Engaging marginalized youth in positive identity development

The Changing Lives Program

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Context: Alternative high schools, Miami, Florida, USA

- Functioned as a “last stop” for students at risk for school dropout
- Students referred to alternative high schools because of:
  - Absenteeism
  - Academic failure
  - Chronic disruptive behavior
  - Identification as a potential dropout

- Marginalization: disempowering urban contexts
  - Poverty
  - Lack of resources
  - Exposure to violence
    - **Victim** of: mugging (37.5%), stabbing (19.8%), shooting (10.5%)
    - **Witness** of mugging (86.5%), stabbing (63.5%), shooting (60.4%), dead bodies (66.6%), suicide (19.8%), murder (41.6%)

Dade County Public Schools, 1986

Berman, Kurtines, Silverman, & Serafini, 1996
CHANGING LIVES PROGRAM
Miami, Florida, 1995-2011

• Goal: positive qualitative change in the life course, from negative direction to positive
  • Life challenges = opportunities for mastery experiences
  • Intervention strategy = facilitate mastery experiences

Theory of How Lives Change

Transformative Actions → Mastery Experiences → Identity Development → Life Course Change

Actions to solve life’s problems → Sense of control and responsibility; insight → Sense of direction and purpose → Change in life direction
1. Engagement

- Building connections between people in ways that create group cohesion.
  - Empathy, praise, attention in a close relationship $\rightarrow$ connectedness (Karcher, Holcomb, & Zambrano, 2008)
    - Vertical relationships (adolescent $\leftrightarrow$ facilitator)
    - Horizontal relationships (adolescent $\leftrightarrow$ group)
2. Participatory Co-Learning

- **Participatory co-learning** = collaboration between experts:
  - Problem posing = collaborate to identify the right problem to solve (co-construct the problem)
  - Critical problem solving = collaborate to identify the right solution (co-construct the solution)

- Based on Freire (1983): Replace teacher-student dichotomy with a problem-posing dialogue
3. Transformative Actions

- Implementing the solution (i.e., doing something)
  - Creates mastery experiences (Bandura, 1997)
- Life course mastery experiences
  - transform the way youth understand and feel about their capacity to determine who they are and where they are going in life (Kurtines et al., 2008)
Life course narrative

Most important life goals

Life change goals

Critical problem solving

1. Engagement

2. Participatory Co-Learning

3. Transformative Actions

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Structured content

Intervention Processes:

Identity Processes:

Self-Discovery
(Uncovering personal strengths and potentials)

Self-Construction
(createing own solutions to life’s problems)
Previous findings: Self-constructive identity processes

- Two quasi-experimental trials:
  - Ferrer-Wreder et al. (2001; N = 92): Intervention-related increase in self-construction processes
    - Sense of control over and responsibility for life change goal
  - Eichas et al. (2017; N = 209): Intervention-related increase in self-construction
    - Sense of control over and responsibility for life change goal
- Other findings:
  - lesser decrease in self-discovery
  - life goal development \(\rightarrow\) reduction in internalizing problems
Main research questions

• Are intervention processes (engagement and participatory co-learning) associated with
  • increased self-constructive identity processes?
  • increased mental health?
The present study

- 236 adolescents (143 females, 93 males) aged 14-19 attending alternative high schools in Miami-Dade County Public Schools between 2003 and 2008
  - Participated in the Changing Lives Program based on school counselor/teacher/student request, attended at least four sessions
- Changing Lives Program groups were organized and implemented through schools’ on-campus counseling program.
  - met for approximately 45 minutes every week for 8 to 12 weeks (Fall or Spring semester)
  - group members: 4-6 adolescents
  - intervention team: facilitator and co-facilitator (graduate psychology students), group assistant (undergraduate psychology students)
- Assessment:
  - Pretest (T1) = week before start of group sessions
  - Session-by-session evaluation of intervention process
  - Posttest (T2) = week after end of group sessions
Measures

- **Session Impact**: Youth Development Project – Session Evaluation Form (YDP-SEF; Bussell & Kurtines, 1999) collected immediately after each session
  - 10 items on 5-point scale from 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Very much*), adapted from Elliott and Wexler’s (1994) Session Impacts Scale
  - Bifactor model: Specific engagement and participatory co-learning factors
    - Group Impact (GI), 3 items, $\omega = .70$
      - (e.g., “I felt that the group supported and encouraged me”)
    - Facilitator Impact (FI), 2 items, $\omega = .85$
      - (e.g., “I felt that the facilitator supported and encouraged me”)
    - Skills Impact (SI), 2 items, $\omega = .81$
      - (e.g., “I learned things that will help me with my problems”)
    - Exploration Impact (EI), 2 items, $\omega = .72$
      - (e.g., “I felt I had a chance to talk about new and different points of view”)
  - General Session Impact, 10 items, $\omega = .97$
Measures

- **Self-Construction: Personal Responsibility Measure (Ferrer-Wreder et al., 2002)**
  - Life challenges subscale: 4 items on 5-point scale from 1 (None) to 5 (Total)
  - Sense of control over and responsibility for actions and consequences associated with life challenges (sample item: “How much control do you have over your decisions and actions?”)

- **Mental Health: Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (Keyes, 2005)**
  - 13 items on a 5-point scale from 1 (almost never true) to 5 (almost always true)
  - Emotional wellbeing, psychological wellbeing, and social wellbeing as indicators of mental health
Outcome Process Model

Semesters of Program Development

Perceived Session Impact

Program experience at semester of participation
(items)

Self-Construction at T1
C

Mental health at T1
F

Session Attendance
# of sessions

Pretest

Posttest

Average impact of sessions attended

Group
Facilitator
Skills
Exploration

(e8) (e9) (e10) (e11)

Average impact of sessions attended

Cryptic text

Program experience at semester of participation

Parcels

Items

(items)

(parcs)
Outcome Process Model

Program Development → Session Impact

.06 [.002, .12], Std. Est. = .15

Session Impact → Mental Health:

.27 [.07, .48], Std. Est. = .24

Self-Construction → Mental Health

.28 [.02, .55], Std. Est. = .25

Session Attendance → Self-Construction

.08 [.04, .11], Std. Est. = .11
Limitations

- (1) Data limitations:
  - Archival data
  - Self-report only
  - Inconsistent attendance from week to week

- (2) Did not assess effect of change in session impact (session-to-session or trajectory)

- (3) Left out variable error (LOVE) problems?:
  - Student’s transformative actions
  - Facilitator’s experience, facilitator’s skill
  - Home/school environment
Conclusions

• General effect on mental health

• No evidence of a specific effect on self-constructive identity processes—effects on self-construction must work through other processes

• For the program, session impact improved over time

• Self-constructive identity processes are longitudinally linked to mental health

• Broader conclusion:
  • need to link intervention outcome to intervention process to understand how youth development programs work
Thank you.
References


References

