



Qualitative evaluation of an after-school youth leadership program based on the perceptions of the program participants

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Introduction

After-school programs (ASP) provide an excellent opportunity to teach positive behaviors and shape the growth and development of youth (Mahoney, Parente, & Zigler, 2010). In the United States, an estimated 10 million youth participate in ASPs and over 1 billion dollars in government funds support these programs (Afterschool Alliance, 2014; U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2015). However, there have been mixed findings on whether or not these programs have a significant impact on their participants (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). The most popular services offered by ASPs include physical activity, school assistance, and STEM-focused activities (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). Fewer ASPs address the issues of nutrition, body image, and self-esteem. Since these issues continue to be relevant, it is imperative that they are addressed during adolescence in order to establish healthy behaviors and attitudes throughout life.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of an ASP for adolescent females. Specifically, this study assessed perceptions of program impacts on changes in dietary behavior, the way they view their bodies, and self-esteem. This program was evaluated from the participants' perspectives to better understand if it personally impacted them, and to gain insight into how future programs can more effectively target this population.

Methods

Five participants took place in the study, all were in 8th grade at a middle school in Long Beach, California and were members of the ASP called the Female Leadership Academy (FLA) during the 2015-2016 school year. Focus group questions using a semi-structured format were developed by the researcher. Questions were primarily aimed at assessing adolescent's perceptions of how the program has impacted their self-esteem and the way they view their bodies, knowledge of nutrition and changes in dietary behavior, and the overall effectiveness and enjoyment of the program. The focus group discussion was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the focus group leader. The transcript was independently analyzed by two coders; each employed a qualitative analysis technique that is best described as theoretical thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Steps in Theoretical Thematic Analysis	
Step 1:	Read and reread the transcript, noting down initial ideas
Step 2:	Develop a code list by organizing the data into specific and meaningful groups
Step 3:	Compare lists and agree on a common coding scheme
Step 4:	Apply coding scheme to the transcript (independently)
Step 5:	Match codes with data extracts that demonstrated that code
Step 6:	Sort codes into themes
Step 7:	Review themes: Check if themes work in relation to the coded extracts (quotes) and the entire data set, generating a thematic map of the analysis
Step 8:	Generate clear definitions and names for each theme

Results

Six themes were identified from theoretical thematic analysis of the focus group transcript. When assessing program impacts on eating habits, themes identified were practicing healthy behaviors and applications at home. When assessing program impacts on body image, appreciation for health and inner beauty and awareness of false media messages were identified as themes. When assessing program impacts on self-esteem, themes to emerge were embracing true self and realizing capabilities. In exploring overall perceptions of the program, participants used the words "family" and "trust." Participant quotes also shed light onto effective program components: increases in self-esteem and confidence experienced by participants appeared to be linked to the "sharing moments" of the program. Lastly, team bonding activities, such as camping and obstacle courses, seemed to evoke the strong sense of community and program acceptance felt by the program members.

TABLE OF KEY QUOTES SUPPORTING EMERGENT THEME		
Theme	N	Quotes
Practicing Healthy Behaviors	N= 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none">"I've been eating like fruits and vegetables for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and like, if I go out somewhere, like really nice, I'll try to stick to healthier foods instead of like you know, eating ice cream for dinner, like how I kinda use to eat.""I actually improved a lot because I didn't really want to eat like some fruits because I always thought it would taste bad or something. But like I started to try them and I actually do like them, and so like every day after school I would eat like a tangerine or a banana or something after school just for a snack."
Applications at Home	N= 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none">"...like if we go out to vacation or go to my grandma's house, like she normally has only junk food and I will actually make her go to the store and buy some fruits and vegetables so I could eat those.""I've actually encouraged my parents to um start putting more vegetables into the dinners and stuff, so that's really cool..."
Focus on Health and Inner Beauty	N= 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">"So I'm no longer ashamed of the way I look, I love the way I look, I really do. It helps me out a lot, in sports, in height, like I'm able to do, like I'm able to move my legs quickly because of it and I'm really glad about that.""...but yeah after I came here I realized oh maybe like your body really doesn't help you make friends it's like about what you say and what you do that helps you make friends so yeah. That's what helped me."
Awareness of False Media Messages	N= 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none">"... looking at magazines, and knowing that they're photo-shopped and their skin is not really like so perfect it was just photo-shopped and maybe they're wearing some make-up... so yeah that helped me realize that it's just not all real, like they look differently without photo-shop.""...and after we like realized this isn't how people really look , like there has to be something slightly altered, even if it's not much it's still slightly altered, this might not be how they really look like, so, I pay less attention to the media and like I watch TV less and pay more attention to people who do it themselves, like people who show who they actually are and what they actually look like..."
Embracing True Self	N= 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">"The way I act in here, I started acting like out there. Like I've been more goofy, more weird, I've been like actually feeling more happy than I used to and I know there's people that find it weird or off about me but I could care less because this is me and I love myself about it, that I'm allowed to show who I really am.""...because of this group because like it's not just me who's like an awkward, slightly social butterfly, and it's like other people too, and like I get to show it more in this group and like it travels out of the group and I show myself like, the weird part of me, to other people as well..."
Realizing Capabilities	N= 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">"...I feel more confident in stuff I do like I feel more confident in sports, I feel more confidence like saying, speaking out in class. Like when I'm asked to put my opinion on something or argue with someone like about what's right or wrong I'm more confident about saying it.""But then once I came in here, not only did I realize that I can be more confident about myself, I realized in my classes that I'm capable of doing of what they're capable of doing."

Conclusion

Results from the theoretical thematic analysis of the focus group were positive. Participants expressed improvements in eating habits and increased body positivity and self-esteem. The perceived positive impacts on eating behaviors, body image, and self-esteem demonstrate the potential benefits of programs to address common concerns in this audience related to nutrition, body image, and self-esteem.

Findings from this study should be considered in the design of future youth programs. Specifically, participants identified several components, such as hands-on activities, field trips, and structured "sharing moments" to be most memorable and enhance their experience. Additionally, addressing body image and self-esteem concurrently, and with a media literacy component, was found to be effectual in both areas and should be considered as well. These findings are supported by the literature (Brooks and Begley, 2014; Bean et al., 2014; Yager et al., 2013).

Though participants perceived program impacts in all areas, room for improvement exists. Consistent with the literature (Loth et al., 2016), many participants alluded to their family as being a barrier to eating more healthfully. To aid adolescents in changing their eating habits, future programs should address the barriers to healthy eating identified by participants, such as home availability and parental/family modeling.

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