Communities in Action: Mentoring Urban African American and Latina Adolescent Girls

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Abstract

Adolescence is a complicated stage of development for all youth between the ages of 12 and 20. This is particularly for girls of color. Phinney (1992) states that adolescents from ethnic groups who do not view themselves as part of the mainstream social organization will begin to form personal perceptions about themselves based on generalized ideas about ethnicity and race rather than their own individual capabilities. The research in this paper seeks to understand how mentors can help adolescent girls of color develop more individualized personal perceptions about themselves that lead to greater ethnic identify, self-esteem, and self-efficacy.

Keywords: Mentoring, Adolescent Girls, Community, Ethnicity

Introduction

Adolescence is a time when girls experience changing cognitive abilities, physiological growth, changing expectations from family, school, community, and increasing social opportunities to show their independence (Brittian, 2011; Erickson, 1968; Steinberg, 2005; Woolfolk and Perry, 2012). This is particularly true for girls who are African American and Latina who must navigate the realities of the dominant culture and the culture of their personal ethnicity. (Fordham, 1993; Nieto, 2009; Woolfolk and Perry, 2012). Creating a meaningful balance between the direct experience of personal culture and participating in a critical analysis of main-stream culture can contribute to a tumultuous time in one's development (Kiran-Esen, 2012). The adolescent must "learn to cope with racism, subtle and overt discrimination, and social psychological segregation. Both culture-specific and bicultural competencies are required" (Garcia Coll, C., Crnic, K., Lamberty, G., Wasik, B.H., Jenkins, R., Garcia, H.V., and McAdoo, H.P. ,1996, page 1907). Consequently, girls of color need places of emotional safety where they can voice their concerns, develop a self-defined concept of being a woman, and learn techniques to understand their current realities (Holcomb-McCoy, 2004).

Conceptual Background

Ethnic constructs. Ethnic identity is a construct that refers to one's identity or sense of self as a member of an ethnic group (Murry, 1996). In addition, the most fundamental aspect of ethnic identity is how strongly or positively the individual feels about their group membership (Phinney, 1992). While ethnic identity develops over a person's life span, it begins during adolescence. Young adolescents of races and ethnicities outside of the mainstream face even further challenges triggered by the need to decide how to blend within the mainstream

culture and their own culture. Rotheram-Borus, Dopkins, Sabate, & Lightfoot (1996) further explain that the ethnic identity of African Americans and Latino Americans usually falls under three different headings: (a) identification with the mainstream, (b) strong ethnic identification, and (c) bicultural identification.

People that have identification with the mainstream show that they can relate to White, non-Latino, and Protestant cultural norms and identifications. However, people who are categorized as having strong ethnic identification relate to themselves, to their country of family origin, and retain the traditional values, norms and behavior patterns. Finally, bicultural identification, or biculturalism, refers to identification with two distinct cultures within society, and often is caught in the quandary of being caught between two cultures (Guan, Lee, and Cole, 2012). Ramirez (1974) states that it is often beneficial for adolescents to claim a bicultural identification because they have both cognitive and behavior flexibility.

Garcia et al. (1996) also states that ethnic identity is created within the context of environment. The primary construct of this model is that of social position, which is mediated by racism, prejudice, discrimination, and oppression.

Mentoring solutions. Mentoring programs have been found to be helpful in creating solutions that aid adolescents as they navigate the complicated constructs of ethnic culture. Mentoring programs found in churches, schools, community organizations, and social service agencies have been noted to be successful in providing coping strategies for problem solving, (Lindsay-Dennis, Cummings, McClendon, 2011; Holcomb-McCoy, 2004). In addition, mentoring programs for African American adolescent girls are noted as providing a "safe place" to voice personal concerns, dialogue with elders, voice their concerns, develop a self-defined concept of being a black woman, and learn techniques to understand their current realities (Holcomb-McCoy, 2004; Robinson and Ward, 1991).

Research Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate how the Speak 2B Heard community mentoring group, assists both African American and Latina adolescent girls in an urban community in developing skills needed to navigate cultural complexities. The specific focus of the study was to better understand how the mentors provided tools to help adolescent girls develop positive ethnic identities in this group setting.
The three research questions that guided this study were:

> *RQ1*: What social challenges confront African American and Latina adolescent girls in   their community?
> *RQ2:* What social situations are difficult for adolescents to understand and how are they   dealt with?
> *RQ3:* How do adolescent girls define a healthy self-esteem?

A Community Context

Beginning in 1994, the Leslie K. Bedford Leadership Academy (LKB) was established to develop leadership skills of African American girls, in grades 4-12th in urban community settings. The academy is supported by professionals from the community who volunteer their time to help girls express themselves, learn to value themselves as individuals, and cultivate their unique talents. The academy uses camps, workshops, summits, and leadership projects to achieve their overall mission.

One initiative of the academy is the Speak 2B Heard forum designed to support diverse preteen age girls who were attending middle school. The group was designed to help middle school girls explore their own thinking, to help them to navigate their individual journeys and maximize their potential (Leslie K. Bedford, 2018). Within this group, middle school girls are provided with opportunities to interact with their peers and adults who serve as mentors.

Data sources

Fifty girls were recruited from ongoing LKB programs to participate in the Speak 2B Heard mentoring forum. Participants were organized into small groups according to their geographic location. The group consisted of girls from various backgrounds: 84% African American girls, 14% Hispanic girls and 2% other. Ages of the girls ranged from 11 to 13 years.

Table 1 *Distribution of Participants by Groups, Race, and Age*

Groups		Race	Age 11	Age 12	Age 13
Group 1					
	24	African American	14	7	3
	3	Latina	3	0	0
	1	White	0	0	1
Group 2					
	18	African American	10	5	3
	4	Latina	0	3	1
	0	White	0	0	0

Data Analysis

Structured interviews were conducted to examine the research questions and comparative methods (Glaser and Strauss, 1971) were used to explore the themes. This systematic approach involved open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. In the open coding phase, the researchers carefully read the responses to the survey questions. Next, researchers proceeded with axial coding, and identified relationships that were evident. Selective coding was deducted after the relationships noted were related to the variables considered.

Procedure

Participants attended the Speak 2B Heard mentoring forum and were involved in discussions that focused on ethnic identity. Questions that emerged from this major topic was written by past participants, facilitators, and board members in Speak 2B Heard. Mentors engaged the small groups of girls in a dialogue of these topics in ways that were relevant to them. For example, open ended questions were asked to stimulate a conversation with the groups. Each small group was also assigned a note taker that wrote down verbal responses to the questions. All of the open discussion question responses were then transcribed onto a spread sheet. There is one spread sheet for each of the three questions posed to the adolescent girls.

Researchers also took notes when working with the participants. These notes provided narratives including additional description and detail. Through the use of these notes, the researcher was able to point out details, such as quotes, scenarios, or images that are not always included within the data collection (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The young adolescents participated in several small group discussions in which they were given an opportunity to verbalize their perceptions on the topics in a more detailed, comprehensive manner. The mentors initiated a topic for discussion and provided examples of possible scenarios to reflect on. Mentors incorporated stories of personal experiences, short YouTube video clips, and current songs to connect to the theme in a relatable way. These pieces served as prompts to generate conversation on the topics.

The first topic was specifically related to life challenges. The mentor introduced the topic by discussing personal challenges, such as in school or home life related to life challenges. The discussion was generated by the following question: *What are some things that you find difficult and describe some of the ways that you deal with these difficulties?* The students watched the YouTube clip from Atchison's *Akeelah and the Bee* that highlighted the bullies that teased the main character, Akeelah, because she was smart.

Mentors created the second discussion concerning self-esteem with the question *Who and/or what influences you the most in making your decisions? Why?* A YouTube video clip from the movie Mark Waters' *Mean Girls* was shared with the girls. It showed a scene from the movie that highlighted the high school age girls being deceitful in order to be popular.

The third discussion topic concerned self-efficacy. The mentors asked the following question to stimulate group conversation: *What attributes do you associate with a girl your age that has a healthy self-esteem?* The mentors used the lyrics to the familiar pop culture song "Listen" by Beyonce (Knowles, Krieger, Knowles, Krieger, Cutler, and Proven, 2007) to increase conversation among the girls.

"Listen"

Listen
I am alone at a crossroads
I'm not at home in my own home
And I've tried and tried
To say what's on my mind
You should have known oh
Now I'm done believing you
You don't know what I'm feeling
Now I'm done believing you
You don't know what I'm feeling
I'm more than what
You've made of me
I followed the voice, you gave to me
But now I've gotta find my own

I don't know where I belong
But I'll be moving on
If you don't, if you won't

Listen to the song here in my heart
A melody I start, but I will complete

OH now I am done believing you
You don't know not what I am feeling I'm
More than what you've made of me
I followed the voice you think you gave to me

But now I got to find my own
My Own

Figure 1: Lyrics to the song, "Listen" used by mentors to increase conversation among the girls

Results

This qualitative study found evidence that preteen girls were conscious of their ethnic identity, self-esteem, and self-efficacy.

Life challenges. Responses from participants to the first interview question *What are some things you find difficult and describe some of the ways that you deal with these difficulties?* revealed three themes that these girls struggle with: emotional issues, complexities of family, and school. Emotional issues such as anger and self-control pose problems. The dynamics of families are also challenging. This theme included responses about

relationships within families as well as expectations from family members. School was also mentioned by participants as a challenge. Difficulties with content taught, teacher's attitudes towards students and learning styles were discussed. See these responses in Table 2.

Table 2: *Responses to Question 2: What and/or what influences you the most in making your decisions? Why*

Source of Support Identified by Participant	Response of Participant
Family	• *My Momma because she had a difficult time.* • *My brother, we are real close. I go to him for anything and everything.* • *My parents.* • *My goals.*
Friends	• My best friend. We have been through so many things together • My friend tells me I can do anything. • My friends, because I don't really want to talk to anyone else

Decision making. The second interview question asked participants *Who and/or what influences you the most in making your decisions? Why?* The two themes that emerged from participant responses were family and friends. Family members who influenced these girls were broadly ranged. They included Mother, Father, Grandmother, Grandfather, cousin, and siblings. Family members overwhelmingly influenced these participants. A second theme that emerged was friends.

Table 3: *Responses to Question 2: What and/or what influences you the most in making your decisions? Why*

Participant Response Themes	Selected Quotes
Family	• *My Momma because she had a difficult time.* • *My brother, we are real close. I go to him for anything and everything.* • *My parents.* • *My goals.*
Friends	• My best friend. We have been through so many things together • My friend tells me I can do anything. • My friends, because I don't really want to talk to anyone else

Self-Efficacy. Participants' responses to the third interview question provided data that prompted themes related to self-efficacy among the participants at the Speak 2B Heard forum. In response to the question *What attributes do you associate with a girl your age that has a healthy self-esteem?* the adolescents provided answers that were categorized four themes: positive physical health and appearance, exhibits kindness and happiness, is honest and confident, and maintains her outside appearance. Through their responses, it is evident that the girls pay attention to their peers, and have internalized an image that they see as positive. See the Table 4 to show girls' responses to the question.

Table 4: *Responses to Question 3: What attributes do you associate with girls your age that have a healthy self-esteem?*

Participant Response Themes	Selected Quotes
Positive physical health and appearance	• A person that takes care of their physical appearance. • Self-esteem shows if you're healthy. • She knows that she is pretty and doesn't care what people say.
Exhibits kindness and happiness	• Always happy • Kindness shows self-esteem
Honest and confident	• Girls that are just themselves and that don't try to be like others, they have their own ideas and opinions. • Open and honest with everything.
Outside Appearance	• Girls that have their own style and are not carbon copies of all their other friends. • Good dresser

Discussion

Adolescent girls of color are challenged early with recognizing their ethnic identity and may demonstrate higher self-esteem than their White counterparts (Gray-Little and Halfdahl, 2000). Consistent with this research, we found that most of the African American and Latina adolescents participating in the discussions with their mentors did reveal high levels of self-esteem. However, several of the participants exhibited lower levels of self-esteem than their counterparts.

Overall adolescent girls experience a sharp decline in self-esteem over the course of adolescence (Baldwin and Hoffman, 2002). Analysis indicates that the adolescent girls in this study are indicative of the various levels of self-esteem apparent on the growth-curve described by Baldwin and Hoffman. The consistency of responses within several of the survey questions reveal that as the girls' age increased there was a strong desire to maintain positive relationships with their peers. This is a struggle that often occurs during adolescence. Adolescent girls in particular, begin to feel pressure to act in ways that may not be consistent with their actual thoughts and feelings (Brown and Gillian, 1992). Girls would respond to questions in ways that show agreement and support for their peers' responses. In order to avoid disharmony or conflict, girls would become "silent" instead of providing a response that was the opposite of their peers' response.

Speak 2B Heard forums are a work-in-progress with developing preteen girls' ethnic identity, self-efficacy, and self-esteem. While a majority of the participants responded positively to the questions, there were a number of girls who did not provide responses that acknowledged these qualities. Hence, the value of these forums for adolescent girls cannot be ignored. Brittan (2012) notes that this is a very complex time for a developing preteen. Speak 2B Heard has provided an outlet for girls to be self-reflective and thoughtful of all of the trials that they encounter in middle school and at home. One participant shows her understanding through her statement "I tell my friends that [even though] we will get mad at each other, we can talk it out and still be friends." She shows maturity by understanding the importance of communication and showing self-efficacy.

Implications

Four major ideas evolve from this study that can lead to better understanding and practice of a community mentoring program with girls of color who live in urban settings. These ideas include: (a) the desire of adolescent girls to talk to a mentor in a social setting, (b) a mentor/mentee relationship evolves over time, (c) girls involved in community mentoring programs can develop stronger ethnic identify, problem solving, and self-efficacy, and (d) adolescents possess funds of knowledge can be used by mentors to increase self-efficacy . These ideas are described below.

First, the importance of providing a social group for adolescents to talk about relevant issues with mentors was viewed as desirable by the girls. In one meeting, the researcher noted several statements made by the girls that showed their appreciation for having an opportunity to talk. "Listen to our hearts. We are growing up; we are sensitive" and "We want to be able to express ourselves and be ourselves." The girls in the Speak 2B Heard forums felt comfortable sharing their thoughts and statements with the mentors available. Spencer (2007) noted the importance of open communication in the mentoring relationship. This fostered participants' trust in their mentors, much like the mentors in these forums.

Second, a strong mentor/mentee relationship evolves from stable ongoing contact that occurs over time. Pryce and Keller (2012) found that when the mentor/mentee relationship is stable, the bond was generally stronger. In the Speak 2B Heard forums, the preteen adolescents that were able to participate in the forums on a regular basis were able to reap the greatest benefits from their relationship with their mentors.

Third, for the teens of color, a strong mentor/mentee relationship based in community settings can help adolescent girls develop a healthy ethnic identity. The majority of girls involved in the Speak 2B Heard forums discussed pop-culture music, media, and texts that had a large presence in their daily lives. The mentors helped them navigate their feelings and ideas about these images. Though many conversations were complicated and difficult, the process enabled the girls to build personal constructs revealing a positive trajectory for developing a heathy ethnic identity, self-esteem, and in turn, self-efficacy.

Fourth, the mentors in this study used pop culture artifacts (i.e, "Listen" music lyrics and youtube videos) that were known to the girls to increase conversation. These are examples of funds of knowledge described by Gonzles, Moll, and Amanti (2006) are examples of strengths that the girls possessed before entering the mentoring discussion groups. Mentors wisely planned to use these artifacts and, in turn, promoted deep and meaningful conversations among the girls.

Limitations

There are several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings from this study. First, the selections of subjects were based on their enrollment and participation in the Speak 2B Heard program, therefore it is considered purposeful selection. The section facilitators used note takers to capture the participants' responses. However, the note takers were not trained in writing field notes which were hand written. The facilitator collected all of the handwritten notes, and typed them into an Excel spreadsheet. The facilitator then provided the researchers with the Excel file with the comments. This did not allow for the researchers to participate in the data collection process, although, they did have access to the facilitator who served as an informant.

Conclusion

The type of discussion presented in this study is one type of mentoring program that can help young adolescent girls of color identify their own thoughts and feelings. In addition, the discussion groups can help mentors understand the girls' growth in ethnic identity, self-esteem, and self-efficacy better. Once understood, the mentor can provide unique support for the needs presented by individual girls. The mentor/mentee relationship is one valued by the girls and when it is grounded in ongoing and trusting encounters, will produce the greatest gains for the girls.

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