

Empowering Youth Through Mental Health Education

Utilizing a Popular Education Framework to Facilitate Discussions Around Mental Health

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Introduction

- Youth in Chicago's underinvested neighborhoods are disproportionately likely to face mental health concerns.
- 5+1=20 is an organization educates middle and high schoolers about chronic diseases that contribute to a 20 year life expectancy gap between neighborhoods in Chicago.
- Students, teachers, and community members involved in 5+1=20 were interested in developing a more robust mental health curriculum that was engaging and empowering.
- Popular education, an education philosophy coined by Paulo Freire, emphasizes the importance of participatory methods and valuing students' knowledge as much as teachers'.

Objectives

1. Design a participatory and informative 3 day mental health curriculum for middle schoolers participating in 5+1=20.
2. Pilot the lessons and compare their performance to the current curriculum used in 5+1=20.
3. Use quantitative and qualitative feedback to improve the lessons for the 2020 school year.

Methods

- We conducted a literature review of mental health curriculums and designed a participatory and engaging 3 day curriculum.
- Piloted the curriculum at Whittier Elementary and Irma C. Ruiz Elementary.
- Administered a KAP (Knowledge, Attitudes, Practices) survey to students on days 1 and 3 of the curriculum.
- Administered the same KAP survey to a group of students that were taught the previously used mental health curriculum.

Day 1: Introduction to Mental Health, Emotions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What is mental health?• Explore connection between mental and physical health• Emotions and labeling them
Day 2: Stigma and Mental Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Brainstorm examples of stigma in general and around mental health• Practice supporting a friend and asking for help
Day 3: Stress, Positive Mental Health, and Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ways to practice positive mental health• Make a list of people, places, and activities that help us maintain positive mental health• What can we do when we're struggling with mental health?

Figure 1. Outline of topics included in the pilot mental health curriculum.

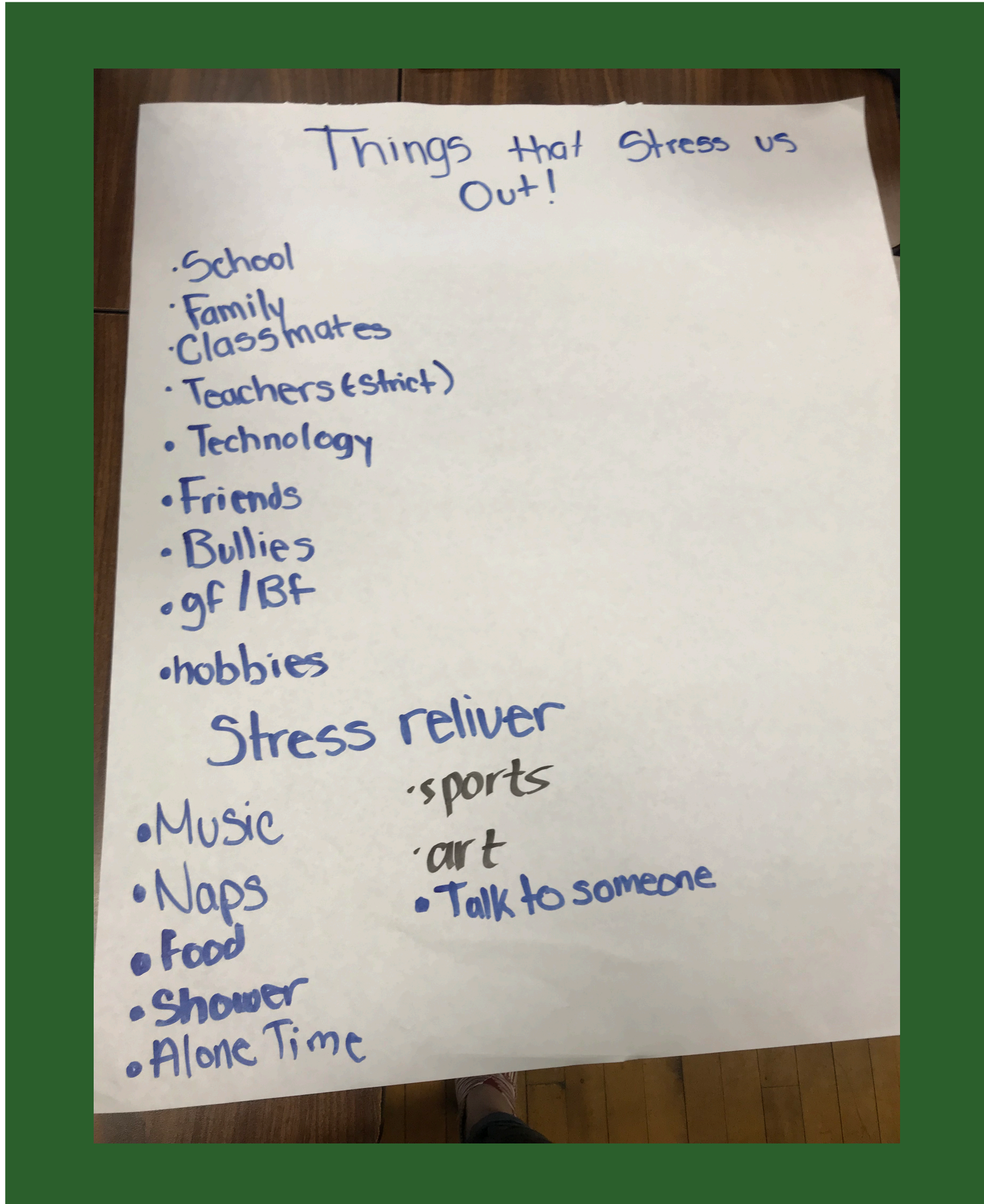


Figure 2. Students brainstormed things that make them stressed and things they like to do to relieve their stress.

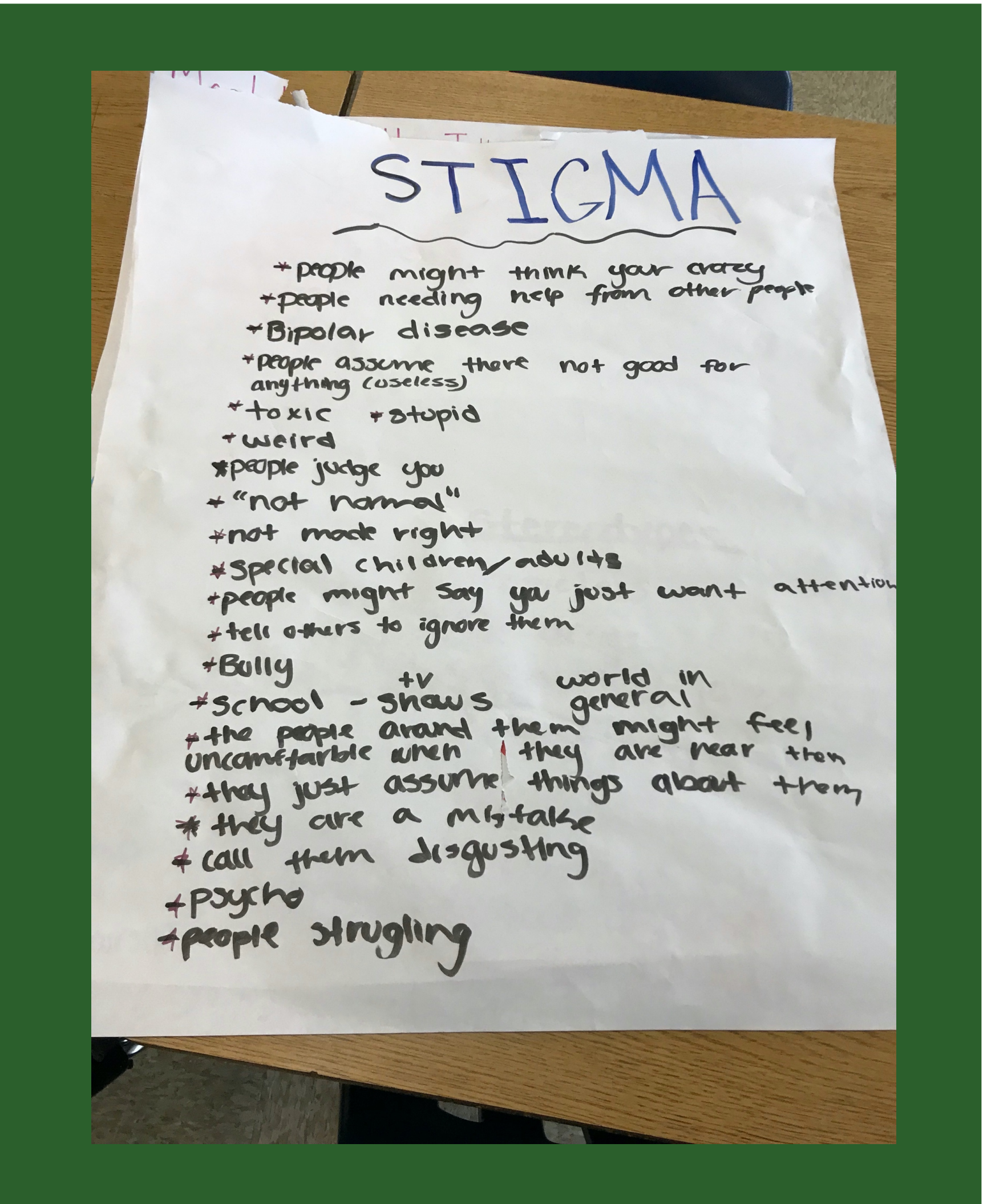


Figure 3. During the lesson on stigma, students brainstorm negative things they have seen or heard related to mental health.

Results

- 22 students participated in the new curriculum (10 from Ruiz, 12 from Whittier), and 11 participated in the control.
- 9 students that participated in the new curriculum (41%) and 7 from the control (64%) filled out the survey.
- Students that participated in the new curriculum saw a mean improvement of 13.4 points (SD = 19.8, range = -15.4 to 43.6), while the control group saw an average improvement of 4.8 points (SD = 19.8, range = -30.8 to 30.8).

Key Lessons

- We found that, in general, students were unafraid to talk about mental health and were very interested in the topic.
- Learning through activities was much preferred to any type of lecturing.
- Students are already talking about mental health, so we need to engage them in these conversations and provide them with accurate and relevant information to support their health.

Conclusion

- Students that participated in the new curriculum may have had greater gains in Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices than students who participated in the previous curriculum.
- Limitations of the analysis were a small sample of survey completion within schools in one neighborhood.
- The KAP findings and the qualitative feedback resulted in changes to the way the 5+1=20 mental health curriculum will be delivered this year and in the future.

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