

BUILDING CONNECTION: VitalVoices Pilot Results

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Introduction

According to the U.S. Surgeon General, the United States is facing a loneliness epidemic. Over the past several decades, adolescents in particular have experienced increased rates of anxiety and despair.¹ Among them, young people from immigrant households, youth who are Global Majority, and students with disabilities have been especially vulnerable.² The U.S. Surgeon General suggests there is a solution: social connection.³

Schools are a natural place to provide front-line support for youth wellbeing. However, schools face numerous competing demands. It can be challenging to imagine how schools can encourage social connection, particularly across ideological, cultural, or linguistic differences. In short, social connection may be a simple concept, but it does not seem easy to deliver.

A new curriculum, VitalVoices, may be one, simple way that schools can support adolescent need for connection. Early pilot results with two 5th grade classrooms suggest that after only about two hours, students experienced a *statistically significant* improvement in their ability to get along with one another, including those whom they perceive as different from themselves. These early results, based on only 15% of the total curriculum, are promising.

VitalVoices Curriculum

VitalVoices promotes wellbeing for middle grade students by helping them meet the needs of connection, competency, and agency. The program is based on international wellbeing research and interviews with adolescents about what supports their wellbeing in school. The program has three components: Connection to Self, Connection to Others, and Connection to Community. Connection to Self includes self-awareness and self-regulation activities, as well as modules that help students learn more about their values and strengths. Connection to Others helps students develop relational assets like generosity, while strengthening communication and conflict resolution skills. Connection to Community helps students learn about the larger community and their place within it.

Teachers deliver most of the curriculum through communication-based modules in which students work through prompts and activities with one another. Students gradually adopt more control over the curriculum, so they develop agency and competency. The curriculum is designed to be inclusive of students with disabilities and multilingual learners, and to help promote understanding in schools that serve diverse populations. See this [overview](#) for more information.

Data Collection

Two fifth grade classrooms administered nine VitalVoices modules from March 25 through May 22 of 2024. Modules included activities to build self-awareness, social awareness, and communication skills. Due to time constraints, we did not offer professional development. We recommend teacher training and expect it will improve results.

Forty-one students completed both pre- and post-surveys. We used the [EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-being](#) to measure connectedness, the Mindsets, Essential Skills, and Habits (MESH) survey to measure social awareness, and the [National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments](#) survey to measure teacher-student relationships and sense of belonging.

Student Survey Findings

After completing the program, students were better able to get along with students who were different from themselves, were more capable of disagreeing without starting an argument, and experienced greater social acceptance (figure 1).

Two survey items, which were about how well students perceived they got along with others, had statistically significant improvements ($p < .05$).⁴ These items were: "I get along well with students who are different from me" and "Students at this school get along with each other."

PILOT SCHOOL DETAIL

SCHOOL TYPE

Public
K-8

STUDENT ENROLLMENT

485

LOW-INCOME

73%

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

16%

DEMOGRAPHICS

ASIAN STUDENTS

4%

BLACK STUDENTS

8%

HISPANIC STUDENTS

17%

WHITE STUDENTS

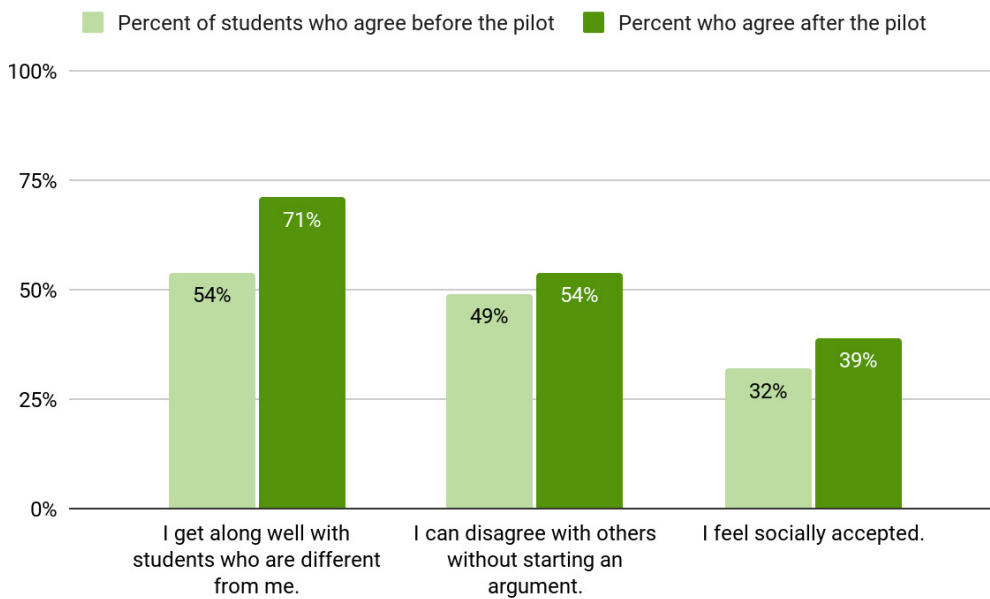
60%

STUDENTS OF TWO OR MORE RACES

11%

SOURCE: Washington Office
of Superintendent of Public
Instruction, 2023-24

FIGURE 1. Student perceptions about getting along with their peers improved following nine modules of VitalVoices



Student and Teacher Comments

In open response survey items, the majority of students said that what they liked about the program was the opportunity to **connect with classmates**. For example, one student said, “[I liked] being able to learn more about my friends,” while another said they liked, “learning to talk to people and understand the situation further to make a stronger bond.” Six students said they **enjoyed learning** communication and self-awareness skills. For example, one student said, “I like having time in the day and learning more about communication skills.”

Teachers completed open response surveys and participated in a focus group. All three participating teachers said they were satisfied with the curriculum. One said she appreciated **the progression**, which starts with the unit Connection to Self: “Starting by being introspective and then looking out is a neat progression.” Teachers also said the curriculum was **easy-to-follow**: “It felt like the lessons were easily digestible while still delivering really important social-emotional skills for them.”

Teachers said they liked the experiential nature of the curriculum because it gave students plenty of time to **practice new skills**: “I liked the ones that gave scholars opportunities to practice using conversation/listening skills with each other. What worked was they had an opportunity to engage in the practice in a safe space with their peers.” After just nine modules, teachers said **students had started applying** what they learned: “One thing that was really neat was hearing them start to use some of those strategies just subconsciously because it was something that they had practiced.”

Conclusion

The VitalVoices curriculum, which includes introspective and communicative aspects, improved student awareness of the relationships they have with classroom peers with distinctly positive results. Results suggest that VitalVoices can help students find a greater sense of belonging and a greater appreciation of their peers.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory (2021). Protecting youth mental health. *The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>
- 2 Williams, E. & Drake, P. (2022). Headed back to school: A look at the ongoing effects of COVID-19 on children's health and well-being. KFF. <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/issue-brief/headed-back-to-school-a-look-at-the-ongoing-effects-of-covid-19-on-childrens-health-and-well-being>
- 3 The U.S. Surgeon's General (2023) Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community. *The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services*. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>
- 4 The Shapiro-Wilk normality test found that the survey data were not normally distributed. Therefore, we used the Wilcoxon signed rank test, a non-parametric alternative to the paired t-test. We only included in our analysis the 41 students who took both a pre- and post-survey. The p-value for "I get along well with students who are different from me" was 0.03, and it was 0.02 for "students at this school get along with each other." No other survey results were statistically significant at $p < .05$. The full survey is here.



About Fig Education Lab

Fig Education Lab is the sponsoring organization for VitalVoices. We are committed to a more equitable education system that embraces students' diverse backgrounds and closes learning and income gaps. Our mission is to reimagine education by collaboratively designing, implementing, and researching innovative programs that help all learners lead lives that are personally fulfilling, socially connected, and economically secure. We believe the best and most enduring ideas in education come from combining practitioner wisdom, rigorous research, and community assets.