2020

Implementing Strategic Support for Sexual Minority Youth and Exploring the Effects of Social Connectedness

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YOUTH AND EXPLORING THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

Introduction to the Study

Youth spend most of their time in schools, which is one of the most influential environments (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). Students who feel connected to their learning environments are healthier, happier, and achieve higher academic success (Juvonen, 2006). In addition to providing a quality education, schools must ensure physical and emotional safety of all students (Andersen, Ronningen, & Lohre, 2019). Sexual minority youth (SMY) students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT+) often struggle with gender identity and sexual orientation (Craig, Austin, & McInroy, 2014). Negative effects can be remedied when students are granted agency to stand up for what they believe (Chong, Poteat, Yoshikawa, & Calzo, 2019). The inclusion of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) and Safe Zones have united students and facilitated cultural shifts in schools (Patterson, 2013). Positive school climates include core values of respect, tolerance, and compassion, which are deeply rooted in GSAs and influence others "acting as a bridge" (Gundling, Hogan, & Cvitkovich, 2011). Gay-Straight Alliances build metaphorical bridges by connecting all students regardless of their beliefs and cultural differences. Teaching others the importance of respect for diverse populations and building cultural competence is essential in establishing inclusive, tolerant atmospheres (McCormick, Schmidt, & Clifton, 2015).

LGBT+ individuals encounter daily challenges (Munoz-Plaza, Quinn, & Rounds, 2002). Students who are ostracized become withdrawn, isolate themselves, and may partake in self-harming behaviors (Ganguly & Mathur, 2016). Conversely, when individuals are supported, they are more likely to become successful adults (Needham & Austin, 2010). Schools can counteract prejudices associated with SMY by forming Gay-Straight Alliances and Safe Zones (Gonzalez, 2017). These organizations promote acceptance and inclusion of all students regardless of age, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, or gender identity (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russell, 2011). Subsequently, when school systems cultivate the social-emotional development of students by providing secure learning environments, their self-worth grows (Chong et al., 2019).

The presence of GSAs in schools may offer opportunities for students to bond with their environments and feel a sense of belonging (Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015). GSAs focus on increasing safety measures and promoting growth and awareness (McCormick, Schmidt, & Clifton, 2015). GSAs make schools safer

for all students (Toomey et al., 2011). Students at schools with GSAs manifest fewer health and academic issues (Poteat et al., 2015). The inclusive curriculum that addresses LGBT+ topics and tolerance creates safe, secure environments in which students are less likely to be bullied (Snapp, McGuire, Sinclair, Gabrion, & Russell, 2015).

Theoretical Foundation

Resilience results from intricate exchanges between one's personal characteristics; it is the manipulation of external conditions and internal devices (Luther, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). A sound resiliency framework reflects being successful when encountering difficulties and compensating when facing challenges (Masten, 2001).

Resiliency can be learned; it is fluid, complicated, and can take on many different forms throughout an individual's development history (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Another viewpoint of resiliency highlights the role of acceptance and integration of self within the SMY community and mainstream culture (Herrick, Egan, Coulter, Friedman, & Stall, 2014). A first step in battling the marginalization associated with identifying as SMY is to accept one's own status and integrate the sexual identity into self-concept (Herrick et al., 2014). SMYs who exhibit pride in their newfound identities adjust easier and share in this transition with others (Herrick et al., 2013). Helping SMY accept and integrate within a community continues to promote resiliency.

Review of the Literature

Academic, social, emotional, and personal development take place in schools (Anderman, 2002; Maddox & Prinz, 2003; Ravens-Sieberer, Freeman, Kokonyei, Thomas, & Erhart, 2009). SMYs are a vulnerable population of students who struggle with their identities, especially in the younger phases of their lives; they have difficulty sorting out their feelings and endure considerable amounts of stress (Craig, Austin, & McInroy, 2014. By providing havens for students to learn, we grant them agency to grow and develop into the leaders of tomorrow.

High school presents many challenges: academic performance, balancing extracurricular activities, relationships with peers, and, sometimes, financial pressures. The perception of students who identify as SMY often report negative feelings and associations of discontent regarding school climate (Yost & Gilmore, 2011). Unsupportive environments and a lack of mutual respect can be detrimental for LGBT+ students. Many students have difficulties from the moment they self-admit and realize their sexual/gender identity differs from the

norm; this is where schools and support systems play integral roles (Jackson, 2017).

Tolerance of SMYs creates a socially acceptable platform and provides safe spaces for divulging their identities. (Aora, Kelly, & Goldstein, 2016). Supportive schools ensure physical and emotional safety, fostering student achievement as their generation transitions into professional roles (Lozier & Beckman, 2012). Teaching resilience skills and helping students accept their identities are core interventions (Hobaica, Alman, Jackowich, & Kwon, 2018).

Social and school connectedness. Social connectedness is the intertwining of one's understanding of the social world with another (Akyel & Tolukan, 2019). People who are in tune with their social connectedness are friendly, outgoing, and active participants in society (Lee & Robbins, 1995). Social support facilitates connectedness (Henderson & Greene, 2014) and promotes a sense of belonging in cases where individuals positively interact exchanges (Lerner et al., 2005). Life experiences, family relationships, and peer exchanges connect individuals to their surroundings (Kurtylmaz, 2011). Social connectedness assists people in adjusting to new conditions and effectively communicating with others (Satici, 2016).

School connectedness is regarded as a crucial "protective factor" for combatting unhealthy lifestyles (Chung-Do, Goebert, Hamagani, Chang, & Hishinuma, 2015). Riekie, Aldridge, and Afari (2017) maintain that social connectedness is strongly related to both resilience and overall well-being; both should be regarded as guaranteeing students to help them find their fit in schools. For students to connect with schools, these criteria must be guaranteed: physical and emotional safety, high academic standards, and positive relationships (Andersen et al., 2019). It is critical that students are feeling safe (emotional level), engaging in meaningful ways with others (behavior level), and exhibiting positive perceptions (cognitive level) about schools (Khawaja, Allan, & Schweitzer, 2018). If the SMYs have not connected socially and do not feel safe, they will not be productive in schools (Gustafsson et al., 2010). Loneliness has been linked to high-risk behaviors that sometimes lead to high mortality rates (Hawkley & Cacioppo, 2010).

Staff members are vital to the cultivation of school connectedness (Biag, 2016). Suicide attempts were less frequent when LGBT+ youth found teachers in whom to confide (Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006). Students must know that teachers care about their education and about them as people (Blum, 2005). Teachers are primary factors determining if students feel aligned with the school settings ("Wingspread Declaration," 2004). Henderson and Guy (2017) couple social connectedness with teacher perception and enhanced student-teacher relationships. By providing a framework of support, creating camaraderie among

their peers, and gently guiding students, they can be reassured of their futures (Major et al., 2001).

Training and support for school personnel. School climate is associated with the personality of the school, pride displayed among members, mutual respect for all, and positive interactions of stakeholders (Biegel & Kuehl, 2010). A vital connection exists between professional development relating to sexual diversity in a school settings and positive school climate (Goodenow et al., 2006). Research indicates that SMYs are more likely to be mentored and supported by school staff members than by their family members (Johnson & Gastic, 2015). This places a huge responsibility on schools and magnifies the roles they play in assisting with the social-emotional development of students. School adults may critically impact students' lives and contribute to their overall well-being. Training increases levels of sensitivity when dealing with sexual minority issues, infusing curricula that expose students and staff to LGBT+ topics then catalyzes a paradigm shift to construct inclusive, tolerant school environments (Goodenow et al., 2006).

Summary

Schools should not only facilitate the attainment of knowledge, but also play pivotal roles in the social development of students (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Schools are forced to evolve and adapt to the rapidly shifting societal views about sexuality (Murphy, 2015). Equal protection and allowing silenced groups a platform to be heard protects not only those group members but an entire society (Tierney, 1992). An obligation to support the SMY is required by all individuals who work with these students to discover ways of meeting their unique needs and finding opportunities to interact with them apart from classroom settings (Kaufman & Gabler, 2004). Research supports the cultivation of academic, emotional, and social development of LGBT+ students; with greater tolerance and acceptance comes less discrimination of SMY (Murphy, 2015). Through purposeful and intentional planning, a positive school climate can be achieved, producing overall increased school improvement (Daly, 2008). Students are the most precious and vulnerable resources of schools (Kosciw et al., 2015). Protecting students and committing to their educational success is a multifaceted endeavor to which teachers commit as their lifelong missions (Kolbert et al., 2015).

Research Design

The researcher relied on a quantitative preexperimental, one-group pretest-postest design (Campbell, Stanley, & Gage, 1963; Creswell, 2003; Spector, 1981). The

researchers were unable to implement random assignment of participants to treatments. The researchers created and implemented levels of independent variables in order to achieve control and observe the variable of interest, social connectedness, to study the possible impact of social connectedness and its effects on the SMYs and overall campus culture. Newman, McNeil, and Fraas (2004) discussed the importance of internal validity when a design includes a test hypothesis in conjunction with a test of an alternative hypothesis. Comparisons within naturally occurring groups of students were examined based on school-assigned classroom teachers. ScholarCentric created the data collection instrument (described later in the study). The tool can be further used as an indicator to determine the risk of potential dropouts. The first school-wide testing dates were coded as each student's pretest. After all initial ScolarCentric data was collected, a GSA was established, Safe Zones were created, and a resiliency curriculum was implemented. A posttest was conducted after students had completed the resiliency curriculum. to determine if an increase in social connectedness mean was observed. GSA students served as the naturally occurring control group for data analysis.

Research Questions

By creating an inclusive environment—meaning one that has established a Gay-Straight Alliance, creating Safe Zones for students, and enriching the curriculum with resiliency lessons—the overall social connectedness mean scores would likely increase, resulting in happier and more productive students. The main research question for this study was: How does social connectedness improve in a Texas high school that creates an inclusive learning environment?

> S1. How does motivation and enjoyment of school improve in an inclusive learning environment?
> S2. How does social stress related to peers improve in an inclusive learning environment?
> S3. How does family support improve in an inclusive learning environment?
> S4. How does classroom confidence improve in an inclusive learning environment?

Setting

The setting for this study was a rural Texas public high school. The high school contained 9th-12th graders and represented a diverse population of learners. The composition of the student body included students identified as gifted and talented, special education, English-learners, at-risk, and an emergent population

of SMYs. The campus data indicates approximately 67% of the students were economically disadvantaged. Over the course of the study, steps were taken to create an inclusive environment for all students.

Sample

Three grade-levels of students were the focus: ninth-grade, sophomores, and juniors. Credits earned determined in which groups the students were placed for data analysis. There were approximately 360 students tracked over the course of approximately 18 months. Not all students were pretested and posttested within the study's date range. Only students with pre- and post-test means were included in the analyses.

Instrumentation

The Academic Resiliency tool by ScholarCentric calculates a student's academic confidence, the extent they value education, connectedness, stress management, overall well-being and intrinsic motivation with reliability ranging from 0.80 – 0.94 (ScholarCentric, 2017).

Data Collection Procedures

Ninth-graders, sophomores, and juniors were pretested in early fall of the school year. No formal teacher training had taken place, resiliency lessons were not present and neither a Gay-Straight Alliance nor any Safe Zones existed; therefore, this entire population of students represented the sample for the quantitative study. Data was entered, collected, and disaggregated using the Academic Resiliency tool developed by ScholarCentric. Over the next several months, developing an inclusive environment was strategic and intentional. First, a Gay-Straight Alliance was formed holding bi-monthly meetings to discuss hot topics and curriculum-based lessons promoting tolerance of sexual minority youth. An outside community resource offered professional development for teachers. The training covered relevant LGBT+ topics and concluded with the declaration of Safe Zones. School-wide stickers stating "Safe Zone" were placed for students to see in general meeting areas. Teachers opted to display symbols (rainbow stickers promoting the support of diversity, safe, inclusive learning environments for all students) on their doors. Finally, resiliency lessons were infused into all subject areas. Different subjects delivered different aspects of the lessons, such as, parent/community involvement, goal setting, extending concepts, and self-reflection.

In January of the following school year, students were posttested. Analysis of data indicate the relationships between components of social connectedness and the effectiveness of an inclusive environment (GSA, Safe Zones, and resiliency curriculum).

Data Analysis

As described in the design section, researchers were unable to randomly assign participants to treatments. During the analysis stage, independent variables (and levels) were established as control factors to observe changes in connectedness. Spector (1981) was clear that:

> It is often taught that only experiments can establish causal relationships among variables and that observational or correlational studies can only establish that relationships exist without specifying causal direction. While in practice this is often true, one should be cautious assuming that experimental designs always establish causality and observational studies do not. (p. 23-24)

Campbell et al. (1963) detailed conditions under which preexperimental and quasi-experimental research studies could yield valid data on which to base causal conclusions, which included models for the analysis of variance applied "to the sampling of 'levels' of experimental factors (independent variables) for sampling finite populations" (p. 31). Minitab statistical software provided a fixed-effects (all teachers, all students were included in data collection and analyses) MANCOVA routine for "Teacher Connectedness" serving as the dependent variable. Two independent variables were coded: GSA (including SMY and allies) membership and teacher-specific classroom groups (coded as class#). Demographic variables (such as race, ethnicity, and gender were analyzed but had negligible effects. Researchers also drew conclusions on teacher effectiveness regarding delivery of resiliency lessons. Although there were differences, none were significant. All other ScholarCentric constructs (Sleep Problems, Eating Problems, Blue, Physiological Symptoms, Agitation, Financial Stress, Social Stress, Academic Stress, Peer Connections, Family Support, Enjoys School, Teacher Confidence, Social Confidence, and Classroom Confidence) were assessed as covariates. Significant factors were indicated with a p value of .05 or less. In summary, "Classroom Confidence," "Family Support," "Social Stress," and "Enjoys School" all had extremely significant effects on "Teacher Connections." "Financial Stress" and class # had insignificant effects statistically but may be of practical significance; those would have been significant at the .10 confidence level. Results also suggested the importance of social connectedness

for individuals to their environment regardless of identifying as SMY. The benefit of creating an inclusive environment (GSA, established Safe Zones, and implemented resiliency curriculum) was justified.

Table 1 MANCOVA results for significant individual factors and cofactors

	Statistics		
Variable	F	df	p
Motivation- Enjoys School	24.539	1	0.000
Stress- Social Stress	15.76	1	0.000
Connections- Family Support	14.419	1	0.000
Confidence- Classroom	7.8	1	0.005

One main question and four sub-questions were posed for the study. The first question examined how social connectedness improved at a Texas high school through the creation of an inclusive learning environment. The remaining four questions looked for statistical significance by comparing an inclusive learning environment and motivation/enjoyment of school, social stress with peers, family support and classroom confidence

Significant gains were seen in the following categories: Motivation/Enjoys School, Social Stress, Connections/Family Support, and Classroom Confidence.

Table 2 MANCOVA results for Enjoys school

Criterion	Statistic	F	p
Wilk's	0.94366	24.539	0.000
Lawley-Hotelling	0.05970	24.539	0.000
Pillai's	0.05634	24.539	0.000
Roy's	0.05970		

$s = 1 \quad m = 0.5 \qquad n = 194$

Enjoys school. The first sub-question and most significant F (1, 194) = 24.539, p = .000 was the relationship of students and their feelings toward enjoying school by creating an inclusive learning environment.

Research reveals that the mere structure of high schools in the United States increase the chance of students experiencing acceptance or rejection because schools represent a "closed system" limiting the choices of peers and consuming most of their time (Crosnoe, 2011). The feelings associated with confirming can be a factor in students enjoying their time at school. A strong relationship exists between fitting in at school and overall happiness. Falci and McNeely (2009) point out that students who are better assimilated into the school community show fewer signs of depression. While some studies indicate that smaller schools exude a more positive climate (Crosnoe, Johnson, & Elder, 2004),

other research leans toward a larger, more diverse school being better for SMYs (Goodenow et al., 2006).

Other clubs and organizations, in addition to the GSA, were established to generate a fun environment for students. Another factor that may have positively affected whether students enjoyed school was the construction of a new high school. Although students had not moved into the new building, they were able to observe progress. Much excitement and community attention stemmed from the new addition for the district.

Table 3 MANCOVA results for Social stress

Criterion	Statistic	F	p
Wilk's	0.96307	15.760	0.000
Lawley-Hotelling	0.03834	15.760	0.000
Pillai's	0.03693	15.760	0.000
Roy's	0.03834		

s = 1   m = 0.5   n = 194

Social stress. This construct was significant $F (1, 194) = 15.760$, $p = .000$ as a predictor. Adapting social settings for students can be difficult. The assessment measured student perspectives on how difficult it was to meet friends, talk with teachers about schoolwork, and handle relationships. Other questions related to how difficult it was for students to take risks in the classroom, to ask questions during class, and to evaluate how other students treated them.

A complex social ecology exists with the dynamic interactions of people within their environment (Martin-Storey, Cheadle, Skalamera, & Crosnoe, 2015). A vital process in the development in young adults stems from the effective maneuvering through social systems (Collins & Steinberg, 2007). The minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003) postulates that the stigma associated with identifying as a minority (like SMY) can prevent individuals from forming close bonds with their peers and within their social framework. Losing friends and other integration issues can be impactful stressors in the lives of SMY (Diamond & Lucas, 2004).

Other positive programming was implemented. "We Dine Together" was an extension of the Student Council that ensured no student ate alone. Creating social opportunities like the GSA or other groups provide students ways to interact with others based on commonalities and interest. A cohesive and supportive vibe is a result of allowing students to bond on extracurricular levels.

Table 4 MANCOVA results for Family support

Criterion	Statistic	F	p
Wilk's	0.96611	14.419	0.000
Lawley-Hotelling	0.03508	14.419	0.000
Pillai's	0.03389	14.419	0.000
Roy's	0.03508		

s = 1   m = 0.5 n = 194

Family support. Family support was strongly significant F (1, 194) = 14.419, p = .000. Students would reflect on questions pertaining to their family support levels. Questions included: Do I have a family member I can talk to, does my family recognize my abilities and skills, are there shared interests, am I close to at least one family member, am I comfortable with talking about issues with a family member, and is there someone I can count on in an emergency?

The interactions of many systems help define growth and development of individuals (Luke & Goodrich, 2015). The ecological systems theory (EST) posits that there are four levels, with the first being the "microsystem" which includes family and close loved ones (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Previously stated, coming out as SMY can be a very difficult process, one that requires the support of family and friends (Goodrich, 2009). Research proves that when SMY are supported and accepted by their family, victimization and harassment can be minimized (Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995). Family support aids in positive identity development of SMY (Goodrich, Selig, & Trahan, 2012) which serves as a protective factor, leading to the acquisition of coping skills and resiliency (Kosciw, Bartkiewicz, & Greytak, 2012).

Increased family involvement activities at school can ensure that students feel connected. A partnership must exist between the two entities: school and home. Educational opportunities and parent nights can keep the lines of communication open for all stakeholders. Parents can show their support to their students by attending their extracurricular activities and special events to honor their talent. The school can help by teaching student's ways to develop their coping skills and provide many lifelines of support (counselors, teachers, parents, and staff).

Table 5 MANCOVA results for Confidence in the Classroom

Criterion	Statistic	F	p
Wilk's	0.98136	7.808	0.005
Lawley-Hotelling	0.01900	7.808	0.005
Pillai's	0.01864	7.808	0.005
Roy's	0.01900		

s = 1   m = 0.5   n = 194

Confidence in the classroom. Classroom confidence was a significant F (1, 194) = 7.808, p = .005 factor. Students could assess their skills associated with taking good notes, writing a good English paper, understanding what they read, figuring out math problems, turning in assignments on time, attending class daily, using the library, using computers, and being up to date with school work.

Classroom confidence is rooted in positive relationships between students and teachers, those in which students feel cared about and are treated respectfully and fairly (Joyce, 2015). Better attendance and test scores are paralleled with increased student engagement (Klem & Connell, 2004). LaRusso, Romer, and Selman (2008) stressed the importance of student connection with their teachers and lower risky behaviors. According to Flaspohler, Elfstrom, Vanderzee, Sink, and Brichmeier (2009), encouraging school staff to serve as a resource for students results in a safe, positive school for all.

Clearly defined rules and expectations in the classroom help students with confidence. By creating a safe learning environment for students to take educational risks, a student can be assured and experience boosts in confidence. The campus's comprehensive library has friendly staff, possibly affecting the positive feelings associated with classroom confidence. All students were assigned Chromebooks.

No effects were observed for ethnicity, race, or gender. On the other hand, there was a slight difference between the mean scores of GSA depending on which teacher the students were assigned for resiliency lessons. The study's independent variables were the GSA and the teacher assigned classes. Researchers noted that this bears closer observation in future studies; randomization of assignment of teachers may be appropriate in some settings

Regression output helps us understand the regression to the mean phenomenon, which is the tendency of outliers becoming average over time, regardless of whatever else is happening in the study. There was a significant main effect for *treatment*, F (1, 145) = 5.43, p = .02, and a significant interaction (for covariates), F (2, 145) = 3.24, p = .04. Separate ANOVA tests on each independent variable and each covariate resulted in the regression output. Almost 13% of variance was attributed to regression of the mean in terms of observed differences in pre-and post-test means.

Practical Application of Findings

Previous research examined GSAs and Safe Zones independent of one another. No other study included all three of these components, to include resiliency lessons to help improve social connectedness. Based on our study, a plan is necessary for deliberate focus on social connectedness and creating inclusive learning environments.

Other contributing factors credited with nurturing social connectedness at school was the incorporation of Safe Zones and training for staff. Creating an awareness of the unique needs of students is imperative. The use of resiliency lessons assists in the development of coping skills.

Summary of Study

Summary of major findings. As the research questions are dissected and compared to the results of the data, some important conclusions can be drawn. The most significant components of the study were students enjoying school F (1, 194) = 24.539, p = .000; social stress with peers F (1, 194) = 15.76, p = .000; family support/connectedness F (1, 194) = 14.419, p = .000; and confidence in the classroom F (1, 194) = 7.18, p = .005. Cultivating a positive school climate can lead to systemic change by properly training school personnel on handling delicate situations (Gonzalez, 2017). Students then connect with the school entity, adapt to change, and are healthier individuals (Riekie et al., 2017). Students must feel safe and perceive positive relationships with their teachers (Andersen et al., 2019). When students know their teachers truly care about them (Blum, 2005) and aim to prepare them for the future, they attend school more regularly. In this study, students enjoyed coming to school when a GSA was part of their collective experience. Another contributing factor for students enjoying school was providing teacher training related to safe zones and ways to establish havens on campus. Incorporating diverse clubs and organizations creates an environment that fosters student-connections.

Other notable findings were statistically insignificant mean-gains in the areas of social stress with peers, family support, and classroom confidence. Lerner et al. (2005) states that social support heavily relies on individuals positively exchanging with one another. Effective communication and adjusting to new situations establish strong senses of social connectedness (Satici, 2016). Opening lines of communication between schools and homes forms a partnership that benefits students. Hosting extracurricular activities and special events that honor both students and parents is crucial.

Conclusions

Several conclusions can be drawn from this study. First, social connectedness can be fostered and grown with targeted attention to teaching resiliency skills, self-confidence, and tolerance. By focusing on lessons that directly relate to building skills of resilience and focusing on confidence, students can experience positive gains. Also, when teachers and students unite to form inclusive environments, all parties benefit. This requires training for both teachers and students to draw from support systems. When students connect with peers, teachers, and their environments, pride can increase, students enjoy attending school, grades improve, and dropout rates decline. This research indicates that using this data to assess students' needs and areas of growth is beneficial. Immediate intervention and support can be provided for struggling students.

Purposeful and intentional efforts ensured that the high school in this study achieved other outcomes leading to increased social connectedness. Students showed interest in starting a GSA which communicated an awareness of diversity. Policies and guidelines were followed to ensure proper instatement of the group. Teachers and staff participated in Safe Zone training and established their own on campus. Students over the course of a few years would take pre-and post-assessments to identify areas of personal strength and growth. With that prescriptive information, students set goals and participated in resiliency lessons delivered through all subjects. Students had several opportunities to share their talents by participating in a variety of groups and organizations, which led to boosting self-confidence.

Based on the data from this study, significant gains were made in the areas of students enjoying school, decreasing social stress with peers, forming positive connections with parents, and increased classroom confidence. Other schools may be able to adapt this model to obtain similar results. The ultimate goal was to create a safe, inclusive, tolerant learning space for all students, emphasizing the SMY population. Equally as important was establishing organizations for students outside of the academic setting to helps them bond and connect with one another.

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