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Missoula Middle School Climates as Perceived by Respect Club Members

Heather Engblom, Anthony Shipman & Mercedes Becker



Introduction

~School-based violence and perceived discrimination have been linked to poorer health outcomes for youth (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Saewyc et al., 2006).

~ Current research has documented the positive impacts of high school clubs that focus on inclusion and school safety, such as high school gay-straight-alliances (Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2011).

~ The current study sought to examine heterosexual and gay, lesbian, or bisexual (LGB) students' perspectives of safety and acceptance at the middle school level within a local network of clubs that promote inclusion and acceptance.

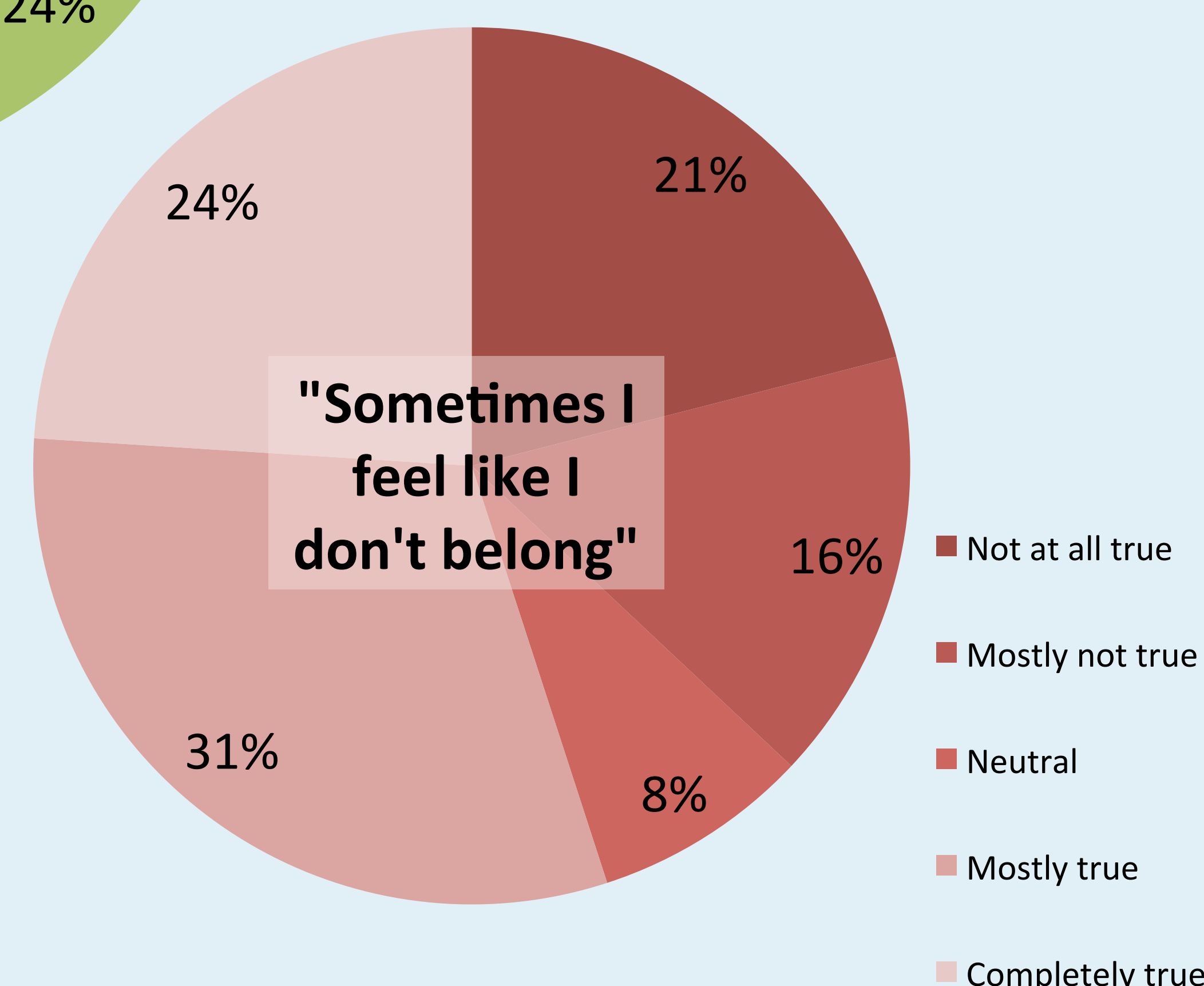
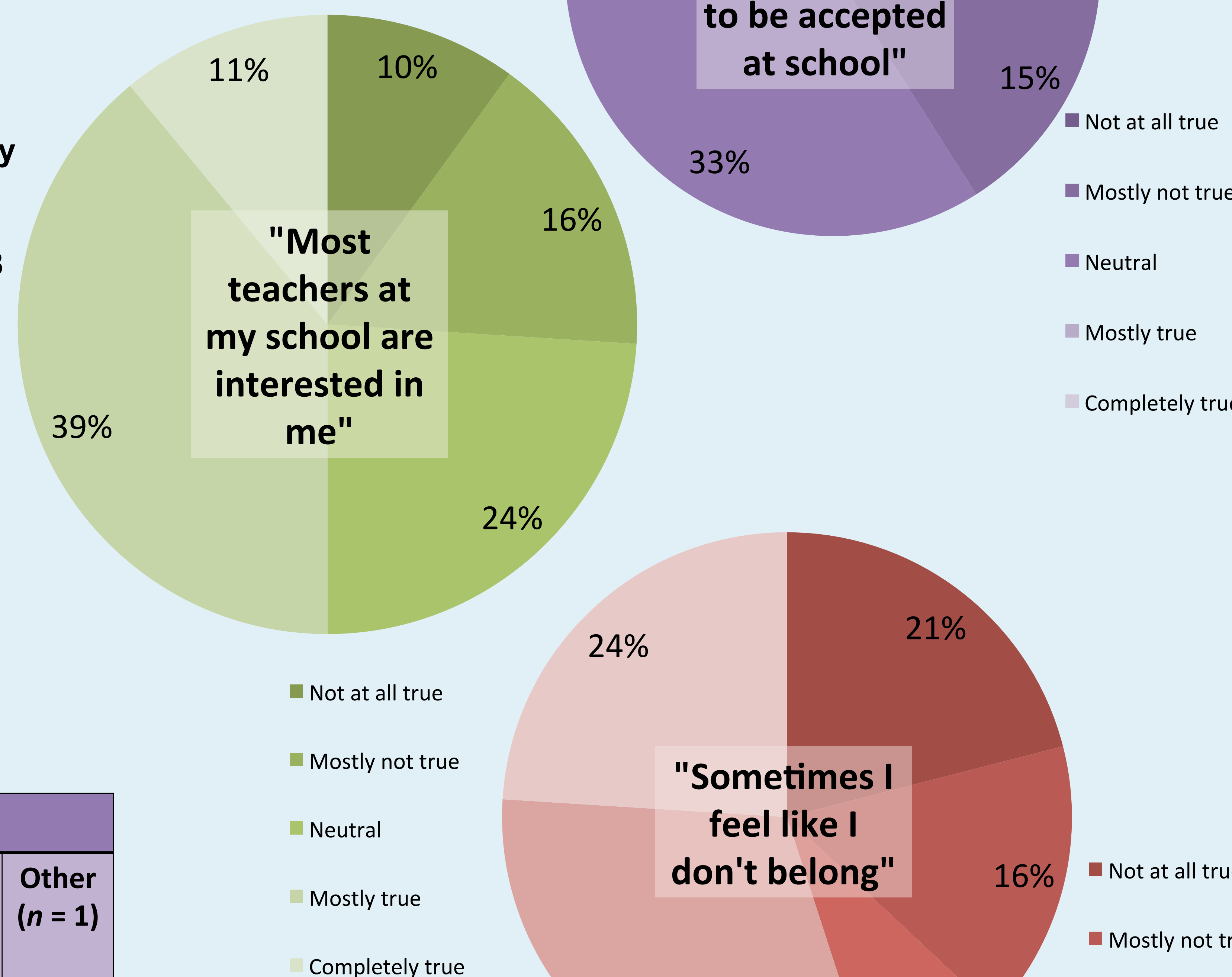
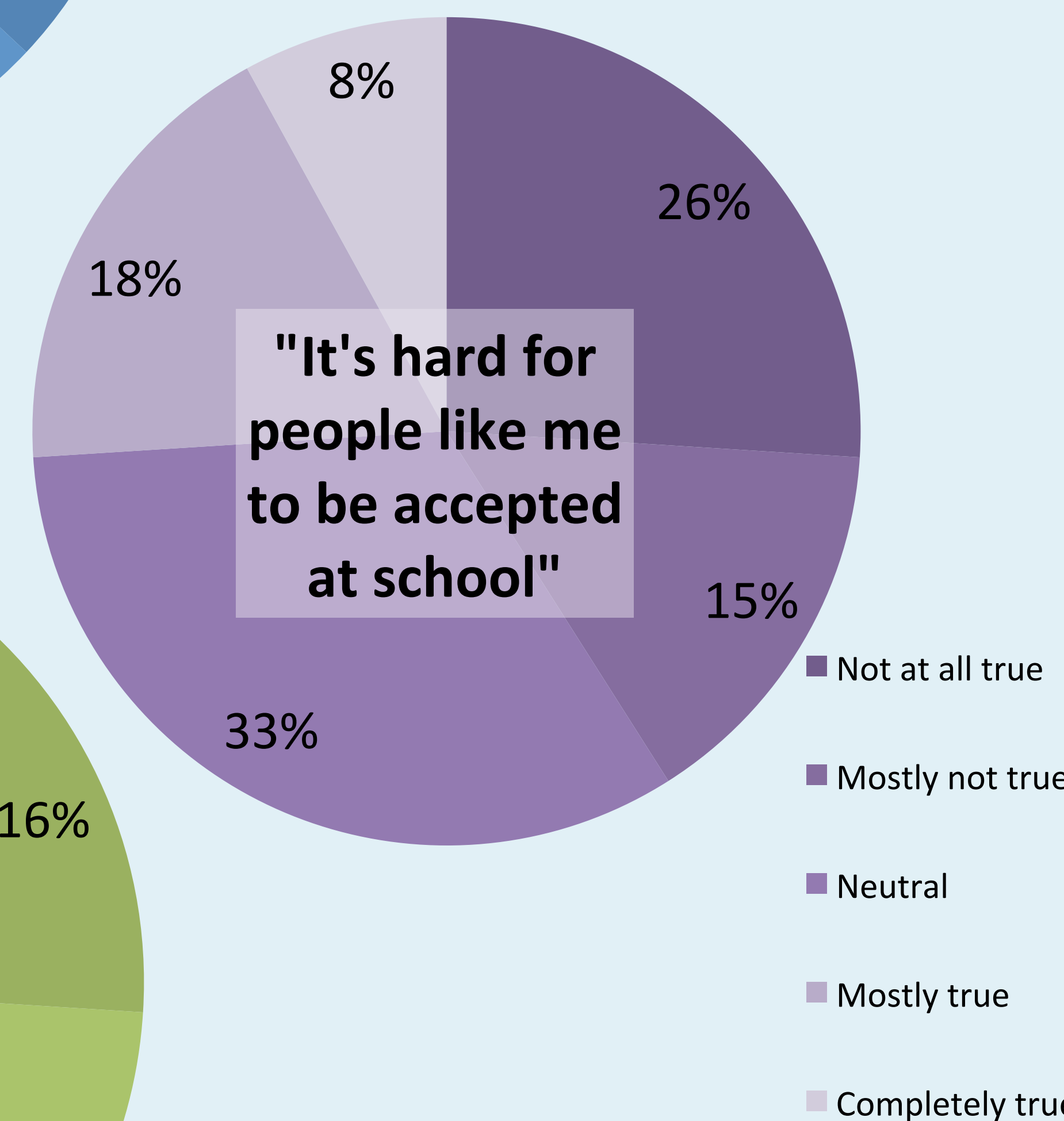
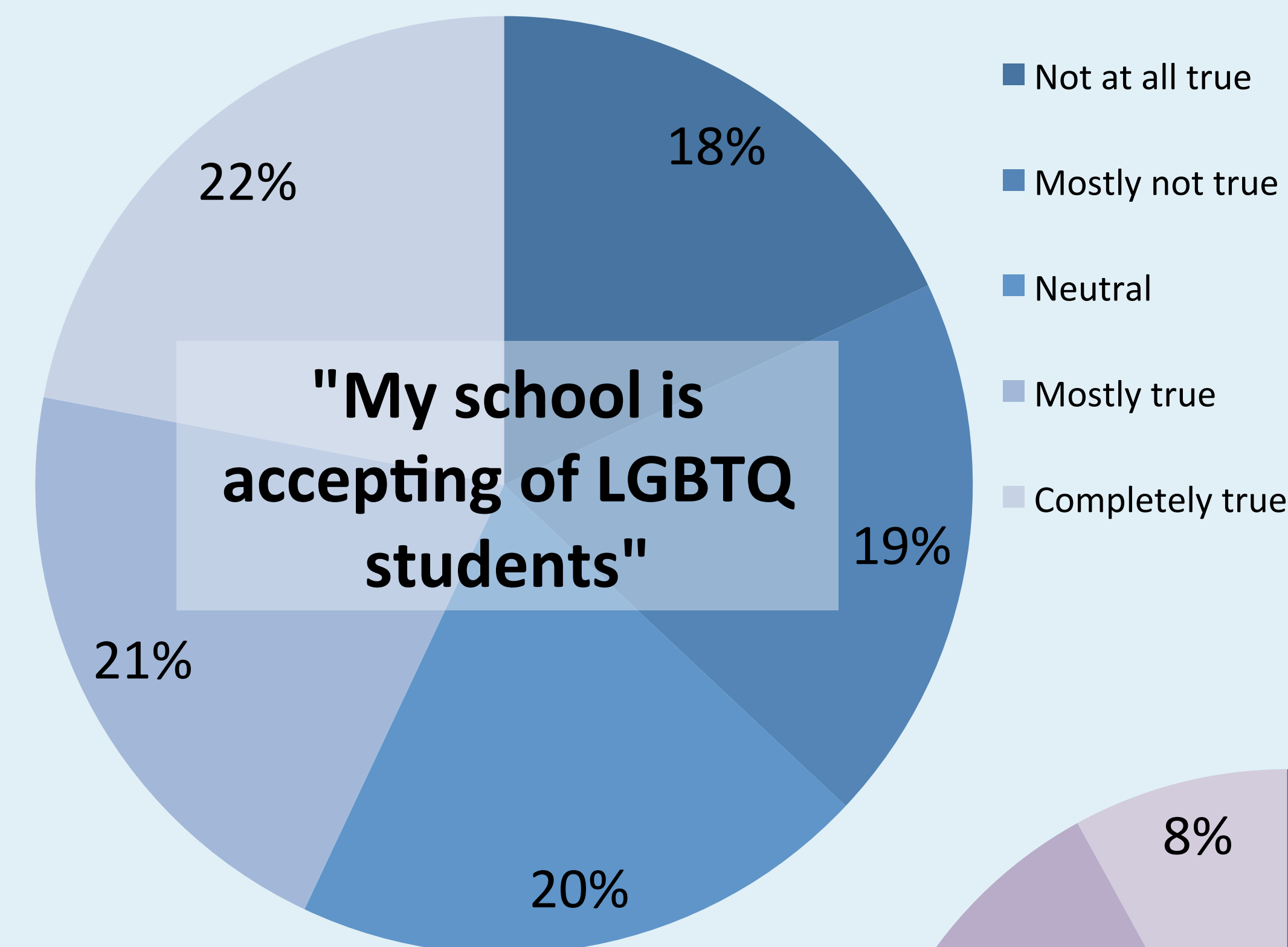
~Respect Club is an after school program that focuses on violence prevention, prejudice reduction, and leadership development in middle schools in Missoula County Public Schools District #1.

Methods

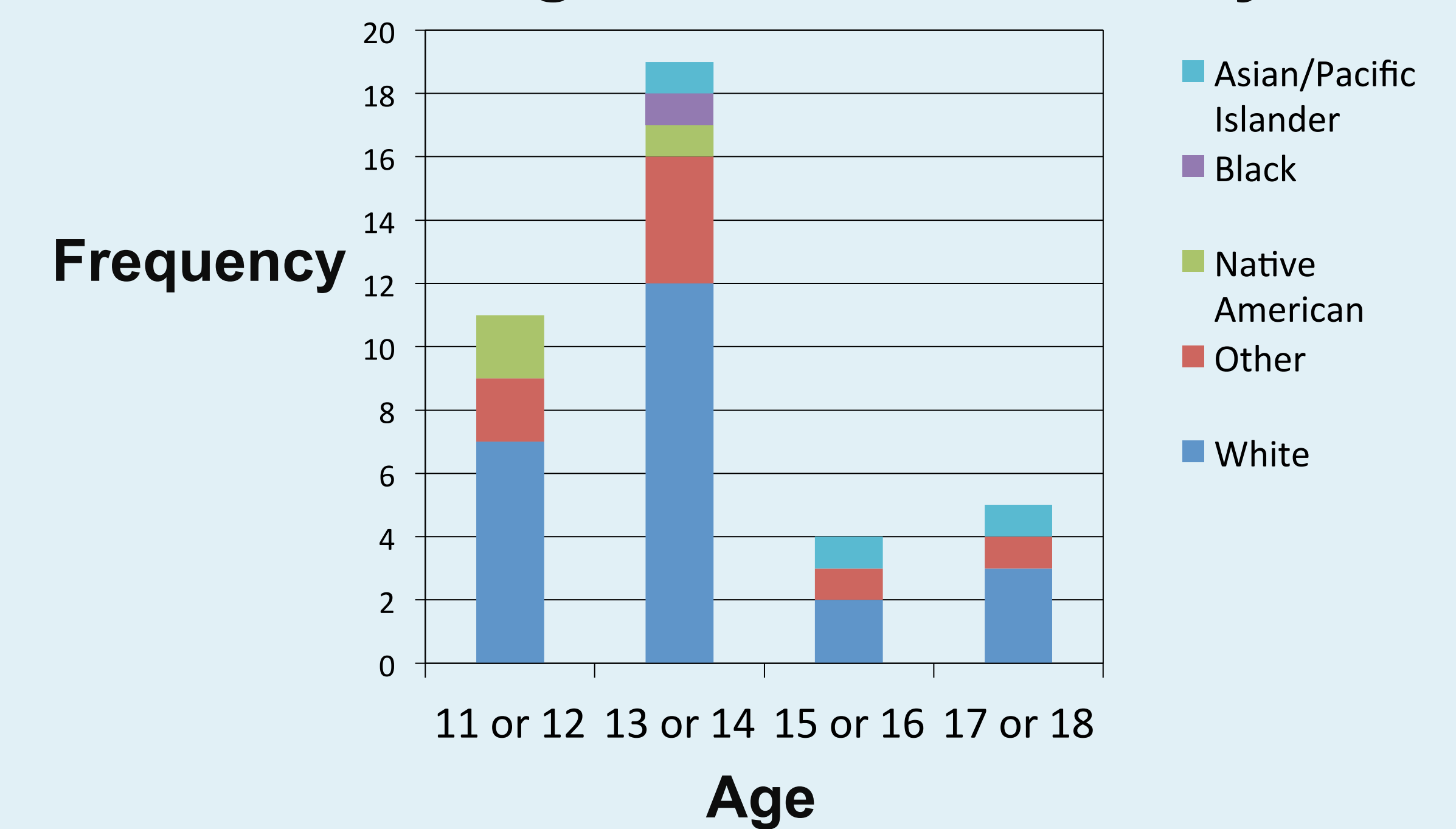
Forty-three participants were recruited through normally designated Respect Club meeting times. Participants were current or recent members of Respect Club, had provided parental consent, and were between 11 and 18 years old. Respect Club facilitators introduced the principal investigator and asked for volunteers to take an anonymous paper and pencil survey. The survey consisted of 26-items, including demographic information, questions targeting individual perceptions of belonging, acceptance, and safety at school. Response options ranged from 1-5 on a Likert scale, with 1 being "Not at all true" and 5 being "Completely true." This study was approved by the IRB prior to data collection.

Demographics

| Participant Gender by Sexual Orientation | | | | | | | |
|--|--------|------------------------|------------------|-------------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|
| Gender | Total | Gay or Lesbian (n = 2) | Bisexual (n = 3) | Straight (n = 24) | Queer (n = 2) | Unsure (n = 3) | Other (n = 1) |
| Female | n = 26 | 1 | 2 | 16 | 2 | 3 | 2 |
| Male | n = 10 | 1 | 1 | 8 | 0 | 0 | 0 |



Age and Race/Ethnicity



Results

~Survey responses were entered into SPSS. We ran descriptive statistics on demographic information and responses to individual questions.

~ Question responses were organized according to the percent of youth who endorsed each answer option.

~Participants reported feeling that they didn't belong (55%) and that they felt it was difficult for others like them to feel accepted (26%).

~In regards to teacher-student interactions, 51% of participants reported feeling as though teachers showed interest in them, while the remaining 49% of participant responses indicated neutrality or disagreement with the statement.

~When asked about LGBTQ students, 37% of participants reported that their school was not accepting of LGBTQ students.

Conclusions

~Students' perceptions of inclusion and acceptance at school varied substantially, which highlights the need for programs that promote diversity and acceptance for all students, such as Respect Club.

~A substantial portion of a mostly-straight participant group reported that their schools would likely be unaccepting of LGBTQ students, highlighting the need for increased attention and awareness in middle schools regarding sexual orientation and gender diversity.

~ Further research should also address the perceptions of acceptance and safety by LGBTQ students, and how these might differ from the current sample.