengagement (Symonds *et al.*, 2026), that positive teacher-student relationships can protect against peer victimization (Ten Bokkel, Roorda, Mae, Verschuere, & Colpin, 2023), that restorative practices can promote positive teacher-student and peer relationships and positive student outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2023) and that a focus on student voice can benefit students' social-emotional development at the middle school level (Schaefer, Pennington, Divoll, & Tang, 2024), our goal was to blend the student-centered reporting tool and curriculum with the teacher-centered training in restorative practices into a comprehensive middle school intervention. This intervention was conceptualized as consisting of three components: a web-based tool allowing students to share information about their school experiences with school adults, a curriculum introducing students to advocacy, ownership, accountability and conflict resolution, and staff training on how to leverage restorative approaches to creating classrooms where students feel comfortable speaking out. The overall goals of this three-pronged intervention were to (1) empower students to make their voices heard and actively engage them in shaping their school's culture and (2) empower teachers and school personnel to support students effectively, efficiently and equitably. Our work was specifically driven by the following research question: What student concerns, teacher support needs and school-level contextual factors should be kept in mind to most effectively adapt programs to middle schools?

In their position paper *This We Believe* (Lounsbury, 1982), AMLE identified five essential attributes of middle school classrooms: responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable and engaging. To promote these classroom attributes, the paper identified a number of necessary ingredients, including an engaging curriculum emphasizing intellectual exploration, an

inclusive and welcoming school culture and adult commitment to and leadership towards implementing these ingredients. More recently, [Harrison and Bishop \(2021\)](#) reaffirmed the need to support an increasingly diverse population of adolescent students as they negotiate societal and cultural challenges and opportunities at a critical moment in their development. The vision of a supportive middle school environment has guided efforts to address disciplinary inequities in middle schools ([Carter Andrews & Gutwein, 2020](#)), teacher stress and classroom management ([Divoll & Ribeiro, 2021](#)) and, most recently, relationship building in virtual environments forced upon students and teachers through the COVID-19 pandemic ([Smith & Falbe, 2020](#)). These recommendations formed the context for our study.

Key aspects of middle grades education

The prior research about middle grades gives key insights into peer aggression and victimization, relatedness and student voice. We describe each of these below.

Peer aggression and victimization

As students transition to the middle grades, aggression and victimization tend to change from physical to relational forms, such as rumor-spreading, social exclusion or shaming ([Espelage, Hong, Rao, & Thornberg, 2015](#)). The covert nature of these behaviors can make it difficult for school adults to intervene ([Ettekal, Li, Chaudhary, Luo, & Brooker, 2023](#)). The literature anchors this shift towards relational aggression in an early adolescence developmental focus on identity formation, sexual maturation and social competency building ([Pellegrini, 2004](#)). Some studies found that female students tend to be disproportionately victimized by relational aggression, as well as students from racial minorities and students with disabilities ([McNicholas, Orpinas, & Raczyński, 2020](#)). Continuous peer victimization has been associated with long-term school disengagement and absenteeism ([Meehan et al., 2023](#)) and poor academic performance ([Polanco, Paskewich, Leff, & Waasdorp, 2022](#)).

Relatedness

Relatedness refers to the perception of belonging to a community while carrying out an activity. Students who do not have a sense of belonging might experience frustration and feelings of incompetence and disengage from learning ([Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013](#)). [Núñez-Requeiro and Wang \(2025\)](#) have shown the interrelatedness of peer-relatedness and teacher-relatedness. Adolescent students benefit from peer-relatedness if they simultaneously have positive relationships with teachers, and they benefit from positive teacher-relatedness if they simultaneously have positive peer relationships. This suggests that simultaneously intervening with teachers and students might be beneficial to students' sense of school belonging.

Student voice

The middle grades are a time when many students begin to develop their autonomous identities ([Reimer, 2023](#)) and seek to become agents in their school's culture ([Holquist, Mitra, Conner, & Wright, 2023](#)). In high school populations, [Jang, Reeve and Deci \(2010\)](#) linked perceived autonomy to greater behavioral and emotional school engagement, and [Van Ryzin et al. \(2007\)](#) associated perceived autonomy with greater psychological well-being in adolescent students. Several studies have linked adolescents' greater perceived autonomy with perceived relatedness as well as academic engagement and performance ([Furrer & Skinner, 2003](#); [Ruzek et al., 2016](#)).

In sum, it appears that relationship building and student voice emerged as the primary potentially protective factors against peer victimization. Students' positive relationships with peers and school adults can protect against negative short and long-term outcomes ([Ten Bokkel, Verschueren, Demol, van Gils, & Colpin, 2021](#)). Building these protective relationships requires first that both school adults and students develop confidence with

community and relationship-building skills (Robinson, 2022). Restorative practices have been identified as a promising approach to developing these skills and building and re-building positive relationships between teachers and students and among students (Lodi, Perrella, Lepri, Scarpa, & Patrizi, 2022).

To honor students' identity formation and desire for autonomy, the literature recommends providing students with choices to shape their own learning experiences (Alley, 2019). In addition, the choice of learning activities should be authentic and purposeful. If students perceive the activity as meaningful to their individual circumstances, they are likely to be more engaged (Alley, 2019). To be able to identify authentic learning opportunities, school adults need to be able and willing to listen to all students' voices (Conner, 2022). Students need to have the tools to share their school experiences with school adults in a manner that does not put them at risk of retaliation from peers or adults (Slocum, Esbensen, & Taylor, 2017), and teachers need to be willing to share authority with students as they deliver instruction (Alley, 2019).

We worked with a Design Team consisting of middle school personnel and a focus group consisting of middle school students to adapt the intervention components to the middle school context, specifically (1) align the web-based Advocatr tool to middle school students' concerns, vernacular and developmental stage; (2) revise the curriculum to facilitate integration with existing school policies and initiatives and (3) align the teacher training with the needs and concerns of middle school personnel.

Methods

Project BASICS is a four-year study with three distinct phases. Here, we focus on the first phase, our nine-month long engagement with our Design Team to guide our adaptation of our program. The overarching goals of our program and Design Team conversations were to reduce peer victimization, improve school engagement through the increase of student voice and advocacy and increase the ability of school staff to build positive relationships through implementing restorative practices along a multi-tiered continuum. An Institutional Review Board approved this research in July 2021.

The study was carried out by a team of researchers who had developed the original components and comprised expertise in multi-tiered interventions within schools, restorative practices and app development. The team had been largely working on a longer research trajectory with the essential goal of addressing discipline inequities and identifying practices that ensure equitable school environments.

Participants

We recruited nine school personnel based on existing relationships with practitioners in the field to form the design team (DT). Six members of the DT identified as female and three as male. DT members could select multiple racial/ethnic categories with which they identified: seven identified as White, one as Asian, one as Black/African-American and one as Hispanic/LatinX. Four taught English/Language Arts, one taught science, five taught social studies, one taught special education, one taught Spanish immersion and one selected "other subject." Two taught 6th grade, five taught 7th grade and 5 taught 8th grade. Six DT members had more than 10 years' experience teaching, two had 6–10 years' experience and one had 2–5 years' experience. DT members' roles included ELA and social studies teacher, special education teacher, science teacher, building behavior support assistant, curriculum specialist and 9th grade transition specialist.

We worked with one middle school to recruit 11 students for the focus group. Three were in 6th grade, four were in 7th grade and four were in 8th grade. Four students identified as female, four as male, two as non-binary/third gender and one as fluid/all genders. Students could select multiple racial/ethnic backgrounds: one student identified as Asian, seven as Hispanic or

Latino/a, one as Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, five as White, two as Black or African-American and one as Multiracial. Eight students identified as heterosexual and three as gay, lesbian or bisexual.

Procedures

Design Team members met during nine monthly 2-h focus groups. Prior to beginning the meetings, all participants provided informed consent, allowing for the recording of full group conversations and the taking of notes by research team members during smaller breakout discussions. Over the nine sessions with the DT, each intervention component was discussed.

The student focus group centered on their relationships with teachers and with each other and their perceptions of their school climate. Each DT participant was compensated \$45 per hour; student participants received \$30.

Measures

Questions posed to DT members were designed to address key concerns relevant to our adaptation process. For the staff training, our objectives for adaptation included: student empowerment strategies and adaptation of materials to the middle school context. For the Advocatr app, our focus was on enhancing the appeal to middle school students, making the data useful to teachers and administrators, encouraging the student's use of the app, addressing students' high tolerance for inappropriate behaviors and aligning report and response systems to existing school data systems. We had three main concerns in delving into student curriculum: how to align the curriculum with existing middle school curricula, how to reduce the time and effort curriculum requires (integrate with community building circles) and how to make it maximally relevant for teachers of various content areas.

Analysis

Focus group recordings were transcribed using Otter.ai and de-identified. An initial coding team of three researchers coded all transcripts using an iterative line-by-line approach to identify key content (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) and 40 initial codes. The coding team followed a common protocol for qualitative research (Cofie, Braund, & Dalgarno, 2022). We used a minimum of two coders, including one coder who was removed from data collection (to address potential bias) and communicated frequently about code meanings to resolve conflicts. After consolidation of initial codes (with umbrella codes of "implementation," "teacher support," and "student support") through an axial coding process into a more succinct coding framework focused on "content," "contextual considerations," and "implementation," we then imported transcripts and our coding schema into Dedoose (SocioCultural Research Consultants, 2021). The research team then undertook three additional rounds of coding to identify broad codes applicable to students and teachers alike; the codes included "buy in," "middle school development," "readiness," "trust," "time constraints," "inclusion," and "accessibility." We computed inter-rater reliability (IRR) to establish transparency and consistency in our coding process, with our highest IRR over 70% indicating a high degree of alignment in interpretation between our two coders (adjusting for agreement due to chance; Cohen's Kappa; McDonald, Schoenebeck, & Forte, 2019). We then used our codebook to code the remaining transcripts. The final "lens" through which the team approached our data was that of thematic analysis (Braun, & Clarke, 2022), in which we identified overarching patterns of meaning across our codes and sub-codes. Three key themes emerged from this final analysis: honoring context, supporting teachers and building connections.

Themes: honoring context, supporting teachers and building connections

The interconnected themes of honoring context, supporting teachers and building connections, and their subthemes reoccurred across student and adult participant conversations, enabling us

to answer our research question of what student concerns, teacher support needs and school-level contextual factors should be kept in mind to most effectively adapt programs to middle schools.

Honoring context

This theme was central to understanding the conditions in a middle school classroom. To expand on the context, three subthemes emerged in conversations addressing each of the intervention components. Educators pointed out the *impact of COVID-19*, the unique *middle school developmental* challenges and the pressures teachers faced with insufficient *time* to do all that was asked of them and as factors to consider when adapting programs to middle school contexts.

The impact of COVID-19 recurred in the data to explain teacher and student needs to recover, build connections, provide support academically and provide and receive support socially. One educator addressed the lag in behavioral skills, saying, “I feel like our kids are like two years behind, like with social-emotional health and just social skills.” Describing how teachers experienced their classrooms after COVID-19, another educator offered, “We have hurt people [who are] teaching hurt people.” When discussing the ways to build relationships, an educator noted in acknowledging COVID-19 effects “the need for human connection is never going to go away . . . teachers are having to connect with students in different ways.”

COVID-19 also functioned as a reference when students were asked what they liked or didn’t like about school. One student voiced their frustration when the “teacher yells at you for your mask sliding down . . . as you’re talking.” Another student liked to socialize with their friends when “we’re outside or eating [and] we don’t have to wear a mask.” These unprompted comments about COVID-19 highlighted the pandemic’s enduring impact.

The educators guided the research team to consider the *developmental characteristics* of middle schoolers to ensure engagement. One educator pointed out that middle schoolers differed in their levels of understanding based on their grade level: “When a sixth grader walks into the room, they’ve just left elementary school. The reality is extremely different than an eighth grader. Their understandings are going to be significantly different.” Another participant noted that some classrooms might be composed of a single grade, others might be multiple grades with “very different levels of experience and understanding” which would impact the design and delivery of lessons. Educators offered opinions on how to create buy-in from students, suggesting that getting students active would engage them: “One thing that I’ve noticed with kids is the more physical you can make an activity, the more engaged they are.” Educators used various expressions such as “kid friendly,” “short and sweet,” “shinier,” “relatable” and “variety” when pointing to what works in adapting high school curricula to engage middle schoolers. One educator succinctly stated, “We need the ‘wow factor’ to keep them engaged for buy-in.”

When students talked about themselves, they valued connections and emphasized the importance of having friends even when “it can be frustrating because yes, we can get in fights . . . and they’re not over really big deals.” Another student recognized that good friends show support for both good and bad ideas. These ideas from the students show the importance of curricular design that acknowledges and incorporates this developmental stage of middle schoolers.

Educators mentioned the importance of time, noting that “time is a precious commodity”; teachers may feel the burden of being asked to “do a training, to learn something new . . . to take on one more thing.” Time was a practical consideration for the length of lessons within the curriculum. As one participant noted, “I don’t know if I could get [the lesson] done in 40 minutes plus what my school wants me to do.”

The subthemes of *time*, the enduring *impact of COVID-19* and the significant physical, emotional, cognitive and social *development* occurring in the middle school years helped us understand the importance of honoring context in adapting programs for middle school classrooms.

Supporting Teachers

The second theme, supporting teachers, emerged as a determining factor for an intervention's acceptance and use. *Identifying the need* for a program surfaced as one prerequisite for securing buy-in from teachers and students. As one participant commented, "There needs to be a purpose-setting lesson, like identifying the need in their school." If this were not the case, the participant continued, teachers "would struggle with buy-in from the students."

Different strategies surfaced as *teacher readiness* was discussed to tackle the complex school environment and to advance the aims of the intervention. The idea of providing "teacher runways" for advancing teacher readiness before classroom delivery was suggested. One educator recommended that staff be offered a different channel on the student app to "practice and maybe use themselves for a while . . . to get familiar with the app." An educator felt that for students to be engaged, "teachers have to be comfortable" and suggested that before lesson activities are delivered to students, "teachers should go through this process themselves . . . maybe it would be the staff meeting the week before . . . [so] we've tried it out with adults." When discussing a student's lesson, an educator noted:

The further we get into this, I'm convinced that teachers need a long ramp to this, right? If they're new to the concept of restorative practice or justice, then they're going to need a ramp to get to the point where they're going to think about [it].

The educators recognized that teachers play a crucial role in securing students' enthusiasm and use for the intervention. For this reason, identifying the need for the intervention and providing strategic teacher readiness opportunities were presented as necessary adaptations.

Building connections

The third theme of *building connections* not only spoke to the importance of positive peer-to-peer and student-to-teacher relationships but also spoke to the importance of building connections to the content and materials of the intervention. The first theme, *honoring context*, recognized the need to foster connections within the school community. The second theme of *supporting teachers* highlighted the role of teachers to deliver and encourage the acceptance and use of the intervention. The final theme addressed the elements of *trust, safety and choice* as necessary to build authentic connections.

Students observed that relationships flourished in spaces where *trust* and *safety* were a priority. When commenting on the positive aspects of school, they mentioned "how welcoming everyone is." A student identified a teacher they had a positive relationship with as someone who "helps a lot" and "makes me feel safe." A gender non-binary student who no longer went by their given name but instead by a self-chosen name spoke to the emotional stress they felt at school, saying, "You tell people your preferred name and they call you by your dead name or name that you don't use at all." Students shared examples when physical safety was also an issue, such as the student who reported, "I've been pushed into lockers so many times." Students felt that problems in school are not always resolved equitably and acceptably, noting that adults in the school "like to pick favorites."

One educator recognized that the intervention could create opportunities for building relationships during a "really difficult time in education right now" and could create content that would foster connections:

Like if I'm a teacher, and you're giving me a way to connect with students, that feels like a lift that I want. But that needs to be the first thing I hear. I need to know how does this program help me connect with students?

Another educator noted that the varied cognitive level and personality traits of students would lead to teachers wanting choices within the curriculum, saying:

I know my kids, I know where they're going to be most comfortable. And I also know myself as a teacher, and I know what I'm going to be the best at facilitating.

Educators also recognized the need students have for safety. Educators, when considering the value of the student app and how adults could respond, imagined that “students might feel comfort and safety when they are getting a message . . . that their voices are being heard.” One student participant acknowledged the importance of safety by expressing a comment in chat writing, “MAKES ME FEEL SAFE” during a discussion about a beloved teacher.

The final theme of *building connections* delved into the conditions that build and strengthen connections. Trust, safety and choice were identified as important contributors to creating a classroom environment adept at supporting interventions.

Three-stage implementation model

Earlier in the paper, we noted the five essential attributes of middle school classrooms – responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable and engaging as identified by the Association for Middle Level Education. These attributes were at the forefront of the adaptation to the middle school level. In particular, we made a deliberate choice to recruit educators from different professional levels with middle school experience (teachers as well as administrators) and to include student voice through focus groups. This purposive sample enabled the Design Team to consider each of the five attributes from multiple angles. These varied perspectives informed the final design of the intervention.

In coding the data, it became evident that the comments participants made about the three components of the intervention itself were less at the forefront of their thoughts than the potential power of the intervention to build connections, both student-to-student and student-to-teacher. Although we asked specific questions about functionality of the app, units in the curriculum and the teacher professional development, we noticed the sheer volume of quotations related to what we have termed *honoring context*, *supporting teachers* and *building connections*; our analysis made it clear that supporting teachers is instrumental in their ability to establish connections with students as well as between students.

As we considered the aspects necessary to adapt an existing program to the middle school level, we pieced together a three-stage model. In the first stage, the development considerations we've grouped into *honoring context* need to be at the forefront. This includes the adaptation of the program to be appropriate for middle school students' cognitive aspects as well as time constraints of the school setting. Then, Stage 2, readiness, can focus on supporting teachers to feel equipped to deliver the program, gaining confidence to engage in the materials before rolling it out in their classrooms. The student trust and sense of safety needed for the third stage, implementation, can only happen once the other two are in place. Our data made it clear that the ability of students to *build connections*, to trust their peers and their teachers to engage fully in any SEL activities can absolutely not be assumed. Our student participants described an alarming prevalence of bullying in their daily lives, supporting [Espelage et al.'s \(2015\)](#) finding that the extent of middle school peer aggression poses a challenge to developing supportive student-teacher relationships. Thus, unless the first two stages are fully executed, students are unlikely to allow themselves the vulnerability to engage fully in the program once implemented. The need for the first two stages to be given sufficient time before implementation was exacerbated by COVID-19. It was clear from our data that the increased isolation during COVID-19 lockdowns – and the increased hostility toward those with differing opinions on vaccines and mask-wearing – heightened the vulnerability of middle school students. Schools are now faced with repairing broken trust as well as preparing for the inevitable next crisis, be it a natural disaster like the fires that devastated the Los Angeles region in 2024, ongoing wars in Ukraine and Palestine, or changes in diversity, equity and inclusion policies. Schools should attend to building connections prior to engaging in implementing programs that require high levels of student-to-student or student-to-teacher trust.

Learning as a reciprocal process

The iterative process of working with the Design Team and developing the intervention components highlighted learning as a reciprocal process and essential in developing classrooms of trust and shared responsibility. When we increase students' sense of trust and safety, teachers gain opportunities to learn from their students and engage them in authentic and meaningful interactions so that both can effect shifts in school climate. With this in mind, our adaptations focused on simultaneously placing teachers and learners in a collaborative relationship. This is a lesson broadly applicable to adaptation work in middle schools, regardless of the content of the intervention.

As we implement the adapted program in middle schools – 11 schools so far – we are conducting pre- and post-administrator interviews to understand the extent to which school climates have shifted because of the program by promoting reciprocal collaborations between teachers and students. These ongoing interviews are exploring whether hypothesized shifts are taking place through teacher professional development related to the Advocatr program – which in turn leads to stronger connections with and among students – and students feeling greater self-efficacy in promoting a prosocial school environment. The lessons learned from our adaptation work can inform the work of others working in the middle school grades.

Limitations and areas for future research

Several limitations are worth noting, which help identify areas for future research. First, the design team were local to our area and drew from our professional networks limiting generalization. Future research is needed across other jurisdictions to test the applicability of findings in different contexts. Secondly, the small number of participants (nine educators and ten students) is likewise insufficient to warrant generalization. Further studies should include more participants as well as ensure a diverse sample. Further, although focus groups are a powerful data collection tool to enable participants to bounce ideas off one another, they can also stifle divergent views through social desirability bias; future research could include one-on-one interviews to reduce such occurrence. Finally, the shortened time of this phase of the research means we are unable to assess the full implementation of the intervention. Additional longitudinal research would enable impacts to be recorded.

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