Background

- Exposure to social-emotional learning (SEL) provides students with the opportunity to practice meaningful life skills such as prosocial behaviors.  
- In expanding the accessibility of SEL, kindness programming provides schools with a shared understanding and meaning of practicing such behaviors.  
- Kindness is linked with students’ sense of belonging and positive mental health outcomes.  
- Relatedly, students’ who experience high quality exposure to social-emotional learning (SEL) and supportive figures their capacity to thrive.

Goals

Guided by a positive youth development perspective, this study examines whether students’ participation in one locally-developed, evidence-informed, grassroots, school-wide kindness program is related to their sense of belonging at school. Teachers are also instrumental in modeling kind behaviors to students and teachers identify students as key enactors of kindness on campus.

Methods

Participants. Middle school students (N=399) from 4 schools in one Southwestern school district; 221 girls and 173 boys, 5 students did not self-identify their gender, with a mean age of 12.93 (SD = 0.50).

Procedures. Students were eligible to participate if they self-identified their gender, and their homeroom teacher opted into data collection. Students self-reported on all items.

Measures. School belonging (4 items), α = .78.

Intent to perform kind behaviors (4 items), α = .76; created for program evaluation purposes.

Teachers’ positive behaviors (2 items), α = .70.

Program exposure (8 dichotomous items); created for program evaluation purposes.

Analyses. Two mediation models were performed in R Studio (version 4.2.1) to examine whether teachers’ positive behaviors toward students mediated the effect of program exposure on students’ sense of belonging, and (2) intent to perform kind behaviors. Significance was tested using bootstrapping with 10,000 samples.

Results

Note. Bootstrapped mediation models. *** p < .001.

Conclusions and Future Work

Strengths

- Students’ exposure to kindness programming was positively associated with both their sense of belonging and intent to perform kind behaviors.
- Students reports of teachers’ positive behaviors mediated both associations.
- In the context of scarcely-resourced schools, the Kind Campus program provides an opportunity for schools to have exposure to important lessons without high implementation costs.

Limitations

- Data are cross-sectional therefore we cannot determine temporal precedence.
- Data originate from one school district in the Southwest.
- Students are the only reporters included in the current study.

Future directions

Areas of opportunity include 1) longitudinal work, measuring exposure and surveying the same cohort of students at multiple timepoints, and 2) including teachers’ perceptions of belonging and kindness on campus.

References


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