Character Strengths in the Classroom:

Effectiveness of a Character Strength Curriculum in Reducing Disciplinary Incidents

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Outline

- Background
- Rationale and Hypotheses
- Method
  - Participants
  - Measures
  - Procedure
- Results
- Discussion
  - Strengths and Limitations
  - Future Directions

Background

School-aged Mental and Behavioral Health

- 49.5% of US children and adolescents will meet criteria for a DSM-IV diagnosis by age 18
  - 50% of those affected experience onset prior to age 15

- Children with mental health issues tend to also present with behavioral + academic issues

- Positive psychology takes a proactive, rather than reactive, approach to disease prevention & mental health promotion
  - Aligned with school mental health and multi-tiered systems of support

(Csizszentmihalyi, 2000; Hopkins, 2014; Kessler et al., 2005; Merikangas et al., 2010; Seligman & Vostasnis et al., 2013)

Positive Psychology

- Individuals desire and strive to lead meaningful lives

- Primary focus is well-being, which is comprised of five pillars
  - PERMA
    - Positive emotion (i.e., happiness and life satisfaction)
    - Engagement
    - Relationships
    - Meaning and purpose
    - Accomplishment

- Character strengths underlie each pillar

(Seligman, 2002; Seligman, 2011)

VIA Character Strengths

- Character encompasses morally-valued facets of personality, or strengths

- VIA Classification of Character Strengths
  - 24 positive traits possessed by everyone
  - Six overarching virtue categories

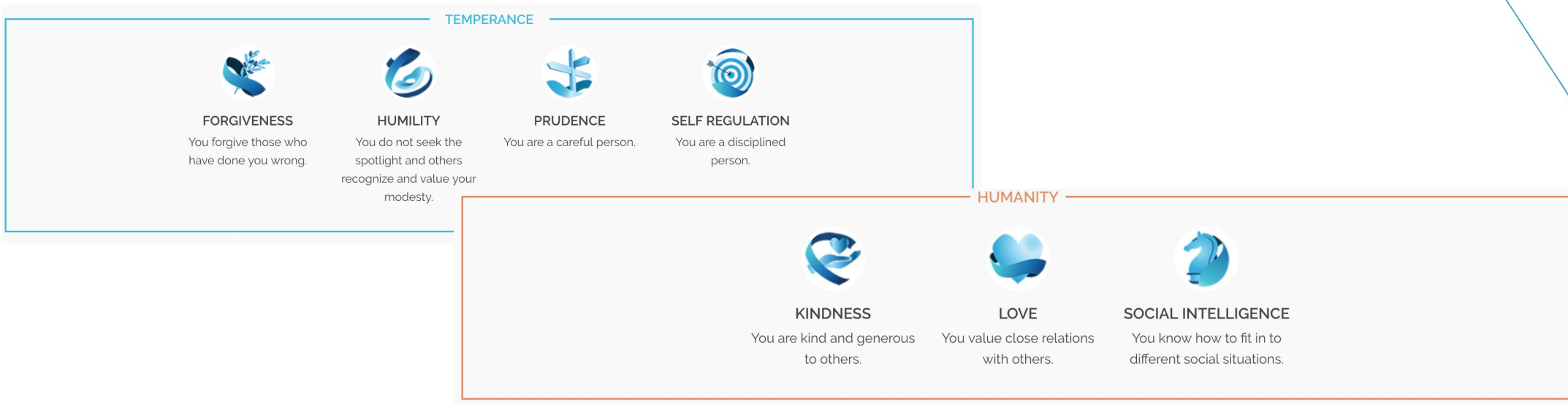(Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Peterson & Seligman, 2004)

thriving
learning
communities

TRANSCENDENCE	APPRECIATION OF BEAUTY & EXCELLENCE	GRATITUDE	HOPE	HUMOR	SENSE OF MEANING
	* Awe * Wonder * Shows admiration	* Thankful * Feels blessed * Shows appreciation	* Positive outlook * Expects the best * Excited about the future	* Playful * Brings smiles to others * Sees the funny side of things	* Sense of purpose * Strong beliefs * Searches for meaning

COURAGE	BRAVERY		PERSEVERANCE	HONESTY	ZEST
	* Valor * Accepts challenge * Speaks up for what's right		* Hard worker * Completes tasks * Overcomes barriers	* Truthful * Genuine * Owns up to his/her own behavior	* Active * Enthused * Energized

JUSTICE	TEAMWORK			FAIRNESS	LEADERSHIP
	* Loyal * Team player * Responsible to group			* Cares about what's right * Treats others fairly * Respects others	* Encourages others * Organizes groups * Sets good example

HUMANITY	LOVE	SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE			KINDNESS
	* Loving * Compassionate * Relationships are important	* Strong relationships * Understands others' thoughts and emotions			* Nice * Caring * Generous

TEMPERANCE	FORGIVENESS	HUMILITY	PRUDENCE		SELF-CONTROL
	* Doesn't hold grudges * Gives second chances * Accepts others' faults	* Humble * Focuses on others * Lets actions speak for themselves	* Careful * Practical * Plans ahead		* Disciplined * Manages feelings and actions

WISDOM	CREATIVITY	CURIOSITY	JUDGMENT	LOVE OF LEARNING	PERSPECTIVE
	* Clever * Inventive * Comes up with unique ideas	* Open to new ideas * Explores * Asks questions	* Critical thinker * Open-minded * Thinks things through	* Enjoys building knowledge & skills * Looks for new things to learn	* Wise * Gives good advice * Sees the big picture

Character Strengths and Youth Outcomes

- Various strengths linked to an array of positive outcomes

- Relationship between character strengths and academic success mediated by promotion of positive classroom behavior

- Temperance and humanity strengths have been identified as being related to classroom behavior

TEMPERANCE

FORGIVENESS
You forgive those who have done you wrong.

HUMILITY
You do not seek the spotlight and others recognize and value your modesty.

PRUDENCE
You are a careful person.

SELF REGULATION
You are a disciplined person.

HUMANITY

KINDNESS
You are kind and generous to others.

LOVE
You value close relations with others.

SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE
You know how to fit in to different social situations.

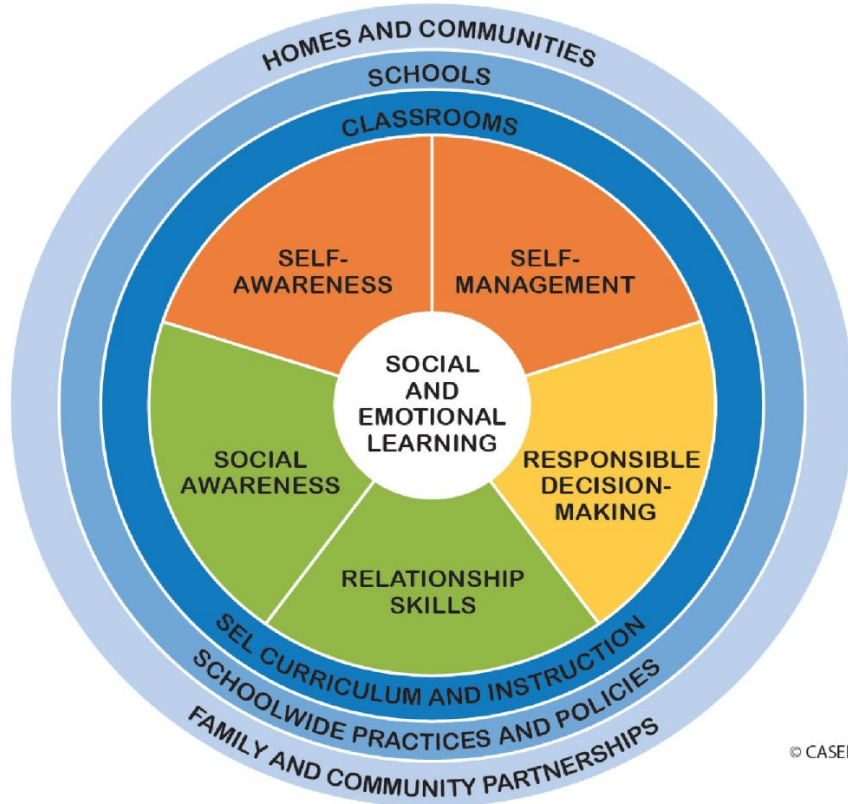(Shoshani & Slone, 2012; Wagner & Ruch, 2015; Weber & Ruch, 2012)

Positive Education

- Positive education is the application of positive psychology into the classroom/school setting

- Positive education programs often incorporate character strengths to promote student well-being
  - Identification, education, and everyday utilization of strengths

- Classroom teaching of academic *and* character strength curricula can maximize holistic student success
  - Research suggests positive outcomes
  - Limitations in sample size and diversity, study design, replication

(Gillham et al., 2007; Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001; Madden, Green, & Grant, 2011; Seligman et al., 2009; Vella-Brodrick, Rickard, Hattie, Cross, & Chin, 2015)

Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

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- Mission of positive education is aligned with SEL

  - Schools are epicenter of student success and should be holistic

  - Character strengths have become a popular framework for enhancing SEL

- Need to explore specific relationships between demographic variables and individual outcomes

(Benninga et al., 2003; Benson, 2006; Berkowitz, 2002; Berkowitz & Bier, 2004; Cohen, 2006; Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2005; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Payton et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2002)

Mayerson Academy

- Mission of successful learning and educational development
  - Focus on schools, organizations, and neighborhoods

- Strive to encourage strengths in people, specifically character strengths, in order to improve students' educational experiences
  - Increased motivation, classroom engagement, academic performance, and appropriate conduct

- They provide programs (e.g. TLC), professional development, and consultation

(https://www.mayersonacademy.org/)

Thriving Learning Communities (TLC)

- Implemented for five years in 90+ schools in US and 5 international

- Three core features: SEL, character strengths, digital tools

- *Thriving Classroom*
  - Uses VIA character strengths as language and framework for teaching, promoting, and practicing SEL
  - Cover four of five SEL competencies; one per unit
  - Four relevant character strengths highlighter per unit
  - Two versions for 5/6 grade and 7/8 grade

(Bates-Krakoff, McGrath, Graves, & Ochs, 2017)

24 CHARACTER STRENGTHS
13 highlighted for 5/6 grades

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TRANSCENDENCE	APPRECIATION OF BEAUTY & EXCELLENCE	GRATITUDE	HOPE	HUMOR	SENSE OF MEANING
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24 CHARACTER STRENGTHS
15 highlighted for 7/8 grades

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UNIT 2 | LEARNING MODULE TWO

DISCOVERING MY ABILITIES

📎 ACTIVITIES AT A GLANCE

THRIVING CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY	TIME	MATERIALS NEEDED	HAPPIFY
Flexing My Strengths	15 min	• Activity sheet: *Flexing My Strengths* – Appendix C	Set 1
If You Don't Give Up, You Can't Fail	15 min	• Video: *Derek Redmond* • *Character Strengths Definitions* – Appendix B	Set 3
Building My Perseverance Muscle	15 min	• Strengths journal • *Character Strengths Poster* – Perseverance	Set 3
Goal Setting by and for Kids	30 min	• Video (3:28): *A Pep Talk from Kid President to You* • *Character Strengths Definitions* – Appendix B • Strengths journal	Set 2

STUDENT ACTIVITIES IN *HAPPIFY* — Students choose one activity per set.

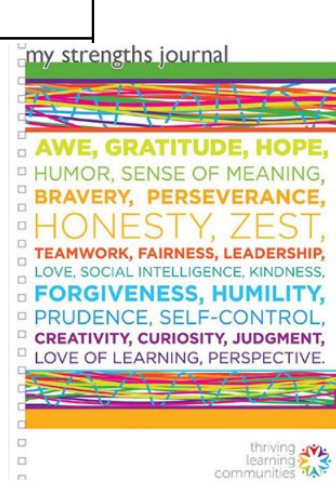| TRACK 2, PART 2: A FRESH LOOK AT MYSELF		FOCUS OF ACTIVITY
Set 1	a. Is School Gettin' to Ya? b. Stretching Our Strengths c. Problem Bashers	Using different strengths to manage difficult times and challenging problems.
Set 2	a. Picture This! b. Success with Goals	Opportunity to establish steps in setting and following through on goals.
Set 3	a. Using Perseverance b. Where Does It Work for You? c. Building the Perseverance Muscle	Exploration of ways to use the strength of perseverance.
Set 4	a. Post-it Strengths b. Be Your Own Hero c. Your Big Prouds	Opportunity to acknowledge and name successes.
Polls and Quizzes		Help students explore goal-setting, perseverance, and long-term friendships.

Name: _____

Flexing My Strengths

Select five strengths that you think would help you get over an upset. Then think how you could "flex" each strength to feel better. For each strength you select, finish the sentence:

When I use my _____, I am able to_____.

When I use my:	I am able to:
Example: When I use my <u>hope,</u>	Example: I am able to <u>believe that tomorrow will be better</u>.
When I use my _____,	I am able to_____.

Caught Ya! Cards

Use these cards whenever you notice your students using one of the 24 character strengths. Read a couple out loud to the class at the end of the school day. Everyone benefits from strengths-spotting!

Caught Ya!

I saw _____ using their strength

of _____

when _____

_____.

Way to go!

Caught Ya!

I saw _____ using their strength

of _____

when _____

_____.

Way to go!

CHARACTER STRENGTHS INSTRUCTIONAL 8×11 POSTERS

my strengths journal

AWE, GRATITUDE, HOPE, HUMOR, SENSE OF MEANING, BRAVERY, PERSEVERANCE, HONESTY, ZEST, TEAMWORK, FAIRNESS, LEADERSHIP, LOVE, SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE, KINDNESS, FORGIVENESS, HUMILITY, PRUDENCE, SELF-CONTROL, CREATIVITY, CURIOSITY, JUDGMENT, LOVE OF LEARNING, PERSPECTIVE.

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CHARACTER STRENGTHS JOURNAL

appreciation of beauty & excellence

* You notice and admire beauty in many places (e.g. nature, art, music).
* You notice and enjoy watching people who are talented or very skilled at what they do.

CHARACTER STRENGTHS CARD DECK

Rationale and Hypotheses

Rationale

- Current study improves upon previous studies of positive education programs

    - Larger, more diverse sample within the US
        - Increased generalizability

    - Explicit reporting of demographic data

    - Analysis of demographic differences in outcomes

Hypotheses

1

The average number of school-reported disciplinary incidents per student will significantly decrease across engagement in TLC as measured from:

- pre-TLC to end of year 2 (two time points)
- the start of year 1 to the end of year 2 (four time points)

Hypotheses

2

There will be no significant differences in change in disciplinary outcomes across demographic variables of student gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

Method

Participants (Full Study)

- Students (N = 2,141) attending seven schools during the

  '16 – '17 and '17 – '18 academic years
  - Fifth (n = 270), sixth (n = 429), seventh (n = 681), or eighth (n = 761) grades
  - 51.2% female, 48.8% male
  - 63.6% qualified for free/reduced lunch
  - 51.2% White, 29.9% Black, 9.5% Hispanic, 5.7% Biracial/Multicultural, 3.6% Asian/Hawaiian/PI

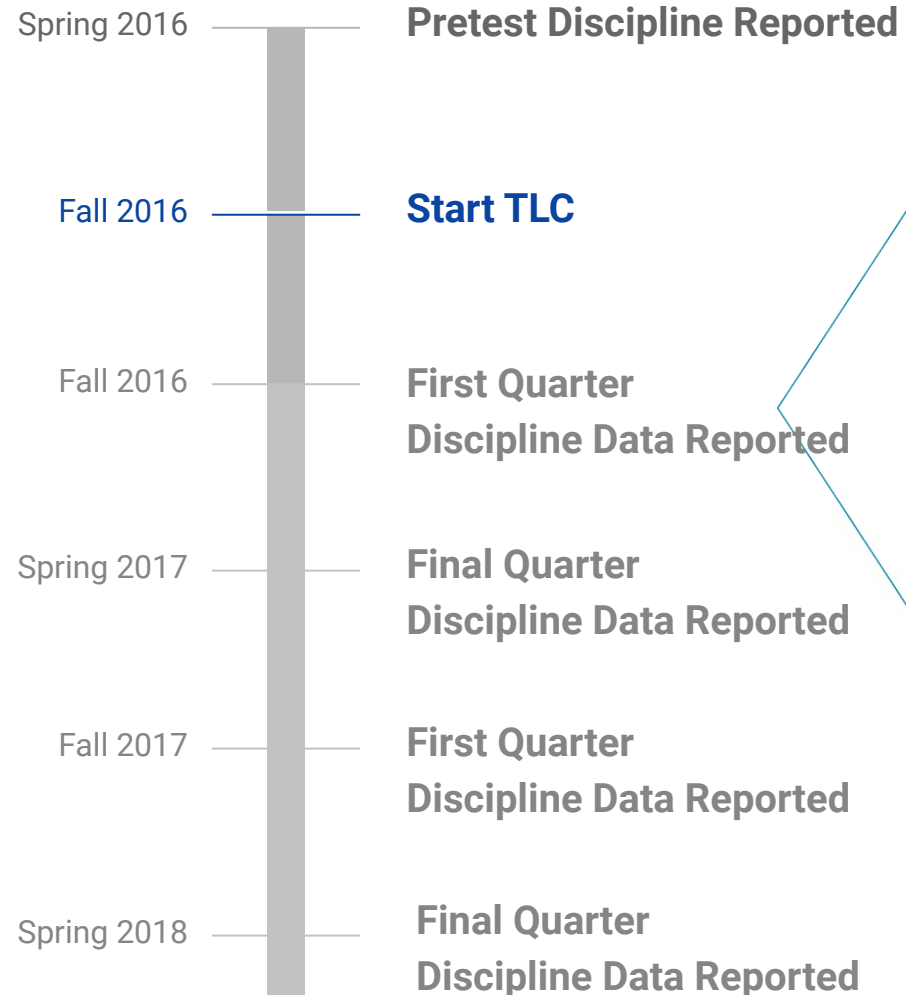- Public, private, parochial, and charter institutions

	Discipline (Two time points)	Discipline (Four time points)	Discipline Across Gender	Discipline Across SES	Discipline Across Race/Ethnicity
Total	551	650	455	657	451
Gender					
Male	178 (51.1%)	232 (48.2%)	236 (51.9)	236 (51.9%)	233 (51.7%)
Female	170 (48.9%)	216 (51.8%)	219 (48.1%)	219 (48.1%)	218 (48.3%)
SES					
No Free/Reduced Lunch	235 (42.6%)	260 (40.0%)	261 (57.4%)	261 (39.7%)	257 (57.0%)
Free/Reduced Lunch	316 (57.4%)	390 (60.0%)	194 (42.6%)	396 (60.3%)	194 (43.0%)
Race/Ethnicity					
White/Caucasian	279 (80.4%)	228 (51.4%)	229 (50.8%)	229 (50.8%)	229 (50.8%)
Black/African American	20 (5.8%)	152 (34.2%)	154 (34.1%)	154 (34.1%)	154 (34.1%)
Asian, Hawaiian, Pacific Islander	10 (2.9%)	9 (2.0%)	10 (2.2%)	10 (2.2%)	10 (2.2%)
Hispanic/Latino(a)	12 (3.5%)	36 (8.1%)	39 (8.6%)	39 (8.6%)	39 (8.6%)
Biracial/Multiracial	26 (7.5%)	19 (4.3%)	19 (4.2%)	19 (4.2%)	19 (4.2%)

Note. There were 204 students in the first column, 206 students in the second and fourth columns, and 4 students in the third column for whom we did not have gender and/or race/ethnicity data. Results are reflective of data from schools that provided student data relevant to each particular analysis.

Procedure

- Evaluation period of 2+ academic years
  - Baseline discipline data from spring before TLC
  - Discipline data collected at beginning and end of year 1 & 2 of TLC implementation

- Discipline data reported by schools to Mayerson Academy
  - # recorded discipline incidents per quarter

Spring 2016	**Pretest Discipline Reported**
Fall 2016	**Start TLC**
Fall 2016	**First Quarter Discipline Data Reported**
Spring 2017	**Final Quarter Discipline Data Reported**
Fall 2017	**First Quarter Discipline Data Reported**
Spring 2018	**Final Quarter Discipline Data Reported**

Results

Results

1

The average number of school-reported disciplinary incidents per student will significantly decrease across engagement in TLC.

- Across two time points (pre-TLC, end of year 2)
  - Mean number of disciplinary incidents per student pre-TLC (M = .45, SD = 1.59) was significantly greater than at the end of year 2 (M = .20, SD = .65), $t(550)$ = 3.86, p < .001.

- Across four time points (start of year 1, end of year 1, start of year 2, end of year 2)
  - Significant differences between all time points, $F(1, 649)$ = 50.12, p < .001, η_p^2 = .07
    - Significant *increases* in means from start of year 1 to end of year 1
    - Significant *decreases* in means form end of year 1 to start to year 2 and start of year 2 to end of year 2
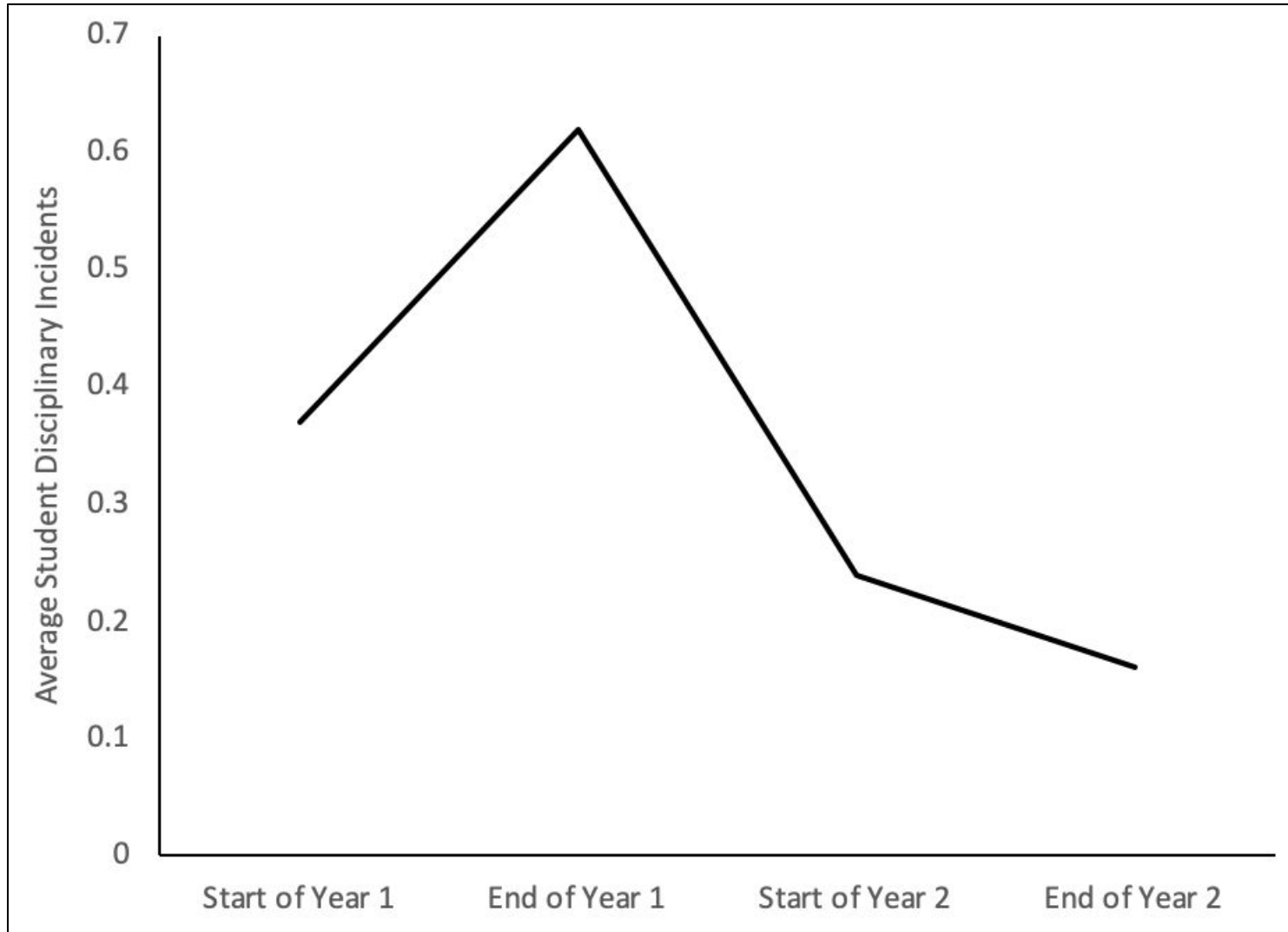
Results

Figure 1. Change in student disciplinary incidents across four time points

Results

2

There will be no significant differences in change in disciplinary outcomes across demographic variables of student gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

Gender

- Time main effect was significant, $F(1, 453) = 106.50$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .19$
- Gender main effect was significant, $F(1, 453) = 4.83$, $p = .03$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$
- Time x Gender interaction was not significant
- See Figure 2

Results

Figure 2. Change in student disciplinary incidents across time and gender. Error bars represent the 95% CI.

Results

2

There will be no significant differences in change in disciplinary outcomes across demographic variables of student gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

SES

- Time x SES interaction was significant, $F(1, 655) = 9.03$, $p = .003$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$

- Students of higher SES demonstrated greater decreases in discipline ($M = .63$, $SD = 1.28$) compared to lower SES peers ($M = .34$, $SD = 1.15$)
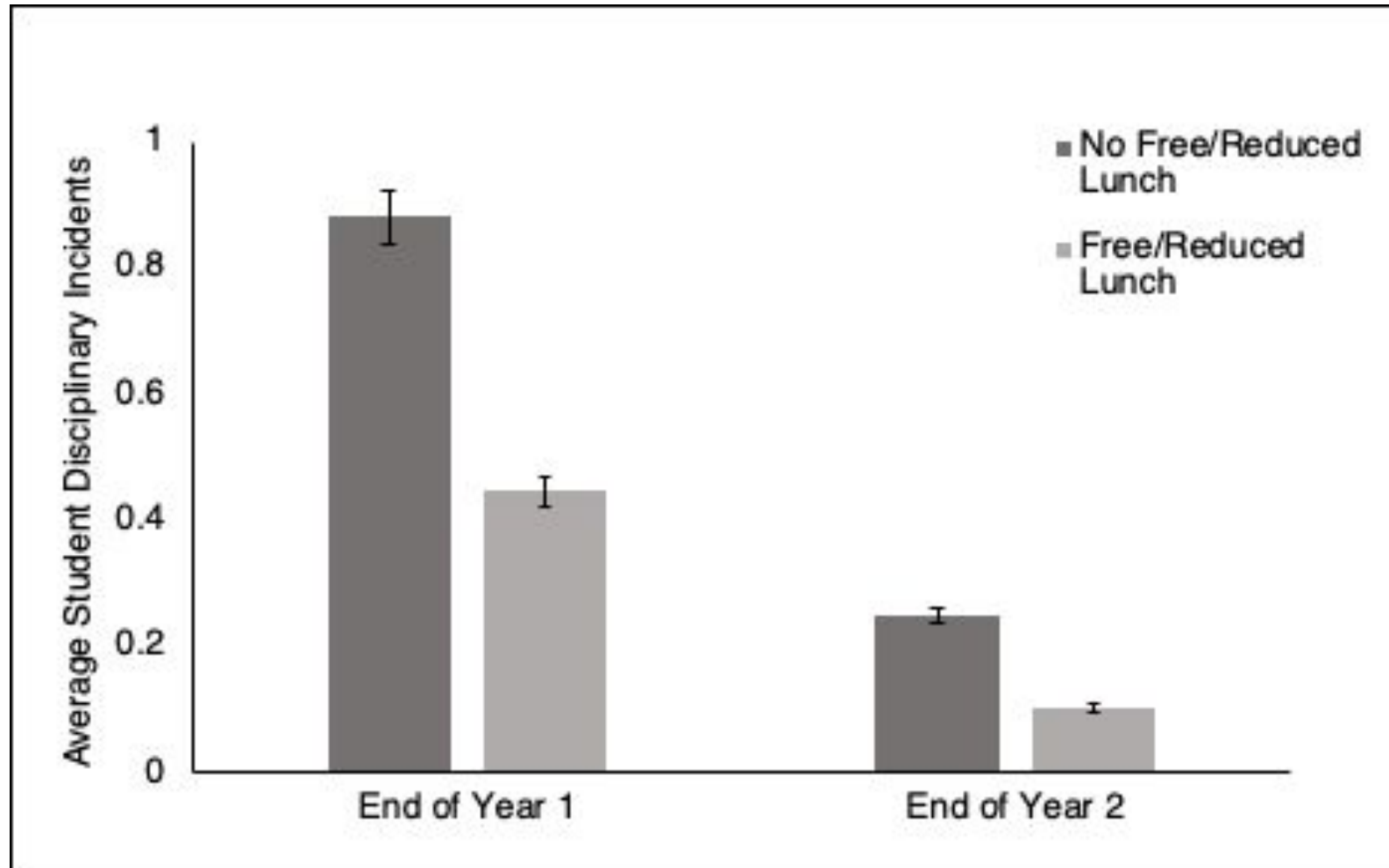
- See Figure 3

Results

Figure 3. Change in student disciplinary incidents across time and socioeconomic status. Error bars represent the 95% CI.

Results

There will be no significant differences in change in disciplinary outcomes across demographic variables of student gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

Race/Ethnicity

- Time x Race/Ethnicity interaction was significant, $F(4, 446) = 2.48$, $p = .04$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$.
- White/Caucasian-identifying students demonstrated significantly greater *decreases* compared to Hispanic ($MD = .52$, $p < .001$) and Asian/Hawaiian/PI-identifying ($MD = .42$, $p = .03$) students
- Black/African American-identifying students demonstrated significantly greater *decreases* compared to Hispanic-identifying ($MD = .39$, $p < .001$) students
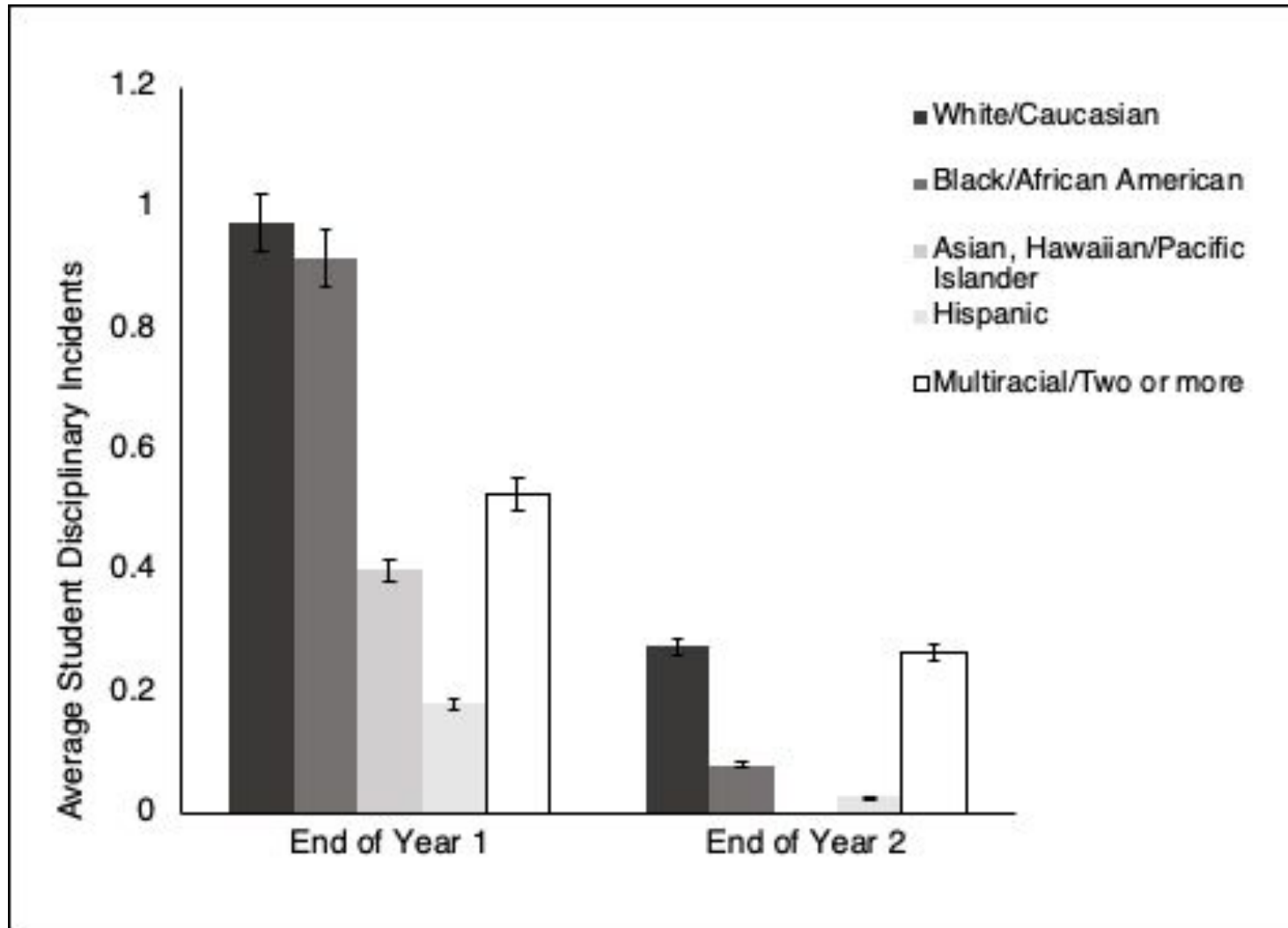- See Figure 4

Results

Figure 4. Change in student disciplinary incidents across time and race/ethnicity. Error bars represent the 95% CI.

Discussion

Discipline and Program Implementation

- Both analyses suggest a decrease in disciplinary incidents across the first two years of TLC implementation

- Initial increase from beginning to end of year 1 may suggest a normative trend and…
  - difficulty achieving program fidelity in initial stages
  - the importance of sustained implementation

- Need for supports around program fidelity, especially at start of program

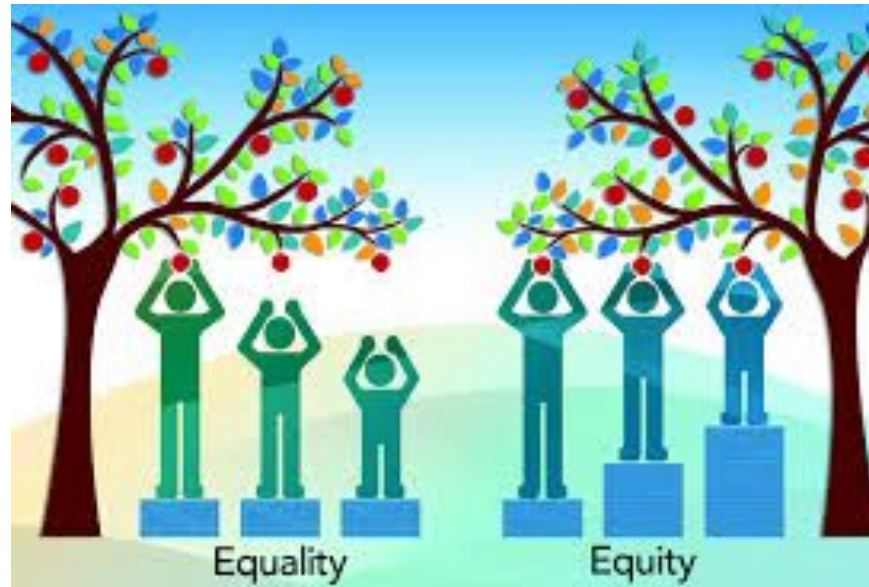- Longer implementation may maximize effectiveness

Discipline Across Demographics

- Current study presented contradictory results to previous research
  - May be due to differences in programming goals and measurement of outcome variables

- *Equality* vs. *equity*
  - Those groups with higher initial levels of discipline made the greatest gains

  - Ability to make greater impact where greater impact is needed

Saskatchewan Health Authority (2017)

Strengths & Limitations

- Strengths
  - Longitudinal design
  - Large and diverse sample

- Limitations
  - Archival data leading to…
    - Unequal cell sizes (i.e., gender, race/ethnicity, SES)
    - Reduced sample size and power due to student mobility and schools' not providing comprehensive data
  - Adult observation and reporting of behavior vs. actual behavior
  - Lack of control group (e.g., non-TLC students)

Future Directions

- Further examine fidelity and minimum length of implementation

- Targeted curricula to maximize decreases in discipline

- Reexamine the effectiveness of TLC and other positive education programs addressing the aforementioned limitations

- Utilize longitudinal and repeated measures designs to investigate character strengths as predictors of other student outcomes (e.g., GPA, attendance)

Thank you!

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