Building Resilience and Self-Awareness in 8th Grade Students

By

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Abstract

Stress impedes a students' ability to learn. This includes learning concepts in the academic realm, but also socially, emotionally, and culturally as well. This study took place in a K-12 school in rural North Dakota with a student population of under 200 children. The focus of this research was to find out more about stress and emotional recognition in middle school students by building resilience and self-awareness. The guiding question was: In what ways will a self-management training session impact stress levels in a group of 8th grade students? The assumption of this study was that by focusing on the CASEL core competencies of self-management and self-awareness, students would learn coping skills, how to recognize stress triggers, and how to manage their emotions, behaviors, and thoughts. Major themes within the literature were social emotional learning, adolescence, Social Cognitive Theory, stress, and SEL programs. A group of eight students participated in a CharacterStrong© focus group for 30 minutes, twice weekly in a five-week time span. Participants completed a Google forum pre/post-survey focusing on emotions, coping skills, current stress level and stress triggers. Additional data was collected during Socratic seminar sessions and exit interviews. Findings reveal participant increase in self-awareness, reported use of coping strategies and a reduction in daily stress levels following the study. Limitations and future research are discussed.

Keywords: Self-management, self-awareness, stress, coping strategies, emotions, CharacterStrong©, adolescence

Building Resilience and Self-Awareness in 8th Grade Students

Middle school is a time of big change and a time of self-awareness. Whether it be physical growth, hormones, a new building, or more responsibility, students are trying to find their place in the world, and these kids are stressed out. "The transition from primary to secondary school is regarded as one of the most difficult in pupils' educational careers" (Zeedyk, Gallacher, Henderson, Hope, Husband, & Lindsay, 2003, p. 67). Traditionally there has been a lack of social and emotional learning in public education. Throughout history, school has often been, "sit down, be quiet, and listen to your teacher," largely due to Horace Mann's factory model (Watters, 2022). High focus has been placed on academics rather than teaching the whole child. In recent, this mindset is changing with the widespread social and emotional learning. When leaving the elementary safety net and as the demands in school ramp up, a lack of effective coping strategies can be seen. This brought the question, what can we as educators do to help reduce this stress in middle school students? Social and emotional learning has been brought to the forefront.

Population Background

This study included eight voluntary 8th graders who were in an elective study hall. At the start of this academic school year, the school had just purchased CharacterStrong© social and emotional curriculum and began to implement its teachings school-wide. As this curriculum was just purchased, this 8th grade group did not have the exposure to any of the prior 7th grade CharacterStrong©. The researcher came twice a week to teach a novel concept of self-management to the targeted 8th graders starting in January 2024. There were nine total visits using the CharacterStrong© curriculum. In the 2022-23 school year, the researcher taught multiple subjects to all participants.

Problem Statement

This research took place with eight 8th grade students in a prekindergarten through 12th grade school with a student population of under 200 students. According to the World Population Review (2020), the town in north central North Dakota covers 1.2 square miles and has a population of 471. The diversity in this town is minimal, with 91.74 percent of the population being White/Caucasian, 4.4 percent two or more races, and the remaining 3.86 percent a combination of African American, Native American, and Asian.

Middle school students have high levels of stress and the systems in place rarely teach students how to deal with these feelings; North Dakota currently does not have any state social emotional learning (SEL) standards outside of preschool, which can lead to long-term negative health outcomes. "Research has well established that negative emotions, coping styles, and management of stress are predictive of a variety of adult diseases and morbidity" (Durlak, Domitrovich, Weissberg, & Gullotta, 2015, p. 87). Social and emotional learning can help students cope with what is happening internally. The Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning (CASEL) has done extensive research on the impact of social emotional learning on the developing brain and has broken this research into five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2023)

Self-awareness and self-management are two skillsets crucial for reducing stress because understanding emotional responses is a subcomponent of self-awareness and self-management. By building these skills up to manage one's emotions, educators can help students take charge of their stress levels and reduce negative impacts.

This research examined the impact of targeted teachings of emotional understanding, stressor identification and coping strategies. Students were asked to participate in CharacterStrong© curriculum, group discussions, and reflect on their experiences via surveys and an interview. The goal of conducting this study was to see an increase in awareness and help reduce stress that these middle school students feel.

Theory of Action

The purpose of this study was to examine if seven 30-minute sessions focusing on stress and emotional understanding over the course of four weeks would have an impact on stress levels in eighth grade students. The curriculum CharacterStrong© was used to teach novice emotional understanding and self-management skills to a small group of students. As CharacterStrong© was implemented during the 22-24 academic school year, the study utilized the seventh-grade pathway learning lessons nine through 15 to gain that foundational knowledge. These lessons range from understanding emotions and identifying them to understanding stress and learning coping strategies.

A set of targets were created: achievement, process, program, and performance. Figure 1 shows the breakdown in priority for the study. Achievement targets included changes in student stress levels, students' self-management when feeling stressed, understanding the emotions running through them, and the whole class being able to have a high level understanding of course material. Process targets included leading open discussion and fostering a safe learning environment free of judgment which is vital for open and honest communication. Program targets include the introduction of CharacterStrong© seventh grade curricula and multiple ways to show mastery of concepts. Performance targets include students identifying when they are feeling stress, triggers for their emotions, being able to self-advocate for themselves about their

emotional needs and using coping skills by managing one's emotions, behaviors, and thoughts (see Appendix A Theory of Action for further breakdown).

Figure 1

Priority Pie On Stress Reduction Via SEL
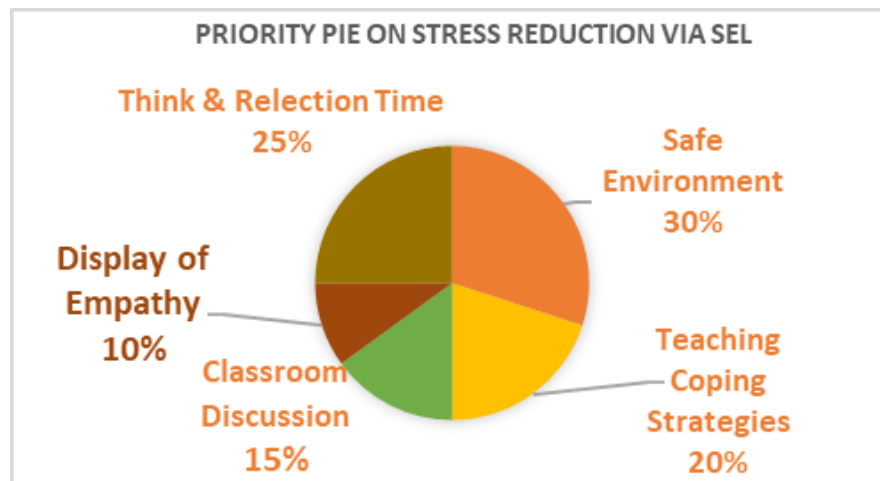
Statement of Theory/Theoretical Framework

The assumption of this study was that by focusing on the CASEL core competencies of self-awareness and self-management, students would learn coping skills, how to recognize stress triggers, and how to manage one's emotions, behaviors and thoughts. These students would become more comfortable with what was going on internally to be able to cope with and manage with the stress that comes with life as a middle school student, physical growth, hormones, a new building, or more responsibility. Experts agree with this; Durlak et al. (2015) state "When children develop more effective social and emotional skills, they are changing the way they respond to stress and may be creating new patterns of neurocircuitry, or physiological patterns of response that may have lasting positive effects on how they adapt to their environment and cope with stress" (p. 89). This transition in adolescence of being able to "apply skills for recognizing, regulating, and benefiting from emotions as they arise in diverse situations and context of daily

life" (Rusk et al., 2013) is new to them and having effective program leaders plays a vital role in this development.

Researchers studying positive youth development state the ability to manage emotions is associated with numerous favorable results, highlighting the importance of understanding the development of these skills (Rusk et al., 2013). On the contrary, children who show emotional dysregulation may have increased experiences of conflict and lower ability to control stress-induced feelings (Faucher, 2020). Harris et al. (2018) speak on how emotional dysregulation and stress may be key factors in suicidal ideations. Stress has short and long-term negative health effects. Middlebrooks & Audage (2008) state how it can affect the functioning of the immune and nervous systems along with a disruption in early brain development. They go on to state the multitude of effects in the long-term including depression, heart disease, alcoholism, cancer, and eating disorders- making stress reduction an important focal point.

Research Question

What impact does a targeted focus group covering both self-awareness and self-management strategies have on the stress levels of 8th grade students?

Review of Literature

In the following literature review, texts are discussed thematically, moving from social emotional learning (SEL), the uniqueness of adolescence, stress and negative outcomes associated with prolonged experiences of stress. It concludes with SEL programs that have successfully shown a reduction in stress.

Social and Emotional Learning

In the relevant literature, many sources utilized SEL and have found that they are effective in both helping children in the affective domain as well as in the academic realm.

Durlak et al. conducted a meta-analysis of 213 school based SEL programs involving 270,034 students kindergarten through high school. In this study, researchers saw significant improvements in social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviors, and academic performance including lower levels of distress and higher levels of socio-emotional skills (2011). This large-scale breakdown is promising that SEL overall has important benefits in self-awareness and self-management skills that overall reduce stress.

Social and emotional learning has evolved over the years but is most currently defined as "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions." (CASEL, 2023, para.1). Learning how one's thoughts and emotions can affect decisions and relationships is important to how we manage ourselves.

CASEL (2023) further breaks this down into five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Self-awareness is tuning into our thoughts and emotions and recognizing how they influence our behavior. Self-management is the ability to process and manage the things internally that are going on. Social awareness is empathy and compassion despite coming from different backgrounds. Relationship skills are the ability to create and maintain positive relationships with others. And lastly, responsible decision-making is putting all the other competencies together to make informed decisions in a multitude of settings. Although all portions of SEL are important, the first two competencies play critical roles in the proposed research question.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention put out the results from their Youth Risk Behavior Survey, and the results should not be overlooked. From 2011 to 2021, percentages of

students who made suicide plans, seriously considered attempting suicide, attempted suicide, and experiences persistence feelings of sadness or hopelessness all increased (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023). As students spend a portion of their awake hours in the education system, focusing on the SEL competencies of self-awareness and self-management can help students with big emotions they are feeling.

Self-Awareness and Self-Management

Both self-management and self-awareness are key components in recognizing and managing stress. Coskum worked in the primary setting with 10-year-olds going through SEL activities in the classroom and found that through these activities, student's skills increased on the relationship between emotions and their behaviors. Similarly, their ability to use practical and strategic knowledge on skills regarding self-regulation increased (2019). Reflections also enabled participants to connect interests, engagement, and accomplishment to varying extents, enhancing capacities for self-management and responsible decision-making (Strahan & Poteat, 2020). Both studies showing an increase in two of the core competencies.

Demink-Carthew et al., (2020) looked at personal learning in seventh and eighth graders to see if personalized learning could promote self-awareness. Students were given a project and asked to self-assess and reflect prior to and after the extended assignment. Identifying emotions and feelings was the third most common part of self-awareness that was identified by students. When given the opportunity for full control, this study shows that it can help students increase their emotional recognition which in turn leads to stress recognition. School is a constant in children's lives, and implementing social and emotional learning in the school day has the potential to change student's self-awareness and self-management in a positive way.

Social Cognitive Theory

Developed by Albert Bandura, Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) highlights learning through observing, mimicking, and modeling the behaviors of others (Mcleod, 2024). In relation to stress, this can be directly related to how we learn coping strategies and how to process stressful situations. Prati et al. (2010) states that, "According to Social Cognitive Theory, stress reactions depend on self-appraisal of coping capabilities" (para. 1). Adolescents can develop self-management skills through observing and imitating role models, receiving feedback, and building confidence in their ability to manage their own behavior (Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning, n.d.). This highlights the importance of peer and adult influence of adolescents' own abilities to self-regulate.

Morowatisharifabad et al. (2024) completed a study based upon SCT that examined educational intervention on stress and anger management skills in female adolescents. The researchers found that following SCT, it is a "strong and effective" theory when teaching life skills to adolescents (p. 174). There were a multitude of positive effects reported, but worth noting was the perceived reinforcement to control their anger and stress. Bandura (1991) himself agrees stating that self-efficacy plays a major role in how adolescents endure and perceive stress. The body of research supports SCT being an important part when aiding adolescents in learning self-management skills.

Adolescents

Students in the middle school age range are unique in many ways due to psychological development, physical growth, social and emotional needs (McCarthy et al., 2016; UNICEF, 2017). "The years between ages 10 and 14 are a pivotal period in the transition from childhood to adolescence. During these years of rapid development, important health and social knowledge is gained, behaviors are established, beliefs and attitudes are shaped, and the foundation is laid for

adulthood" (McCarthy et al., 2016, p. V). Furthermore, stating that stress levels, self-consciousness, and emotional dependency on one's friend's increase as well as self-image fluctuates. UNICEF (2017) concurs, stating that the experiences encountered during early adolescence can significantly shape various aspects of social, emotional, and motivational behavior, exerting lasting effects throughout one's lifetime.

These differences in adolescence can be linked to changes in neural plasticity in the brain. "Neuroplasticity, also known as neural plasticity or brain plasticity, is a process that involves adaptive structural and functional changes to the brain" (Puderbaugh and Emmady, 2023, para. 2). These rapid pruning and regrowing of synapses during puberty "creates a unique window of opportunity to influence positive and negative behavioural and developmental trajectories" (UNICEF, 2017, p. 23) Given the rapid pruning and regrowing of synapses occurring during this timeframe, adolescents are ideal candidates for increased social emotional supports to help guide them through this transitional period and build positive behavioral trajectories.

Stress

Stress for middle level students is a common occurrence and there are a multitude of reasons for this stress. Cervantes et al. (2012) talk of eight stressors specific to Hispanic populations such as family economic stress, acculturation-gap stress, culture and educational stress, Immigration-related stress, discrimination stress, family immigration stress, community and gang-related stress, and family and drug-related stress. Hamilton et al. (2016) discuss interpersonal stressors, peer victimization, and familial emotional maltreatment. Additionally, lack of conflict resolution experience and managing relationships adds more strain to adolescent functioning (Benner et al., 2020).

Benner et al. (2020) looked at trajectories of friend-related stress across early adolescence and later well-being and stated:

> Overall, the high-stress group struggled most following the high school transition. These students had higher negative affect and a higher likelihood of having consumed at least a sip of alcohol in ninth grade compared with all other groups. The high-stress group also reported lower behavioral school engagement than both the low-stress and moderate-decreasing friend-related stress groups as well as higher social anxiety and higher positive alcohol expectancies compared with the low-stress group. Not surprisingly, the low-stress group exhibited the most positive outcomes following the high school transition (para. 26).

With these stressors comes adverse effects. Other authors agree stating that "Stress is a common element related to a wide range of risky behaviors" (Cardoso et al., 2016, p. 215). Stress is not limited to only adopting poor choices; physical and psychological symptoms are a side effect as well. "Social anxiety and depressive symptoms dramatically increase and frequently co-occur during adolescence" (Hamilton et.al, 2016, p. 495), and the culprit of these symptoms have been linked to stress. Harris et al. (2018) reported that emotional dysregulation and stress may be the underlying reason for suicidality in individuals outside of certain diagnoses. Stress has many different causes and a multitude of negative side effects. With the adolescent age band being a big period of growth and development, examining stress is crucial.

Student Perceptions

Researchers agree that middle school is an important time for SEL, but Glover (2017) argues that it is critical to provide this support when students transition from fifth to sixth grade. When looking at the transition period from primary to secondary school, Mahmud (2020) found

from the interviews conducted with students that there needs to be an improvement in social processes and transitional supports. Glover (2017) states, "Students entering middle school are concerned about how they will be treated by their teachers and older students. There is anxiety related to finding classes, using a locker, changing for gym class, and increased homework" (p. 5). Researchers go on to highlight just how students' perceptions affect them during this time period. Stranhan (2020) states that "…pupils had difficulty in understanding their experiences [transitioning from elementary to middle school] and seemed unaware how particular emotions led to particular behaviour" (p. 38). Anxiety and stress are closely intertwined; a lack of understanding will only heighten this response.

Promising Research

The body of research covers multiple different curriculums that are SEL based. Many curricula have an aftereffect of stress reduction. The IMPACT Leadership and Personal Development program seems to be promising in terms of stress reduction. Brown (2013) followed the impact of 28 middle school students' emotional intelligence (EI) who participated in a 36-hour SEL program put on by a local university. When looking for a relationship between SEL and EI, Brown found a significant relationship between interpersonal skills, stress management, adaptability and general mood. This is a promising tool for alleviating stress in middle level students.

Valosek et al. (2019) followed students in a meditation program who participated in the standard seven-step course over five sessions. When compared to a control group, those who participate in Transcendental Meditation showed significant improvement of psychological distress and social- emotional competencies. "The findings of improved total social emotional

competency and decreased negative emotional symptoms were most pronounced in the subgroup of at-risk students" (Valosek et al., 2019, p.115).

Crooks et. al (2015) look at the outcomes utilizing the eighth grade Fourth R program. This version specifically focused on reducing violence and developing healthy coping strategies in response to stress. Students participating in the study identified more positive coping strategies when compared to the control school's data, thus showing preliminary data that eighth grade Fourth R program is effective for seventh and eighth graders (Crooks et al., 2015).

Immordino-Yang et al. (2018), researched helpful strategies to reduce stress and found that "adequate physical activity, social connection, nutrition, and sleep are particularly important in adolescence, as these buffer the effects of stress on the brain and improve well-being, emotion regulation, cognition, and decision-making" (p. 10). These factors play important roles to help mitigate stress before it becomes a problem.

Another program that approached significant improvement in psychological distress was a ten-lesson classroom program based on the Victorian Education Department's Social and Emotional Learning Resources. Topics included emotional literacy, personal strengths, positive coping strategies, problem-solving strategies, help-seeking and peer support, and stress management and emotional regulation (Midford et al, 2017). This research suggests this program can be effective in reducing distress such as anxiety and stress in the classroom.

The most impactful study found was the use of MOSAIC SEL curriculum. This was taught during the first 15 minutes of the day in the students assigned homerooms. When comparing two different schools, one participated in the MOSAIC SEL curriculum where the other did not, the school that participated showed statistically significant differences in academic

achievement when compared to the school that did not (MacDonnell et al., 2021). These studies show gains in adolescent ability in terms of academic achievement and life skills.

Methods and Procedures

Participants in the research were pulled from their study hall in 30-minute periods over the nine-session duration starting in January. This spanned over a five-week period, meeting two times a week and once on the fifth week. The learning environment for the duration of the study was in the teachers' lounge of the school and then in the gym when a larger space was needed for the curriculum.

The students participating in the research completed a Google Forum serving as both a pre- and post-survey. The pre-survey was conducted on the first day and the post-survey was completed on the last day of the sessions. The survey consisted of 16 questions focusing on emotions, coping skills, current stress level and stress triggers (see appendix B for Pre/Post-Survey). Participants spent 10-20 minutes to complete the survey both times.

The CharacterStrong© curriculum was implemented following the seventh grade path lessons nine through 15 out of 35. This curriculum was followed as it was intended to be, apart from the CharacterDare activity being omitted 50 percent of the time. The researcher found the topic to not align with the studies achievement targets. If students missed a day, they made up the time and completed a one-on-one session. This ensured all students received the full seven sessions. Students were given stress logs to fill out when they felt stressed during the week (see appendix C for Stress Log). Once a week, a Socratic Seminar was held after the CharacterStrong© content was covered during the 30-minute time block. This was prompted by the researcher, but was open discussion based. Students were asked to bring their stress log if they had filled it out and were asked if anything had stressed them during the week, how or if

they used coping techniques, and if the student deemed it helpful. Notes were recorded as they spoke in the group.

After the seven lessons of CharacterStrong© and the post survey were completed, four students were selected to complete an in-person interview at random. The mix was two girls and two boys. Interviews were brief, lasting up to two minutes long; they were audio recorded and then transcribed (see Table 5). The purpose was to have multiple methods of recording information to make sure the information is both valid and accurate.

Data Analysis

When looking at the pre/post-survey, due to the variety of questions and formats used, the researcher looked at trends in the data that are both qualitative and quantitative. Participants chose questions from a list of specified answers and numerical data was collected to examine the trends. Open ended questions followed a qualitative analysis and were coded for common themes and key words. Data was triangulated to ensure data was accurate (see appendix D for Triangulation Matrix). Attendance and completed make up days of the students were logged. The transcriptions of interviews and Socratic seminar notes were also coded to identify common themes.

Findings

With this research, the goal was to increase self-management and emotion recognition, get students to cope better and improve overall stress levels. I believe that when students are coping with their stress effectively, they will have more time to focus on the academic material being presented and be happier overall. There are a few studies on different programs and on stress specifically, but none are on CharacterStrong©. The goal is that this research

will provide insight into this curriculum in regard to self-awareness and self-management skills.

Pre/Post-Survey Results

When questioned, "How has school helped you manage the stress you feel?" 100% of students voiced that school has not helped in the pre-survey. One student changed their response during the post survey to state that school helps keep their mind off their stress.

Pre-survey results for the question, "In what ways do you calm yourself when feeling stressed?", student answers included distractions such as being on their phone, reading, and watching T.V. The post survey results logged more strategies for this question rather than distractions. Four out of eight students stated breathing, which was a strategy explicitly taught during the study.

Pre-survey results two out of eight participants accurately listed physical symptoms of stress while the others listed things that cause stress. In the post results, six out of eight listed accurate physical symptoms of stress such as "difficulty breathing, warm, and sweating". This is an increase from 25% to 75% of participants.

When students were asked "My thoughts are consumed by the stressful situation(s)". Four out of eight students scored the same, two students' scores decreased, and two students' scores increased. When students were asked "I can identify the emotions I am feeling" two students' scores increased, four students' scores stayed the same, and two students' scores showed a decrease.

Frequency of different stress triggers was logged from the pre/post-survey results. Only one entry per student was logged if duplicates occurred. Out of the 20 stress triggers logged, 14 can be directly linked to school or school related activities.

Table 3

Middle School Student Stress Triggers

Stress Triggers	Number of Students	School Related
Video Games	4	
Loud noises	3	x
Sports	3	x
Teachers	3	x
School	2	x
Siblings	2	
Classmates	2	x
Being Yelled At	1	x
Chores	1	
Failing At Trying	1	x
Family Relationships	1	
Game Days (sports)	1	x
Getting Hurt	1	x
Homework	1	x
Living Up to My Parents Expectations	1	x
Messy House	1	
Not Understanding Something	1	x
People Not Listening to Me	1	x
Scary Movies	1	
Sports Coaches	1	x

Figure 4 shows before the study, five out of eight students believed they were good at identifying what stresses them out 50% or less of the time. After completion of the study, five out of eight students believed they were good at identifying what stresses them out 75% of the time or more. When looking at individual data, five out of eight students showed an increase in ability to identify what stresses them out. Two out of eight students' scores decreased, and one student's score remained at "all the time".

Figure 4

I Am Good At Identifying What Stresses Me Out
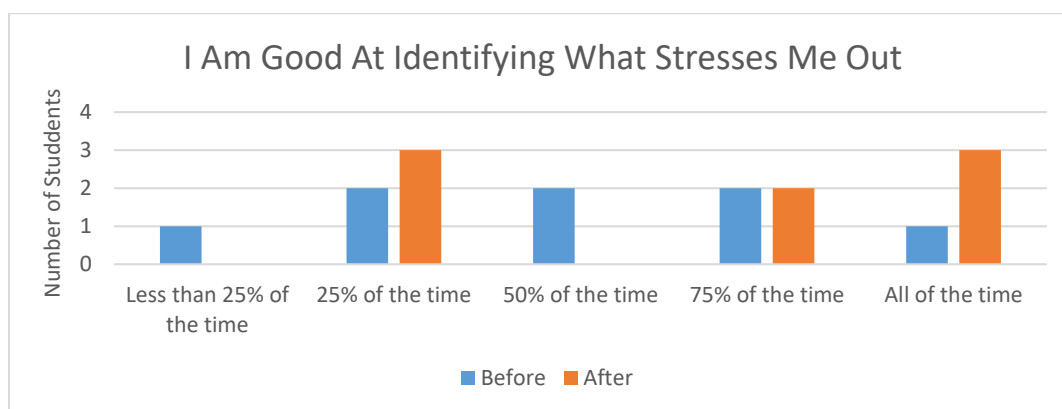
Before the study, three out of eight students were stressed in a typical school day less than 25% of the time. After completion of the study, seven out of eight students said that they were stressed less than 25% in a typical school day. In individual data, half of the student's stress levels decreased, three students stayed at "less than 25% of the time", and one student stayed at "25% of the time".

Figure 5

In a Typical School Day, How Often Do You Find Yourself Stressed?
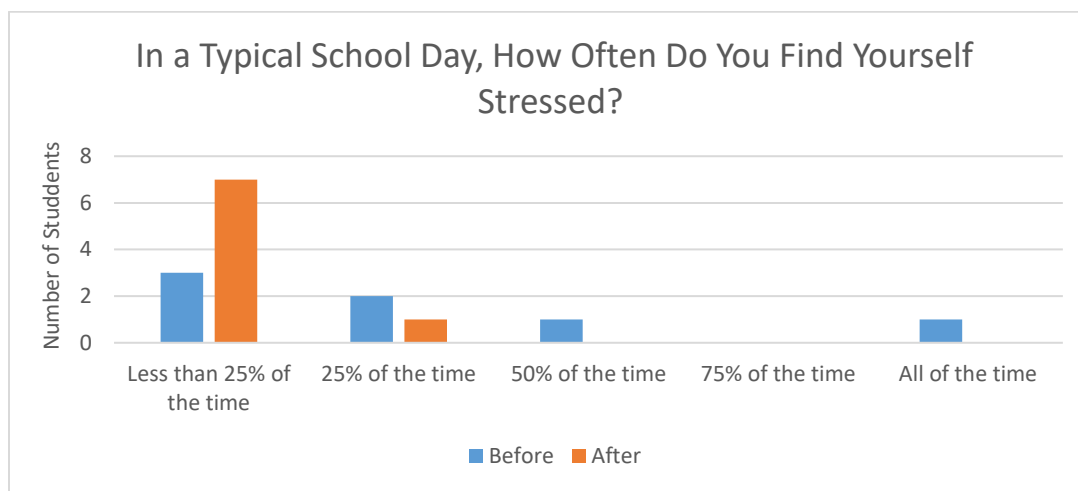
Before the study, seven out of eight students knew how to calm themselves down when the onset of stress occurred 50% or less of the time. Four out of eight students knew how to calm themselves down when the onset of stress occurred 50% of the time or more. When looking at individual data, three out of eight student's data increased from pre- to post-survey results. Two out of eight students' responses stayed the same, and three out eight students decreased.

Figure 6

I Know How To Calm Myself Down When I Start Feeling Stressed Out
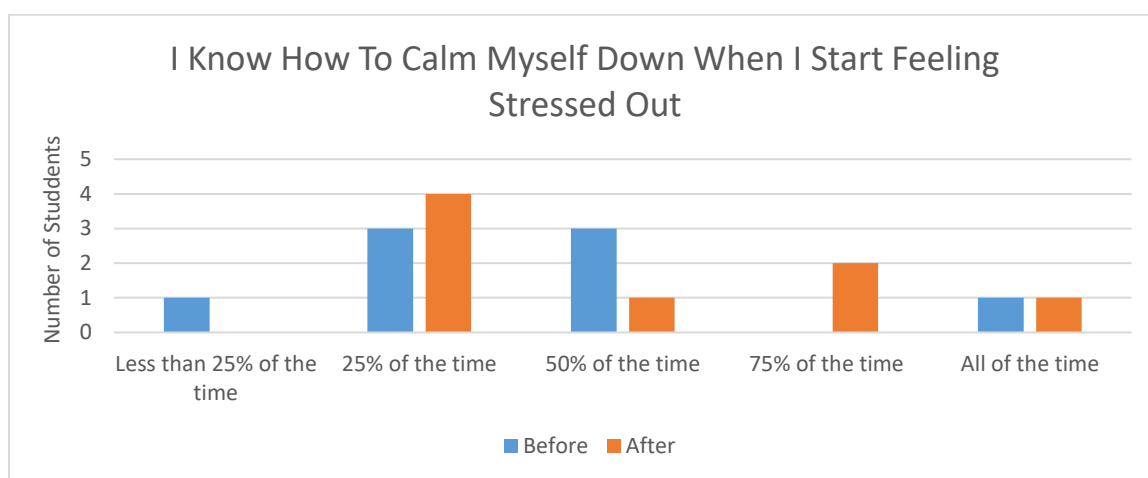
Additional Data Collection

During the Socratic seminar, participants followed the stress log format to share what caused stress this past week, and what they did to help cope with it. Students were apt to share stressful experiences aloud when they had done something they deemed helpful to combat it. Out of the two participants who filled out and turned in the Stress Log, most of the entries involved stressful situations where they responded ineffectively to manage their stress (see Table 3). Four participants were interviewed at random, see Table 4 for data and analysis.

Table 4

Examples of Socratic Seminar and Stress Log Responses

Student Response	What was done	Helpful?	Socratic Seminar or Stress log
I am stressed about needing surgery.	Being positive	Yes	Socratic Seminar
I didn't turn in an assignment and my teacher got mad.	I did not do anything	No	Socratic Seminar
I had gotten a bad grade.	I talked to the teacher and the teacher put in the wrong grade	Yes	Socratic Seminar
Coach yelled at me for no reason.	Thought about quitting basketball	No	Stress Log
Teacher	Cried	No	Stress Log
Homework	Gripped my hair, slammed desk	No	Stress Log

Table 5

Interview Questions and Responses

Example Question	Responses	Analysis
Has this training helped you reduce stress?	Student 1: no Student 2: Kind of Student 6: No, but it has not made more stress Student 5: Yes, it like let me know how to cope with stress and when I am not handling things well.	Half of the students did not find the focus group to help reduce stress, 25% thought it helped "kind of" and 25% of the students thought that yes it did help and could give examples of it.
What is something new you learned while participating?	Student 1: You can die from too much stress Student 2: Umm that they are so many ways that you can deal with stress and not just one thing I don't know Student 6: Nothing Student 5: Like you can like ground and breathe, and other strategies	All but one student brought up something covered during the study, concluding that students did in fact retain some knowledge.

Table 5 (continued)

What did you learn about yourself?	Student 1: I don't know um, I am very stressed.	Most students had a hard time articulating what they learned about themselves during the study. One student who across the board was able to articulate well their learning was able to give some insight into this question.
	Student 2: Umm (shrugs)	
	Student 6: Nothing	
	Student 5:	

	a) I can calm myself better.
	   b) Teacher: "What do you mean by that?"
	   c) Like before I would like just scream and yell and I like can control myself.	

Would you recommend this to other middle school students?	Student 1: yeah Student 2: yes Student 3: sure Student 4: yes	All students would recommend this experience to other middle school students.

Discussion

The overwhelming majority of students surveyed believe that school has not helped them deal with stress or learn how to manage stress. Participants via the survey logged using explicitly taught coping strategies to reduce stress and an increased awareness of different stress symptoms after completion of the study. When looking at stress in a typical school day, there was a positive shift from 37.5% of students to 87.5% recording they were stressed less than 25% of the time. There were 62.5% of participants that showed an increase in ability to recognize the source of their stress. Students sharing experiences aloud were more inclined to share if they did something that they deemed helpful. When given the opportunity to share experiences privately, they were more inclined to log them if they did something they deemed unhelpful.

There was no notable difference in emotion identification or thoughts being consumed by the stressful situation.

Key Findings

What impact does a targeted focus group covering both self-awareness and self-management strategies have on the stress levels of 8th grade students?

- Reported stress levels decreasing in a typical school day

- Reported coping strategies being used by half of participants

- All students would recommend this experience to other middle school students

- Over half of students showed an increased ability to identify stressors

- 70% of logged stressors are related to school or school activities

- Increased ability of participants being able to list physical symptoms of stress

Limitations

There were a few limitations worth mentioning for this body of research. Firstly, the sample size was small with only eight 8th grade students. Some participants were absent and had to be caught up the following day, leading to some missing the group discussion pieces. The Stress Log (see Appendix E for Stress Log) was introduced as optional. Full implementation of this would have allowed an increase in student participation in Socratic Seminar times as it was a reference for stress during the week. When it came time for the interview, the majority of participants were playing a game in their study hall. There was a low priority for students to give full feedback during the interview as they wanted to get back to the game. The result of this is prevalent in some of the short answers provided. In addition, the duration was only four weeks. This would be beneficial to see the impacts of a yearlong SEL curriculum compared to short bursts on stress management.

Conclusion

The research aimed to determine if a targeted focus group covering both self-awareness and self-management strategies had any impact on the stress levels of 8th grade students. A review of literature and analysis spoke of social emotional learning, the uniqueness of adolescence, Social Cognitive Theory, stress, and the negative outcomes associated with prolonged experiences of stress. It concludes with SEL programs that have successfully shown a reduction in stress. The information presented in this study focused on teaching emotional understanding and self-awareness, and the importance of recognizing stress and using coping strategies.

The results of this action research support that the CharacterStrong © curriculum when implemented with fidelity, has multiple positive benefits in relation to stress. Students reported an increase in self-awareness, use of coping strategies and a reduction in daily stress levels following the study. As stress is linked to long term negative health outcomes, it is vital that adolescent youth be taught these skills to combat stress levels at a young age. This allows students to become more comfortable with what is going on internally to be able to cope and manage the stress that comes with life as a middle school student.

Future Research

This researcher would like to see implementation of the CharacterStrong© curriculum implemented on a long-term basis. The results of this study have promising results that should be verified with a larger population base to verify the data across the board. Achieving sustained success for this study involves students recognizing their emotions, understanding what triggers them, being aware of their stress levels, and advocating for their emotional well-being. It would be beneficial to see an assessment based upon these specifications. Stress

reduction has been talked about in the field of study, but not many go on to research stress

directly. This would be a much-needed view on stress, specifically in the middle grades.

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Appendix A

Table 1

Theory of Action

Performance, Process, or Program Target	Strategies for Program, Process, or Program Target	Evidence of Program, Process, or Program Target
Performance Target (students): - identifying when they are feeling stress - triggers for their emotions - can self-advocate for themselves about their emotional needs and coping skill usage - manage one's emotions, behaviors, thoughts	Teacher will model coping strategies, hold open discussion about experiences with stress, and	• Student can identify a coping skill in the moment and follow through with implementation • Student can identify when they are feeling stress • Student can identify triggers for their emotions • Students can self-advocate for themselves about their emotional needs and coping skill usage • Students log what they have done that worked • Students can manage one's emotions, behaviors, thoughts
Program Target (class): introduction of CharacterStrong© seventh grade curricula	Teacher will utilize CharacterStrong© curriculum as it was intended by the developers	• Character Strong curriculum was used
Process Target (researcher): fostering a safe learning environment free of judgement	Teacher will express the importance of a safe space	• Researcher lead open discussion • Students felt safe to share experiences with the group • Researchers allow students to use effective coping strategies

Appendix B

Figure 2

Pre and Post-Survey

Middle School Stress

My name is Amanda Rollins, and I am a student at National University working towards my Masters in Social and Emotional Learning. If you have received this survey link, you have agreed and your parents have authorized you to be a part of my research, which I thank you for! The focus of my research is stress in middle school students. Please input your unique number that has been assigned to you. With that, it is important to be as truthful as you can.
This 16-question survey should take no longer than 25 minutes to complete.

1.   Unique Identification Number

2.   Current Age

3.   Current Grade Level
Mark only one oval.

   ( ) 7th Grade
   ( ) 8th Grade

4.   You have some control over how stress affects you.
Mark only one oval.

   ( ) True
   ( ) False

5.   Stress caused by daily life can lead to health problems.
Mark only one oval.

   ( ) True
   ( ) False

6.   List as many physical symptoms of stress that you can.

Figure 2 (continued)

7. In a typical school **_week_**, how often do you find yourself stressed?
   Mark only one oval per row.

	Less than 25% of the time	25% of the time	50% of the time	75% of the time	All of the time
Scale:	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

8. In a typical school **_day_**, how often do you find yourself stressed?
   Mark only one oval per row.

	Less than 25% of the time	25% of the time	50% of the time	75% of the time	All of the time
Scale:	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

9. What are some triggers (things in life) that make you stressed?

   _____

   _____

10. My thoughts are consumed by the stressful situation(s).
    Mark only one oval per row.

	Less than 25% of the time	25% of the time	50% of the time	75% of the time	All of the time
Scale:	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

Figure 2 (continued)

11. I think of ways that I can change the situation to make it better.
     Mark only one oval per row.

	Less than 25% of the time	25% of the time	50% of the time	75% of the time	All of the time
Scale:	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

12. I can identify the emotions I am feeling.
     Mark only one oval per row.

	Less than 25% of the time	25% of the time	50% of the time	75% of the time	All of the time
Scale:	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

13. I am good at identifying what stresses me out.
     Mark only one oval per row.

	Less than 25% of the time	25% of the time	50% of the time	75% of the time	All of the time
Scale:	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

14. I know how to calm myself down when I start feeling stressed out.

Figure 2 (continued)

Mark only one oval per row.

	Less than 25% of the time	25% of the time	50% of the time	75% of the time	All of the time
Scale:	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯

15. Name all the coping strategies you can think of for stress.

_____

_____

16. In what ways do you calm yourself when feeling stressed?

_____

_____

17. How has school helped you manage the stress you feel?

_____

_____

Appendix C

Figure 3

Stress Log

Date	What caused the stress? (examples: test, conflict, sports)	What did you do? (deep breaths, set goals, ignored it)	Did it help? (circle one)
Dec 2nd	*-Had homework assigned in every class today*	*-used my planner to write them all down* *-prioritized what ones to do first*	(Yes) / No
			Yes / No
			Yes / No
			Yes / No
			Yes / No
			Yes / No
			Yes / No
			Yes / No
			Yes / No
			Yes / No
			Yes / No

Date	What caused the stress? (examples: test, conflict, sports)	What did you do? (deep breaths, set goals, ignored it)	Did it help? (circle one)
			Yes / No
			Yes / No
			Yes / No
			Yes / No
			Yes / No
			Yes / No
			Yes / No
			Yes / No
			Yes / No
			Yes / No

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Appendix D

Table 2

Triangulation Matrix

Research Question	Data Source 1	Data Source 2	Data Source 3
What did we actually do?	Pre-survey	Post-survey	Interviewing students
What changes occurred with our priority achievement targets?	Will get students base knowledge on self-management concepts, coping mechanism knowledge and current stress levels	Will document student growth, identify gaps in learning	Socratic seminar notes, typed notes of specific questions asked during interview
What relationship between the actions taken and changes in performance on achievement targets?	Contrast data with post-survey	Contrast data with pre-survey	Correlate coded themes with survey results and add any new unanticipated themes as a result