

THESIS

RAISING CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN ADOLESCENTS: AN EVALUATION OF THE
FAIR CURRICULUM

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

RAISING CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN ADOLESCENTS: AN EVALUATION OF THE FAIR CURRICULUM

There is some evidence that critical consciousness, sociopolitical awareness and action, may be beneficial to youth development. However, there is a paucity of research throughout the critical consciousness literature evaluating replicable diversity awareness interventions intended to raise levels of critical consciousness. The primary objective of the present study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the FAIR: “Fairness for All Individuals through Respect” program in raising levels of critical consciousness among youth. Critical consciousness was measured using the newly validated Critical Consciousness Scale. No significant differences in critical consciousness scores from pre-test to post-test were found in the intervention group, who participated in the FAIR program, compared to the control group. There were several limitations in the study that prevent the researchers from drawing definitive conclusions.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Critical consciousness, or sociopolitical awareness and action, is an important aspect of youth development that remains peripheral to research (Watts, 2011). Some evidence indicates that critical consciousness may benefit adolescents' career development and health, thereby suggesting the value of making this concept a central piece of the discourse related to youth development (Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Zimmerman, Ramírez-Valles, & Maton, 1999). Diversity awareness training programs are a method that has been used to develop critical consciousness among adolescents. The present study aims to examine the efficacy of a particular diversity awareness intervention, "FAIR: Fairness for All Individuals through Respect," at raising levels of critical consciousness among at-risk youth enrolled in a mentoring program.

Critical Consciousness

Critical consciousness consists of two components: critical reflection and critical action (Diemer, Rapa, Park, & Perry, 2014). *Critical reflection* is cultivated as a person learns about the way in which institutionalized oppression and inequality are perpetuated in every day society resulting in heightened awareness of structural oppression and greater endorsement of egalitarian ideals (Diemer, Kauffman, Koenig, Trahan, & Hsieh, 2006). Critical reflection can be divided into two subcomponents: perceived inequality, which is the understanding that societal structures result in certain groups of people having fewer opportunities in life, and egalitarianism, which is the endorsement of egalitarian ideals. Critical reflection is often accompanied by *critical action*, which is defined as acting in a manner intended to produce sociopolitical change (Diemer et al., 2014).

Critical consciousness was originally conceptualized by Paulo Freire as part of a pedagogical method used to increase literacy among Brazilian peasants by enabling this oppressed group to both critically analyze their social conditions and to make efforts to change them (Watts, 2011). Freire was influenced by the ideas of social theorists of the twentieth century such as Albert Memmi and Franz Fanon, who believed that policies and practices on an institutional level lead to the internalized oppression of marginalized groups (Watts, 2011). Freire asserts that as people learn about institutionalized oppression they gain the power to reduce the internalization of oppression (Watts, 2011).

Developing critical consciousness is considered essential to the empowerment of oppressed communities (Diemer et al., 2006; Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999). For example, young black men in America face higher rates of incarceration, homicide, substance abuse, unemployment, and restricted access to high quality education compared to young white men (Watts et al., 1999). Critical consciousness researchers believe that the best interventions for these young men include learning about the personal, cultural, sociopolitical and spiritual perspectives that raise consciousness related to societal oppression, rather than conventional interventions that focus solely on domains such as coping and stress management (Watts et al., 1999).

Theoretical Rationale

According to certain theories, critical consciousness is considered an antidote to oppression such that as disenfranchised people develop greater levels of critical consciousness, they are better able to realize their sociopolitical inequalities and to take action to change them, rather than internalizing the oppression (Diemer et al., 2014). For example, several theories include critical consciousness as a fundamental component to the empowerment of oppressed

communities ([Watts, 2011](#)). Sociopolitical Development Theory is a theory of the process by which people develop the understanding of societal oppression necessary to take action against those oppressive systems (Watts, 2003). Empowerment theory, another theoretical perspective, is also informed by critical consciousness. This theory focuses on both self-acceptance, and sociopolitical understanding and action as a way to combat oppression ([Watts, 2011](#)). Empowerment is particularly important considering the associations between the effects of oppression and increased health risks. For instance, in the Mexican American population acculturation has been linked to increased body mass index, hypertension, and substance abuse (de Heer et al., 2011).

Several of these theorists have examined the benefits of critical consciousness, specifically on adolescents. For example, adolescents with greater levels of critical consciousness reap benefits in several areas including career development (Diemer & Blustein, 2006), mental health (Zimmerman et al., 1999), and physical health (de Heer, Balcazar, Rosenthal, Cardenas, & Schulz, 2011). These youth also have a greater connection with their vocational future, more work role salience, increased clarity in their vocational identity, and less hopelessness (Zimmerman et al., 1999). Benefits extend to the realm of health including reduced rates of diabetes, and prevalence of symptoms known to increase the risk of heart disease, stroke, and diabetes (de Heer et al., 2011).

Critical Consciousness Interventions

Given the potential benefits of having higher levels of critical consciousness, it is important to develop, examine, and determine the efficacy of interventions that specifically target increasing sociopolitical awareness among youth. Specific interventions are necessary given that youth report lacking information, classes, and sociopolitical conversations related to

multiculturalism and diversity in their schools (Johansen & Le, 2014). One diversity awareness intervention intended to raise levels of critical consciousness was delivered to members of the Young Warriors mentoring program. This program pairs male mentors with male youth to support the mentees in becoming men in our society (Watts et al., 1999). The intervention consisted of critical analysis of rap music videos and other relevant media through discussions of popular media's construction of the African American image, and how this image may contribute to community conditions. Critical consciousness was measured based on participants' answers to questions related to perceptions and interpretations of the videos, emotional and intuitive responses to the videos, and action strategies based on the social issues illuminated in the videos. The researchers found that youth responses that were indicative of critical consciousness increased across eight sessions of the intervention. However, the results were only suggestive as no control group was utilized (Watts et al., 1999).

Another program called the Working Community Program located in Melbourne, Australia provided education about diversity, and required youth to design a community program based on a sociopolitical issue they felt passionate about (Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007). These researchers found that youth reported greater sociopolitical awareness, and a greater sense of control and social responsibility following the intervention (Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007). However, neither of these programs were described in the kind of detail necessary to further validate or replicate results with confidence.

“Anytown” is one intervention which follows a replicable curriculum. This week-long program organizes youth into discussion groups to analyze and discuss experiences related to their sociopolitical positionality. Youth in the program learn about diverse perspectives through education, discussion, and experiential learning such as personally experiencing a disability or

discrimination. Participants who attended the program reported increases in social competence, acceptance of diversity, feelings of social responsibility and community involvement compared to the control group (Lyons, 2006). Thus there is some evidence for the efficacy of replicable programs in raising critical consciousness.

The FAIR Program

The present study expands on the literature of diversity awareness interventions used to increase critical consciousness by evaluating the FAIR program developed at Colorado State University. The FAIR program incorporates education about the “Big 8,” which includes race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, ability, age and religion, through guided discussion as well as activities designed to give students an experiential understanding of the concepts (Brinkman, 2009). Some unique features of the FAIR program are that it is designed for both boys and girls, that it incorporates information about a broad scope of social justice frameworks, and that it has a detailed curriculum, which can be implemented in four hours, and is widely accessible to educators through its free website (Brinkman, 2009). The intention of the FAIR program is to raise critical consciousness.

The FAIR program consists of five activities, and begins with an introduction of the “Big 8” and the concept of privilege. Each activity is followed by a rich discussion. The five activities of the FAIR program are as follows:

1. “First Thought Second Thought.” This activity introduces the concept of “first thoughts”, our immediate assumptions about people, and “second thoughts,” the act of acknowledging that our assumptions may not be correct. Participants are instructed to describe the first image that comes to mind from generic descriptors, such as “doctor” or

“parent,” and are then shown images that may not have immediately come to mind, such as a female doctor or homosexual parents.

2. “Toy Sorting.” For this activity, facilitators ask participants to designate toys that are typically marketed to boys or girls as either “boy toys” or “girl toys” to illustrate gender socialization in our society.
3. “In the Box/Out of the Box.” Participants are first asked to describe what it means to “act like a lady” and to “be a man” in our society. Then, participants are given magazines, and are instructed to put pictures that don’t fit our typical gender stereotypes on the outside of their shoebox and to put conforming images to the inside of their shoebox.
4. “House Building.” Participants are given a trash bag full of materials to build a house that represent either low-, middle-, or high-income status, and are asked to build a house with these materials. Participants then reflect on how their experience was affected by the amount of resources they had, and to discuss what traits (i.e. smart, hardworking, generous etc.) we typically associate with different socioeconomic groups.
5. “Marine Life Story.” Facilitators read the “Marine Life Story,” which is about a shark, a dolphin, a carp, and a crab who represent bullies, allies, victims, and bystanders, respectively. After hearing the story, participants read vignettes of situations involving bullying to illustrate how the Marine Life Story may apply to their lives. After reading through the vignettes, facilitators lead a discussion about how we take on each role at various times, and how we should strive to be dolphins (i.e., allies) as often as possible.

One previous evaluation of the FAIR program focused on its impact on *knowledge of gender* and *perceived gender prejudice* among boys and girls aged 10-13, (Brinkman, Jedinak, Rosen, and Zimmerman, 2011). The study sample included children from a variety of ethnic

backgrounds drawn from fifth-grade classrooms. Students participated in the FAIR program over the course of one school day. Students completed questionnaires focused on gender prejudice experiences and teachers completed questionnaires on student engagement in gender prejudice. In addition, the intervention group participated in a focus group to discuss knowledge gained through participation, gender prejudice experiences and attitudes about gender.

The results of this evaluation were that students who participated in the FAIR program had significantly fewer gender prejudice behaviors and experiences at post-test compared to students who did not participate in the program. Focus groups with participants in the intervention group revealed a number of themes, such as students' experiences with gender prejudice (e.g., exclusion, institutionalized prejudice, conformity expectations). These results suggest that the FAIR curriculum has been effective in increasing thoughts and behaviors indicative of critical consciousness such as the increase in endorsement of gender equality and reduction in gender prejudiced behaviors.

Current Study and Hypothesis

For my thesis, I participated as a member of a research team to expand on previous literature by administering a newly validated scale for critical consciousness, The Critical Consciousness Scale (CCS) to assess the effectiveness of the FAIR program (Diemer et al., 2014). Researchers in the field have defined and measured critical consciousness disparately across studies, which has created a lack of replicability of findings and a lack of cohesive understanding across studies (Watts, 2011). The CCS is the first known direct measure of critical consciousness, and therefore offers a potential solution to the disparity in definition and measure across studies (Watts, 2011). Our study hypothesis was that youth who received the

FAIR intervention would have higher levels of critical consciousness at post-test measurement compared to youth who did not participate in the FAIR intervention.

CHAPTER 2: METHODS

Participants

All participants in our study were enrolled through the Campus Connections mentoring program at Colorado State University. This program provides services to youth (10-18 years of age) deemed “at risk” for delinquency, truancy, and mental health and substance use problems. Consent was obtained during the intake procedure for the Campus Connections program.

Participants included 76 youth, 36 in the intervention and 40 in the control condition. Fifty-eight youth completed the post-intervention survey, and one youth did not provide sufficient demographic information to be included in the study. Thus, 57 youth were included in data analysis: 33 in the intervention condition and 24 in the control condition. Of the 57 participants included, 40 were male and 17 were female. The youth reported themselves to be White (n=36, 63%), Hispanic (n=16, 28%), African American/White (n=3, 5%), White/Asian (n=1, 2%), and Asian (n=1, 2%). Mean age for the intervention condition was 13.58 (SD=1.32), and mean age for the control condition was 13.82 (SD=2.04).

Materials and Measures

Critical consciousness was measured using the newly validated scale developed by Diemer and colleagues (2014), the Critical Consciousness Scale (CCS). The CCS was developed and validated via exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, and is intended for a sophomore reading level (Diemer, 2014). The CCS is separated into three subscales with three separate scores. The three subscales measure critical reflection: perceived inequality, critical reflection: egalitarianism, and critical action. Our assumption was that participants would not engage in increased levels of sociopolitical activism (i.e. critical action) given the brief time between pre-

and post-test measurements. For this study, therefore, we did not use the critical action subscale of the CCS.

A Likert-like 5-point scale is used to rate participant agreement from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” on statements where higher endorsement indicates higher levels of critical reflection: perceived inequality, or critical reflection: egalitarianism. The critical reflection: perceived inequality subscale is comprised of eight items, such as: “Women have fewer chances to get good jobs.” These items include statements about women, poor people, and certain racial and ethnic groups as examples of groups who may be treated without equality. The internal reliability for this sample was high at pretest (Chronbach’s alpha = .89) and at posttest (Chronbach’s alpha =.83). The critical reflection: egalitarianism subscale consists of five items, such as: “Group equality should be our ideal.” These statements are not specific to any demographic groups. The internal reliability for this sample was high at pretest (Chronbach’s alpha = .80) and at posttest (Chronbach’s alpha =.93).

Procedure

Our convenience sample consisted of 76 consenting youth who signed up to participate in the Campus Connections program for one day a week (Monday-Thursday) over 12 weeks. At that time, consent for the FAIR Program was also obtained. No announcement was made about the week or night(s) for the FAIR Program. The FAIR program ran for two nights on week five of the program, and all five FAIR activities were facilitated on each night that the FAIR program ran. FAIR evenings were selected based on facilitator availability. Facilitators were experienced with the FAIR program and were selected to represent a variety of demographics (see Table 1 for facilitator demographics.) Youth attending on either evening that the FAIR program ran became

the intervention group (n=36) and youth attending on either evening that the FAIR program did not run (n=40) became the control group.

Table 1. Facilitator Demographics

Demographic	Facilitator 1	Facilitator 2
Age	Young Adult; Student	Middle Age; Faculty
Gender	Male	Female
Race	Black	White

The Campus Connections mentoring program consists of undergraduate student and youth pairs (i.e., mentor-mentee pairs). Undergraduate students, or mentors, receive special preparation to work with at-risk adolescents. Youth in this program receive mentor support, and they also engage in prosocial activities during the 12-week program. Aside from week five, the week of the FAIR program, youth in the intervention and control groups received the same offerings and supports over the other 11 weeks of the Campus Connections mentoring program.

On week five of the 12-week program, all youth completed the pre-test questionnaire upon arrival at Campus Connections. Youth in the control condition proceeded with the usual Campus Connections programming for the remainder of the evening. Youth in the intervention condition spent the remainder of the evening engaging in the five FAIR activities, as detailed above. For the following two weeks visual reminders of the FAIR program were set out for the intervention group only, which included posters and crafts the youth had made during the FAIR intervention (e.g., shoe boxes, house building).

All study participants took the post-intervention survey, which was the same as the pre-survey, on the eighth week of the Campus Connections semester, three weeks after the

intervention. Week eight was selected for the post-test survey because our research team wanted to allow a few weeks for the intervention group participants to reflect on FAIR activities.

CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

Baseline Differences

Independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to examine differences at baseline between the intervention and control groups. There were no significant differences between groups with respect to gender ($t(55)=.486, p>.05$), race/ethnicity ($t(53)=.166, p>.05$), age ($t(54.35)=-.528, p>.05$), pre-intervention critical reflection: perceived inequality scores ($t(55)=.011, p>.05$), or pre-intervention critical reflection: egalitarianism scores ($t(55)=.079, p>.05$). (See Table 2 for a list of means by group.)

A paired samples *t*-test was conducted to determine any changes in pre- to post scores across the entire sample, and no difference in scores was found, $t(54)=-.018, p>.05$ (See Table 2 for a list of pretest and posttest scores by experimental group.)

Table 2. Means for Pretest and Posttest score for Intervention and Control Group

	Pretest		Posttest	
Measure	Intervention Group	Control Group	Intervention Group	Control Group
Critical Reflection: Perceived Inequality	17.94 (6.67)	18.17 (6.85)	18.70 (7.17)	19.21 (7.37)
Critical Reflection: Egalitarianism	20.47 (3.69)	22.00 (3.43)	19.97 (7.17)	21.17 (4.10)

*SD reported in parentheses

Attrition

Participants who dropped out of the study were significantly more likely to be in the control group than in the intervention group, $t(17)=3.24, p<.05$, and they were significantly more likely to be male, $t(14)=2.24, p<.05$. Some participants who did not complete the post survey

were absent when surveys were administered, or they had dropped out of the Campus Connections program.

Critical Consciousness

An independent samples *t*-test was conducted to test whether there was a change in critical consciousness scores in the intervention versus control conditions. No significant differences in change scores were found between the two groups for either critical reflection: perceived inequality, $t(53)=-.000, p>.05, d = -.10$ or critical reflection: egalitarianism, $t(53)=.151, p>.05, d = .09$.

CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to determine the efficacy of the FAIR program at raising levels of critical consciousness among youth. The hypothesis that participation in the FAIR program would lead to higher levels of critical consciousness was not supported. No significant differences between conditions were found on critical reflection: perceived inequality or critical reflection: egalitarianism scores from pretest to posttest.

These findings are not consistent with previous evaluations of diversity awareness curriculums intended to raise levels of critical consciousness. As noted above, several diversity awareness program evaluations have yielded promising results in raising levels of critical consciousness among youth. However, each of these evaluations utilized a unique curriculum, and each evaluation measured critical consciousness differently.

Our findings are also inconsistent with a previous evaluation of the FAIR program specifically. This evaluation had a larger sample (66 girls, and 55 boys), and was conducted in the same Western community (Brinkman, 2009). Analyses revealed fewer gender prejudiced behaviors after a critical consciousness intervention. Based on focus group findings, participants in this earlier study also reported an increased understanding and appreciation of gender prejudice or inequality.

One possible explanation for the difference in study findings between previous research with the FAIR program and this study is the age disparity—chronological and developmental. Although Brinkman's (2009) sample had a similar ethnic and gender composition as the current study, their study sample was all fifth graders, aged 10-13. In our study sample, youth ranged in ages from 10-18, with a mean age of 13.58 for the intervention group and 13.82 for the control

group. According to the Sociopolitical Development Theory, youth pass through different stages of awareness and action related to social justice, and these changes are a result of building awareness of societal structures that enforce oppression through education and discussion (Watts, 2003). It is feasible that youth who are older will have had more opportunities to build sociopolitical awareness across their lifetime compared to younger adolescents, and thus are less likely to have changes in critical consciousness as they have already reached a high level of critical consciousness.

Another possible explanation for the disparity in results across studies is that the previous evaluation focused on gender socialization as an outcome while the CCS used in the present study is a measure related to both gender and racial socialization. It may be that the FAIR program is more effective in raising awareness of gender socialization than racial socialization, and therefore the measure used was too broad. There is face level support for this theory in that of the five activities in the FAIR program, one focuses generally on stereotypes based on a variety of demographics including both race and gender, two focus specifically on gender socialization, one focuses on class stereotypes, and one focuses on bullying and bystander intervention. Thus, having two activities geared specifically around gender socialization may be enough targeted intervention to change attitudes and understanding of this subject while there may not be enough specific instruction around racial socialization to produce significant changes in critical consciousness specific to race.

Limitations

There were several limitations to the study that may have contributed to the lack of significant results. One possible explanation is the small sample size. Based on the small effect sizes ($d=.09/.1$) and small sample size, the experiment did not have sufficient power to

accurately detect changes across groups if there was a true change. A post-hoc power analysis revealed that a much greater sample size ($n=1200$) would be required to meet the recommended statistical power level of .8 (Welkowitz, Cohen & Lea, 2012).

Another weakness of the study is that some of the participants and their mentors may have been included in previous FAIR program activities. The FAIR program was offered multiple times prior to this study, and participants were not asked whether or not they had engaged in previous FAIR activities. In addition, the Campus Connections mentoring program provides a number of supports and services that may sensitize this youth population to be more aware or critically conscious of themselves and others. Finally, there was a high attrition rate from this study, particularly from the control group.

Another component that may have affected the results is the CCS. Because the CCS was recently developed and validated further replications are needed with larger, diverse sample populations of different developmental ages and backgrounds to determine the effectiveness of this scale for detecting the benefits of brief intervention programs, such as the FAIR program. It is still unclear if the CCS sensitive enough to detect intervention outcomes for certain populations, such as older adolescents. Additionally, as the scale was developed at a sophomore reading level, it may have been an ineffective measure for the younger adolescents participating in the evaluation.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Due to the many possible explanations for the lack of significant results of this study, it is not possible to determine accurately the efficacy of the FAIR program in raising critical consciousness among youth based off of this study's findings. Further research is necessary to determine the effectiveness of the FAIR program; to test the validity of the CCS in brief

intervention settings and to determine the benefits of interventions aimed specifically at raising critical consciousness among different populations of children and youth. Future studies will benefit from having a larger sample size, and controlling for age. Additionally, using a replicable intervention and consistent measures of sociopolitical awareness is necessary to develop a cohesive understanding of how diversity awareness programs impact levels of critical consciousness among youth.

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