Grief and Trauma-Informed Empowerment Summer Community Arts Curriculum: Qualitative Perceptions of a Pilot Implementation

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Abstract

This article aims to illuminate the perceptions of a pilot grief- and trauma-informed empowerment arts summer program for adolescents who lived in an at-risk Southern, urban neighborhood identified by the city in question as having a high percentage of street violence. The study it is based on was grounded in qualitative techniques, which consisted of focus groups and interviews. All focus groups and interviews were analyzed for themes to determine common experiences among adolescent participants and instructors responsible for implementing the curriculum. Responses from 18 African American adolescents and four instructors were included in the data analysis. Themes from focus groups and interview results were explored. Some themes included positive rapport with instructors, resistance to the psychosocial components of the program, satisfaction with changes made midway through the program's implementation, and greater levels of respect and transparency.

Keywords: adolescents, community violence, program implementation, trauma

Introduction

Incidents of violence plague many communities across the United States. Over 96% of youth have experienced or witnessed some form of community violence, which is exposure to intentional acts of interpersonal violence committed by individuals who are not intimately related to the victim (Community Violence Collaborative Group, National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2013). Such a staggering statistic is a clarion call to mental health clinicians, politicians, and other stakeholders to develop multifaceted strategies to address forms of childhood trauma such as community violence. Examples of community violence that youth experience are gang conflict, bullying, and shootings. Herman (1997) stated, "When the victim is already devalued (a woman, a child), she may find that the most traumatic events of her life take place outside the realm of socially validated reality. Her experience becomes unspeakable" (p. 8). Thus, the voices of those impacted by community violence must be centered in research scholarship. Centering marginalized communities illuminates the association between racism, classism, and community violence. Arts and culture have been used to promote social justice to validate the experiences of the oppressed and disenfranchised (Naidus, 2007). Throughout history, several forms of art, such as painting, poetry, and music, have been used to fuel social change movements (Abdel-Raouf, 2010; Lander, 2020). Additionally, researchers have examined art's role in enhancing children's awareness of injustice and systemic oppression.

Osei-Kofi (2013) used different modes of art to teach graduate students arts-based research. During the course, students participated in activities such as photovoice, poetry, ethnodrama, and collage making to illuminate themes that involved gender inequity, racism, and their personal experiences. At the end of the course, students showed improvement in their self-reflexivity. Hanley (2011) used theater to analyze social problems experienced by African American and Latino youth from poor urban communities where they engaged in theater to reflect on their personal experiences and imagine solutions to these problems. Because of their participation, they were able to express themselves and think critically about social problems in their communities and how they can promote social change. Duncum (2011) researched the use of physical public space to engage the public in issues of social injustice and found the use of engaging public space allowed the community to discuss, debate, and protest issues. These studies (Duncum, 2011; Hanley, 2011; Osei-Kofi, 2013) have suggested that using art to teach and address the problems of social injustice can increase a child's self-reflexivity to work through traumatic experiences.

The recent surge in research relating to childhood trauma has allowed practitioners to identify innovative methods for the treatment of childhood trauma. Allowing children the opportunity to be creative and use imaginative methods may help them overcome such barriers to expressing themselves (Ho, 2014; van Westrhenen et al., 2017). Because children often experience collective trauma from social injustices such as racism, poverty, and community disinvestment, art-making may help children transform their emotions in a way that can be analyzed by the maker and by others to increase the child's self-reflexivity (Osei-Kofi, 2013). The use of art—writing poems or stories, painting, drawing, or composing music—can be an effective strategy to improve the child's ability to analyze their emotions and process their trauma (McCabe, 2014; Schwan et al., 2018; Slayton, 2012).

Many cities have piloted citywide or community-specific programming to support children and their families. Community-based art projects can generate a sense of stability and pride in distressed neighborhoods (McCabe, 2014). Other researchers found arts-based programs with elements of environmental justice helped to transition communal spaces considered dangerous or violent into safe havens (Anguelovski, 2013). Slayton (2012) reported art had been successfully used to help youth reconstruct or reimagine a community to feel physically and psychologically safe. This point is crucial because the perception of one's neighborhood is related to psychological distress (Flórez et al., 2016). Further findings suggested that graffiti, as a form of art, allowed Israeli youth to cope with collective trauma (Klingman et al., 2000). Similarly, Schwan et al. (2018) reported art-creation projects positioned to address community violence helped youth cope with adversity, create meaning for their lives, and recover from trauma by creating safe places. The purpose of this study was to highlight the process and learning outcomes of developing and implementing a grief- and trauma-informed empowerment arts curriculum in a summer program for youth who reside in a Southern, urban city plagued by social injustices like racism, poverty, violence, and disinvestment.

Development of the Youth Empowerment Art and Design Curriculum

In 2015, an arts agency—one whose mission is to use art expression and design to address civic, social, and community development challenges—sponsored the development and implementation of a trauma-informed art and design summer program for high school–age youth in an urban city in the Southeast. The program was developed with the goal of facilitating community artists' support of youth impacted by neighborhood violence. The program developers believed that building artistic expression and design skills among youth with trauma related to community violence could promote healing and resilience and, at the same time, address neighborhood blight through community development.

During the spring of 2015, five leaders (i.e., two art instructors, a community artist, a developmental psychologist, and a school psychologist) met for two months to develop a community-based art curriculum that incorporated psychosocial components for high school–age youth to be implemented for a five-week summer intensive project. The school psychologist was an expert in trauma-informed and behavioral health care for youth. The curriculum development was

part of a collaborative youth empowerment initiative that sought to address (a) pervasive youth violence and trauma, (b) the prevalence of blight in the built environment, and (c) an underutilized workforce of artists and designers. The initiative had two aims: (a) to establish collaborative efforts between artists, mental health professionals, and youth participants by implementing an integrated art and design curriculum with established grief- and trauma-informed components with youth from underserved and marginalized neighborhoods who may be at risk for community violence exposure, and (b) to address neighborhood blight.

Many lessons were centered on understanding space and relationships within a neighborhood to create a sense of safety and optimism for the future. The grief and trauma components included affect modulation, active listening, effective communication skills, problem solving, perspective taking, and trauma-narrative skills. Thus, skills were identified that could be universal and helpful for all youth who participated in the program without the need to have youth discuss and explore specific traumatic experiences. Curriculum lessons and activities were designed to address the following impact areas: (a) art and design (b) academics (c) culture (d) community, and (e) youth development. Learning objectives included the development of specific skills such as problem-solving, effective communication, team cooperation, self-awareness, and positive self-regard. Activities were designed to be broad enough to be adapted to various timelines, structures (e.g., a 10-week afterschool program or 5-week summer intensive program), and educational contexts (e.g., a program run by a high-school teacher or a housing nonprofit seeking to engage young people). The current study was a qualitative evaluation of a pilot implementation of the youth empowerment art and design curriculum. High school–age youth participated in the program for five weeks, from 9:00 AM to 1:00 PM.

Method

Participants

After the team agreed on the curriculum final draft and it was approved by the executive director of the agency, curriculum developers sought a neighborhood for program implementation. Relying on the relationship between crime and trauma, curriculum developers used local crime data to select a neighborhood with high crime rates. The agency then collaborated with the city-sponsored jobs program that provided youth with work experience and an income during the summer. The city agreed to hire youth from the identified neighborhood to participate in the youth empowerment art and design program. The city-sponsored jobs program informed the youth that part of their job experience would be to explore their feelings, experiences living in the neighborhood, and coping skills. Eighteen African American high school students from 15 to 17 years old who all resided in the identified neighborhood, with the city's highest percentage of community violence, enrolled in the program and participated in the pilot study with four instructors. The students' legal guardians provided consent for participation. Two of the instructors identified as European American, and the other two as African American. Three of the instructors were artists and designers, and one was a school psychologist, who led the delivery of the youth grief- and trauma-informed components.

Neighborhood Area

The neighborhood where the study took place had been impacted by racial residential segregation, which had been correlated with violence throughout the city of New Orleans. The city was one of the first major cities in the United States to adopt racial zoning laws in the 1900s that were created to keep Black residents out of predominately White neighborhoods (Seicshaydre et al., 2018). To address violence in the targeted neighborhood, former Mayor Mitch Landrieu implemented the Ceasefire program, which was a version of a program developed in Chicago (Maggi, 2012). The program relied on staff trained in conflict mediation to stop shootings and murders before they happened. Though no official information could be found, it appeared the program ended when the former mayor's term ended in 2018. Also, we could not locate any data that evaluated the program's long-term effects. Further, researchers have indicated that even during the post–Hurricane Katrina period (i.e., after 2005), racial inequality has persisted for Black communities in the city; more affluent communities disproportionally benefited from the recovery and rebuilding efforts (Weil et al., 2021). Watchese et al. (2022) reported that some neighborhoods in the city, like the one we targeted for our study, are impacted by higher crime rates, which is a feature of concentrated disadvantage. In addition to violence, problems included other disparities, such as food access. When we conducted this study, inadequate access to healthy food was a problem for neighborhoods like the one we targeted (Mundorf et al., 2015).

Procedure

The study was approved by an independent institutional review board. The researchers obtained consent from legal guardians and instructors and assent from the youth. They conducted a process evaluation to examine the extent to which the curriculum was being implemented as intended by assessing ongoing operations and determining whether the target population was being served (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2007). The researchers used qualitative data collection approaches, including youth participant focus groups and instructor interviews, to assess the curriculum implementation processes with a special emphasis on instructor-youth interactions (see Appendix for focus group and instructor interview guides). Focus groups were conducted in person, with all 18 youth participants, halfway through the program and again at the end. Participants were introduced early in the program to the developmental psychologist, who was identified to them as both a team member and an evaluator. Prior to conducting the focus groups, the developmental psychologist explained the purpose of the groups, emphasizing the opportunity for the youth participants to have their voices heard and to provide substantive feedback that would be implemented. Likewise, the youth participants were notified of the study's emphasis on confidentiality, anonymity, and participant rights, with the voluntary nature of the focus groups highlighted. The youth had the opportunity to ask questions. These efforts, combined with the program's culture of teamwork, led to full participation.

The focus group protocols were designed to be approximately 45 minutes long. The first focus groups, which the developmental psychologist conducted, consisted of three groups of six youth per group and focused on the youths' feelings about how the program was being conducted up to that point. The results of these focus groups provided feedback to instructors about the strengths and weaknesses of the program and the instruction style at that point. Similarly, the developmental psychologist conducted the second focus groups, which examined the program overall and the changes made to the program following midpoint feedback. In addition to youth focus groups, the developmental psychologist conducted individual instructor interviews with all the instructors except for the school psychologist to gather information about the functionality and effectiveness of the program from the instructors' perspective.

Results

All audio-recorded focus groups and interviews were transcribed into text data, and text data were coded line-by-line. The developmental psychologist and her research assistant read the transcripts separately and presented emerging codes that were collaboratively refined. Once codes were defined, each coder then separately coded the focus groups. Data validity was determined by peer debriefing with a qualitative researcher who had expertise in process evaluation and social skills interventions (Creswell, 2014). Data reliability was determined by cross-checking codes to achieve intercoder agreement, where two researchers reviewed coding done independently and agreed on the final codes (i.e., category labels) by consensus (Creswell, 2014). Using thematic analysis, the

developmental psychologist and her research assistant synthesized the codes into themes based on overlapping experiences among the youth participants and the instructors.

Midpoint Youth Focus Groups

A thematic analysis was conducted to highlight themes that emerged from the midpoint focus groups. Some of the codes identified included: (a) positive rapport with instructors (b) dissatisfaction with trauma-informed psychosocial aspects of the program, and (c) enjoyment of hands-on activities.

Positive Rapport and Perceived Instructor Expertise in Art and Design

Some themes from our analysis included the experience of positive rapport between youth participants and instructors and perceived instructor expertise in art and design. Quotes from youth participants illustrative of these themes included, "I feel like all of them [the instructors] have done a great job, to be honest." Another youth participant stated, "[The instructor] really knows this design stuff, and, you know, how to teach it to us, too."

Dissatisfaction with Trauma-Informed Psychosocial Activities

Consequently, another theme emerged, one regarding both resistance to trauma-informed psychosocial activities among the youth participants and a sense of disconnect between the activities and the art and design program components. This theme, at times, had a negative effect on the interactions between instructors and youth participants. The perceived ambiguity of integrating the psychosocial components led to difficulties for the instructors in behavioral management of the youth, and youth participants expressed diminished enjoyment in their program experiences. Youth participants were uncomfortable discussing their feelings or challenges in life as the instructors attempted to connect discussions to art design activities. For instance, one psychosocial activity included affect modulation, which included identifying emotions and being able to express emotions effectively. In another activity, which included empathy training, instructors would discuss recognizing feelings and taking others' perspectives into consideration.

Youth Satisfaction with Mid-program Adjustments of Increased Hands-On Activities

Results of midpoint focus groups with youth participants were presented and discussed with instructors after the third week of the program. In addition, recommendations for programmatic adjustments, determined by the program director in consultation with the lead researcher, were presented and discussed with the instructors. Based on the midpoint focus group results, more hands-on activities, such as creating wooden benches and chairs, were incorporated. Thus, the end-of-program focus groups with youth participants largely focused on the youths' perceptions of the changes instructors made to the program components—with a specific focus on the psychosocial components—based on initial focus group findings.

End-of-Program Youth Focus Groups

Themes emerging from the end-of-program focus groups included expressed satisfaction with changes to the program components, perceived greater respect from the instructors, and perceived greater transparency about program activities. Youth participants largely expressed satisfaction with the instructors' program changes. One participant noted, "They [the instructors] respect our opinions more." In the midpoint focus groups, most youth participants said their opinions were rarely or only sometimes respected. In addition, the youth were significantly more positive about their experiences with the activities during endpoint focus groups. Youth participants noted that they felt an increased desire for their input and increased opportunities to lead and act independently. For instance, youth participants identified a blighted area in their shared community that they wanted to remake. As a group, they decided to build wooden benches and paint inspirational messages and quotes on them. One youth participant said:

> The majority of the time [they respect our opinion] when they say, 'We got this park, what do you want to do with it?' We got quiet for a minute 'cause we weren't sure, but then we thought about the playground and all that stuff we did with the community survey. We all got to put something in and we all got to tally votes so we all got to be part of it.

These quotes reflect greater transparency about the purpose of activities and improved rapport with the youth participants in the final two weeks of the program. Overall, youth participants enjoyed painting inspirational messages on wooden canvasses.

Instructor Interviews

Interviews were conducted with instructors at the end of the program. Emergent themes from interviews fell into three broad categories: curricular areas of improvement, interactions with youth participants, and program logistics.

Ambiguity About Program Purpose and Lack of Transparency Regarding Trauma-Informed Psychosocial Activities

One theme was ambiguity about the curricular goals. One instructor stated, "It was not clear to me if the primary purpose was to impart design skills, psychoeducation, or community outreach. It was also not clear in what order those skills should be prioritized." Related to this theme, instructors expressed doubts about the embedded nature of the psychosocial components of the curriculum due to their felt lack of transparency about this program component. Instructors observed that the psychosocial components of the program were not explicitly explained to youth participants at the start of the program, so in the instructors' perception these activities were not received well by youth participants. One instructor stated, "They [youth participants] felt uncomfortable talking about feelings and how something makes them feel." The instructors also identified a lack of preplanning and preparation for the psychosocial activities. One instructor stated:

> I think as facilitators we really did not understand the big picture ourselves. I think that was a huge struggle for the group. Do we know why we are doing this and what it means? Because if we don't know, how can we effectively convey it to them [the youth participants]? Secondly, I think when it comes to the grief and trauma components, talking about feelings and how to be positive about the future, I think from an ethical standpoint that the youth were misled. I don't think they knew this was a grief and trauma program.

Positive Youth Rapport

The second emergent theme focused on instructors' interactions with youth participants. Instructors reported youth participants enrolled in the program were an asset to the program's implementation. For instance, an instructor stated, "I think overall the kids that they got for this program are great kids." Instructors generally expressed an understanding of youth participants' responses to the program components and a feeling of good rapport with them. One instructor noted: "When we were very explicit about the flow of activities, that worked really well." Also, instructors saw examples of growth and development in both youth participants and instructors because of the process. One instructor observed, "Many of them [youth participants] are more empowered now than when we started to look at a problem and think about how to approach fixing it."

Insufficient Program Logistics

The third emergent theme from instructor interviews focused on program logistics. Instructors reported that five weeks was not enough time to accomplish all curriculum goals. Instructors learned through implementing the curriculum that youth participants already had a range of skills. The absence of an assessment of youth art and design skills at the start of the program required the instructors to do skill assessments to determine what youth participants knew and did not know to create work plans they could accomplish. One instructor stated, "I think all of it could've worked better if the kids had an idea of the scope as a whole, from A to Z, and these are the increments in between." This lack of scope resulted in insufficient time to develop significant skills that were not already present. Instructors also reported difficulty integrating grief and trauma-informed activities into the arts and design instruction and activities and vice versa. One instructor noted, "We didn't bring in the students with an understanding that there is a socioemotional component to it." This instructor also stated, "We would like to meet with a student and a guardian so the guardian knew what the kid is signing up for." Instructors' challenges with this integration mirrored youth participants' reported confusion about and resistance to trauma-informed psychosocial activities.

Discussion

The need of many youth from communities harmed by decades of racist terror and economic neglect demands action. Likewise, researchers, practitioners, and other community stakeholders have come to recognize the interconnectivity of challenges in the lives of youth. Trauma-informed practices are built on recognizing that trauma does not disappear when a youth enters a school or a summer program. The skills youth need to meet life's challenges are interconnected and can be developed simultaneously.

This program sought to provide youth participants with art and design skills, trauma-informed skills, a workplace-like experience, greater community awareness, and many soft skills or relationship-building skills implicit in these types of programs. Balancing these priorities can be challenging. The findings from this pilot program highlight the need for transparency, instructor training, and self-assessment when implementing an arts and trauma-integrated program.

The program was most successful in art and design programming. The success in these areas is likely a combination of instructors' preexisting skills and confidence and congruence with youth participants' program expectations. Youth participants' perceptions of recruitment materials emphasized the program's art and design aspects, and instructors were selected because they were professionals in that field. Consequently, the youth reported that they recognized the skills of their instructors; were eager to learn; felt that they did learn, because the instructors did a good job; and enjoyed developing those skills.

In addition, this part of the program included many hands-on activities that youth specifically cited as valuable and enjoyable. Often, interactive learning has been valued by youth yet is absent from traditional classrooms. Another strong program aspect was the degree of independence and input granted to the youth, especially after mid-program adjustments. In the earliest stages of a program, it can be expected that instructors need to set standards, establish the program culture and norms, and assess the youth before gradually increasing their independence within those established boundaries. In the second round of focus groups, students reported feeling more heard and that their opinions were more valued, partly due to feeling heard during the first round of focus groups and due to their increased independence. Finally, the instructors and students reported satisfaction in how the community history and culture aspects of the program were integrated with the art and design activities.

However, the integration of grief- and trauma-informed components into the programming was not as successful, because the youth and the instructors were uncomfortable with these activities. First, though it was clear that psychosocial practices were part of the program, it was not clear what priority these practices should have relative to the other goals. Second, instructors were less comfortable with the content. They received training, and their concerns about how this portion of the program was integrated relate to the training successfully imparting many of the lessons of trauma-informed practices. That is, they demonstrated concern for the well-being of the participants from a perspective that was cognizant of trauma and its effects. However, there is a gap between understanding and being comfortable addressing trauma, which the instructors seemed to feel they had not closed. Instructors also felt that the lack of transparency about this part of the program to the youth—although unintentional—was an ethical concern. Consequently, youth did not expect this type of content and were not prepared. Activities felt disconnected from the program's primary purpose, and their efficacy was consequently undermined.

Students expressed greater satisfaction with the program after midcourse corrections were implemented for the grief- and trauma-informed aspects of the program and for other activities. One possible explanation was an increase in the amount of hands-on art and design activities in the second half of the program; perhaps the youth were responding to these changes rather than to changes in how psychosocial aspects of the program were conducted. Midcourse changes also may have led to changes in instructor behavior, that could explain some of the increased student satisfaction. The results suggest the value of integrating a check-in with participants and the value of making changes based on those discussions.

The challenges of this pilot study do not negate the starting premise that youth empowerment programming is possible and beneficial. First, embedding the trauma aspects of the program into the design program was not adequately executed to address the program's aim. For the present project, the disconnect instructors and participants reported about the grief- and trauma-informed content suggests it was not "subtly woven" into the program. It may be possible to accomplish this integration with greater planning, more training, or staff with a stronger background in mental health. It may also be that inclusion of grief- and trauma-informed activities separate from the art and

design activities would have been better received had youth entered the program expecting this. Youth who expected programming to include grief- and trauma-informed content would likely be more willing to engage with that material. In fact, subsequent iterations of this program addressed some of these shortcomings and improved the program, which is discussed next section. In addition, a mechanism to screen youth to determine if they would benefit from such a program is needed.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Program Goals

First, the goals of a program should be clear and transparent to instructors and participants. The goal of the present program was to seamlessly integrate trauma-informed activities into an arts and design program. However, as the results demonstrated, confusion about this aspect of the program led to the disconnects described previously. Second, it is important that instructors feel confident and competent in their ability to achieve the program's goals. When considering the integration of trauma-informed programming into other activities as the sine qua non of a project, it is important that interventions are implemented to full fidelity and effect to minimize the risk to participants. Also, providing instructors and participants with the freedom to use the appropriate terminology is vital so they are fully aware of the nature of the various activities. Reexposure to trauma without completed healing does more harm than good and is unethical.

Consequently, such programs benefit from the presence of staff who have a mental health background. Not all programs will have access to qualified personnel or the resources to hire outside consultants. Results of the present project suggest that training protocols for instructors from diverse careers need to be considered carefully. Likewise, the decision to move forward should include the instructors and their self-assessed level of comfort and competence with the material after training. After these steps are taken, if there are still concerns, a variety of indicators and skills that fall under the category of grief- and trauma-informed are still of significant value to participants and can realistically be integrated into a program like the present one. We recommended that designers select a few grief- and trauma-informed lessons. In addition, programs could provide support for connecting participants to services as needed.

Program Planning

Several steps are recommended for designing a curriculum. During this process, it is important that the link between activities and program goals is well delineated so that all understand the purpose. Second, potential recruitment requirements and procedures need to be considered. A greater understanding of or control over the selection of participants will lead to a greater understanding of the skills and needs for entering the program, allowing potential instructors to better coordinate and implement early program activities. For the present program, significant variance in the students' art and design skills revealed the need for planning activities that met all skill levels. The curriculum could also be adjusted to include early skills assessments for placement or increased instruction time. Third, a more robust training program is needed for program instructors. Moreover, the instructors wished they were part of the design phase, so they could fully understand all curriculum components. Instructor training should focus on role clarification, activity planning, and understanding how the grief- and trauma-informed components of the program fit with other goals.

Collaboration

A more robust collaborative approach may have been needed to realize the present program fully. Nastasi et al. (2004) argued a participatory approach can lead to improved mental health promotion, and there was collaboration in the design of the project, including youth participants. However, there was a rift in understanding and intention of the trauma-informed component between team members that was never fully resolved. This rift contributed to the ambiguity about program goals and priorities. In addition, though this collaboration brought people together with different expertise but similar values and ideals, it takes time to build strong collaborations even in favorable circumstances. This pilot was the first youth program attempted by this specific collaboration of individuals, included only a few months of planning time, and everyone involved had other, competing priorities. Subsequent iterations of the curriculum design and program implementation benefitted from the strengthening of

collaboration and from greater time to implement changes and solidify changes between summer implementations.

The success of the midcourse corrections showed the value of collaboration and the value the team placed on collaboration for this project. The youth, instructors, and evaluators came together to articulate the strengths and weaknesses of the program with a spirit of openness that led to substantive changes. These changes led to greater satisfaction from all parties. Programs should be open to making changes to programming suggested by stakeholders, but it is important to retain a program's goals. Scholars of implementation science have suggested that when changes are made to an intervention or program, they should be noted with a rationale to maintain the integrity of the treatment (Moir, 2018). However, the costs and challenges of midcourse corrections are balanced with increased participant ownership, buy-in, and satisfaction. Together these benefits lead to greater engagement, likely to translate into stronger outcomes.

Program Implementation

Transparency is important to program implementation as well. First, transparency to the youth about the nature and purpose of activities is critical from the outset of a program. This transparency is particularly important regarding any sensitive content or goals and objectives not self-evident from the program name. The youth at issue here did not know why they were chosen to participate in the program. Therefore, from the instructors' perspective, this created an ethical dilemma because the youth were unable to provide well-informed assent. Also, since the youth were minors, their legal guardians should have provided legal consent. Further, the youth were dissatisfied with and confused by the grief- and trauma-informed components of the program. Both they and the instructors acutely felt the disconnect between these components and the program's other activities. This detachment led to resistance in the youth participants, who were uncomfortable discussing their feelings and engaging in some grief- and trauma-informed activities. These consequences were due to the lack of transparency. Programs are advised to establish trust with the communities they serve by being transparent. In the present program, the recruitment materials did include language suggesting grief- and trauma-informed activities would be a part of the program. The results of this pilot suggest that additional verification of student understanding may be necessary.

Second, curriculum designers might consider including hands-on activities earlier in a program to promote engagement and youth participant buy-in. Results of this evaluation show participants were significantly more satisfied with the program after several midcourse corrections were implemented. This finding may also be because these activities were more congruent with their program expectations.

Program Evaluation

There are several lessons learned and recommendations for program evaluation. First, the pre- and postsurvey tools should be refined to improve reliability and validity of responses and diminish the possibility of ceiling effects. A small sample size can limit the interpretability of data. Quantitative results were not included in this analysis for this reason. One way to address this limitation is for the program evaluation to use novel data collection methods, ones that may promote better quantitative capture of program effectiveness. The following, for example, have been shown to elicit valid and reliable evaluation data from adolescents: (a) participatory research methods, such as structured interviews that use card game/pile sort, photo pile sort, or Arun's Dilemma; (b) digital technologies, such as photovoice, and audio or digital diaries; and (c) embedded reflection into each activity or curriculum unit. Additionally, novel focus group techniques such as *Storytelling Using Graphic Illustration, My Life,* and *Photo Feedback Project* could also be used to elicit meaningful data from adolescents (Hieftje et al., 2014). Second, if preassessments or screenings of participants are conducted, screening results should be integrated into the overall program evaluation. Third, indicators for any pre- or post-assessment should consider the timeframe and likelihood of change for the indicators. Ideally, these indicators would be grounded in theory, which would underlie the program evaluation. For instance, according to self-determination theory, the three basic psychological needs for human motivation and thriving are relatedness, autonomy, and competence. In addition, self-determination theory can be used to evaluate the program's art or design skill section and the grief- and trauma-informed skills (Brenning et al., 2020). Thus, we believe that the promotion of these and similar indicators can quickly impact youth development, with effects that would outlast the program itself. Finally, pilot program evaluations should include assessments of implementation to provide potential feedback by which to improve fidelity to the original program goals.

Implications for Community Work

This pilot study and the partnership that led to its development are indicative of progress toward a better way for nonprofits and service providers to work within the community setting—specifically, longer engagement and greater community feedback. Too often, the community is something to be fixed by a program supported by external funders rather than equal partners in solving challenges. This paradigm shift would necessitate that community members be much more involved in the earliest phases of program design and throughout the entire process.

As stated, the lessons from this pilot were applied to subsequent iterations of the curriculum and program implementation. Collaboration and feedback from the community were important in this process, especially the views of the youth participants the program intended to serve. For instance, the grief- and trauma-informed materials were more often a part of cultural exploration activities rather than separated. In addition, initial activities were more hands-on, so as to promote student buy-in at the program's earliest phases, and instructors were given stronger guidance on how the activities were linked to specific learning goals.

This process required a longer period of investment and collaboration for the design to evolve and for program capacity building. Fortunately, this program's funding source allowed for the needed time for the program to further develop, but many programs are tied to a grant cycle too short to allow this type of evolution to occur. Most social problems result from decades of disinvestment in ethnically and socioeconomically marginalized communities. Lasting progress requires reinvestment in ways that build the capacity of the community. We should endeavor to include sustainability and local employment opportunities in our programs. Likewise, we should focus on empowering a community to address the challenges it sees as most salient. This change would likely require greater tolerance for "mission drift" from funders as a community's needs can shift. However, if the partnership between a community and the funder is strong, open communication should facilitate the community's confidence in presenting its goals. If a program aims to improve the lives of youth, then we must allow its short-term goals to change to fit the contextual needs of the lives of those youth.

Conclusion

Overall, the youth enjoyed their art projects and believed the staff established rapport with them, but they did not believe that their perspectives and ability to act independently were respected. This finding could have impacted the program's overall effectiveness. Bloom (2014) reported that creating a sense of shared governance and open communication between adults and youth is a vital aspect of trauma-informed spaces. Youth need to feel safe and respected to express their views. Another interesting finding was that both the youth participants and the instructors believed that the program's trauma aspect was embedded in unclear and frustrating ways. This disconnect could have contributed to the ineffectiveness of the grief- and trauma-informed activities. Also, this posed an ethical dilemma, because the youth were not adequately informed they were participating in an art-based trauma program. It is clear from the pilot study that the goals of a program must be clearly established and explained. Lastly, a program's delivery needs to be intentional and transparent.

Author Statements

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Appendix

Youth Participant Focus Group Guide

1) What are you learning that you did not know before?

Probes: About your neighborhood, city, people in in your neighborhood, art/design skills and careers? About yourself?

2) What are you learning that you knew already or were aware of already?

Probes: About your neighborhood, city, people in your neighborhood/city, art/design skills and careers? About yourself?

3) Follow up: Did it change anything about or any aspect of what you already knew? If so, how?

4) Do you feel like activities include your ideas?

5) Do you feel like your opinions matter?

6) Are you able to make decisions about how activities are happening, what is being done, and how things are being done?

    a) Follow-up: Are you treated as a decision maker/leader?

7) Do you feel like the time you spend on activities is worthwhile?

8) Do you feel like the instructors value your opinions?

    a) If so, how do you know?

    b) If not, why do you think they do not?

9) Do you think the instructors are knowledgeable about the topics and issues being covered?

Probe: Do they have knowledge about the neighborhood, culture, and art & design?

10) How do you think the instructors are doing at implementing the activities?

    a) What do they do well?

    b) What do you think they could do better?

11) What do instructors do to involve or engage you in planning and doing the activities?

12) What would you do to make activities, training, and/or the program more fun, relevant, impactful?

13) How do you think you will benefit from participating in this program?

14) What do you think are the challenges "on the ground"?

15) How do you think the neighborhood will benefit from this program (the people in it and the space)?

16) Do you feel that programs like this are necessary to make neighborhoods better?

    a) If so, why? If not, why not?

17) Do you think programs like this are necessary to increase opportunities for young people?

Ending Questions

    a) Do you have any suggestions for the activities being done in the program?

    b) Do you have any concerns? Anything else you would like to talk about?

Instructor Interview Guide

1) Describe your training, educational background, and relevant skills.

Teaching methods

2) Are the teaching methods (e.g., lecture, discussion, games, group work) used in the activities successful in

increasing design interns' knowledge/understanding?

3) Do some methods work particularly well?

4) Do some methods not work and need to be changed? If so, what adaptations were made?

Curriculum Content

5) Is the content at the appropriate depth and breadth for the participants (age-appropriate and developmentally, socioemotionally, and culturally appropriate)?

6) Does the curriculum facilitate learning for different abilities and learning paces?

7) Have you solicited youth input to determine program need? If so, how?

8) Have you solicited youth input to determine program activities and outputs? If so, how?

9) Are the right topics being covered?

10) Are there topics missing?

Materials/Tools

11) Are the materials/tools user friendly for both instructors and participants?

12) Do participants refer to the materials/tools during activities?

13) Are there additional materials and resources that would enhance the curriculum?

Setting

14) Is the curriculum easily adaptable to the setting?

15) What challenges are you facing in delivering the curriculum in this setting?

16) What benefits do you see for delivering the curriculum in this setting?

Timing and flow

17) Is too little or too much time allocated for individual activities?

18) Is too little or too much time allocated for the sessions as a whole?

Effectiveness

19) Are participants showing an increase in the intended skills and knowledge? If not, what were the weak areas?

20) Are participants receptive to the information and methods in the curriculum?

21) What skills to you think participants will or could use in the future?

22) Any other suggestions, comments, or concerns?