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Introduction

Low family socioeconomic status (SES) has been noted to impact children and youths' development, specifically in cognitive skills and risky behaviors (Brieant et al., 2021). Low SES often increases stressors for parents, may hinder monitoring of youth if parents must work multiple jobs, and may impact child-parent quality time and bonding (Conger & Conger, 2002). It also presents barriers to cognitively stimulating resources and social activities. Children from lower SES families are less likely to visit the zoo, go to museums, or attend cultural arts performances, which are important for positive, healthy development (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002). Youth from low-income families and communities often have low quality resources for mental health, fewer organized activities for youth and families, and decreased social support in comparison to moderate- to high-income families (Andrews et al., 2015).

In addition, impoverished communities struggling with high unemployment rates, high rates of property, and violent crimes pose risks for children/youths, such as lower academic achievement, psychological problems (anxiety, fear, anger), and increased likelihood for maladaptive behaviors (Bowen & Bowen, 1999; CDC, 2021). Studies have found that youth from low-SES families and communities are more likely to engage in risky behaviors, especially during early adolescence, like smoking, drug use, delinquency, and fighting (Cambron et al., 2018; Piotrowska et al., 2015).

Some of the overall strategies to offset risks for youth from low-SES or high-crime neighborhoods include teaching life skills, providing healthy after-school activities, and connecting youth with positive, caring adults (CDC, 2021). The Prodigy Cultural Arts program was developed to offer an after-school program in a neighborhood where youth often experience low SES and have few free, enriching activities, especially after school. The program includes cultural arts programming embedded with life skills and envisions itself as an early prevention program for youth in the surrounding community.

The purpose of this study was to add empirical information about arts-based youth programs and life skills in after-school programming. Our specific research questions asked whether there were any differences in life skills, risk, and protective factors for the youth after completion of the Prodigy program. The following literature review presents some background about the components of the Prodigy program.

Life Skills

Life skills are defined as abilities that enable individuals to effectively handle requirements, difficulties, and other stresses found in day-to-day life. They can include critical and creative thinking, problem-solving, decision-making, coping skills, interpersonal relationships, communication skills, empathy, and self-awareness (Srikala & Kishore, 2010). Studies have found that life-skills training with youth significantly increase problem-solving skills, social interest, and relationship skills compared with a control group (Özbay & Nazlı, 2021). Lewis et al. (2013) provided a life-skills program to low-SES youth and found significant reduction in students' beliefs supporting aggression and disruptive behaviors. Srikala & Kishore (2010) noted that life skills integrated into the high school curriculum led to significant increases in the self-confidence of the students and improved classroom behavior and interactions. Many programs have embedded life-skills training in sports programs, but literature regarding using these skills in arts programs is very limited.

Cultural Arts

Cultural art programs can consist of visual arts, theater, dance, music, and other forms of expression. The arts have a long, proven history of assisting with the positive development of children and youth (Dutton, 2001; Elpus, 2013; Stevenson et al., 2013). For example, Alegrado & Winsler (2020) observed overall positive effects from music programs included cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and social benefits. Music also enhanced self-confidence, persistence, and motivation in youth. Catterall et al. (1999) completed a longitudinal study on effects of arts programs on youth and reported youth with an involvement in music had improved proficiency in mathematics, youth in any form of art programming had improved academic achievement, and students involved in theater arts exhibited gains in reading, self-concept, motivation, and empathy for others. In addition, Kang Song & Gammel (2011) noted improvements in leadership skills, collaboration, and persistence, in youth after arts programming.

After-School Programs

After-school programs can promote essential life skills and social-emotional learning by offering children and youth opportunities to form positive relationships with adults and peers, and to explore their talents through activities (Hurd & Deutsch, 2017). With many schools focusing on increasing academic performance, after-school programs can offer youth structure, physical, and psychological safety, and a sense of belonging (Olive at al., 2020). A meta-analysis of after-school programs found that programs that targeted social-emotional learning improved self-confidence, prosocial behavior, and positive attitudes toward school. This meta-analysis also found a reduction in substance abuse and maladaptive behaviors

(Kremer et al., 2015). After-school programs that use evidence-based approaches were the most effective (Hurd & Deutsch, 2017).

Prodigy Cultural Arts Program

The Prodigy Cultural Arts program is a research-based prevention and diversion program for at-risk youth ages 8–15 years of age. The free program, offered at a community center, serves youth who come from surrounding neighborhoods with low SES and above-average property and violent crime rates (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Some youths in the program have begun to exhibit academic and/or disruptive behaviors at school. The visual and performing arts classes are taught by local artists and teach life skills such as communication, problem-solving, and anger management during the art classes. Classes are delivered two times per week between 3 and 6 pm for eight-week sessions, and youth can choose the type of art class they prefer and can continuously enroll in the classes if they wish. The intent of the classes is to bring cultural arts to youth who are not generally exposed to the arts; to provide safe, free after-school programming; and to teach helpful life skills, while creating positive relationships with positive adults.

Prior research has been conducted on the program and several important results have been observed. Using a quasi-experimental pre-posttest and 108 Prodigy youth and their parents, significant reductions in internalizing and externalizing mental health symptoms were found. In addition, increases in academic self-efficacy and academic achievement were also noted (Rapp-Paglicci et al., 2011). In another study consisting of 350 adolescent participants and their parents, a significant improvement in family functioning overall as well as statistically significant changes in mental health symptoms including depression/anxiety, somatic, and suicidal symptoms for both males and females at urban and rural locales were found. The quasi-experimental design with pre-posttest suggested that females appeared to especially benefit from the program (Stewart et al., 2009). In 2012, another quasi-experimental design was used with pre-posttests with 140 adolescent participants and again found a decrease in internalizing symptoms for females and externalizing symptoms for males in addition to improved family functioning and increased academic performance (Rapp-Paglicci et al., 2012). Overall, the Prodigy after-school program has support for reducing mental health symptoms and increasing academic self-efficacy and academic achievement, all indicators of positive youth development.

The impact of the three life skills (communication, problem-solving, and anger management) and the risk factors for youth have not previously been evaluated. The Prodigy program requested an exploratory evaluation by Saint Leo University to examine these factors. The purpose of the study was to add empirical information about arts-based youth programs and life skills since there is a dearth of studies on this topic. The research questions for the evaluation were:

1. Are there differences in life skills (problem-solving, communication, anger management) between pre- and posttest for Prodigy participants?
2. Are there differences in risk and protective factors between pre- and posttest for Prodigy participants?

Methods

Participants

Participants were parents/guardians and their youth aged 8 to 15 who participated in the Prodigy program between August 2019 and December 2021. Youth come from the area surrounding the community center, which has higher than U.S. average crime rates and lower than average SES. Youth chose from a selection of arts classes (dance, guitar lessons, painting, ceramics etc.) and attended 90-minute sessions twice per week, for eight weeks. Attendance was taken at every class. Classes were grouped by age, so they were

developmentally appropriate. Parents did not participate in classes but attended youths' performances and/or art exhibits and completed measures about the youth.

The art instructors were professional artists who were hired to teach Prodigy classes. They were trained by the program on tactics to teach art skills to youth and to teach the three life skills mentioned previously. An instructors' manual (developed by the program) was used to enhance program fidelity and included strategies for teaching the three life skills (anger management, problem-solving, and communication). Strategies included conversation starters, stories for discussion, and other activities. These strategies were included in art classes every week. In addition, monthly program themes such as "peace" and "no-bullying" were incorporated into art and music pieces and discussed throughout the eight weeks of the art classes.

Procedures

A quasi-experimental design using quantitative data and one group pre/posttest was employed. Because a waitlist was unavailable, no comparison group was used. Upon approval from the Saint Leo University's IRB, recruitment began in fall 2019. To elevate nondominant voices, all youth who enrolled in the Prodigy program and their parents were invited by staff to participate in the study when they completed registration for classes. The study was explained to both youth and parents/guardians and all required consent forms were signed.

The study surveys were administered to youths and parents/guardians in separate rooms, both prior to beginning the program and upon completion. If a youth dropped out early, the staff administered the posttest surveys to both parent and youth, at that time.

It should be noted that the Covid-19 pandemic interrupted classes and data collection. After a month of hiatus, classes resumed via Zoom and data was collected via email with electronic surveys and later again in person. Names of youth and parents were de-identified to ensure confidentiality.

Two surveys, one for youth and one for their parents/guardians, were administered at pre- and posttest by trained Prodigy staff members. The Prevention Assessment Tool (PAT) was administered by program staff via interview either in person or via phone, and data was de-identified and given to the research team. This data had been collected by Prodigy staff at pre- and posttest from youth and parents. This data, along with survey data, was matched by participant number to ensure confidentiality of the participants.

Measures

To measure life skills and risk factors, both pre- and posttest surveys were created from a series of existing, standardized assessment tools. For this study, the scales demonstrated acceptable reliability. The youth survey (a self-report) incorporated items from: the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) (Cronbach's Alpha = .87); the Affective Empathy scale (Zoll & Enz, 2010) (Cronbach's Alpha = .71); 2019 Middle School Youth Risk Behavior survey (CDC, 2019) (Cronbach's Alpha = .79); Anger Expression Scale for Children (AESC; Steele et al., 2009) (Cronbach's Alpha = .83); Solving Problems Survey (Barkmam & Machtmes, 2002b) (Cronbach's Alpha = .74); and Communication Scale (Barkman & Machtmes, 2002a) (Cronbach's Alpha = .77). To keep the number of items from becoming overwhelming for youths' self-report, salient items were used from each scale to measure changes in life skills and risk factors, empathy, self-esteem, and the Middle School Youth Risk Behavior survey. For example, only the "Anger Control" sub-scale was used from the Anger Expression Scale, while four to six items were selected from the Solving Problems Survey and Communication Scale. All surveys were developed in English and then professionally translated into Spanish and Creole.

To increase reliability of measurement, parents/guardians were invited to complete measures based on their observations of their youth. The parent/guardian survey included questions about their youth's life skills (as described above) and violence in the home. Items from the Partner Abuse scale, Physical and Nonphysical (Hudson, 1982), were also included.

The PAT was developed by the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice, for youth and their parents, and includes questions regarding criminogenic risk and protective factors. The measure includes risky behaviors such as drug/alcohol use, bullying, violence, and other social behaviors that may increase risk for later problems in adulthood, as well as protective factors such as positive adult relationships, prosocial friends, and prosocial behaviors.

Data Analysis Plan

There were no cases of incomplete data on either the pre- or posttests and only participants that completed both the pre- and the posttests were included in the analyses. This procedure resulted in a fairly significant loss of data.

It should be noted that the rate for attrition in this study was 49%, which is above the generally accepted rate of 20%. There are two factors that support the probability that the attrition was random. First, there were no significant differences in any of the demographic or study variables between completers and non-completers at pretest. Second, this data collection occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. The typical attrition rate for the program prior to COVID ranged between 15% and 20% (M. Trepper, personal communication, January 18, 2023).

This project had two main research aims. The first was to determine any change in life skills (problem-solving, communication, anger management) for those youth participating in Prodigy. To address this aim, paired t-tests were performed on the Prodigy youth life-skills measures. Next was to determine any change in risk and protective factors from pre- to posttest. Due to the small sample size at posttest, these analyses were conducted with a Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks test. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SSPS) was utilized to analyze all data.

Results

Demographics

All youth and parents/guardians who were invited to participate in the study agreed and signed consent forms for a 100% response rate. There were 61 youth and parent participants in the study. Youth participants ranged in age from eight to fifteen years with a mean of 11.08 years. There were 32 females and 29 males in the sample. As far as race and ethnicity, 12 youth were Haitian, 41 were Hispanic, 1 was Jamaican, and 7 were non-Hispanic. Ten youth reported their race as Black, 44 were White, 2 were Asian, and 5 were American Indian. The participants were not highly diverse, but they represented youth who attended the program from this community.

Life Skills

Three life skills reported by both the youth and parents were analyzed by paired t-tests. Bonferroni correction, set at .001, was used to control type 1 error rate. For the youth, only the problem-solving skills were found to have significantly increased ($t(30) = 2.14$, $p = .044$) from pre- ($m = 17.39$, $sd = 3.13$) to posttest ($m = 18.20$, $sd = 2.60$). Cohen's d results supported a medium effect size.

Then the life skills were analyzed as reported by the parents. While problem-solving was not significant, anger management ($t(21) = 1.75$, $p = .048$) was significant from pre- ($m = 19.40$, $sd = 4.05$)

to posttest (m= 21.00, sd = 3.65). Communication (t (21) = 3.34, p = .002) also achieved statistical significance from pre- (m = 14.77, sd = 2.30) to posttest (m= 16.59, sd = 2.83). Cohen's d results suggest a medium effect size. See Table 1 for all three life-skills results, including t- and significance.

Table 1. *Youth and Parent Life Skills Paired T-test Results*

Scale	Mean	S.D.	S.E.	95% Confidence Interval		*t*	*df*	Sig. (2-tailed)	Cohen's d
				Lower	Upper				
Youth Problem-Solving	.810	1.50	.265	-.103	.979	2.14	30	.044	0.50
Parent Anger Management	1.55	2.68	.600	-2.30	.206	1.99	21	.048	0.42
Parent Communication	1.82	2.56	.545	.685	2.95	3.34	21	.002	0.53

Risk and Protective Factors

Data from the PAT survey indicated several positive trends in risk factors from the beginning to the end of youths' enrollment in the program. While many of these factors demonstrated improvement, two protective factors were found to have significantly improved through testing utilizing the Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks test. "Positively dealing with others" (z = -2.48, p = .029) and "dealing with difficult situations" (z = -2.01, p = .048), significantly improved from pre- to posttest. No significant differences were noted from pre- to posttest on self-esteem, affective empathy, or Middle School Risk Assessment survey.

Discussion

Overall, the pre/post surveys suggest that problem-solving, anger management, and communication skills have all improved from the beginning of Prodigy involvement to completion, for participants of the Prodigy program. It is interesting to note that youths reported an improvement in problem-solving skills but not in communication or anger management, while parents noted an increase in those two skills in youths and not in problem-solving. Perhaps this is appropriate considering that problem-solving is an internal process and is best measured by oneself, while communication and anger-management skills are skills that can be observed and best measured externally by another party.

Several risk and protective factors were trending in the right direction, but two protective factors, that of "positively dealing with others" and "dealing with difficult situations," were found to have significantly improved. This finding certainly matches an improvement in the life skills of the youth. The risk factors did not show a statistically significant improvement, perhaps because youths and parents reported very few maladaptive or risk behaviors at pretest and there may have also been minimizing by youths and parents regarding risky behaviors since they can be considered stigmatizing. This suggests that further research may be warranted regarding these skills and risk/protective factors, but it's very interesting that these areas increased even during a pandemic. In addition, differences were not found based on gender or age, suggesting that the program consistently assists in teaching life skills to all youth. The results also did not indicate significant changes in self-esteem and affective empathy. It may be that these factors, while related to the targeted life skills, were not emphasized as strongly. Future research studies may help uncover reasons for this finding.

Implications

The evaluation study data suggest that the Prodigy Cultural Arts program may increase three life skills—problem-solving, anger management, and communication skills—for youth attending the program. Two important protective factors for positive youth development also improved, according to the youth and

parents. The program should continue to focus on these skills through activities, themes for the sessions, role-plays, and discussions during art classes. Life skills and protective factors for youth are helpful in offsetting risk factors for youth—especially those living in impoverished, high-crime neighborhoods.

Youth development practitioners can look to replicate cultural arts and life skills in youth programs since both have been found to enhance protective factors for youth. Utilizing professional artists also provides professional role-models to youth who have artistic skills. If it is not possible to add cultural arts, practitioners can also consider inserting life skills into the programming they already offer. Manuals, curricula, and activities assist in learning and applying these essential skills for life success. They also help with fidelity to the program's mission and goals.

Limitations

There are several limitations, which are important to consider regarding these results. The first is that the Covid pandemic interrupted both data collection and class delivery. Changing delivery from in-person to virtual classes may have impacted programming, data collection, dropout rate, and outcomes.

This was a small exploratory study with a relatively small sample size, relatively little diversity within the sample, and a design that could not include a comparison group or random assignment. These factors limit the ability to discuss causation or address confounding factors. Similarly, the large attrition rate and lack of diversity also requires that the results be interpreted cautiously. While the attrition rate was likely due to the pandemic, and pretest analysis provide some support for random attrition, it is important to understand possible impacts of a large dropout rate.

Another limitation can be found based on the nature of the program, in that art classes are delivered by different instructors who may have varying demeanors, styles, and tactics for teaching life skills to youth. This can be difficult to reliably evaluate.

Finally, asking youths to answer large numbers of survey items is not feasible and may risk reliability and validity, so several measures were reduced or only subscales were used to increase the likelihood that youth would complete the measures fully. This may have impacted the findings.

To address methodological limitations, future evaluations could utilize an implementation evaluation framework to help assess instructor effectiveness and fidelity to the manual, curriculum, and activities. In addition, a waitlist or local school might be useful for creating a comparison group of youth not attending the program, which would strengthen the methodology and rigor of findings. Not all youth in the community take advantage of attending the free Prodigy program, and therefore there is limited diversity in the program and the study. Practitioners may need to explore alternative ways to advertise and make parents and youth aware of the program. In addition, listening to youths' feedback about types of art classes can also boost attendance and engagement.

Conclusion

After-school programs provide an important component in assisting youth with healthy development. These programs provide connection to positive adults, assist in developing crucial life skills for later success, and expose youth to novel activities. Finally, these programs can enhance protective factors and minimize risk factors by providing structure, adult monitoring, adult role-modeling, and positive bonding in impoverished neighborhoods, which may have high crime rates. Both arts education and life-skills training have been found to bring benefits to healthy youth development but are rarely combined in one program. The Prodigy program appears to hold promising value that needs further exploration.

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