

The Nora Project 2019-2020 Impact Assessment



THE NORA PROJECT

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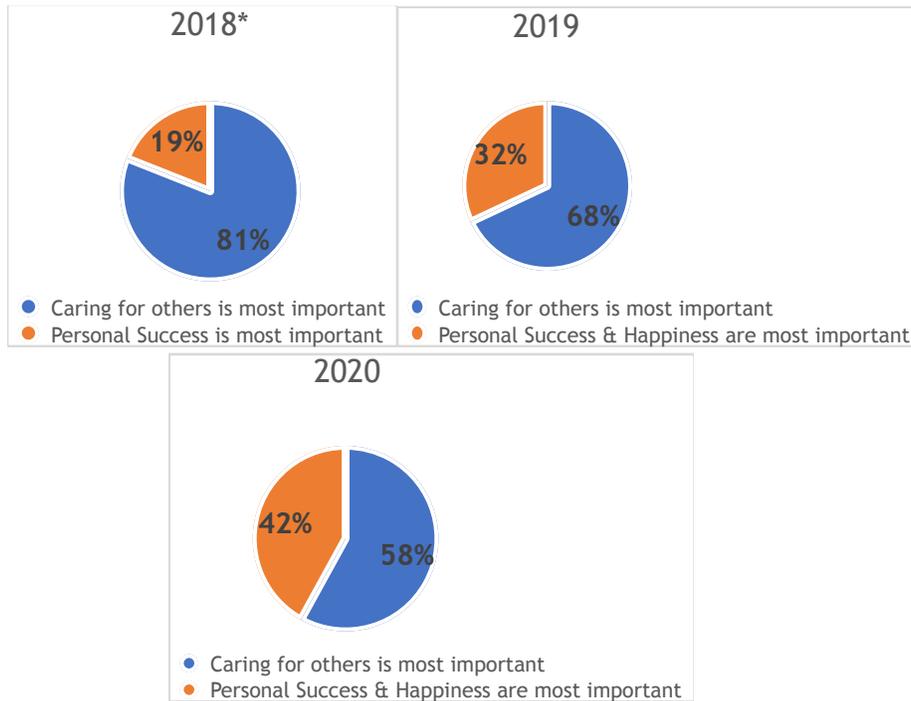
- Lauren Schrero, Executive Director

Forward: A Note from the Executive Director

In the years we've been tracking Nora Project data in classrooms, themes have begun to emerge. For example, we've noticed year-over-year that our students' cognitive, affective, and prosocial empathy scores improve across age, gender, race and other demographics.¹ We've also noticed that an overwhelming number of participants with and without disabilities report making new friends through program participation, and that they believe some of those friendships will last.² Notably, we've observed that through engagement in our Storyteller Project, students' primary concern has shifted from "me" to "we," as by-and-large they prioritize caring for others above their own personal success and happiness.³

As with so many things in 2020, this year was somewhat aberrant. While our Storyteller students continued to make empathy and inclusion gains and to report the formation of authentic, mixed-ability friendships, their shift from "me" to "we" thinking was less complete this year.

Students Reported What Was Most Important to Them 2018-2020



¹ Lewandowski, H. (2018) The Nora Project 2017-2018 Impact Assessment.

² Lewandowski, H. (2019) The Nora Project 2018-2019 Impact Assessment. Retrieved from: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b1b00ad45776eaff77c0d7b/t/5e0d61eaa343487b5caadb56/1577935379206/TNP.EvaluationReport.2018-19.FINALv2.pdf>

³ Ibid



Of course, the first question we asked ourselves in evaluating this data was, “Was there something fundamentally different about how the program was designed or implemented this year?” Given that overall empathy and inclusion impact data was still positive, the flagship program was basically unchanged, and outcomes were strongest in Storyteller classrooms piloting the new co-taught version of the project, we were unable, at first, to identify the cause of the shift. So we looked to the research for possible answers. As it turns out, increases in anxiety, overwhelm, and loneliness have an established relationship with decreases in empathy. This, of course makes sense--concern for self leaves less room for concern for others.⁴

The pandemic has caused all of us great concern, and children have been impacted as much or more than adults. Sudden school closures, mandatory quarantine, unfamiliar masking and social distancing rules, extended uncertainty and confusion about the state of the world and what and who are safe--these factors took a toll. As Nora Project Leadership Council member Dr. Michele Borba observed in her bestselling book *UnSelfie*, “As anxiety increases, empathy wanes: it’s hard to feel for others when you’re in ‘survival mode.’”⁵

This realization is important for several reasons. First, it indicates that this year’s data may be somewhat anomalous, representing a blip on the chart of overwhelmingly positive impact outcomes. More importantly, though, it indicates an urgent need for opportunities to engage students in learning that (1) helps manage their anxiety and overwhelm; and (2) gives them opportunities to connect with others and flex their empathy muscles, lest the decline in empathy and rise in narcissism, bullying, and depression that has plagued our children over the last several decades will continue. Indeed, these opportunities may be more important now than ever before, as in deciding what to teach with limited time and resources, we risk compounding students’ pandemic trauma by ignoring the learning they need most.

⁴ Jamil Zaki, *The War for Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World*. Crown (2019) at pp. 40-41 (citing John M. Darley and C. Daniel Batson, “From Jerusalem to Jericho: A Study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behavior,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 27, No. 1). (1973); John T. Cacioppo et al., “Reciprocal Influences Between Loneliness and Self-Centeredness,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 43, no. 2 (2007)).

⁵ Michele Borba, *UnSelfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World*, Touchstone (2016) at p. xvi (“As anxiety increases, empathy wanes: it’s hard to feel for others when you’re in ‘survival mode.’”).



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Executive Summary

The 2019-2020 school year was unlike any other since The Nora Project began. First, the organization debuted its “Lifecycle Program Suite,” including a brand-new program for preschoolers and early elementary students--the Primer Pack--as well as a middle school and high school program--the STEmpathy Club. In addition to launching these programs, The Nora Project tested a new, co-taught version of its flagship program, the Storyteller Project. A rigorous impact study design was developed to capture outcomes for all three programs. However, school closures in March due to the Covid-19 Pandemic made data collection difficult. No post-program student data was collected for the Primer Pack since our teachers were not able to observe their students in the classroom setting past March, and not all of the extracurricular STEmpathy Clubs were able to complete their work. While a great deal of post-project Storyteller data was captured, as the majority of classrooms were able to continue the work remotely, the results were difficult to analyze given the state of the world at the time the data was collected.

Therefore, it is the purpose of this report to highlight how the data collected suggests each of the programs is contributing to the dual goals of the organization: teaching empathy and sparking friendships between students and their peers with disabilities.

Key Findings: Primer

Research shows that children are more vulnerable to the emotional impact of traumatic events such as the Covid-19 pandemic⁶. Identifying and talking about emotions help children to understand their mental health and how to manage stress. Children in the Primer program not only learn about empathy, but also how to identify and talk about their emotions and manage conflict—a skill more critical now than ever.

Teachers in Primer classrooms reported observing their students being more empathic with their peers in the classroom and naming emotions and managing conflict. Specifically, findings show:

- 95% of Primer Pack teachers reported their students demonstrated a greater capacity for naming their emotions and managing conflict.
- 98% of Primer Pack teachers reported their students demonstrating an ability to show empathy towards their peers in the classroom.

Key Findings: Storyteller

Research suggests that especially during periods of isolation, such as the Covid-19 lockdown, a way to combat loneliness, depression, anxiety and an inward focus is to engage in ways to demonstrate care and concern for others⁷. The Storyteller Program is designed to do just that, bringing students together and allowing them to safely share their stories with one

⁶ The National Children’s Traumatic Stress Network. *How Early Childhood Trauma is Unique*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/early-childhood-trauma/effects>

⁷ Boudreau, E. (2020) Cultivating Empathy in the Coronavirus Crisis, [Blog post] Usable Knowledge, Harvard Graduate School of Education. Retrieved from: <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/20/03/cultivating-empathy-coronavirus-crisis>



another. It is therefore no surprise that students in The Nora Project Storyteller Program increased their empathy when comparing pre to post-program scores. Students increased

their cognitive empathy scores the most (a 7% increase), followed by affective empathy and then prosocial motivation.

While there were trends in positive empathy growth in both the original Storyteller program and the co-taught program, the co-taught program demonstrated better empathy outcomes. Program findings show:

- Students in the co-taught program scored higher on all domains on an empathy assessment at the beginning and end of the program compared to the original program.
- Almost all teachers (91%) shared some type of positive changes to their classroom culture as a result of participating in the Storyteller Project.
- Almost half of teachers (47%) reported students being more accepting of disabilities and differences.

Given the success of the co-taught pilot, The Nora Project is transitioning all Storyteller Programming to this inclusive model going forward.

Research has shown that higher scores on all domains of the Nora Project empathy assessment (EmQue-CA) correlate to lower levels of bullying behavior and higher levels of friendship quality⁸.

Trends seen in an individual classroom using the co-taught program bear this out, showing that when empathy scores increase, behavioral incidences decrease.

- Boys in the individual classroom made substantial gains in Affective Empathy, Cognitive Empathy and Prosocial Motivation.
- Girls also made substantial gains in Cognitive Empathy.
- The teacher for this classroom shared that there were zero disciplinary issues for the entire school year in this classroom—the only classroom that was true for in the entire K-8 building.

Key Findings: STEMpathy

Research and best practices in education show that giving children choice in their learning and ways to demonstrate their understanding, such as through student-driven, problem-based learning, helps children to feel in control of their learning and improves engagement and learning outcomes—especially at the middle school level⁹.

⁸ Overgaauw, S., Rieffe, C., Broekhof, E., Crone, E. A., & Güroğlu, B. (2017). Assessing Empathy across Childhood and Adolescence: Validation of the Empathy Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents (EmQue-CA). *Frontiers in psychology*, 8, 870.

⁹ Draiger, C. and Wilson, D. (2016) How to Give Children More Control Over their Learning, [Blog post] Education Week Teacher. Retrieved from: <https://www.edweek.org/tm/articles/2016/03/08/give-students-more-control-over-their-learning.html>



The STEMpathy Club is designed to give students control over their learning to make positive, inclusive changes to their environment and to optimize belonging for all.

- All teachers responded that STEMpathy Club members identified problems and generated solutions to create a more inclusive environment for people of all abilities either for the school community or the broader community in which the school is based.

Full detail on these findings is set forth below.

Program Background

A recent study from the University of Michigan found that empathy in teens has decreased by 40% over the last 30 years. A host of related studies show that as a consequence, bullying, cheating, narcissism, and feelings of isolation are on the rise among youth. There is a lack of formal education about disability as a form of human diversity, leaving children to come to their own conclusions about what is “normal.” Without developing empathy skills and best practices for creating inclusive communities for all, and without spending time in mixed-ability settings where differences are addressed openly and honestly, typically-developing students may develop misconceptions about their peers with disabilities, and students with disabilities may feel shame about their differences.

The Nora Project is an education-based nonprofit founded in 2016. Its mission is to teach empathy and spark friendships between students and their peers with disabilities. To that end, they developed a program suite spanning from pre-kindergarten to high school that advances what they call the Ability Inclusive Mindset, AIM, which is grounded in three core values and requires the cultivation of three key behaviors:

Values:

- (1) Accessible spaces are better spaces;
- (2) Inclusive activities are richer activities; and
- (3) All human lives have equal value.

Behaviors:

- (1) Approach relationships with empathy;
- (2) Plan thoughtfully and creatively to ensure access for all; and
- (3) Step outside your comfort zone to meet new people and try new things.

Three programs make up The Nora Project Program Suite: the Primer Program (for grades pre-kindergarten through third), the Storyteller Project (for fourth through eighth grade and high school), and the STEMpathy Club (for middle and high school students). Each of the three programs is designed for students of all abilities, with carefully differentiated lesson plans





including visual supports so all learners can access the entire curriculum. A dedicated

inclusion specialist is available on-demand to all program participants. Nora Project programs take a deep dive into the concepts of empathy and inclusion, teach about disability as a part of human diversity, and position the disability justice movement as a powerful political force for social change that benefits all. The programs connect what students are learning to the real world, offering them authentic opportunities to practice the skills they learn during direct instruction. The Program Suite is written by teachers, for teachers, and every participating classroom or club has a dedicated Nora Project program coach.

For the 2019-2020 school year, The Nora Project piloted a second version of their flagship program, The Storyteller Project. The new version of the program requires general education and special education teachers to co-teach it, and students work in mixed-ability groups to get to know each other's stories, develop friendships based on what they have in common, and create documentaries that share what the project has taught them about friendship. Two additional pilots were launched in the 2019-2020 school year, The Primer Pack and the STEMpathy Club. The Primer Pack program grew out of our participating schools' desire for Nora Project programming for younger students. The Primer Pack was designed to lay a foundation for the experiential learning students would do in the Storyteller Project. The STEMpathy Club was designed to provide alumni of the Storyteller Project with an extracurricular opportunity to continue to foster mixed-ability friendships and to extend the learning of the Storyteller Project, turning it into action.

For the 2020-2021 school year, the Storyteller Project will be completely co-taught. The Nora Project staff made this change for three reasons. They heard from a number of parents of students with disabilities that their children had questions for their general education peers and also wanted to be filmmakers and learn friendship skills as general education students do in the traditional Storyteller program. Best practices in teaching about inclusion show that combined, differentiated learning using principles of Universal Design ensures that the curriculum is accessible to all students. The action of "recruiting" students with disabilities for the traditional Storyteller Project placed The Nora Project staff in a position of deciding who was different enough to be eligible for participation. This realization further solidified the need for a co-taught program where all students are Nora Friends. Finally, as set forth below, impact data suggests that empathy outcomes and friendship impacts are better in the co-taught version of the program.



A view of the world that AIMS for ability diversity

ABILITY INCLUSIVE MINDSET

BELIEFS

1. Accessible spaces are better spaces
2. Inclusive activities are richer activities
3. All human lives have equal value



BEHAVIORS

1. Intentional and creative planning
2. Stepping outside your comfort zone
3. Practicing Empathy



THE NORA PROJECT



Evaluation Design and Methodology

A mixed-methods approach, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data, was taken to evaluate The Nora Project on participating students' knowledge, attitude, and behavior change, as well as acquisition of new skills. The evaluation presented here utilized survey data collected from students, teachers and parents of students with disabilities from August 2019 to June 2020 to inform the outcome evaluation. In order to explore areas of program impact and individual outcomes that the closed-question surveys did not cover, open-ended survey questions were utilized, and a qualitative study was conducted. The mixed-method study aimed to answer the following evaluation questions:

1. How have participating students' knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs changed because of their participation in The Nora Project?
2. How have these changes influenced student behaviors?
3. Has participation in The Nora Project improved classroom culture and the way students relate to and interact with one another?
4. How are the program materials, curricula, program training, and coaching on The Nora Project programs received by teachers?

Evaluation Measures and Program Participants

Survey Name	Respondent Type	Number of Respondents	Data Collection Timeframe
Storyteller Student Assessment	4-5 th Grade Students	1126 (pre), 515 (post)	8/19-6/20
STEMpathy Student Survey	5-6 th Grade Students	20	5/20-6/20
Teacher Surveys for each program	Teachers Implementing Primer, Storyteller, and/or STEMpathy	89	5/19-6/19

Descriptions of how the survey data were analyzed and findings are included in the sections that follow.

Data Analyses

As mentioned above, a mixed-methods approach was employed for this evaluation. Students and teachers completed surveys via Google Forms. The Evaluation Consultant downloaded and cleaned each dataset (i.e. checked for and removed any errors in data entry, such as



duplicate responses), and conducted descriptive analyses (e.g. frequencies, percentages, mean responses) of individual survey items pertinent to the evaluation questions.

The Evaluation Consultant developed an iterative process for coding open-ended survey questions from each of the four survey types, which resulted in two cycles of analyses: (1) pattern, and (2) conceptual model building. A categorized inventory of the open-ended survey questions' content was conducted and set the groundwork for thematic analysis. Pattern coding was used to organize thematic patterns that describe phenomena in the qualitative data that relate to specific evaluation questions. Following pattern coding, the Evaluation Consultant developed conceptual models by linking themes and emergent codes generated from the first cycle of analysis to create a higher-level understanding about the impact of The Nora Project.

Covid-19 Considerations

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic stay at home orders and subsequent school closings in mid-March for the rest of the school year, The Nora Project quickly adapted all its programs for remote learning. Staff developed dashboards of suggested lesson plans and provided coaching to all teachers who continued to teach The Nora Project programs during remote learning. Because of the need to adapt school curricula to online in a matter of weeks, some schools elected to not teach any of their social-emotional learning programs during remote learning.

The Evaluation Consultant, with the help of The Nora Project staff, adapted evaluation tools for remote learning. Changes included adapting the instructions for the evaluation tool to be read by parents instead of teachers and including audio files for the survey instructions and for each survey question to aid in student comprehension of the directions and questions asked. One tool, the Primer Student Impact Post Survey, which is completed by teachers, was not required for teachers to complete at the end of the school year.

Teachers were asked to rate individual students on empathy for this tool and was solely based on observation. Since teachers were not able to observe students' behavior directly at the end of the school year, this tool was omitted from the evaluation. Given that The Nora Project programs were not implemented as intended for the entire school year, the evaluation findings are being presented in as complete form as possible.



Evaluation Findings

Analyses of survey data from all students and teachers show that teaching empathy and inclusion directly affects students' knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about empathy, kindness, being an upstander, and advocating for an inclusive environment for all students. Teachers reported positive behavior change attributed to The Nora Project such as an increase in empathic behavior, capacity to manage one's emotions, and being more inclusive of all peers whether in the classroom or playing at recess. Teachers also reported a more positive classroom culture or school environment attributed to The Nora Project due to students using



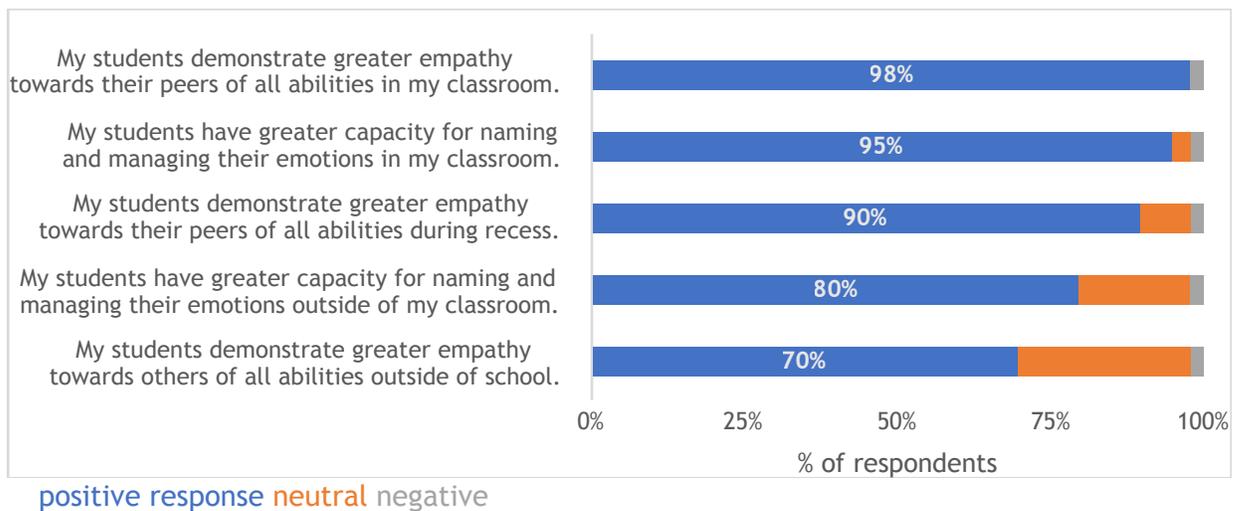
problem-solving skills to manage conflict, being kind to one another, and advocating for how the school environment could be more inclusive of all students of all abilities. The sections below cover evaluation findings from the 2019-20 school year organized by program.

Primer Pack

The Primer Pack is a one year classroom curricular program that teaches a variety of social/emotional learning concepts and skills including emotional literacy, emotional regulation, empathy, friendship, inclusion, disability awareness, how to ask respectful questions, and how to adapt activities so that all can participate. The materials are designed for students in preschool through third grade. Because the Primer Program is focused on young learners, the evaluation does not rely on individual student self-reports, but rather teacher observations of individual students. Due to the switch to remote learning before the end of the school year no post-program data collection on individual students' knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs was collected for this program.

Instead, Primer teachers were asked to rate to what extent they agreed with statements describing their students' behavior in the classroom, during recess and outside of the classroom as a result of participating in the program. Teachers overwhelmingly agreed that the Primer Program had a positive impact on students' ability to show empathy towards their peers in the classroom and at recess and a greater capacity for naming and managing their emotions in the classroom. The graph below shows teacher responses grouped by positive (agreed or strongly agreed), neutral (neither agreed or disagreed), or negative (disagreed or strongly disagreed).

Teachers overwhelmingly agreed that the Primer Program had a positive impact on their students.



Teachers also shared specific examples of how the Primer Program impacted their students in open-ended answers on the survey or via email to The Nora Project staff. Below are several quotes from teachers that describe examples of students applying what they learned from the program.

I noticed a huge improvement in their independence and problem-solving skills. Through the program, they learned the tools to feel capable of solving their own



problems and advocating for themselves. They also became much more aware of their feelings and how-to self-regulate.

I saw examples of vocabulary usage and the concepts they learned used in their classroom play and attached to completely different learning pieces. It showed me, they internalize the ideas and used them when appropriate.

Students have the vocabulary to express how they are feeling. I have heard students say, "I'm at a 10 and I need space to cool down." Students have been able to work through problems with their Peace-Talks (loved that lesson!). The lessons allowed students to open up and know each other better.

While this data is significant on its own, it is even more critical in light of current events. For example, research shows that children are more vulnerable to the emotional impact of traumatic events such as the Covid-19 pandemic¹⁰. Identifying and talking about emotions help children to understand their mental health and how to manage stress. Children in the Primer Program learned these important skills, helping them cope in this difficult time.

Story of Impact: Primer Program Students Show What It Means to be an Upstander

A Primer teacher shared this story via email to The Nora Project staff:

There was a child who was being bullied in first grade because he speaks with a stutter. There were a few kids being particularly mean and relentless and yesterday three of my students, all boys who have grown significantly during the course of these lessons, stood up for the 1st grader and told the kids to stop. Coming from cool 2nd graders, it really impacted them. They also responsibly reported the behavior. Then today the 3 boys all waited for the first grader outside his classroom so that they could escort him out to recess and play with him.

Primer teachers were asked “Have you noticed any changes in the culture of your classroom that you attribute to the Primer Pack?” Teacher responses were qualitatively analyzed and grouped by themes. Most teachers (55%) shared that they noted students worked out conflict by talking through their feelings. Another 25% of teachers shared that their students worked to create a positive environment with kindness and empathy being emphasized. The graph on pg.12 below shows teachers’ answers grouped by theme.

Indeed, these behaviors withstood school closures. One teacher shared their observation of their classroom culture in the quote below:

While the school year was cut short, I noticed that our classroom maintained a very close culture throughout our time together. As tensions arose through various problems throughout the year, we were able to refer back to the Nora Project lessons and students were able to work toward solving their own problems.

¹⁰ The National Children’s Traumatic Stress Network. *How Early Childhood Trauma is Unique*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/early-childhood-trauma/effects>



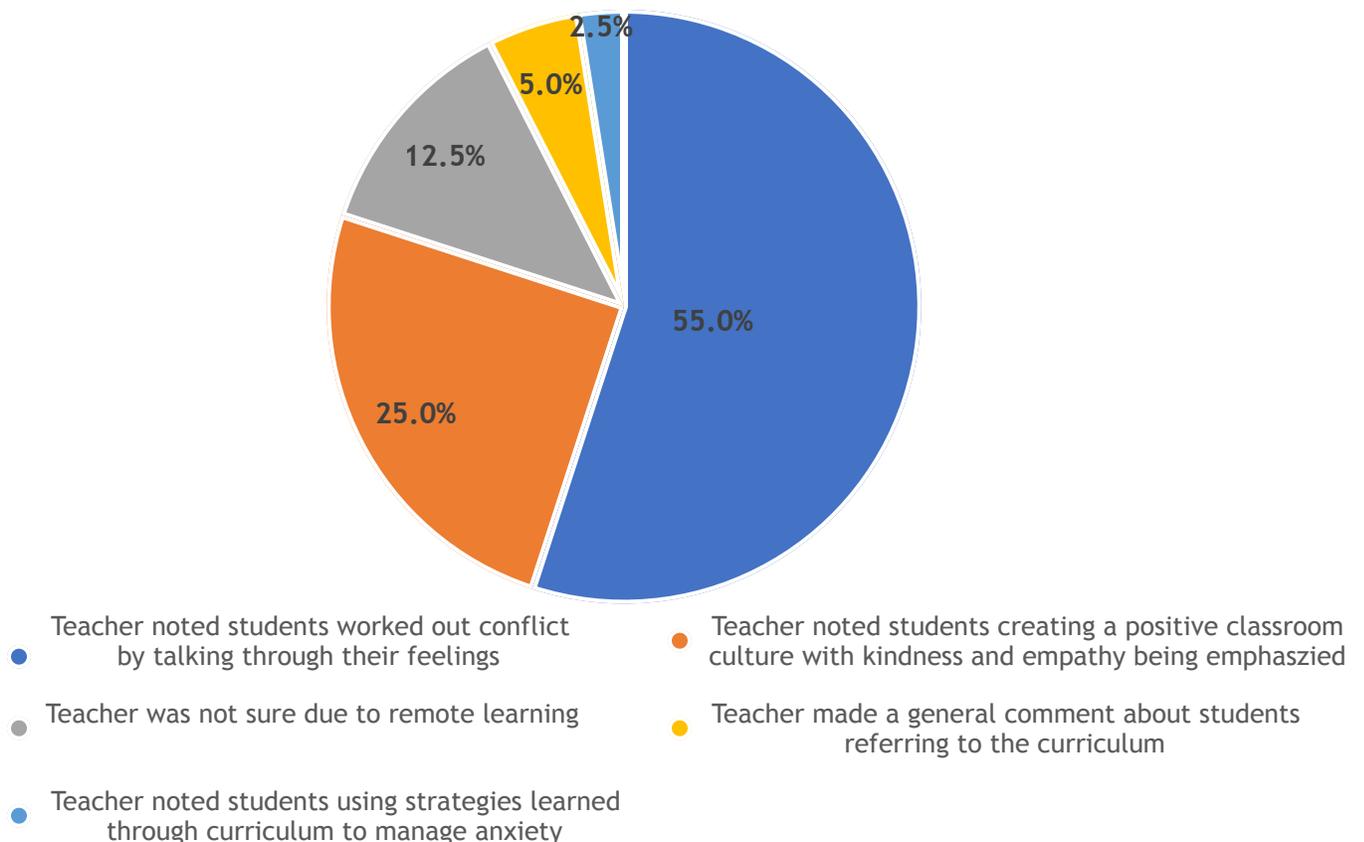
Teachers also shared what they learned about themselves personally or professional while teaching the Primer Program. The quotes below describe how impactful the Primer Program was for teachers and students.

It reinforced the importance of explicitly teaching social & emotional skills. Learning can only happen if students know themselves well and know how to create healthy relationships in the classroom. The Nora project helped me create a safe, healthy and supportive classroom community.

I think I learned that many children do not realize how what they do or say affects others and just how important it is to teach them about that. It is more than just saying you hurt someone's feelings, or you made someone feel angry. They have to really learn to listen to the other person and they have to practice telling how they feel and why.

Teachers in the Primer Program reported promising outcomes for students in pre-school to third grade. The next section describes findings from The Nora Project's Storyteller Project, which targets middle and high school students.

A majority of teachers noted students worked out their conflict by talking through their feelings.





“The Nora Project helped me create a safe, healthy and supportive classroom community.”

- SY19-20 Primer Pack Teacher



Storyteller Project

Since 2016, The Nora Project has implemented its flagship program, the Storyteller Project to 4th-8th grade students or High School students with and without disabilities. Students learn together about empathy, disability justice, inclusion, storytelling and advocacy. Students work in mixed-ability groups to get to know each other's stories, develop friendships based on what they have in common, and create documentaries that share what the project has taught them about friendship.

As mentioned above, the Storyteller Project piloted a co-taught version of the program that was taught to general education and special education students and had activity days where students of all abilities worked in small groups to learn each other's stories, build friendships and work on the program's capstone project, a documentary, together. This version of the program differed from the original flagship program in that the original program was only taught to general education students, students with disabilities visited general education classrooms for activity days, and students with disabilities were interviewed for documentaries, but were not involved in creating them. The evaluation of the Storyteller Project consists of a comparison of the two programs: Storyteller Original and Storyteller Co-taught to determine the effectiveness of the co-taught pilot. The student impact surveys for each version covered the same questions on empathy and inclusion. The results of this evaluation are provided below, and clearly demonstrate superior outcomes in the Co-taught version of the program.

Students in participating Storyteller classrooms were given a survey that measures key project outcomes two times during the school year: (1) At the beginning of the program before any instruction had taken place and (2) At the end of the program, after students had screened their documentaries at the conclusion of the school year. The survey data below shows promising signs of program impact on participating students with regards to cultivating and practicing empathy and building inclusive friendships among all children in the classroom.

In order to measure empathy, a research-validated questionnaire called EmQue-CA is included in the Storyteller Student Impact Surveys. The EmQue-CA contains 18 statements and students select from 3 responses - Not True, Sometimes True, or Always True about how they feel for each statement. The EmQue-CA has three domains that measure three kinds of empathy:

- **Affective Empathy** - A scale that measures the extent to which the child/adolescent feels for the emotional state of the suffering person,
- **Cognitive Empathy** - A scale that measures the extent to which the child/adolescent understands why the other person is in distress,
- **Prosocial Motivation** - A scale that measures the extent to which the child/adolescent is inclined to actually help or support the suffering person.¹¹

¹¹ Overgaauw, S., Rieffe, C., Broekhof, E., Crone, E. A., & Güroğlu, B. (2017). Assessing Empathy across Childhood and Adolescence: Validation of the Empathy Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents (EmQue-CA). *Frontiers in psychology*, 8, 870.

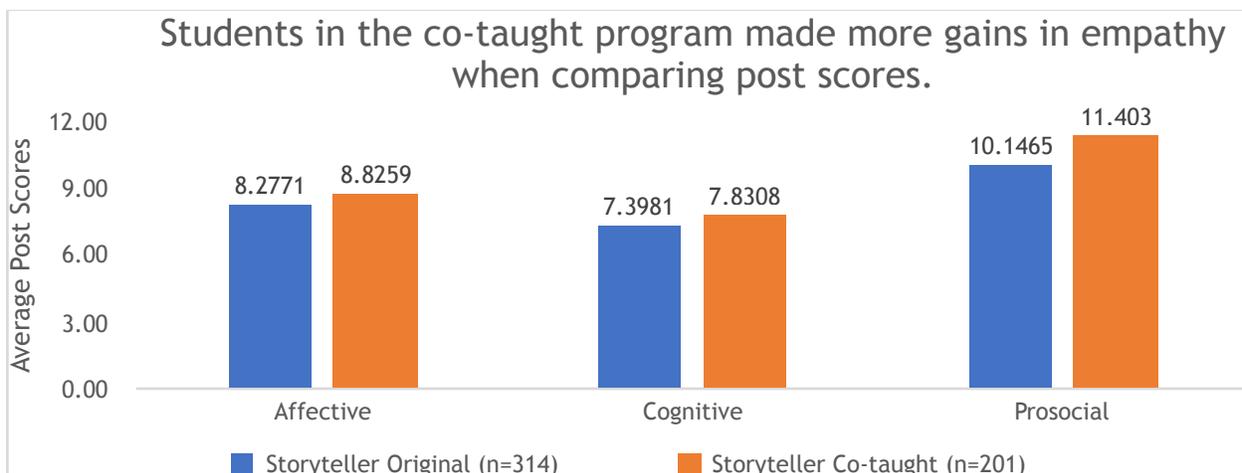


Research has shown that children and adolescents who score high on Affective Empathy bully less and have better friendship qualities.^{12 13} Research also shows that as boys move from childhood into middle adolescence, their Affective Empathy scores decrease, while girls' scores increase.^{14 15}

Research suggests that especially during periods of isolation, such as the Covid-19 lockdown, a way to combat loneliness, depression, anxiety and an inward focus is to engage in ways to demonstrate care and concern for others.¹⁶ The Storyteller Program is designed to do just that, bringing students together and allowing them to safely share their stories with one another. It is therefore no surprise that students in The Nora Project Storyteller Program increased their empathy when comparing pre to post-program scores. Students increased their cognitive empathy scores the most (a 7% increase), followed by affective empathy (2% increase) and then prosocial motivation (0.3% increase).

In the big picture, the data confirms that the move to co-taught programming yields greater impact. The major findings that support the move to co-taught programming are outlined below.

A. When comparing the two Storyteller Programs empathy scores, students in the co-taught program score higher on all empathy domains in pre and post scores as shown in the graphs below.



¹² Stavrinides P., Georgiou S., Theofanous V. (2010). Bullying and empathy: a short-term longitudinal investigation. *Educ. Psychol.* 30 793–802. 10.

¹³ Berndt T. J. (2002). Friendship quality and social development. *Curr. Dir. Psychol. Sci.* 11 7–10.

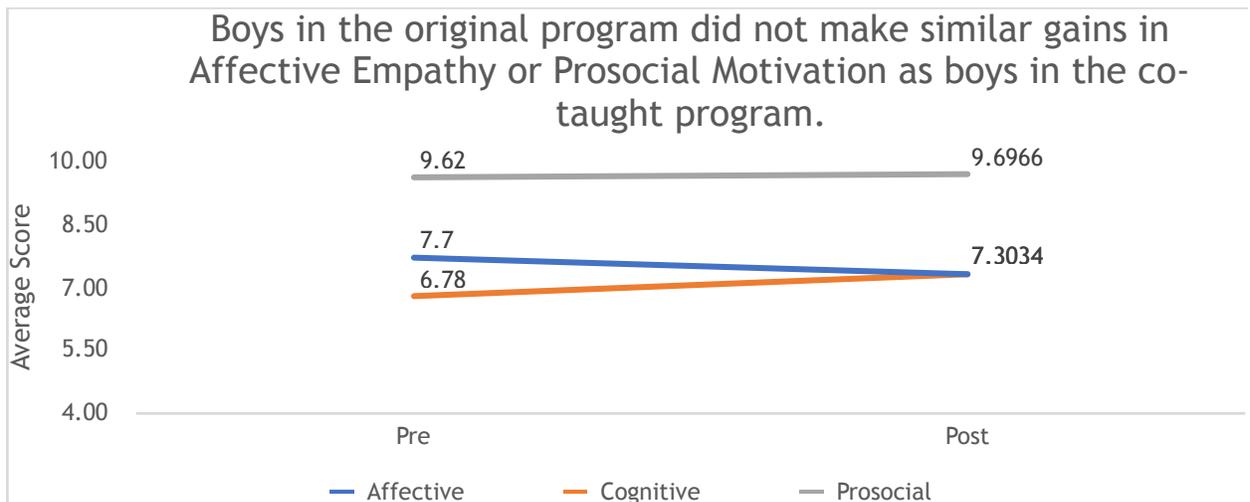
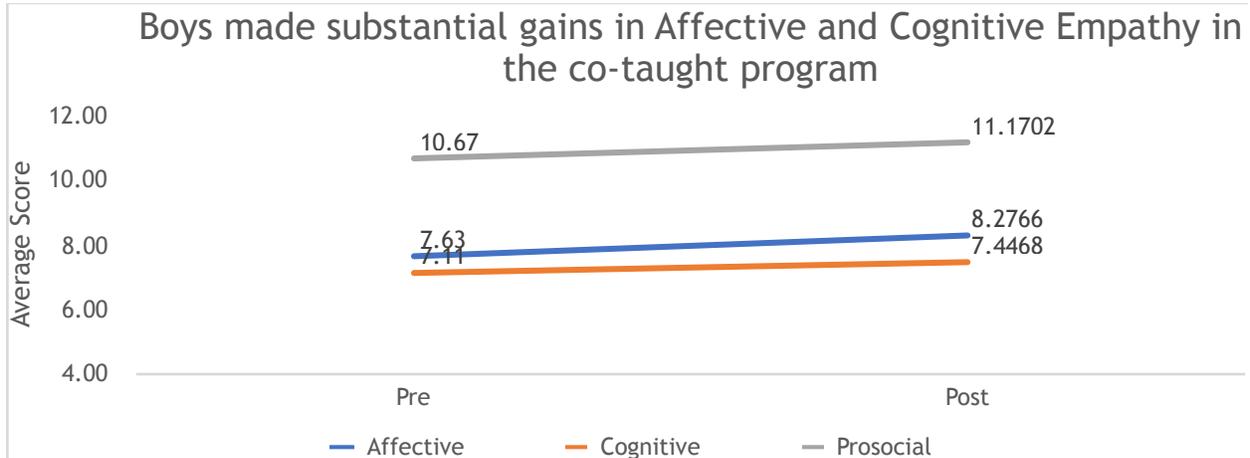
¹⁴ Van der Graaff J., Branje S., De Wied M., Hawk S., Van Lier P., Meeus W. (2014). Perspective taking and empathic concern in adolescence: gender differences in developmental changes. *Dev. Psychol.* 50 881–888.

¹⁵ Taylor S. J., Barker L. A., Heavey L., McHale S. (2013). The typical developmental trajectory of social and executive functions in late adolescence and early adulthood. *Dev. Psychol.* 49 1253–1265.

¹⁶ Boudreau, E. (2020) Cultivating Empathy in the Coronavirus Crisis, [Blog post] Usable Knowledge, Harvard Graduate School of Education. Retrieved from: <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/20/03/cultivating-empathy-coronavirus-crisis>

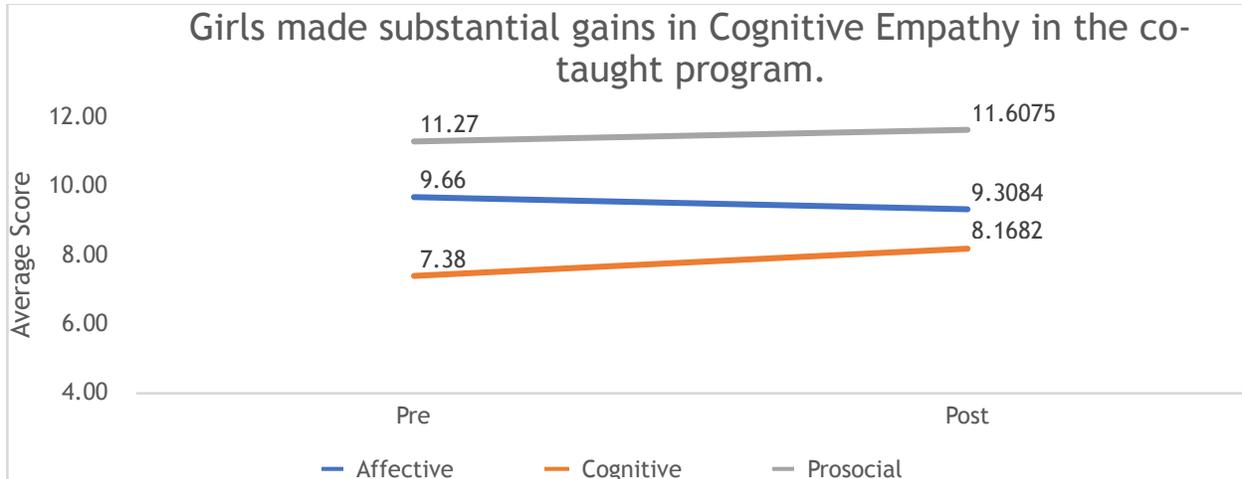


- Boys made more gains in Affective and Cognitive Empathy Scores in the co-taught than the original program when comparing pre to post.





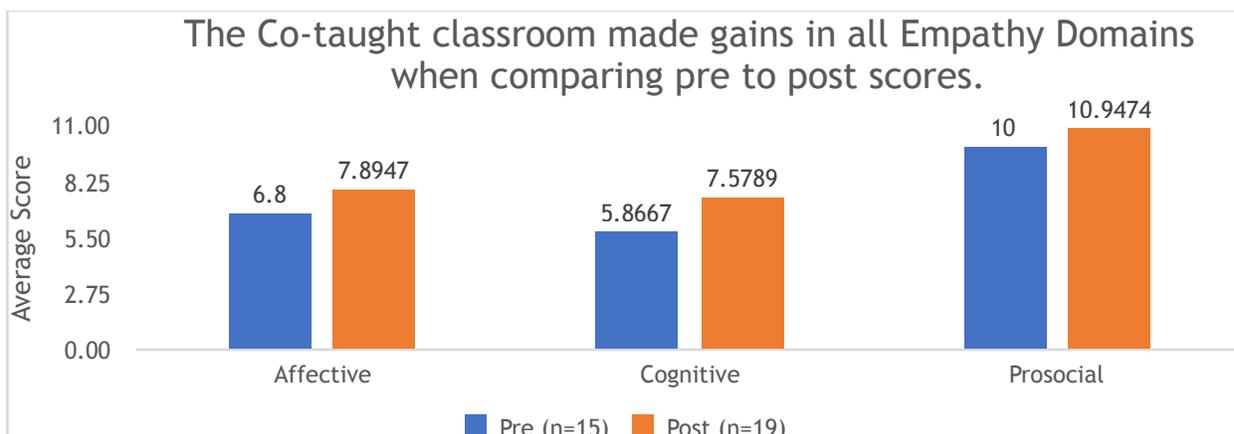
- As the graphs show, girls in the co-taught program scored higher in all empathy domains than girls in the original program and made gains in Cognitive Empathy from pre to post.



B. The data in one co-taught classroom illustrates this finding of superior impact.

An elementary school in an urban area with 96% free and reduced lunch, 64% English language learners, and 13% of students with IEPs implemented the Storyteller co-taught program in a 4th grade classroom. The racial/ethnic diversity make-up of the school is 84% Hispanic/Latinx, 6% White, 5% Asian, 4% Black/African American, and 1% consisting of American Indian, Pacific Islander, and multiracial students.

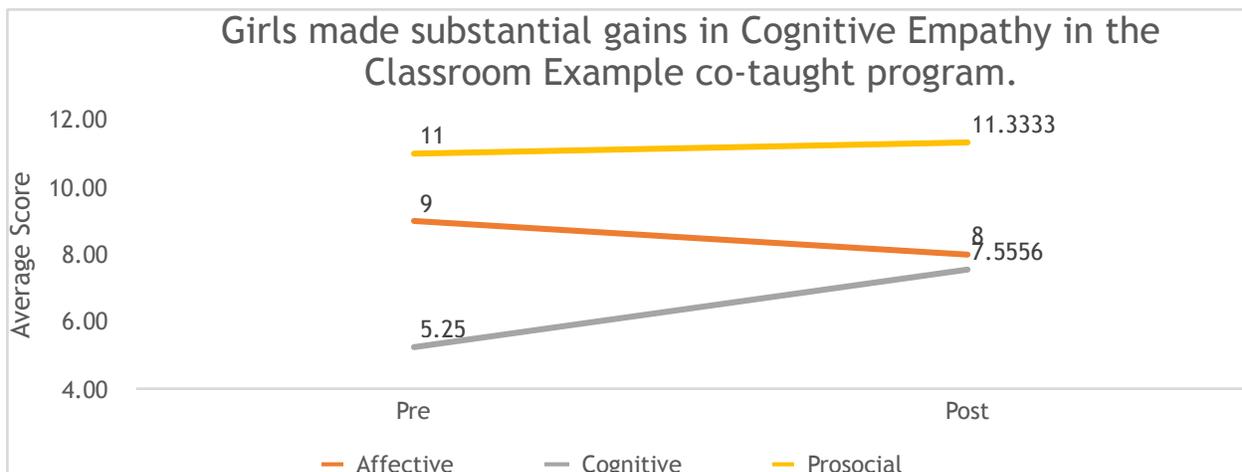
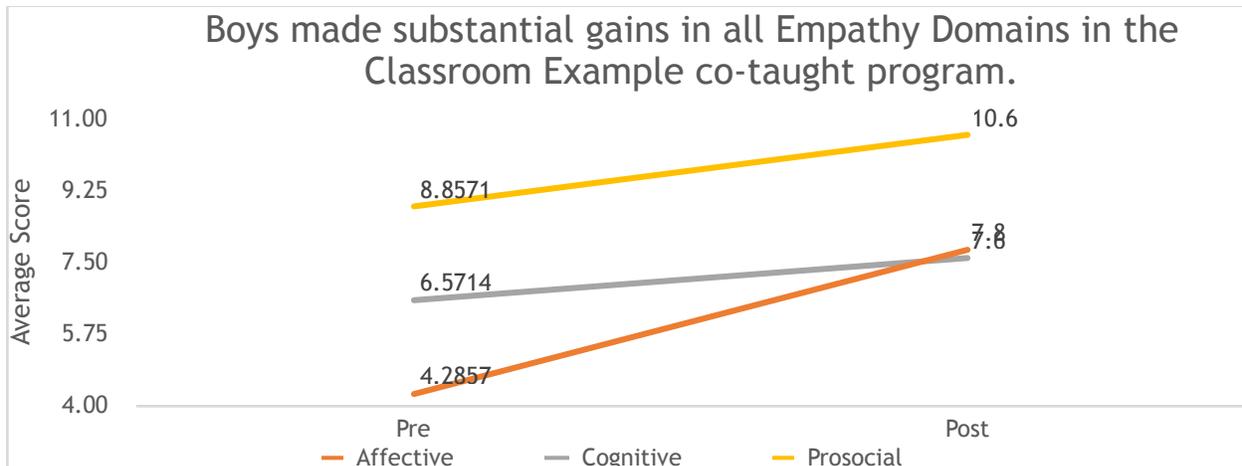
The project leader discussed The Nora Project themes 2-3 times per week and held activity days biweekly. As the graph below shows, students in this classroom increased their empathy scores in all domains from the beginning of the school year to the end.



When breaking out student empathy scores by gender, we see who was impacted the most by The Nora Project. Boys in the example classroom made substantial gains in Affective Empathy, Cognitive Empathy and Prosocial Motivation. Girls also made substantial gains in Cognitive Empathy. Research has shown that higher scores on all domains of the EmQue-CA



correlate to lower levels of bullying behavior and higher levels of friendship quality. (Overgaauw et al., 2017)



A quote from the teacher survey for this classroom supports current research:

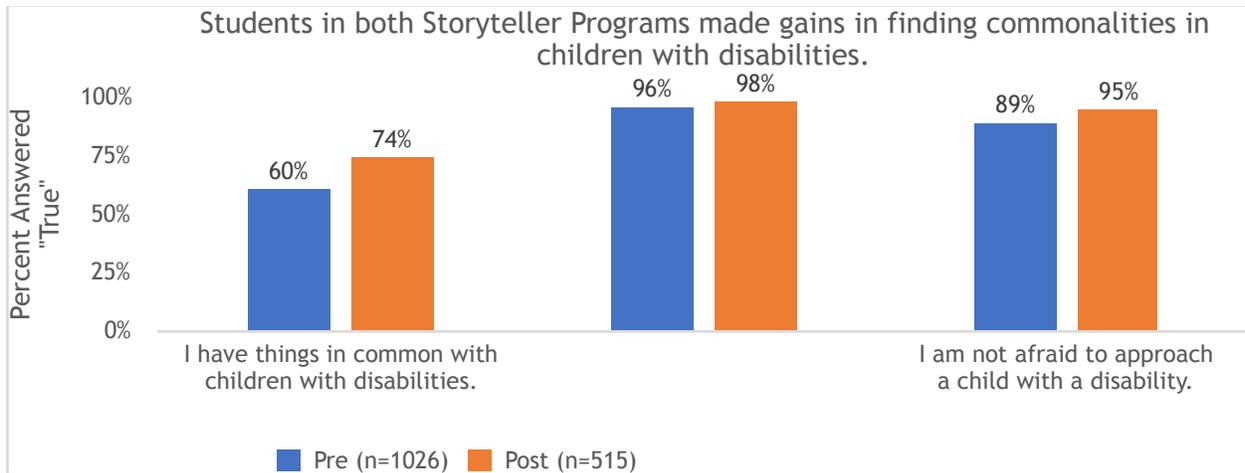
Yes, I have noticed the participating class in Nora Project has ZERO disciplinary issues throughout the entire school year even while their general education teacher was on maternity leave. Also, I noticed that students were able to show kindness and empathy towards others in a way that was not only age appropriate but at times in ways that were beyond their age level.

C. Storyteller students in both the original program and the co-taught program made inclusion gains.

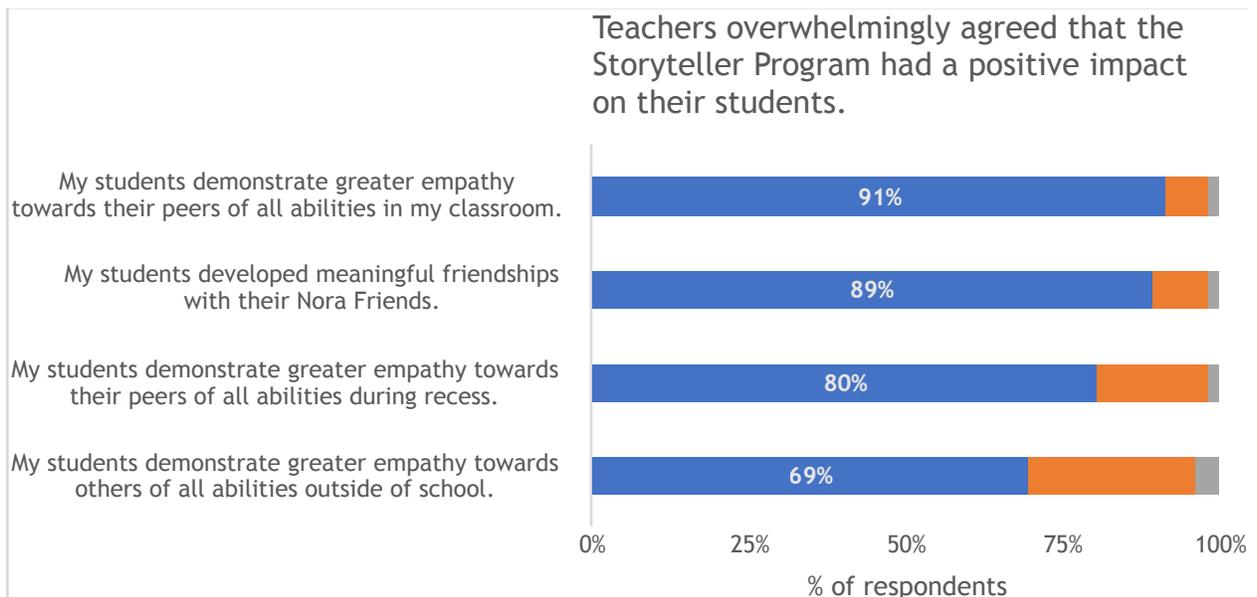
When looking at inclusion questions on the student impact survey, both Storyteller Programs made similar gains on questions pertaining to finding commonalities, being willing to play with and not be afraid to approach children with disabilities.



D. Storyteller Teachers in both programs report positive changes to individual student behavior and classroom culture.



Like Primer teachers, Storyteller teachers were asked to rate to what extent they agreed with statements describing their students' behavior in the classroom, during recess and outside of the classroom as a result of participating in the program. Teachers overwhelmingly agreed that the Storyteller Project had a positive impact on students' ability to show empathy towards their peers in the classroom, to develop meaningful friendships with students of all abilities, and to demonstrate greater empathy toward peers at recess. The graph below shows teacher responses grouped by positive (agreed or strongly agreed), neutral (neither agreed or disagreed), or negative (disagreed or strongly disagreed).



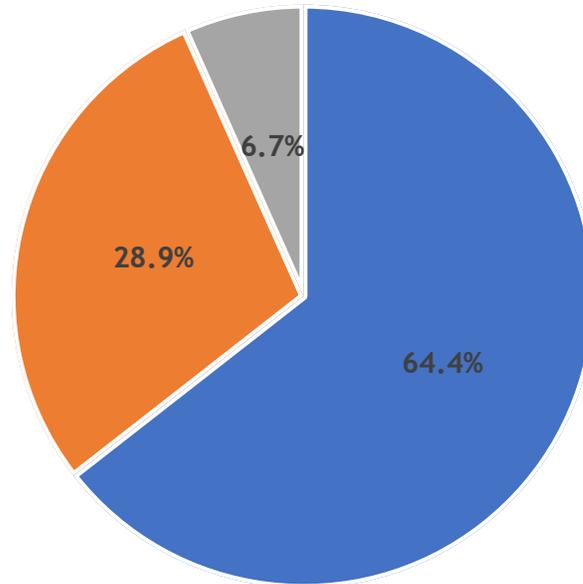
positive response, neutral, negative

Storyteller teachers were also asked to share if they have noticed any behavior change in their students that they could attribute to participating in the Storyteller Project. Most teachers (64%) described observing their students being kinder and more inclusive with each



other. Almost a third of teachers (29%) described ways in which they observed students having the capacity to work things out with their peers when they had a conflict.

Teachers reported specific changes in their students that they attributed to the Storyteller Project.

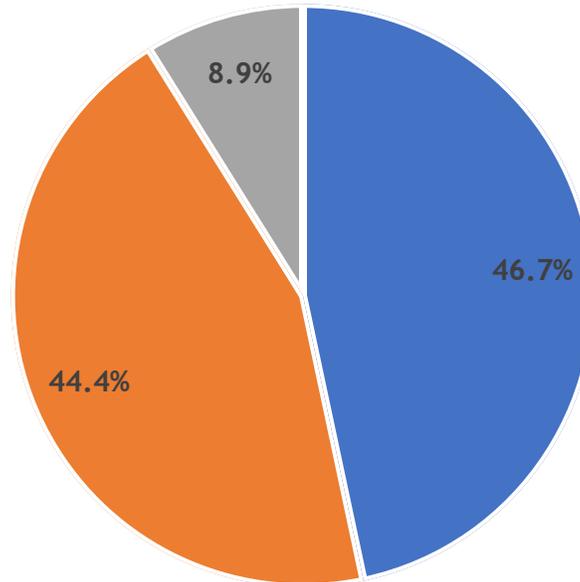


- Teachers reported students were kinder and more inclusive.
- Teachers reported students were able to work things out when they had conflicts
- Teachers reported no change in student behavior

Storyteller teachers were also asked “Have you noticed any changes in the culture of your classroom that you attribute to the Storyteller Project?” Teacher responses were qualitatively analyzed and grouped by theme. Almost all teachers (91%) shared some type of positive changes to their classroom culture as a result of participating in the Storyteller Project. Almost half of teachers (47%) reported students being more accepting of disabilities and differences as the graph below shows. A teacher shared an observation of her classroom’s acceptance of others in this quote: “There was a noticeable difference in [students’] behavior in the classroom. I believe that the students are learning to listen to other’s “stories” of who they are, what they think; and in doing so, students are feeling empowered to be more transparent because they trust they will be accepted for who they are.”



Teachers overwhelmingly reported positive changes to their classroom culture attributed to the Storyteller Program.



- Teacher reported students being more accepting of disabilities or differences
- Teacher reported classroom culture as more empathetic
- Teacher reported no change in classroom culture

Story of Impact

The Storyteller Program’s impact reaches beyond the students in the classroom. One teacher shared in the quote below that because of implementing the Storyteller Project, administrators in their building are implementing more inclusive measures to integrate students with disabilities into more general education classes.

Because of The Nora Project, our administrators are finally seeing the potential of so many of our students [with disabilities]. So much so, that next year, several of our incoming sixth graders will be fully included in social studies and science. To this point, these students have only ever been included in related arts, lunch, and recess. I

am so excited and credit The Nora Project 100% for this very positive step forward for inclusion. I’m hoping this is a first to even bigger moves in the future.

The data overwhelmingly demonstrates the significant impact Nora Project programs have not only on students’ knowledge and understanding, but on their daily practices. In the words of one teacher, “I learned that if we make the attempt to educate students about difference and empathy, they take the instruction and run with it. They were engaged in learning about and working with their Nora Friends, and the change was evident in how they carried themselves throughout the building, not just in the classroom.”



“I believe that the students are learning to listen to other's stories of who they are, what they think; and in doing so, students are feeling empowered to be more transparent because they trust they will be accepted for who they are.”

- SY 19-20 Storyteller Project Teacher



The STEMpathy Club

The STEMpathy Club creates space and time for students to foster friendships with their peers and to apply engineering design principles to create a more physically, culturally, and socially inclusive school environment. Students take a hard look at their school community through a variety of lenses and consider whether it is ability inclusive. They identify potential problems and solutions, pitch their ideas to school officials, and ultimately carry out their vision for how to improve the inclusiveness of their school community.

The STEMpathy club curriculum is broken into four phases that are completed over the course of a school year. Due to Covid-19 and remote learning, the STEMpathy Clubs completed the following steps: understanding inclusion, setting a purpose and understanding the work and identifying problems and generating solutions. Research and best practices in education show that giving children choice in their learning and ways to demonstrate their understanding, such as through student-driven, problem-based learning, helps children to feel in control of their learning.¹⁷ Despite the lockdown and transition to remote learning, several clubs were able to execute a plan and one club presented their idea to school officials.

At the end of the program, teachers were asked to complete a survey. All teachers responded that club members identified problems and generated solutions to create a more inclusive environment for people of all abilities either for the school community or the broader community in which the school is based. One teacher described the club's plan in the quote below:

We were going to present on the need for paras and CPA certified staff in after school clubs. Only then will we really be able to include students in self-contained classrooms in after school programs. The kids jumped into phase 3 by educating their peers and fundraising money. They read books to almost every classroom that did not participate in The Nora Project. The books were on empathy and kindness. They did go to the principal and asked that they take over a few school wide meetings. They were able to do one (due to COVID-19). In that meeting, they presented on what the Nora Project Club is, empathy and respect. They raised \$300 for Community Based Instruction field trips for our self-contained classrooms.



Students participating in the clubs were also asked to complete an end of the year survey. A question on the survey asked for respondents to share what they thought they learned. Most students responded that they learned that their school or community had room for improvement when it came to inclusion. Several quotes from students that describe what they learned are included below.

¹⁷ Draiger, C. and Wilson, D. (2016) How to Give Children More Control Over their Learning, [Blog post] Education Week Teacher. Retrieved from: <https://www.edweek.org/tm/articles/2016/03/08/give-students-more-control-over-their-learning.html>



I learned [and] noticed that most of our school is inclusive and some things could be done differently in our school to make it a more inclusive space.

We noticed that we can add way more things and make the connection kids feel welcome. And a lot of people ignore them so I feel like we need to have things that they can do and we can do to get them included.

Because the STEMpathy Club's goal is to affect the school-wide culture, students participating in the club were asked to share what they thought their club achieved so far. All students who responded to the survey (n=20) felt that their club accomplished changing the school-wide culture positively. The quotes below are from students that represent the different clubs that participated in the pilot.

I think the club had great ideas to change people's mindsets. Even though we did not get to accomplish everything we planned we still did things like interviewing people with disabilities and sharing our ideas to get different perspectives on people with disabilities. I believe that with more time we could've achieved great things.

I think the club has achieved a lot. One thing I think we have achieved is really showing the importance of friendship and how even if you're different you can still be amazing and have wonderful friends and be a wonderful person.

I think our club has achieved a great deal of helping the younger grades understand what it means to be kind.

It is clear that participation in the STEMpathy Club has the potential to change hearts and minds not only in students, but also in staff members:

I learned that as a teacher, it is my social and moral responsibility to make my students aware of inequities and social injustices. I need to have conversations about those in society who are marginalized, even if it makes people uncomfortable. I have to instill empathy and love in my students. I have to empower them and guide them in becoming agents of change, because my students will become our world's change makers.



“I think the club had great ideas to change people’s mindsets. Even though we did not get to accomplish everything we planned we still did things like interviewing people with disabilities and sharing our ideas to get different perspectives”

- SY 19-20 STEMpathy Club Student Member



Limitations, Next Steps, and Recommendations

Limitations

While student findings from several sources show that the programs are making an impact on students of all abilities, this evaluation relied heavily on self-reported surveys from students and qualitative methods to confirm trends in quantitative data. It is not known to what extent these outcomes impacted classroom behavior since student behavior data or individual student assessment data for students with IEPs were not collected for the evaluation.

A major limitation to the evaluation was the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which greatly affected implementation of The Nora Project curricula as intended. Indeed, students' lives, especially those that need one-on-one supports, were significantly impacted by school closings. Children now more than ever need social-emotional learning in order to process the pandemic's effects on their lives and tend to the grief they experience by not being able to return to their daily routines fully. Just as it is largely unknown what are COVID-19's effects on the body; we do not know the pandemic's lasting effects on children's mental health and social development. We also do not know how the evaluation results from this year's programs were influenced by shifting learning to online for the last quarter of the school year. We only know that a program suite that is greatly reliant on students of all abilities learning, socializing, and working together in person was impeded by the need to mitigate community spread of the virus and practice safe social distancing protocols. As the pandemic continues, it will be important to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies The Nora Project has implemented to adapt its program suite to online learning.

Program Improvements

As a part of their dedication to continuous program improvement, The Nora Project set out to deepen their commitment to equity and inclusion. The bullets below describe how TNP is working toward becoming a leader in equity and inclusion within the educational community.

- TNP engaged Conscious Roots, LLC, a consulting firm that focuses on diversity, equity, inclusion and justice-centered professional development. Conscious Roots reviewed TNP's three curriculum areas (Primer Program, Storyteller Project, and STEmpathy Club) through the lens of culturally responsive pedagogy to situate disability within diversity and create opportunities to explore marginalized identities whether within oneself or others.
- TNP also partnered with Communities in Schools of Chicago to review their curriculum materials to ensure they are culturally inclusive of all students no matter race, gender, socioeconomic status, or ability.
- TNP developed a partnership with Aspire, which is a leader in providing services to children and adults with developmental disabilities, their families and their communities to develop professional development for school administrators and teachers focused on cultivating an inclusion mindset. They plan to pilot this professional development series with 10 schools during the 2020-2021 school year.
- With the new organizational goal of bringing in and amplifying diverse disabled voices, TNP held a program panel at their annual training camp in which disabled activists



shared their knowledge around presuming competence, how to be an ally, how to promote inclusion and how to teach about the disability rights movement. Further, TNP issued a call for stories from disabled adults to add to their Library of Stories You Need to Know. These stories will be used in a new lesson in the Storyteller Project and available to all program participants.

- To bolster students' understanding of disability as a part of human diversity, a new lesson was added to the Storyteller Project which focuses on disability history and the disability rights movement in the United States.

Evaluation Design Recommendations

TNP should be commended for collecting evaluation data since the first year of the program and engaging an external evaluator early on. Recommendations presented here cover steps to ensure that evaluation is embedded in the organization and is sustainable. Ideally, these recommendations would be developed into a three to five-year evaluation plan that outlines the following recommendations in detail with an implementation plan and action steps to guide TNP staff.

1. Measure the effectiveness of TNP's online adaptation of its curricula. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the move from in-person learning to online learning, TNP will need to track the effectiveness of adapting its curricula and instruction to remote learning and measure to what extent this adaptation is inclusive of all students participating in the program.
2. Use results from the impact study to refine existing evaluation tools and inform the development of new tools. Now that a full year of evaluation data for TNP's program suite have been analyzed and summarized in one place it is important to reflect on how existing evaluation tools can be revised to capture student outcomes most efficiently and thoroughly. It is also important to reflect on whether the evaluation is capturing all intended outcomes or if there is a need for more outcomes to be developed. Having said that, refinements have been made to evaluation tools for the Primer Program to capture specific student outcomes. A similar strategy will be employed to the STEMpathy Club evaluation measures during the FY21 fiscal year.
3. Take steps to further define TNP's evaluation. In the FY20 fiscal year, TNP began the process of developing a theory of change for its program suite. Finalizing the overall theory of change and a literature review of best practices research will help to focus the overall evaluation for years to come.
4. Consider future studies to measure the impact of TNP's programs. TNP has demonstrated strong results for students and it should consider ways to further measure the impact that teaching empathy and inclusion and sparking friendships has on the students participating in the programs. To that end, TNP will develop a study to compare students participating in the Storyteller Project to a comparison group of students not participating in the program in order to further demonstrate program impact. Results from this study may be used to apply for the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning's (CASEL) SElect Program designation.



Conclusion

This report highlights the first full year of implementing The Nora Project's suite of programs. Several themes from the evaluation findings are reflected across all programs. One theme is students from preschool to high school have been observed using vocabulary and problem-solving skills to manage their emotions and resolve conflict. Another theme from the evaluation findings shows that students know how to be empathetic, show kindness, be an upstander to their peers, and recognize the need for an inclusive school environment. Finally, teachers have reported that their classroom culture, or in the case of the STEMpathy club the school-wide environment, has been positively affected by implementing one of The Nora Project programs. Noteworthy to this year's evaluation results, in the Storyteller and STEMpathy Club programs students with disabilities fully participated in these programs - learning and working side-by-side with their peers and completing the same evaluation tools. It will be exciting to see the long-term effects of these programs in the years to come.

Overall, The Nora Project has made a unique contribution to social emotional learning programs aiming to address a decline in empathy by using thoughtful lesson plans and classroom or afterschool activities along with experiential learning rooted in inclusive practices and play. The Nora Project experience, taken as a whole, teaches skills, values, and beliefs about our common humanity and what it means to live in community. The Nora Project is poised to scale up its programming in more schools and demonstrate evidence that it is living up to its mission - teaching empathy and sparking friendship between students and their peers with disabilities.

About the Author

Holly Lewandowski, M.A. started her company, Evaluation for Change, Inc. in 2008 and she has worked as an evaluation consultant for the past 12 years on many education evaluations spanning early childhood to post-secondary with institutions such as the Ounce of Prevention Fund, Illinois Education Research Council, City Colleges of Chicago, Westat, and Roosevelt University and University of Illinois at Chicago. Additionally, she has held positions in evaluation and research at both DePaul and Northwestern Universities. She earned her MA in Sociology at DePaul University and BA in Anthropology at Antioch College.