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Academic Year 2021-2022 ACE Project Report



BACKGROUND

During Academic Year (AY) 2021-22, Colorado Springs School District 11 (D11) introduced the Achieving Competitive Excellence (ACE) Project to 712 students in the 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades at five district elementary schools. This census represented a five-fold program increase from AY 2019-20 where ACE served the same 3rd-5th grade population in one D11 elementary school. A study conducted on the AY 2019-20 population highlighted an improvement of learning conditions, attitudes and academic performance following exposure to the ACE program and suggested students experienced improved focus, concentration and were better able to regulate their emotions (Huisingh, 2020).

ACE was designed to teach students how to analyze situations in real-time and make the best decision in the moment. Using a proven coaching model, *Think-Say-Do*, students were guided through novel decision-making approaches intended to improve behavior, increase attention, and enhance classroom performance. ACE provided students with adaptive skills to enable social and academic success in and out of the school setting.



Coach Charmas Lee

PROGRAM DESIRED OUTCOMES

Intended results at this point in the program of instruction included improved emotional intelligence, self-regulation, decision making, and the skills of self-efficacy, focus, and concentration.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a mixed-methods design consisting of both quantitative and qualitative data streams from multiple sources. Collected data included a Likert-based survey instrument developed by Lee and Lee (2019) related to specific ACE Project objectives. This survey was administered to 590 students in all five ACE Project schools during second semester AY21-22. The data set also included open-ended comments from students and semi-structured interviews conducted with principals and assistant principals from all elementary schools employing the ACE Project. The survey instruments were compiled and reported in bar charts, while the student comments were coded using an iterative nodal development process focusing on theme discovery. The school administrator interviews were transcribed verbatim using Otter.AI software and coded using a similar process as the student comments to discover themes.

Conclusions were made based on the corpus of collected quantitative and qualitative data using a process of triangulation as described by Kelle (2001).

STUDY LIMITATIONS

This study was conducted under a persistent COVID-19 threat, with precautions ranging from compulsory to voluntary masking as well as a mixture of virtual and in-person attendance. These factors may have impacted both the extent and variability of student participation in the ACE program of instruction. The COVID-19 threat may have also impacted the number of students available to take the *ACE Project Survey*.

FINDINGS

ACE Project Survey

Students from all five elementary schools involved with the ACE Project took a survey (Lee & Lee, 2019) during the second semester, AY 21-22 (n=590). The questions were binned into two categories (a) stem-response [self-confidence, attitude, focus, behavior, self-belief, learning, motivation, participation] (Figure 1) and (b) yes or no [ACE Project impact] (Figure 2).



Coach Janice Lee

Figure 1.

ACE Project Survey, Stem-Response, 2nd Semester, AY 2021-22

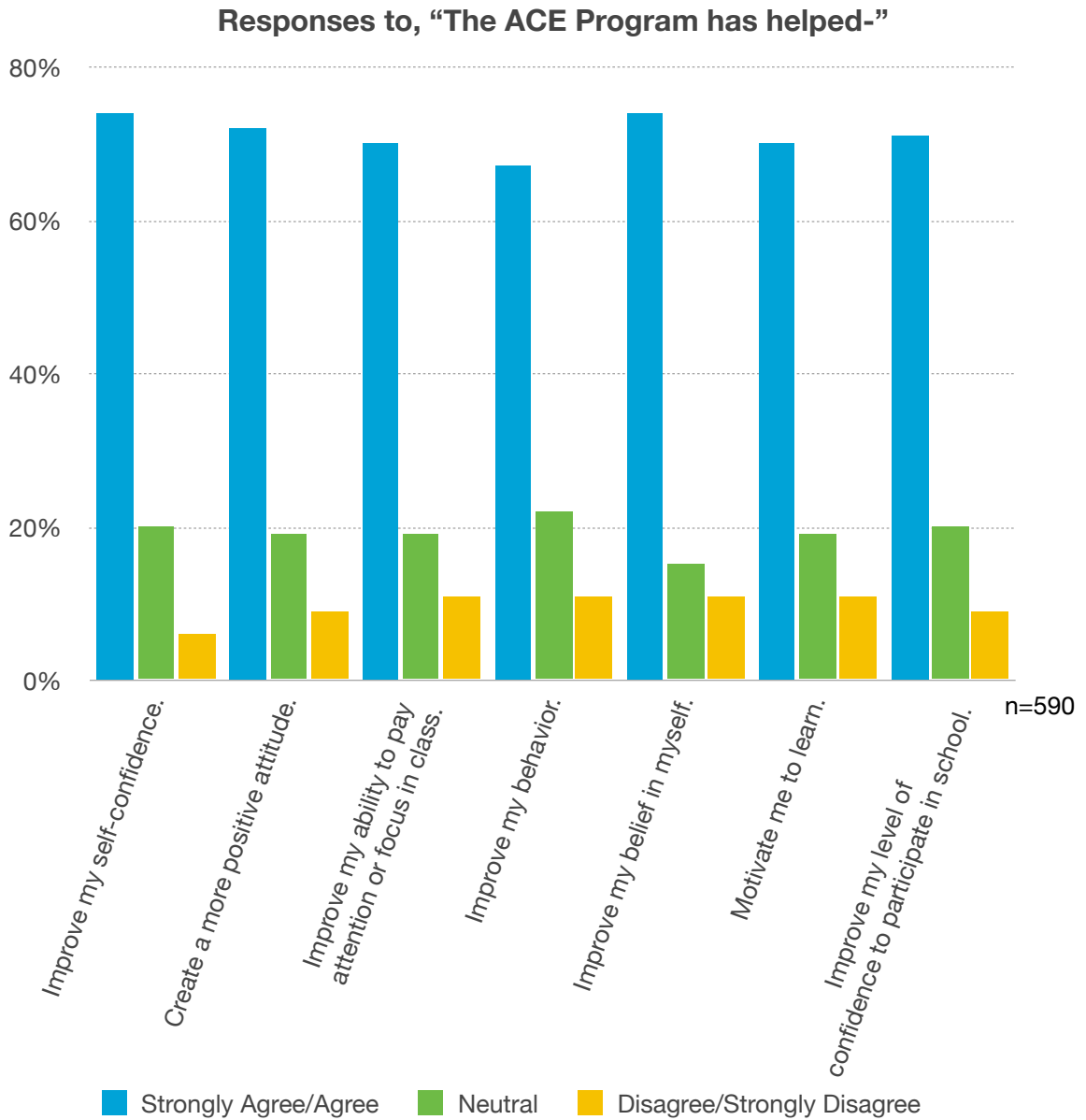
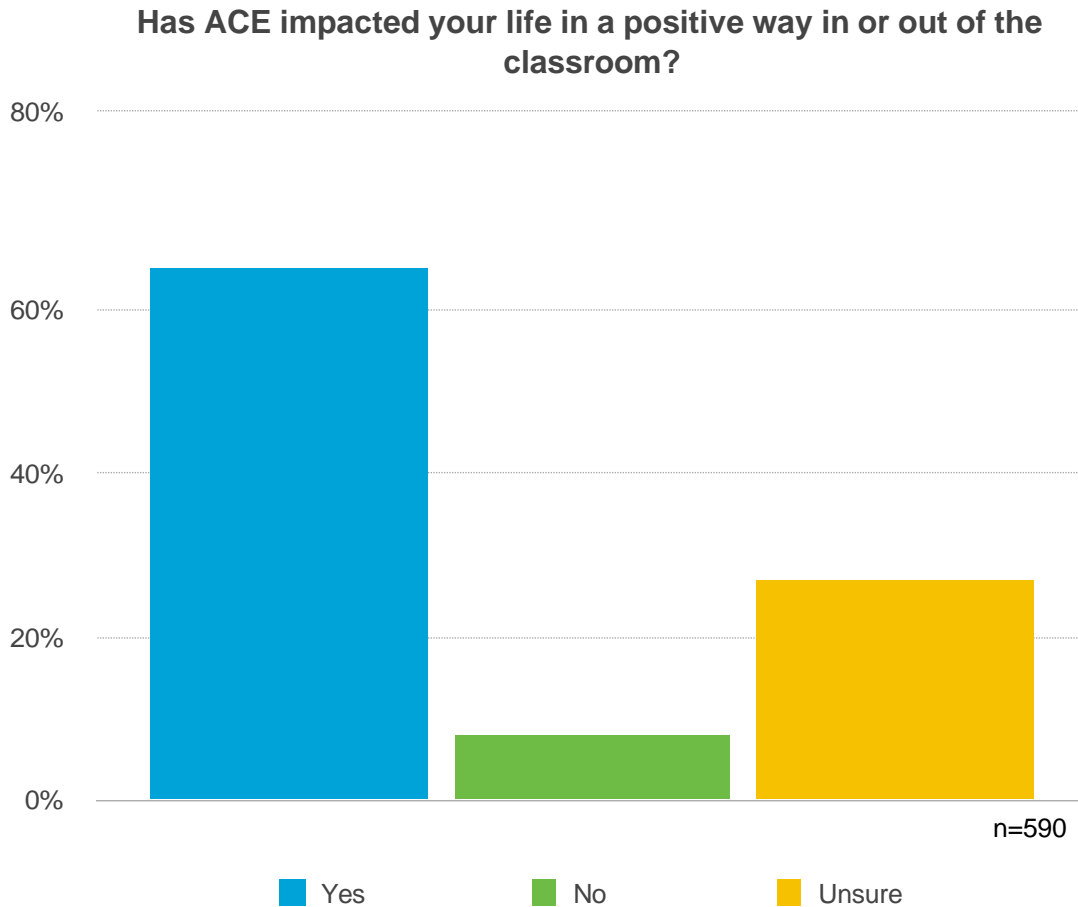


Figure 2.

ACE Project Survey, Yes or No, 2nd Semester, AY 2021-22



Survey Analysis

Students participating in the ACE Project in five D11 elementary schools self-reported overwhelmingly positive feedback as to the program’s merits with positive sentiments expressed 10 to 21 times more often than negative comments concerning the attributes of self-confidence, attitude, focus, behavior, self-belief, learning motivation, and participation. As a check to see if this performance was anomalous over previous years, the response means were compared against data from Adams Elementary School in an ACE pilot study from February 2020. The AY 21-22 results for this report showed no statistically significant difference (between the means in six of the seven questions). The one exception was that self-reported confidence to participate in school was higher in the 2020 study [4.42 (2020) v. 4.14 (2021) on a 1-5 scale {higher is better}]. When converted to the initial adjectives used in the survey, both values lie on the continuum between *agree* and *strongly agree*. The consistency between the 2020 survey conducted in the one ACE Project school to the AY21-22 survey administered in five schools

supports the notion that despite the project scaling five-fold, the program results remained positive and generally stable.

Student, Teacher, and Principal Comments

Students, teachers, and principals provided written feedback on the ACE Program. No negative comments were received, with overwhelmingly positive perceptions of the ACE program from student to administrators. Their comments follow.

“You will not find a more impactful program that supports a positive framework for student decision making.”

—D11 Elementary School Principal

“The ACE program is excellent at motivating my students. Students have responded very positively to the coaching they receive. I have often caught snippets of conversations throughout the year where students are talking about their “power words” they used that morning to set their day off in a positive manner. It has been very helpful after covid causing so much disruption to help them deal with emotions, friends, and refocusing on the positive. I wish we could have them every week instead of every other. My students have gained emotional awareness and strategies to dealing with strong emotions, as well as emotional stability through positive thinking, reflection, and goal setting.”

—D11 Third Grade Teacher

“I have more courage.”

—D11 Fifth Grade Student

“Mr. Lee made me believe in myself, like I can do anything if I try.”

—D11 Fifth Grade Student

“Mr. and Mrs. Lee give me lots of hope in myself.”

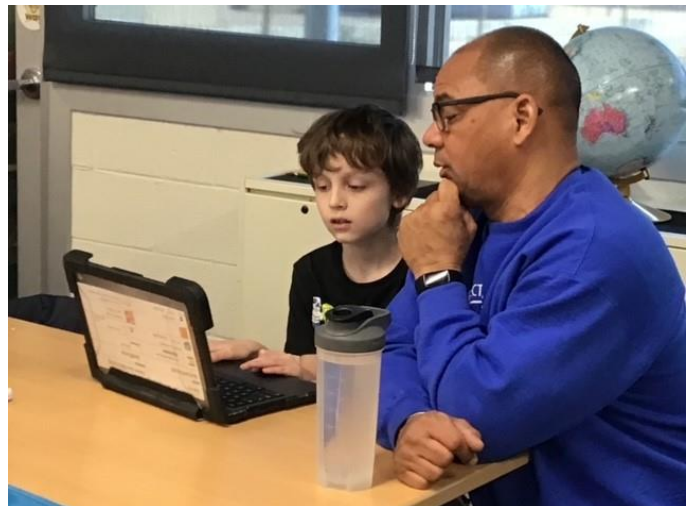
—D11 Fourth Grade Student

“This program makes me feel like I have a voice.”

—D11 Fourth Grade Student

“I have built confidence and feel better about myself.”

—D11 Fifth Grade Student



Coach Charmas Lee

Principal Interview Analysis

Six principals and assistant principals in all five of the elementary schools with the ACE Project were interviewed in sessions ranging from 20-70 minutes. Principals reported that their insights were based on both personal observations and discussions with teachers with participating ACE students. The sentiments of all interviewed converged on the following themes:

- a. *Janice and Charmas Lee are uniquely gifted coaches.* They are compelling role models for the 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade student population. Their personalities, exemplary ethical code, and their ability to connect with students is considered anomalous. All the principals expressed the sentiment that it would be extremely difficult to find others that could replicate the intangible qualities Charmas and Janice bring to the classroom.
- b. *Engagement.* Three of the principals offered that the students were engaged with the Lees like no other teachers they had seen. One principal, sitting in on an ACE session, observed 100% student engagement for 32 minutes, while another cited 12 continuous minutes. They had not observed this level of engagement with their students previously.
- c. *Respect.* The principals cited examples of increased student respect which translated into positive experiences by substitute teachers and other students. Principals reported this level of internalization of the program's messaging with students incorporating ACE program language into their conversations with students and teachers.
- d. *Supportive integration with other programs.* The ACE program provided a complimentary message to the Capturing Kids' Hearts program extant in all five schools.
- e. *Faculty endorsed.* All principals stated the program had both their support and the endorsement of teachers—with one exception. In that school, teachers approved of the program but wished it did not take time away from core curriculum instruction. These teachers felt the reallocation of 35 minutes every two weeks away from core instruction was significant enough to negatively impact student performance in standardized testing in mathematics and language arts. In this case, the principal recommended that ACE be an after- or before-school program in order to preserve classroom instruction time.
- f. *Additional ACE contact time wanted.* All principals wanted an expanded ACE presence in their schools. Many felt that 35 minutes every two weeks was insufficient as students had difficulty remembering and implementing ACE concepts over the time between sessions. Most principals advocated once weekly as the target contact frequency. As a note to frequency, one principal suggested the Lee's implement a goal accountability program as a means to keep students focused on the goals they established as part of ACE between sessions.

Conclusions

The quantitative and qualitative data set analyzed suggest that the ACE Project is an effective program contributing to the self-confidence, attitude, focus, behavior, self-belief, learning, motivation, and classroom participation of students in the 3rd through 5th grade population in the five D11 schools under study. Principals endorsed the program, specifically citing Janice and Charmas Lee, as a positive influence in their schools. Recommendations for improvement included increasing student contact with the Lees from once every two weeks to once a week with options for tracking accountability and modifying the program delivery window from during to either before or after school. Additionally, all principals supported retaining and expanding the ACE Project in their schools.



Coach Charmas Lee

References

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- Kelle, U. (2001). Sociological explanations between micro and macro and the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 2, (43 paragraphs). Retrieved from <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs010159>
- Lee, J. & Lee, C. (2019). Achieving competitive excellence: Second quarter student survey. [Survey instrument].