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Resilience in Urban Middle School Students: The Impact of Character Education

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Abstract

There is a benefit in promoting character education in urban school settings. Character education could foster traits of resiliency and support youth in recognizing their innate abilities to become successful future citizens and leaders despite the adversities they may encounter. Resilience is an adaptive behavior trait that combats adversity. The recent research on resilience and youth is a growing topic due to the benefits of positive youth development. This literature review and study will explore characteristics of resilience and character education to identify a correlation between the two principles in regard to positive development within urban youth. Resilience traits such as purpose, problem solving, social competence, and autonomy will be the focus while incorporating character education traits such as trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, caring, fairness and citizenship.

Resilience in Urban Middle School Students: The Impact of Character Education

In the aspect of life adversities, many urban youth are at-risk of developing behavioral and mental health issues that can impact their educational growth and development as a result of life adversities (Ginsburg, 2011). Despite the challenges often found in life, some youth remain well-adapted and thrive; a term referred to as resilient. Resilience can be defined as the ability to cope and persevere through stressful situations and can also be looked at as adaptive behavior (Clinton, 2008). Clinton (2008) elaborated that resilience refers to doing well, despite adversity. Behaviors associated with the term are not simply part of someone's personality but may be encouraged through personal/social development such as traits of character education.

Urban students are sometimes viewed as at-risk youth and face harsh conditions within their community (Leff et al., 2009) and yet resilience is a positive trait that has been shown to combat adversity. The difficulties youth face in an urban community often times are challenging to withstand. Additionally, Adolescent is typically a stage in human development where one begins to find meaning and sense of purpose. Resilience may serve as a buffer to ones reaction to such difficult events such as a loss of a parent, friend, or loved one, violence and gangs, drug use, and lack of structure at home, school, and within the community.

Review of the Literature

This literature review will explore characteristics of resilience and character education to identify a correlation between the two principles in regard to positive development within urban youth. Resilience traits such as purpose, problem solving, social competence, and autonomy will be the focus. Historically, character education aspects have remained a vision in The United States of America.

Character Development in School Settings

Character development has been an objective of the American education system since its beginning to foster such development. Thomas Jefferson and Horace Mann considered universal public education as a lever for instilling in children the values such as respect, loyalty and self-discipline necessary to develop well-rounded citizens (Seider, 2013). Character has been an initiative of the educational system to benefit our society.

Character education, as is defined by the Character Education Partnership (2010) as the intentional effort to develop values that are widely affirmed across all cultures including urban culture. Character education promotes positive morals and benefit to youth by the development of encouraging purpose, problem solving, social competence and autonomy especially when facing challenging times. Ginsburg (2011) explained the more character one possesses the more likely they are to return to their core set of values during times of crisis. Hence, they are more resilient during trying times.

Purpose

Wagnild and Collins (2009) identified a sense of one's own meaning or purpose in life as the most significant characteristic of resilience because it lays the foundation for the other four characteristics. Resilience is revealed in having a sense of purpose and a belief in a successful future, including spiritual connectedness, educational aspirations and motivation (Bernard, 2004). CE encourages positive morals and is beneficial to youth.

Kielty-Briggs, Akos, Czyszczon, and Eldridge (2011) stated themes of spiritual wellness can be addressed effectively without promoting the language of spiritual and religion and focus on issues of meaning and purpose. Congruently, there are examples of schools that have found

spirituality could demonstrate positive influences on youth and their sense of purpose (Kim & Esquivel, 2011).

The Renaissance Charter School (TRCS) is one example of a non-domination public school whose curriculum is based on core educational values of spirituality, meaning making, ethical awareness and actions. TRCS students report being more engaged in learning and show higher achievements than peers. In addition, students are more satisfied with their school experiences, particularly in terms of relationships with peers and teachers (Kim & Esquivel, 2011).

Character education and spirituality are connected through the means of building upon the relationship to yourself and others. Character education traits provide moral instructions that enhance personal strengths and resilience. In addition, Maslow (1954) proposed that coping behaviors always have an underlying connection between needs, goals, and purposes that play a role in motivation and problem solving.

Problem Solving

Bernard (2004) defined problem solving as the way one responds to events using abilities from planning, flexibility, resourcefulness and insight. Research suggests urban youth are vulnerable to emotional and behavioral issues thereby leading to a lack of problem solving skills, less focus on academics, and a heightened risk of dropping out of school (Leff et al., 2009). An important aspect of interventions directed at improving children's problem-solving and coping skills is personal control. Researchers such as O'Hearn and Gatz (2002) have assessed the association between self-control, responsibility and resilience in youth.

O'Hearn and Gatz (2002) evaluated skills necessary for students to devise different solutions to a problem and incorporate the perspectives of others in these solutions. Problem solving skills were measured by the students' success in abilities to recognize the end results, consequences and applying strategies. Indeed, a positive correlation between problem solving skills and knowledge was found; skills that are found to be developed through character education. Knowledge often relates to social competence (Partnership, 2010).

Social Competence

Developmental psychologists consider social competence to be a helpful predictor of youth's general positive adaptations and wellness (Bernard, 2004). At the root of social competence are character traits such as caring, trustworthiness and citizenship; traits that are important to forming relationships and positive attachments. Maslow (1954) mentioned love and belonging as basic needs for motivation and human development. He outlined if the need for love and belonging are not met it would be difficult for one to create healthy relationships and move towards self-actualization possibly resulting in mental health issues.

The basic needs Maslow speaks of also align with Erik Erikson's stage of psychosocial development (Hranitz & Eddowes, 1987). The first stage of Erik Erikson's psychosocial development is trust versus mistrust. If a child's needs are not met in the first stage, the child may learn unhealthy habits during the growth process such as avoidance of close relationships. Such maladaptive behaviors can lead to one becoming suspicious and consequently guarding themselves from others. Furthermore, if the child's needs are not met in this may lead to insecurities, a lack of independence, self-confidence, and social competence (Capps, 2012). Therefore, it is necessary to encourage and build on resilience and character education in a

school setting to encourage and promote youth to obtain social competence and intrinsic motivation (Bernard, 2004).

Autonomy

Autonomy, like most other resilience traits, is associated with positive and healthy development. Autonomy is defined as independence, the freedom of external influence and control (Benson, 2009). Erikson (1968) addressed autonomy and identity as two positive traits. Character education is one way to develop one's autonomy and identity by becoming more aware of the self and their role in society, and connections with others. Benard (2004) discovered the process of identity formation has an added element related to environmental circumstances in youth development. Additionally, lack of positive relationships could result in youth engaging in risky behaviors such as gang activities and violence. For example, youth with current or past gang membership were shown to have lower levels of resilience (Xioaming, 2002). In relation, the number of developmental assets one has the least likely they are to engage in such activities.

Benson (2009) proposed that both ecological and internal factors contribute to youth violence and the 40 developmental assets are used as predictors of living a successful life. Research has shown a higher number of developmental assets results in lower aggressive and violent behaviors in youth attending middle and high school (Benson, 2009). Additionally, internal and external assets have some overtone of value and are important predictors of healthy development in adolescents. It has been found that developmental assets tend to weaken over the high school years if a strong foundation of assets is not laid (Scales, 2005). Internal assets such as caring, integrity, and sense of purpose are a few examples of assets can set that essential foundation and align with aspects of both resilience and character education. The Search Institute

Insight and Evidence Journal (2003) introduced a study that found as the number of developmental assets increased so did grade point averages. The study suggests a positive relationship between current asset levels and future academic achievement.

Limitations and Conclusion

There is a dearth in literature in regard to resilience found within adolescents. Studies conducted among adolescents are more rigorous and time consuming due to the barriers of conducting research with minors. Additionally, in a school setting personal/social needs tend to not receive as much attention as academics resulting in less studies attending to such areas. Adversities from family, community, and school can impact urban youth's academic success. Fostering resilience through character education could be both a preventive and intervening measure to combat the challenges that most urban youth face in today's society.

The main findings of this literature review are that resilience and character education can be beneficial to urban youth, not only in education but in healthy development as well. The existing literature conceptualizes that there are common aspects of both resilience and character education that may contribute to positive youth development yet to date no researchers have undertaken a examining the relationship between the two constructs. Meaning making and purpose are ways to connect the importance of education to adolescents not only as a mandatory part of life but as an essential to one's overall well-being. Promoting character education could foster traits of resiliency and assist urban youth in recognizing their innate abilities for developing into proficient and healthy citizens despite the adversities they may face. Therefore, the researcher will explore character education and resilience and seek to answer if character education could nurture resilience in urban middle school students.

Method

Setting

The population served were youth who attend an urban public middle/high school in western New York. Over eighty five percent of the students in the school receive free or reduced lunch. The demographics of the districts population is 60.1 percent African American/Black, 25.6 percent Hispanic, 10.2 percent Caucasian/White, and 4.1 percent Asian/Native American/East Indian/Other. The average classroom setting has approximately 25 students. Within the 8th grade population there are 219 students.

Participants

Seven students participated in the study. The participants consists of four female and three male 8th grade students. The racial identity of the group members is 28.6 percent African (one male, one female) American/Black, 28.57 percent Hispanic (one male, one female), and 42.86 percent Caucasian/White (one male, two female). The students were selected by recommendation by administrators, counselors, social workers and teachers. Students were then given information about the group and then given a permission slip to be signed their parent or guardian. The requirements for the group were that the participants must be an 8th grade student at an urban public middle/high school in western New York and be willing to meet once a week during their lunch period.

Materials

The Resilience Scale (RS) was used to assess the student's level of resilience. The RS consists of 25 items that focuses on positive psychological qualities. The RS is easy to use, quick

to complete, and applicable to almost any age group. The RS has both content and construct validity and has consistently demonstrated internal reliability with alpha coefficients ranging from 0.84 to 0.94 (Wagnild, 2014).

During the first session the students will be asked to complete the RS will be given as a pre-test. After the RS, the remainder of the session were focused around a 6-week psychoeducational group based off of the six pillars of character education. The six pillars of character education are trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, citizenship, fairness, and caring. Each session was an hour long. The first 30 minutes consisted of an activity which was modeled after one of the six pillars of character education (e.g. respect) then followed by a discussion of the topic for that session. Questions guided by the group facilitator.

Results

The results of this study were used to determine if there is a correlation between resilience and character education. A pre and post-test were used to measure each student's level of resilience. A 6 week character education group was directed with the participants to determine the correlation between character education and resilience. The 6 week character education group consisted of a group activity followed by discussion questions that relate to the character word of the session along with the activity conducted.

The results focused on a pre and post-test results of the RS within the group. Descriptive statistics were used to compare the pre and post-test of the seven participants. The mean for the pre-test was 129, the median was 124, the range was 50 and the standard deviation was 18.65. For the post-test the mean was 137.29, the median is 139, the range was 35 and the standard deviation was 11.34.

<i>Resilience Scale Scores</i>				
	Gender	Pre-Test Score	Post-Test Score	Difference
Student 1	M	134	132	-2
Student 2	M	150	147	-3
Student 3	M	156	152	-4
Student 4	F	113	117	4
Student 5	F	106	139	33
Student 6	F	124	140	16
Student 7	F	120	134	14
Total Mean (N=7)		129	137.29	8.29

Table 1 shows the scores of the participants on the RS. On average males scored higher than females. On the pre-test male students' average score was 146.67 and fell in the moderately high range. The female students' average score was 115.75 and is in the on the low end range of resilience. Whereas, on the post-test the male students' average score was 143.67 dropped into the moderate range and the female students' average score was 138.08 which was a 22.33 point increase and moved up into the moderate range of resilience.

<i>Paired Two Sample for Means: Female Students</i>		
	<i>Pre-Test</i>	<i>Post-Test</i>
Mean	115.75	132.5
Variance	62.9167	113.667
Observations	4	4
Pearson Correlation	0.18723	
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	3	
t Stat	-2.7828	
P(T<=t) one-tail	0.03441	
t Critical one-tail	2.35336	
P(t<=t) two-tail	0.06883	
t Critical two-tail	3.18245	

Table 2 illustrates a paired two sample for means for the female students who participated in the study. The table indicates that the six pillars character education group was beneficial and raised the resilience scale score for the female students with 90% confidence. Reflected in the pre-test results females score lowered than the male participants however their scores for the post-test align more closely with the male participants.

Table 3			
<i>Resilience Scale Characteristics</i>			
	Pre-Test Means	Post-Test Means	Difference
Self-Reliance	24	27.86	3.86
Purpose	26.43	28	1.57
Equanimity	23.14	25.43	2.29
Perseverance	25.14	25.71	0.57
Authenticity	30	29.43	-0.57

Table 3 shows the five characteristics of the RS average mean of the participants on the pre and post-test. The RS items has five items for each of the five characteristics consisting of 25 items total. The five characteristics of resilience are self-reliance, purpose, equanimity, perseverance, and authenticity. The change in the mean from the pre-test and the post-test were not significant however, it is apparent that students scored highest in authenticity and lowest in equanimity on both the pre and post-test. Students lacked resilience scores in equanimity which relates a sense of balance and harmony and remaining calm when dealing with problems or pressures and had highest resilience score in authenticity which relates to an acceptance and knowledge of yourself for who you are and being comfortable with yourself.

Discussion

In the present study, the focus was on urban middle school students and their level of resilience before and after a 6 week character education psychoeducational group. Although there were not a large number of participants, the results of this study indicated that the overall average students had on the RS increased from 129 to 137.29. The female students in an urban school-setting increased their resilience scale score whereas, the male students' resilience score decreased but remained in the same resilience range which was averaged at a moderately high range.

The results of this study indicated that character education was beneficial in maintaining and increasing resilience in urban middle school students. Table 1 shows evidence that there was an increase in resilience within the participants. Furthermore, there was a greater increase of resilience in the female participants. The female participants' resilience score was more significant than the male students.

There is limited research on the direct correlation between resilience and character education. However, there is an abundance of research that connects aspects of character education and resilience. Elias (2014) reflected that there is no consensual language used for character education and currently promoting character development can be referred to as character education, SEL (Social-Emotional Learning), SEAL (Social, Emotional, and Academic Learning), PYD (Positive Youth Development), PBS (Positive Behavior Supports), Life Skills, and Emotional Intelligence (EI) among other terms.

Character development may serve as a buffer to negative life events such as a loss of a parent, friend, or loved one, violence and gangs, drug use, and lack of structure at home, school,

and within the community. Research by Armstrong, Galligan, & Critchley (2011) discussed EI as a protective factor and found that intrapersonal EI outweighed interpersonal EI. All five of the RS characteristics relate to intrapersonal aspects such as purpose, self-reliance, perseverance, equanimity, authenticity.

Bryan (2005) proposed that resiliency in youth can provide protective factors which are necessary to overcome challenging circumstance and risk factors that urban students endure. She further expressed the main protective factors that families, schools, and communities could offer youth is to foster resiliency through caring and supportive adult relationships, providing opportunities to student engagement and participation in schools and the community, and holding students accountable. Many of the notions mentioned were addressed through the 6 week character education group such as building relationships through mutual respect and caring and provided the students opportunity to learn about citizenship, leadership, and responsibility.

Berkowitz (2013) stated that when students feel respected, cared for, held responsible for their actions in a school setting then students are less likely to engage in undesirable behaviors and more likely to work harder and have greater resilience. Throughout the group sessions, it was evident that each member felt respected in the group. As the session went on the students began to trust each other more by sharing personal experiences. School-based character development can nurture a positive community where all stakeholders, especially students, will feel supported both emotionally and academically.

Limitations

This study had a few limitations. The most significant limitation to this study was that the research did not demonstrate enough statistical significance to correlate that the 6 week character

education group could foster resilience which relates to the limitation of a the small sample size. This could be addressed by running several character education groups and by setting school-wide character education initiatives to help to increase the sample size.

Another limitation was that not all the participants attended each session of the character education group. The overall attendance rate of the group was 88 percent. Two participants missed one session each, one participant missed two sessions and the remaining four participants had perfect attendance for the group sessions. The group sessions were during the students lunch period. Therefore, students may have had other appointments that would need to be rescheduled in order to attend group.

Implications

Character education may be important in the public education system but the main area of focus is academic development. Mathematics, English, Social Studies, and Science are subjects in which each student needs multiple credits in to graduate with a high school diploma. However, life is more complicated than these four subjects. An equal emphasis on personal/social development such as character education could increase academics by strengthening student engagement (Li, Lerner & Lerner, 2010).

When teaching character education characteristics such as respect, responsibility, and citizenship it can assist in fostering a positive school climate. Li, Lerner & Lerner (2010) mentioned that substantial effort needs to be put into promoting positive school climates in both middle and high schools and further linked academic competence through behavioral and emotional school behavior.

Another implication found throughout the research on character education is sustainability. Elias (2014) reported that it is not uncommon in educational policy, shown in character education policy, to have inconsistencies between rhetoric and action. Many schools implement a form of character education through district-wide, school-wide incentives as previously mentioned. A key to implementing these initiatives is follow through and commitment from all the stakeholders in the system such as students, staff, families, and the community.

Future Research

This study was comprised of 7 out of the 219 students in an 8th grade at an urban public middle/high school in western New York. Although there was a small sample size this research could be used to pursue further research on resilience and character education. When conducting research in the future, it will be vital to have a larger population sample to administer the RS to and to offer more character education groups or to implement a school-wide character education initiative.

Within the past years there has been a number of charter school in which character education is a key component to promote academic achievement and character development has been looked upon to cultivate academic success (Seider, Gilbert, Novick & Gomez, 2013). Character education efforts address outcomes such as emotional awareness, empathy, communication, problem solving, self-control, and community skills that have been linked to positive developmental and academic outcomes (Kress & Elias, 2013).

The developmental asset profile (DAP) would be another assessment to administer to urban students to assess the developmental needs of students. The DAP relates to the 40 developmental assets which consist of 20 internal and 20 external assets that are important predictors of healthy

adolescent development. Several adolescent's experiences when looking at the 40 developmental assets tend to weaken over the middle school years (Scales, 2005). With that being said, implementing character education would be an appropriate time to help enhance developmental assets in adolescents.

Many of the 40 developmental assets, both internal and external, have similarities with both character education and resilience. Internal assets such as caring, integrity, and sense of purpose are a few examples of assets that align with aspects of both character education and resilience such as meaning making and purpose. Not only are developmental assets identified as building blocks of healthy development there is also a correlation between the number of assets one has and their grade point average (Boosting Student Achievement, 2003).

Furthermore, when a student feels a strong connection to their school community their grade point averages are highest (Seider, Gilbert, Novick & Gomez, 2013). Resilience is a personality trait that encourages a person to strive beyond stressful times and relates to many characteristics of character education such as responsibility, respect, and importantly citizenship not only in their school community but in all communities in which the student is involved and could combat life adversities such as poverty, homelessness, violence, and substance use.

Mulloy (2011) stated interactive resilience processes develop out of a positive counterbalance of protective factors and risk factors in a person's life. Children and adolescents spend the majority of their day at school and researchers have concurred that school-based programs that are high in protective factors can have a strong impact on students both in education and personal achievements (Mulloy, 2011). Character education can be a way to increase resilience and contribute to positive student development as a whole.

Along with fostering resilience in students, research should be conducted on school personnel and families to foster a sense of community and encourage all parties to collaborate to create a holistic approach to students' development. Williams & Portman (2013) conducted a qualitative study with five self-identified African American students and the first theme to emerge was shared responsibility for educational outcome. All five participants emphasized the importance of collaboration between families, schools, and the communities to promote personal and academic growth among urban students.

In connection, two other themes identified by the participants such as allowing the students to be a part of the solution and school counselors as change agents (Williams & Portman, 2014). Part of creating a comprehensive school counseling curriculum is administering a needs assessment to the students which is a way for school counselors to be aware of the individual and group needs of their students. The needs assessment could be one way to involve the students and obtain their input as a group. Individual connections are also of high importance.

All five of the participants in the Williams & Portman (2014) study were in agreement that it is essential for school counselors to build genuine rapport with urban students and advocate for resources, programs, and policies to assist in student achievement. Therefore, a school counselor evaluation form should be administered to assess the effectiveness of the school counselor.

It is of immense importance to listen to each student allow their voice to be heard in the process of creating and developing their futures and communities. Also of high importance, student should be a part of creating a school-based character development program. This would create a stronger bond between students and the program.

Conclusion

Character education is an intentional effort to develop values that are widely affirmed across all cultures including urban culture to promote positive morals and benefit to youth by the development of encouraging purpose, problem solving, social competence and autonomy especially when facing challenging times (Character Education Partnership, 2010). Urban middle school student often experience several life adversities such as poverty, violence, substance abuse, and homelessness to name a few. Although this study had a small sample size, it has shown that the resilience range for each student either remained the same or increased a level through attending a 6 week character education group focused on the six pillars of character education.

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