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Identity and Advocacy: The Missing Components in Promoting Social-Emotional Health and Self-Regulation for Multiply Marginalized Girls

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Abstract

Girlhood has been a topic of great interest in the last decade. As individuals have examined the lack of girls in STEM or the increase of bullying in girls, there has been a push to understanding the differential experiences along gender-based lines. In this study, the researchers highlight the results of the successful implementation of a group-based curriculum that utilized identity and advocacy as critical components in a treatment package focused on self-regulation. Using a pretest-posttest design, the researchers found a statistically significant difference in several key areas that are of key importance when supporting the needs of adolescent girls. The researchers will discuss the findings of this pilot study, limitations, and recommendations for further research.

Keywords: girlhood, multiply marginalized, advocacy, empowerment, and intersectionality

Introduction

In 2017, Georgetown Law School's Center on Poverty and Inequality released the report "Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girl's Childhood" which focused on the adultification of black girls in educational, justice, economic, and welfare contexts. In this report, Epstein, Blake, and Gonzalez (2017) provided the first data-based link that adults view "black girls as less innocent and more adult-like than their white peers" (pg. 1). Similarly, Morris (2016) provided the first glimpse into the damaging effects of pushout and criminalization on the black girl in educational spaces as young as preschool. For black girls with disabilities, Annamma (2018) writes that "once these [dis/abled] girls are "caught in the gaze of the "prison nation, this cycle became a permanent fixture in their lives." The Commission on the Status of Women (2017) highlighted the issues that women and girls with disabilities face in both private and public sectors as they strive for economic independence.

In the face of interruption, pushout, oppression, and disillusionment; the sustaining of a "girlhood" that is defined and managed by the very young women for whom it matters most - is necessary. According to Pipher (2000), adolescents face enormous cultural pressure to develop a "false self" while abandoning genuine interests and passions in lieu of a more socially-acceptable persona. In order to meet societal expectations, females lose the "honest" part of themselves, meaning that they suppress their true opinions in favor of finding acceptance or avoiding punishment from school officials and peers.

Purpose

In this investigation, the authors implemented an original curriculum of ten psychoeducational lessons that are associated with an increase in self-concept, an improvement in attitudes toward women, an improvement in body image, an increase in conflict resolution skills, an increase in healthy friendship skills, and a diminishment of relational and social aggression. According to Mary Pipher (2000), adolescents face enormous cultural pressure to develop a "false self:" abandoning genuine interests and passions in lieu of a more socially-acceptable persona. In order to meet societal expectations, females

lose the “honest” part of themselves, meaning that they suppress their true opinions in favor of finding acceptance.

Girls with marginalized socio-cultural identities experience these dynamics even more acutely. These discrepancies between the traditional gender expectations that also intersect with race place girls in a unique conundrum – for they find themselves responding to the multiplicative effect of being a girl and being marginalized according to race, ability, socioeconomic status, or housing insecurity. As they process these negative labels from peers and others, they turn to their false selves in order to survive. They create alternative modes of belonging within this restrictive culture and will conform to the group in order to promote their own feelings of self-worth (Ellis & Zarbatany, 2007). However, this can be detrimental, especially during adolescence. It is essential that educators, and the teens themselves, understand both the need for belonging and the powerlessness that can result from that need, in order to understand the group dynamics and power hierarchy that exist in teen friendships. For those that are multiply marginalized, this is especially critical.

Research Questions

In a sample of at-risk early adolescent girls, what are the effects of a curriculum designed to promote healthy friendships, identity development, and leadership skills upon the following elements?

- Self-concept and attitudes toward women
- Body image
- Conflict resolution skills
- Friendship (pro-social) skills
- Behaviors of relational and social aggression

Methods

Participants

In this study, the participants included 28 early-adolescent female students who attended grades 6 - 8 in Southwestern PA. All of the participants attended public school. These students were considered to be dually disadvantaged (e.g., come from a non-majority background and were financially at-risk).

Procedures

This study was confirmed to be exempt by the Institutional Review Board. This study employed a quasi-experimental Pre and Posttest Design. To be included in the study, participants were recommended by their teachers or another educator at their school and must be considered dually disadvantaged (e.g., come from a non-majority and financially at-risk background). All students and parents completed consent forms prior to the beginning of the study. Prior to participating in the activities of the curriculum, a battery of instruments was administered. After pretest data were collected, the ten lessons were implemented. The lessons were implemented by graduate students in special education or school psychology. After successful completion of the curriculum, the second battery of instruments were completed by participants. The students also completed a social validity questionnaire and a demographic survey.

Measures

Prior to beginning the curriculum, the researchers had participants complete the measures as listed in Table 1. These measures were given across two sessions prior to the start of the curriculum. During the pre-test, each participant completed paper-based versions of the measures in small groups. The same procedure was completed for the post-test in the two sessions following the conclusion of the curriculum. The researchers conducted each of these sessions at the schools.