Experimentally Evaluating the Impact of a School-Based African-Centered Emancipatory Intervention on the Ethnic Identity of African American Adolescents

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Abstract

Ethnic identity, the extent to which one defines one's self as a member of a particular ethnic group, has been found to be an important predictor of African American adolescents' psychological and behavioral well-being. This study experimentally examined the effects of a school-based emancipatory intervention on the ethnic identity of African American adolescents. Using a promising education framework drawn from elements of East African Ujamaa philosophy and practice, the intervention was provided to a randomly select-ed group of 32 eighth graders in a predominately African American inner-city mainstream public school and then compared to a randomly selected group of 33 eighth graders in a regularly scheduled life skills class from the same

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population. Contrary to expectations, growth trajectory modeling indicated that participants' ethnic identity significantly decreased throughout the intervention compared to youth in the control group. Intervention and evaluation challenges are discussed as are implications for future practice and research.

Keywords

African American youth, ethnic identity, MEIM, intervention, Project EXCEL

Adolescence is a time of change and exploration for youth, as well as a critical period in which questions of identity become salient. Achieving a strong sense of identity is not only a major developmental task of adolescence but one that can have significant implications for future functioning (Erikson, 1968). For minority youth in particular, ethnic identity can be a central component of personal identity due to the historical and contemporary significance of race and ethnicity in the United States (Phinney, 1990). Minority youth, such as African American youth, are often devalued by the dominant culture (Phinney, 1990) and must contend with racism and negative stereotypes that make development of a positive ethnic identity even more complicated and crucial. African American youth must grapple with understanding not only the self but also the self in social contexts (Worrell & Gardner-Kitt, 2006), thus making ethnic identity particularly salient for them. Research suggests that when African American youth's ethnic identity is in question, poor psychological (e.g., low self-esteem, depression, anxiety and educational alienation) and behavioral outcomes (e.g., poor motivation to achieve, poor academic performance, and school rejection) often result (Clark, 1991; Goodenow, 1993; Hemmings, 1996; Kaplan & Maehr, 2000).

While psychosocial and educational interventions have been designed to enhance the ethnic identity of participating youth, many interventions targeting African American youth fail to address and/or assess their participants' change in ethnic identity, and even fewer of those that do have been rigorously evaluated (Whaley & McQueen, 2004). This study attempts to bridge this critical gap in the research and practice literature by rigorously evaluating the results of one culturally relevant school-based psychosocial intervention (titled Project EXCEL and designed by the first author) on participating African American youth's ethnic identity. To this effect, this article begins with a definition of ethnic identity, followed by an examination of its documented effects on African American youth. We then explore the concept of African-centered emancipatory education and its positive impact on the

ethnic identity of African American youth. Finally, Project EXCEL is described before discussing the intervention results and implications.

Ethnic Identity Defined

Ethnic identity refers to the belief that one has regarding the significance and meaning of ethnicity and how one defines oneself or ascribes to membership in that ethnic group (Phinney, 1992; Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998). Ethnic identity typically focuses on the worldview, beliefs, and traditions associated with individuals with a common cultural heritage (Watts & McMahon, 2002). In other words, it is a self-ascribed group identity that is formed from self-definition by group members who perceive themselves as sharing similar culture, language, values, and ancestry (Verkuyten, 2005). African Americans and Jamaicans, for example, may consider themselves as distinct ethnic groups because of differences in the formation and expression of their culture, linguistic, historical, and social experiences. It is argued that ethnic identity encompasses the entirety of feelings associated with group membership resulting from ancestral origins, cultural ties, racial categorization, and the social status of ethnic groups in the greater society (Phinney, 1996; Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997; Smith, 1991).

For African American youth in particular, the conceptualization of ethnic identity versus racial identity is important to distinguish, as these concepts overlap but represent two different perspectives on identity (Cokley, 2005). Most often racial identity is used when describing group affiliation created in response to societal oppression, while ethnic identity is most often associated with acquiring and retaining cultural expressions, traditions, and language.

One limitation of focusing solely on the racial identity of African American youth is that the conceptualization of identity is limited to their interactions with Whites and coping in an oppressive society, while neglecting the significance of cultural characteristics derived from within-group processes and their African heritage (Azibo & Robinson, 2004; Cokley, 2005; Smith, 1991). Consequently, many African American psychology scholars contend that African American group identity should be analyzed from the ethnicity paradigm in order to accommodate the totality of forces that shaped their group membership. Hence, this study focused on examining the ethnic identity of African American youth.

Much of the conceptualization of ethnic identity development has its roots in Erikson's (1968) ego-identity model. Erikson viewed identity development as a process of search and commitment, beginning in childhood and

eventually leading to an achieved identity in early adulthood. He located the critical identity crisis, responsible for spurring the period of exploration, during adolescents.

Phinney (1992) created a stage model of ethnic identity development drawing from previous work. She proposed that youth begin with a *diffused* identity, not having contemplated the meaning of their ethnic group membership or made any commitment, followed by a period of active questioning and exploration of their feelings toward their ethnicity and ethnic group membership called *moratorium*, which eventually leads to an *achieved* ethnic identity. Some youth simply accept the beliefs and attitudes of their parents and peers (i.e., make a commitment without exploration); these youth are considered to have a *foreclosed* ethnic identity. Phinney (1990) proposed that ethnic identity consisted of three main components: a sense of belonging, self-identification, and pride in one's group. Her model of ethnic identity development and the corresponding scale (the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure [MEIM]) were developed to measure aspects of ethnic identity common to all ethnic groups.

Seminal works in the area of ethnic identity suggest that it is a complex construct that varies among members of an ethnic group rather than simply a categorical variable. Its ability to predict meaningful psychological outcomes is dependent on its importance and salience for a particular individual (Phinney, 1996). Components of ethnic identity relative to this study include the original three subscales developed for the MEIM; Affirmation and Belonging, Ethnic Identity Achievement, and Ethnic Behaviors.

Affirmation and Belonging is conceptualized using a social identity theoretical framework that focuses on an individual's feeling that they are part of a group and the sense of validation and esteem they obtain from group membership (Roberts et al., 1999). An ethnic group is one of the societal groups in which people may draw parts of their self-concept and receive a sense of belonging that contributes to their self-esteem. *Ethnic Identity Achievement* focuses on ethnic identity as it relates to Erikson's (1968) theory of identity development, where adolescents go through a period of exploration and questioning followed by a commitment to an ethnic identity as discussed above. Within the MEIM it is assessed by statements that indicate exploration of one's ethnic group have occurred and the extent to which one endorses a commitment and clear understanding of their ethnic identity (Phinney, 1992; Roberts et al., 1999). *Ethnic Behaviors* include specific practices that are linked to ethnic group membership that can be clearly expressed. Measurements of ethnic behaviors commonly include languages used, friendship or association with ethnic group members, and foods eaten (Phinney & Ong, 2007).

Ethnic Identity and African American Youth

Ethnic identity has been found to play a prominent role in the overall identity development and well-being of African American youth (Aries & Moorehead, 1989). Such youth have been found to engage in more exploration regarding the meaning of their ethnic identity as compared to European American youth and to achieve higher levels of ethnic identity development relative to other ethnic groups (French, Siedman, Allen, & Aber, 2006; Phinney, 1992). Similarly, African American youth who perceive their group identity to be very important, tend to have a stronger evaluation of their group and themselves as group members (Crocker, Luhtanen, Blaine, & Broadnax, 1994; Martinez & Dukes, 1997; Phinney & Alipuria, 1990; Phinney & Chavira, 1992; Wright, 1985).

This reported salience and centrality of ethnic identity for ethnic minority youth suggests that ethnic identity has implications for psychological outcomes. For instance, African American as well as other ethnic minority youth with a more positive ethnic identity have been found to also have higher levels of self-esteem (Martinez & Dukes, 1997; Phinney & Alipuria, 1990; Phinney & Chavira, 1992; Wright, 1985), more active coping styles and less aggressive beliefs (Watts & McMahon, 2002), and lower levels of depression and internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Yasui, Dorham, & Dishion, 2004) compared to European Americans. There is some research that suggests that ethnic identity may also help buffer the negative effects of racial/ethnic discrimination for ethnic minority youth (Chavira & Phinney, 1991; Wakefield & Hudley, 2005) and serve as a protective factor against the negative effects of perceived discrimination on academic achievement for African American youth (Eccles, Wong, & Peck, 2006).

Considerable research similarly suggests that ethnic identity for African American youth has implications for behavioral outcomes like academic achievement (Humphreys, 1988). Only a few of these studies have shown a direct relationship between ethnic identity and achievement, suggesting that their relationship is more complex (Bennett, 2006; Taylor, Casten, Flickinger, Roberts, & Fulmore, 1994). For instance, Cokley and Chapman (2008) found ethnic identity to be indirectly related to academic achievement positively through academic self-concept and negatively through devaluing school success. Eccles et al. (2006) hypothesized that ethnic identity would have a positive effect on African American youth's academic achievement due to cultural socialization messages stressing the importance of education in overcoming future discrimination. Hughes, Witherspoon, Rivas-Drake, and West-Bey

(2009) also found ethnic identity to be a mediator in the positive relationship between cultural socialization and academic efficacy and engagement.

Though beyond the scope of this study, overall, prior research suggests that successful change in ethnic identity by way of cultural socialization messages may ultimately help enhance healthy outcomes (e.g., academic achievement, coping with discrimination) and protect African American youth from ultimately engaging in problem behaviors (Clark, 1991; Cort, 2008). For this reason, it is important to consider interventions with cultural socialization messages that can help foster higher levels of ethnic identity among African American youth.

African-Centered Emancipatory Education

One alternative form of education that has been theorized to positively influence African American youth, including their ethnic identity, by way of cultural socialization messages is African-centered emancipatory education (Potts, 2003). African-centered emancipatory education literally means "freedom education" and refers to a process of training that liberates Black people from racist ideologies and social institutions in contemporary society. Three important goals of African-centered emancipatory education include (1) connecting African American culture with Africa through the introduction and infusion of Afrocentric cultural approaches and cultural socialization messages into curricula and training, (2) facilitating teambuilding and communalism, and (3) encouraging youth to become agents of social change (Akoto, 1992; Azibo, 1996; Potts, 2003; Shujaa, 1994; Viadero, 1996). African-centered emancipatory education is more than mere curricular additions. In fact, the philosophical foundation of African-centered emancipatory education differs from that of mainstream public education in that there is more emphasis on communalism over individualism, cooperative learning over competitiveness, and spirituality over materialism (Freire, 1998; Potts, 2003). These changes in the educational environment are theorized to empower and bring out the best in African American students (Madhubuti & Madhubuti, 1994; Potts, 2003; Shujaa, 1994).

Currently, little empirical research exists regarding the effectiveness of African-centered emancipatory education and the mechanisms through which it affects African American youth's outcomes. One study evaluating African-centered emancipatory schools found that this type of education has generally been effective at increasing the academic achievement of African American youth (Ratteray, 1992). Anecdotally, graduates of emancipatory schools report a number of positive characteristics about these schools, including academic

curricula, a family-like school climate, bonds with teachers, small student body, and the affirmation of African American culture in the school (Ratteray, 1992). Studies evaluating the Benjamin E. Mays Institute, an emancipatory education program within a Connecticut public middle school, found that students in the program had higher GPAs, higher scores on the Connecticut Mastery Test, and made the honor role more often compared to the general student body (Potts, 2003).

Compared to the number of public mainstream schools that exist nation-wide, there are relatively fewer independent African-centered schools across the country and even fewer mainstream public school-based interventions that purportedly use an African-centered emancipatory educational frame-work. Though some public school-based interventions have included similar African-centered emancipatory components, like teaching African American history, developing critical thinking skills, and promoting positive social change involvement, these programs have rarely empirically evaluated the effects of the culturally relevant intervention on participating youth's ethnic identity or examined the effects of such processes during the school day.

Thomas, Davidson, and McAdoo (2008) conducted one of the few studies that investigated the effects of an after-school-based culturally relevant inter-vention on African American adolescent girls and found that it had a signifi-cant and positive impact on their ethnic identity. However, this intervention did not use an African-centered emancipatory education framework nor did it occur during the school day. Earlier works by Belgrave, Chase-Vaughn, Gray, Addison, and Cherry (2000) developed a community-based culturally rele-vant intervention to promote resiliency among African American preadoles-cent girls and reported that the intervention did increase participants' ethnic identity; however, a racial identity scale was used for the ethnic identity assessment and the program did not occur during the school day or utilize an African-centered emancipatory education framework. A similar community-based, culturally relevant intervention developed for a mixed-gender group was found to cause increases in racial identity as well (Cherry et al., 1998). However, again a racial identity scale was used for the assessment, and the program did not occur during the school day or utilize an African-centered emancipatory education framework. Essentially, only one of these published empirical evaluation studies specifically targeted ethnic identity develop-ment, and none of them occurred during the school day or utilized an African-centered emancipatory education framework. More research is needed to understand the relationship between African-centered emancipatory public school day interventions and ethnic identity development particularly.

Project EXCEL

Project EXCEL (Ensuring eXcellence through Communalism, African Education and Leadership), is a school-based (school day) psychosocial African-centered emancipatory intervention that seeks to improve the psychological and behavioral well-being of African American adolescents. The intervention is based on the East African Ujamaa philosophy and practice that emphasizes sharing, cooperation, and respect between individuals. Project EXCEL includes two components: (1) an *educational component* that involves learning about African American history and cultural values as well as engaging in cohesion-building activities based on ancient African practices and rituals and learning opportunities that dealt with leadership and social change for African American adolescent students and (2) an *empowerment component* that involves furnishing youth with practical avenues through which they could change their own lives and that of their communities. This included participation in libations (an ancient African method of making offerings to our ancestors and reaffirming our place in the universe) and other empowering ceremonies derived from traditional African practices that aimed to maximize youth potential for strong identity development. Intervention topics included African/African American History and Culture (books, articles, videos, music); Cohesion-Building Activities and Communalism, Rituals and Practices, Interpersonal Skills and Inner Strength, Putting Theory Into Practice, Student Leadership and Activism, and School and Community Partnerships. The Project EXCEL curriculum is broken down into the following five corresponding units: Communalism, Black America, Africa, Black Diaspora, and Leadership.

Many researchers have expressed the need to emphasize African American culture in mainstream public schools using cultural socialization messages and practices (Phinney, 1992; Eccles et al., 2006; Lewis, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2006; Tatum, 1992; Thomas, Davidson, & McAdoo, 2008). This is done by imparting African/African American cultural and historical learning in the classroom so that African American youth are taught to take a proactive stance in defining, within a community context, the possibilities and gifts that African American youth can offer the world (Lee, 1992). Moreover, they are taught to think critically and question everything, to understand "true history," and to practice a lifestyle that recognizes the importance of African and African American heritage and traditions in society (Carol Lee, as cited by Shujaa, 1994, p. 306). This is done by teaching traditional African diaspora academic content as well as the moral, ethical, and cultural values and heritages of their communities (Foster, 1992). There is also inclusion of a more accurate view of the

United States and world history, which embraces the cultural acknowledgment, contributions, and perspectives of African Americans and other African diaspora communities in world history (Lee, 1992). Scholars argue that this type of historical and cultural learning exposes African American youth to new realities and empowers them to feel good about being African American while influencing their place within their own African American group. Thus, knowing one's culture is a necessary foundation for positive ethnic identity change (Tatum, 1992).

However, traditional mainstream educational systems have been less active in infusing African Diaspora culture into curricula and instruction and in promoting positive images of Black people (Hilliard, Payton-Stewart, & Williams, 1990; Littleton, 2002; Sefa Dei, 2008; Tate, Ladson-Billings, & Grant, 1993; Woodson, 1990). Thus, a large segment of the African American youth community misses out on this important learning. Much of Project EXCEL involves exploring the historical and contemporary experiences of African Americans. It is this focus that could potentially influence participants' ethnic identity. For example, in the beginning of the EXCEL curriculum, students are introduced to concepts of cohesion building, communalism, and collective responsibility, which are critical to enhancing the *Affirmation and Belonging* aspects of their ethnic identity. As such, students work together to establish group expectations and common goals while collectively participating in the group naming ceremony—an African ritual that allows students to take ownership of the group while developing a sense of connectedness and personal responsibility to the group.

To enhance their *Ethnic Identity Achievement*, students are led through a series of exercises and activities in the EXCEL curriculum focused on forming and changing their positive reference group orientation. As such, students learn through games, demonstration, and film about the continent of Africa and the unique contributions of various kings and queens that shaped world history. They travel through the middle passage, learning by way of role-plays, movie clips, demonstrations, and games that African Americans and West Indians resisted the institution of slavery and did not enter it passively as many mainstream texts suggest. Along the way, students learn about African and African diaspora culture by way of rituals, film, music, and dance activities. The curriculum then aids students in connecting African and African American/ Caribbean history and culture with contemporary African American culture. Again, this is done by way of film, role-plays, music videos, guest lecturers, games, and group discussion.

Finally, to enhance their *Ethnic Behaviors*, namely, those behaviors associated with ethnicity such as active involvement in customs, traditions, and

social interactions within one's group, students in the EXCEL intervention are afforded opportunities to participate in African rituals, customs, and other activities that educate students on African traditions and customs and promote their social interaction. Students are encouraged to identify current customs in African American and Caribbean culture that mirror African traditions (e.g., pouring libations). Continued social interaction within ones ethnic group is further encouraged through ideas of communalism and social responsibility as well as through the development of leadership skills introduced throughout the 16-week curriculum.

Essentially, cultural socialization is a key aspect of racial-ethnic socialization (Hughes et al., 2009). Research has shown a link between the racial-ethnic socialization practices of parents and youth's ethnic identity (Hughes et al., 2009; Quintana & Vera, 1999; Stevenson, 1995; Umana-Taylor & Fine, 2004). Like parents, Project EXCEL could function as a socializing agent.

Project EXCEL is the first experimentally evaluated African-centered emancipatory intervention to be implemented during the public school day to both male and female middle school students. This offering strengthens the intervention and its outcomes in two ways. First, it emphasizes that the Project EXCEL curriculum is just as important as more traditional curriculum, potentially increasing its impact on students. Second, it allows more African American youth across genders to become exposed to and benefit from emancipatory education. In a previous article (Lewis, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2006), it has been documented that Project EXCEL positively affected students' school connectedness, motivation to achieve, communal orientation, and preference for social change. These shorter term psychological and behavioral outcomes have been linked to longer term student outcomes such as academic achievement, grades, attendance, and graduation rates (Arroyo & Zigler, 1995; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Kagan, 1990; Senior & Anderson, 1993). The present article examines the extent to which the Project EXCEL intervention enhanced students' ethnic identity. It was hypothesized that the youth exposed to the intervention would show an increase in ethnic identity, both during and after the intervention as compared with youth in the control group.

Method

Sample and Setting

This research was conducted in one Midwestern predominately African American, inner-city, public middle school with an enrollment near 500 that was situated in a neighborhood where poverty ($21,000 median household

income), crime, gang activity, homelessness, and abandoned properties (11% vacancy rate) were prevalent. The school principal and one eighth-grade teacher agreed to have the program run 3 days per week for one semester (approximately 16 weeks) during the school day in a class period that was mutually agreed on between the principal and teacher (e.g., elective period/ life skills class). By selecting numbers out of a hat, the teacher and principal randomly selected which of the three eight grade classes at the school would receive the intervention and which class would serve as the control group. To be eligible for either the experimental or control condition, youth had to be in eighth grade and indicate through self-report that they were of African descent. All students came from the same geographic location described above. Eighth graders were chosen because they are at the beginning of the adolescent stage of development where individuals start becoming aware of their socio-political environment and begin getting involved in change activities— important notions of African-centered emancipatory education (Hilliard et al., 1990). Additionally, eighth graders are young and malleable enough to embrace notions of African-centered emancipatory education, yet old enough to understand what it means and how to put it into practice.

Because it was essential that the teacher to student ratio be moderate in order to uphold the intervention program goals (e.g., mentorship, ethnic identity change), a conservative estimate of the number of student participants was 30 in each group (intervention and control) or 60 across both groups. Therefore, this study aimed to attain 60 students across both groups. The data revealed that the actual number of student participants was closely in line with the original number estimated; however, there were some small variations over time due to attrition and enrollment changes.

Of the 65 participants enrolled in the study, 32 were in the experimental condition and 33 were in the control condition. A total of 53% of the sample were male, and the average age of the total sample was 13.3 with a standard deviation of 0.53. During the intervention, 8 students (1 experimental, 7 control) left the school or were transferred to another class for various reasons (e.g., behavior, performance, etc.); Time 3 measures were not available for these students. In other words, a total of 39 students were initially enrolled in the control group at Time 1, but 4 left the school and 2 were transferred to another class by Time 2, leaving a total of 33 in the control group. Similarly a total of 31 students were initially enrolled in the experimental group at Time 1, but by Time 2, 1 was transferred to another class for performance reasons and 2 new participants were enrolled, leaving a total of 32 in the experimental group.

No significant differences on demographic characteristics or Time 1 measures were found between the eight students who attrited and the 57 who completed Time 3 measures, and there were no condition differences on demographics for either the entire group of 65 or the retained group of 57. Because the analytic technique (hierarchical linear modeling [HLM]) is able to include cases with partially missing data by "borrowing strength" for estimates of their trajectories from group mean trends (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992), all 65 cases were included in the longitudinal analysis. This is a conservative, "intent-to-treat" analytic strategy that minimizes the biases in experimental-control comparison that would have been introduced through removal of students who did not complete Time 3 assessments (Nich & Carroll, 1997).

In order to make sure that these analyses were feasible given the available sample, a power analysis was completed to estimate the probability of finding a treatment effect on the intervention (change over time). Because we had a larger sample than originally anticipated and attrition was quite low (15.4% between Time 1 and Time 2 for the control group, 2.6% between Time 1 and Time 2 for the experimental group, 3.2% between Time 2 and Time 3 for the control group, and 9.7% between Time 2 and Time 3 for the experimental group), the number of participants remaining for analyses gave us a power of approximately .90 to find a medium sized effect (i.e., $d = .50$). From this, it is apparent that the power of the growth trajectory modeling was adequate. It is important to note that while two new participants joined the intervention group after Time 1, they were still included in the analyses because HLM can handle cases with partially missing data. However, because one student joined the control group at Time 3, the data collected on this student were not included in the HLM analysis because they did not meet the rule of this study: Students that did not participate at Time 2 were omitted from the study (as a rule of this study) in an effort to truly capture the maximum effects of the intervention on youth over time.

Over an entire school semester, 3 days a week, the students assigned to the experimental group received the African-centered emancipatory education course (titled Project EXCEL—Ensuring Excellence Through Communalism, African Education, and Leadership). Students in the control group received a regularly taught life skills course (focused on preparing eighth-grade students for life after middle school by teaching daily living skills, character building, basic employment and vocational skills, and reading and writing essentials). As part of the life skills curriculum, participating students would take field trips and occasionally watch video and film clips related to the course content, with the ultimate goal of (1) improving their basic skills so they could become self supporting, productive citizens and (2) improving their relationships with

others by learning how to respect rights and feelings. A third group of eighth graders took a different course during this time period and did not participate in the study. As the school was offering the EXCEL course as part of its regular curriculum, students did not need parental permission to participate. However, parental consent was obtained for students to complete the voluntary assessments over time. All parents provided such permission. Both the experimental and control classrooms were concurrent during the same class period but in separate classrooms.

Procedure

The intervention was co-taught by the first author and an eighth-grade middle school teacher (both African American) through the use of lecture, group activities, discussion, group projects, videos, music, dance, and guest speakers. Facilitators shared their own experiences during the cultural exchange, mentorship, and other learning opportunities while allowing for topic flexibility, as it was necessary for students to become active participants in their learning. It was equally important that a space be provided where African American students and teachers could learn from each other.

Both the intervention and administration of questionnaires took place in the designated classroom space. Class sessions lasted for 50 minutes. At the appropriate time points (preintervention; midintervention—2 months into the intervention; and postintervention—4 months after preintervention), questionnaires were administered during intervention and control group sessions and were read aloud by the first author, the middle school teacher, or one of two research assistants to control for any reading difficulties among the youth. Each questionnaire administration period lasted for the full 50-minute class period. Because the school was offering the Project EXCEL course as part of the school day, students were not required to obtain parental consent to participate. However, in order for students to complete the voluntary assessments over time, parental permission was obtained.

Measure

Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure. Ethnic identity was assessed using the 14-item MEIM developed by Phinney (1992) to measure adolescent ethnic identity change. Responses are anchored on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 = *strongly agree* to 4 = *strongly disagree*. The MEIM has been shown to be a reliable and valid instrument with African American adolescents (Phinney, 1992). Psychometric work published by Phinney (1992) documented

Table 1. Summary of One-Way ANOVAs Between Experimental and Control Groups at Time 1

Variable	Control Mean (SD), N = 33	Experimental Mean (SD), N = 32	F, df = 1, 63	p
Total Ethnic Identity (MEIM)	2.23 (.494)	2.19 (.612)	.378	.541
Affirmation and Belonging	1.94 (.751)	1.87 (.778)	.013	.909
Ethnic Identity Achievement	2.38 (.555)	2.47 (.543)	.244	.623
Ethnic Behaviors	2.41 (.775)	2.07 (.817)	.001	.980

Note: ANOVA = analysis of variance; *df* = degrees of freedom; MEIM = Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure.

a highly reliable total score (Cronbach's α = .81) and three intercorrelated components of racial identity: (1) Affirmation and Belonging, α = .75; (2) Ethnic Identity Achievement, α = .69; and (3) Ethnic Behaviors (a two-item scale). Sample items from the Affirmation and Belonging Subscale include the following: *I am happy that I am a member of the group I belong to*; *I have a strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group*; *I have a lot of pride in my ethnic group and its accomplishments*. Sample items from the Ethnic Identity Achievement subscale include the following: *I have spent time trying to find out more about my own ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs*; *I have a clear sense of my ethnic background and what it means for me*; *I think a lot about how my life will be affected by my ethnic group membership*. The two items from the Ethnic Behaviors subscale were the following: *I am active in organizations or social groups that include mostly members of my own ethnic group* and *I participate in cultural practices of my own group, such as special food, music, or customs.* On average, youth across the sample had a total ethnic identity score of 2.2 and ethnic identity subscale scores of 1.9 (Affirmation and Belonging), 2.4 (Ethnic Identity Achievement), and 2.4 (Ethnic Behaviors). See Table 1 for more specifics on the descriptives of the general level of scores on total ethnic identity and each of the ethnic identity subscales.

Data Analyses

Given the longitudinal nature of the data, growth trajectory modeling (also known as multilevel modeling, HLM, random effects regression, and random

coefficients regression) was used to test hypothesized increases in participants' ethnic identity over time. This technique offers maximum power in exploring change (both linear and nonlinear) over time across individuals. Between three time points and a total of 65 individuals, growth curve modeling operates with a total N of 195 nonindependent observations, rather than 65. Growth trajectory modeling not only provides increased power, but it has a major advantage over repeated measures analysis of variance—a technique commonly utilized in longitudinal analyses similar to this study—in that it can accommodate missing data at any time point without having to remove any participant from the statistical analyses (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992).

Growth trajectories were modeled with random intercepts (i.e., individual students were assumed to vary on their initial level of ethnic identity) and random linear slopes (i.e., the speed and direction of change over time was assumed to vary from student to student). Change on each dependent variable was examined for nonlinearity (i.e., whether the speed and direction of change accelerated/decelerated over time) by comparing models with and without fixed quadratic terms. Where the addition of a quadratic term made a significant improvement in model fit, it was retained in the model in order to capture the extent of acceleration/deceleration in change over time. Models were estimated using the Student Version of HLM (hierarchical linear and nonlinear modeling) software 5.05 for Windows (Raudenbush, Bryk, & Congdon, 2001), using full maximum likelihood estimation to allow likelihood ratio chi-square model comparisons.

Results

Total Ethnic Identity

The hypothesis that intervention youth participants' total ethnic identity would increase over time during the intervention, relative to those in the control condition, was not confirmed. In the intervention group, participants' total ethnic identity significantly decreased throughout the first part of the intervention and then began to decrease at a slower rate during the second half of the intervention (see Table 2 and Figure 1).

The effect of intervention on the intercept was not significant ($B = -0.001$, $p > .10$), indicating there were no preintervention condition differences. The intervention had a significant, negative effect on the linear growth parameter ($B = -0.657$, $p < .001$), indicating that participants in the experimental condition showed more negative change over time, compared with those in the control classroom, who showed no significant change ($B = 0.111$, $p < .116$). The intervention had a significantly positive effect on the quadratic

Table 2. Growth Trajectory Models of Multicultural Ethnic Identity: Total and Subscale Scores

	Total Racial Identity	Affirmation and Belonging	Ethnic Identity Achievement	Ethnic Behaviors
Fixed effects				
Intercept				
Control	2.227 (0.08)***	2.006 (0.11)***	2.381 (0.08)***	2.431 (0.11)***
Effect of intervention	−0.001 (0.12)	−0.278 (0.15)	0.116 (0.12)	−0.466 (0.15)**
Linear growth				
Control	0.111 (0.07)	0.057 (0.02)*	0.051 (0.07)	0.057 (0.02)*
Effect for intervention	−0.657 (0.09)***	−0.173 (0.03)*	−0.753 (0.10)***	−0.158 (0.03)***
Quadratic acceleration/ deceleration[a]				
Control	−0.011 (0.01)	—	−0.003 (0.01)	—
Effect for intervention	0.073 (0.02)***	—	0.085 (0.01)***	—
Random effects				
Intercept variance	0.120***	0.187***	0.104**	0.205***
Linear slope variance	0.000	0.341	0.000	0.000

Note: Figures in parentheses represent Standard Error.
[a]Quadratic term was included in a model only when it significantly improved fit to the data according to the likelihood ratio chi-square test.
*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

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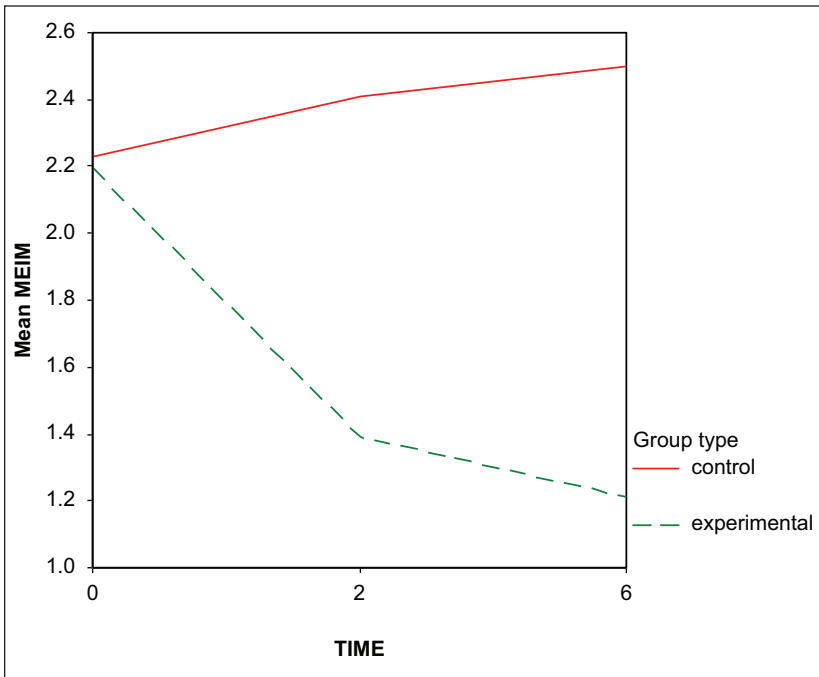
Figure 1. Observed growth trajectories for Total Ethnic Identity by intervention condition

parameter (B = 0.073, $p < .001$), indicating that the pace of negative change decelerated significantly for participants in the experimental condition, compared with the controls, for whom deceleration was not significant (B = −0.011, $p < .316$).

In practical terms, these coefficients indicate that youth participants in the two groups started off (preintervention) with similar attitudes about their ethnic identity. However, during the intervention, youth participants in the intervention group scored lower on ethnic identity, compared with youth in the control group, although this decline in attitude slowed significantly over the second half of the intervention (see Figure 1). Youth in the control group showed no significant change in their attitudes about their ethnic identity.

To more fully understand change in ethnic identity development of youth in the intervention group, analyses then focused on examining various dimensions

of ethnic identity: affirmation and belonging, ethnic identity achievement, and ethnic behaviors.

Affirmation and Belonging

Like total ethnic identity, the hypothesis that intervention youths' feelings of affirmation and belonging would increase over time, during the intervention, was disconfirmed. In the intervention group, participants' feelings of affirmation and belonging significantly decreased throughout the intervention. Change on this dimension was linear, with no significant deceleration.

The effect of intervention on the intercept was not significant, indicating there were no preintervention condition differences. The intervention had a significant, negative effect on the linear growth parameter (B = −0.173, p < .001), indicating that participants in the EFL condition showed more negative change over time, compared with those in the control classroom, who showed significant positive change (B = 0.057, p < .016).

In practical terms, these coefficients indicate that youth participants in the two groups started off (preintervention) with similar attitudes about their affirmation and belonging components of ethnic identity. However, during the intervention, feelings of affirmation and belonging declined significantly for youth participants in the intervention group, while they significantly increased for youth in the control group (see Figure 2).

Ethnic Identity Achievement

The hypothesis that intervention youths' ethnic identity achievement would increase over time, during the intervention, was also disconfirmed. In the intervention group, participants' ethnic identity achievement significantly decreased throughout the intervention, although they decreased at a slower rate during the second half of the intervention.

The effect of intervention on the intercept was not significant, indicating there were no preintervention condition differences. The intervention had a significant, negative effect on the linear growth parameter (B = −0.753, p < .001), indicating that participants in the experimental condition showed more negative change over time, compared with those in the control classroom, who showed no significant change (B = 0.051, p < .488). The intervention had a significantly positive effect on the quadratic parameter (B = 0.085, p < .001), indicating that the pace of negative change decelerated significantly for participants in the experimental condition; deceleration was not significant for the control classroom (B = −0.003, p < .739).
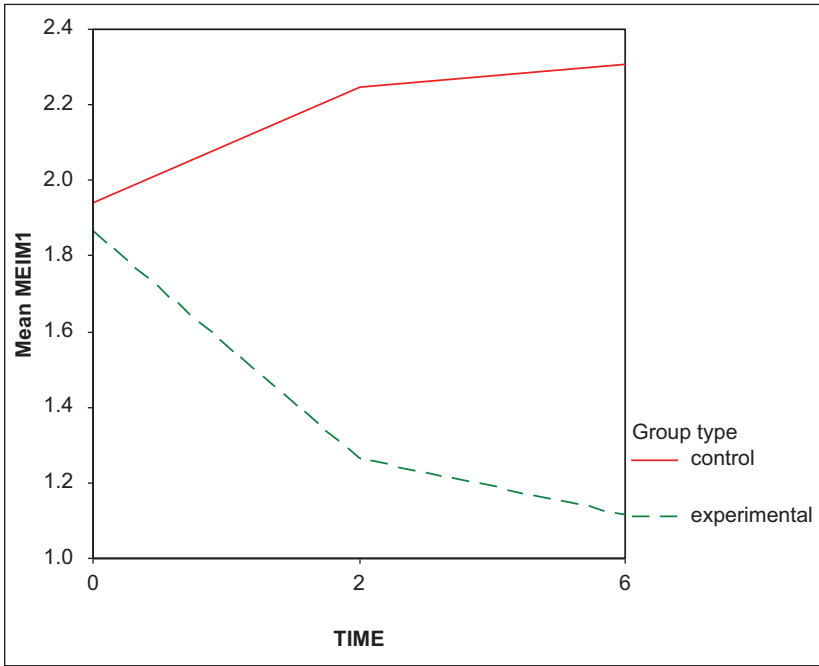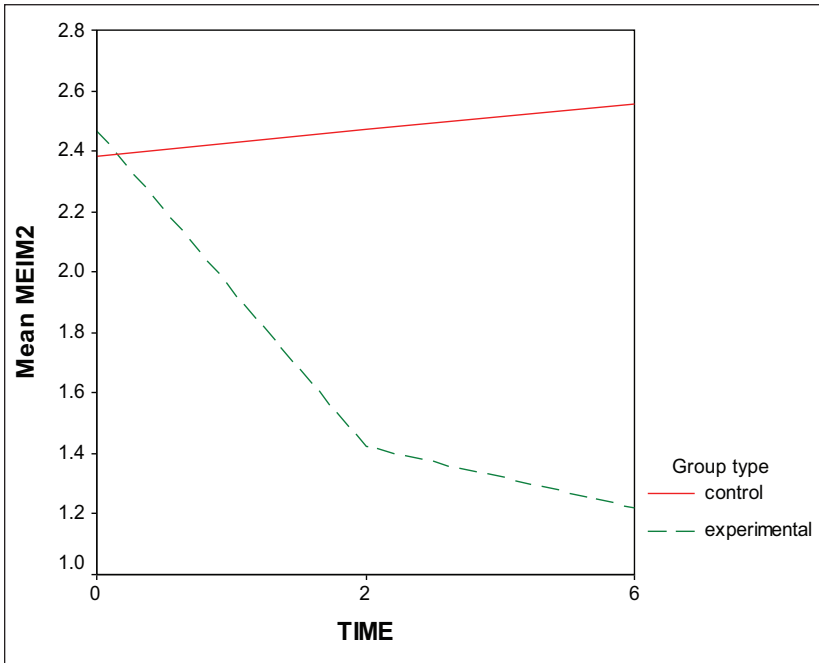
Figure 2. Observed growth trajectories for Affirmation and Belonging by condition

In practical terms, these coefficients indicate that youth participants in the two groups started off (preintervention) with similar attitudes about their ethnic identity achievement. However, during the intervention, youth participants in the intervention group declined in ethnic identity achievement, compared with youth in the control group, who did not change significantly on this variable. For youth in the intervention group, the rate of decline slowed in the second half of the intervention (see Figure 3).

Ethnic Behaviors

Like total ethnic identity, the hypothesis that intervention youths' ethnic behaviors would increase over time, during and after the intervention, was disconfirmed. In the intervention group, participants' ethnic behaviors significantly decreased throughout the intervention. Change on this dimension was linear, with no significant deceleration.

Figure 3. Observed growth trajectories for Ethnic Identity Achievement by condition

The effect of the intervention on the intercept was significant, indicating there were condition differences on preintervention scores, after accounting for the effect of change over time. The intervention had a significant, negative effect on the linear growth parameter (B = −0.158, p < .001), indicating that participants in the experimental condition showed more negative change over time, compared with those in the control classroom, who showed significant positive change (B = 0.057, p < .045).

In practical terms, these coefficients indicate that youth participants in the intervention group declined in their engagement in ethnic behavior, compared with youth in the control group, who significantly increased their engagement in ethnic behavior over time (see Figure 4). In the context of the multilevel model, which accounts for the effect of time, there was a significant condition difference on preintervention ethnic behavior scores.
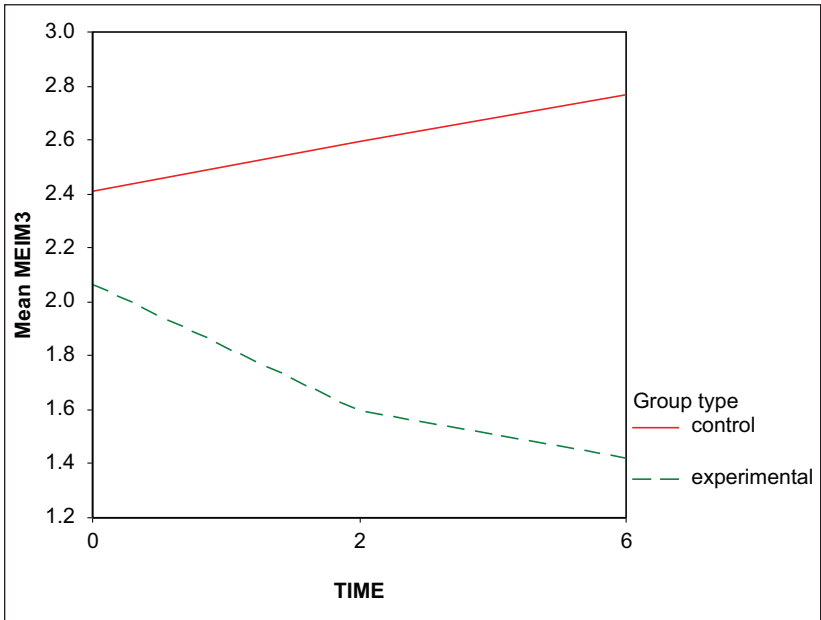
Figure 4. Observed growth trajectories for Ethnic Behaviors by condition

Other Measures

Project EXCEL was also designed to affect communalism, motivation to achieve, school connectedness, and social change involvement. Growth curve modeling was also used to measure these variables, and significant increases were found on all four of these variables for the experimental group compared to the control group. Furthermore, school connectedness and communalism were found to mediate the relationship between the intervention and its effect on motivation to achieve. These results and their implications are discussed in another article (Lewis, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2006); however it is important to note the effects of Project EXCEL on ethnic identity in the context of positive associations with these factors.

Discussion

In previous research, ethnic identity has been found to be an important part of African American adolescents' overall identity and has been linked to different

aspects of psychological and behavioral well being (Aries & Moorehead, 1989; Chavira & Phinney, 1991; Eccles et al., 2006; Martinez & Dukes, 1997; Wright, 1985; Yasui et al., 2004). Cultural knowledge is a critical foundation for developing one's ethnic identity, and cultural influences also aid in socialization processes and interactions with larger societal contexts (e.g., maintenance of bicultural competence in adapting to mainstream and ethnic cultures; Yasui & Dishion, 2007). Essentially, cultural immersion offers a plethora of positive benefits to African American adolescents, of which ethnic identity is at the forefront.

Despite the potential benefits, mainstream education models do not typically infuse African and African American culture into the curriculum (Yasui & Dishion, 2007). When school-based interventions have been tailored to increase adolescent ethnic identity, few have been rigorously evaluated. This study aimed to fill a major gap in the literature by experimentally evaluating an ecologically grounded, culturally specific African-centered emancipatory intervention that focused on the ethnic-racial and developmental stressors often faced by African American youth. Using a promising education framework drawn from elements of East African Ujamaa philosophy and practice, this intervention attempted to create a culturally grounded, value-focused, and leadership-driven setting where African American youth could share their knowledge, work collectively, learn about their culture and heritage, and have their experiences validated.

It was anticipated that the intervention would ultimately enhance students' ethnic identity. However, contrary to what was hypothesized, youth in the intervention group showed a significant decrease over time in their overall ethnic identity compared to youth in the control group. Considering that the intervention increased participants' exposure to cultural knowledge and other content that would theoretically facilitate positive ethnic identity development (i.e., discussions that make race and ethnicity more salient), the results are surprising (Phinney, 1992). These results also differ from those obtained in other culturally relevant interventions developed for African American youth (Belgrave et al., 2000; Thomas et al., 2008). There are many potential explanations for these unexpected results; we discuss two of these and then delineate implications for future research.

First, much of the intervention's content from the first half of the curriculum (e.g., racism, stereotypes, African and African American history and culture) could reasonably be expected to influence both racial and ethnic identity rather than just ethnic identity. It is possible that the first part of the intervention served as an encounter experience for the youth in terms of their racial identity development (Helms, 1990), which is characterized by an experience that

challenges the naïve acceptance of mainstream cultural beliefs, attitudes, and values. The experience can act as a point of departure from a Eurocentric to a more Afrocentric worldview. Though it was not assessed in the present study, in retrospect, it is possible that class discussions about racism and oppression in the first half of the intervention served as an encounter experience for the participants. In other words, the activities and discussions during the intervention may have forced students to acknowledge and think critically (for the first time) about the impact of racism in their life. Faced with the reality that he or she cannot truly be White or achieve the same privileges that Whites are born with, students may have been forced to focus on their identity as members of a group targeted by racism. This realization could cause confusion, at the least, and it may have even caused some anger or discomfort for the participants, which could have resulted in them temporarily distancing themselves from—and declining on—their African American ethnic identity particularly during the first half of the intervention but then less so during the second half of the intervention when leadership and empowerment were the curriculum focus.

Students in the control group never received exposure to activities and discussion on race, racism, or any other encounter type events, which could explain why they did not demonstrate the same ethnic identity declines as students in the intervention group. Instead, control group youth received training on how to become self-supporting productive citizens who contribute to the greater society and how to respect the rights and feelings of others, which could align with aspects of Affirmation and Belonging and Ethnic Behaviors, respectively. This could explain why control group youth showed significant increases in their feelings of Affirmation and Belonging and Ethnic Behaviors during the intervention compared to youth in the EXCEL intervention group.

These findings could have been potentially dealt with by first assessing the racial and ethnic identity of participants to determine if their ethnic identity change over time was in any way attributed to their racial identity development and second by processing with youth their reactions and feelings to class discussions in a developmentally appropriate way to better understand how they were feeling. This could have helped explain the findings further. Future studies of this nature should include measures of both racial and ethnic identity when attempting to assess the identity development and/or change of African American participants and also conduct youth processing sessions about the youth's reactions to class discussions. Qualitative evaluation of the participant's experience may also yield richer data in terms of understanding quantitative findings.

Alternatively, this apparent dis-identification with (decline in) the intervention group's ethnic identity could be understood as a response to learning

about negative stereotypes and the potential for encountering prejudice and discrimination which was covered in the Project EXCEL intervention. This has been referred to as preparation for bias (Hughes et al., 2009). Preparation for bias has been presented as both a protective and a harmful factor (Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999; Hughes & Chen, 1999; Schmitt & Branscombe, 2001). While the research findings regarding the effects of preparation for bias have been mixed, there is both theoretical and empirical evidence to suggest that preparation for bias can have negative effects on ethnic identity (Hughes et al., 2009; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identity theory proposes a social mobility strategy for dealing with a "devalued" social identity, which involves psychologically distancing oneself from that particular social group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). It is possible that we saw this happening to participants in the intervention group as their ethnic identity levels decreased during the intervention and then slowed during the second half of the intervention when leadership and empowerment were the curriculum focus. A study by Steele and Aronson (1995) reflected on this strategy. They found dis-identification in African American youth in response to learning of negative stereotypes of their group. Similarly, in a study examining the effects of different racial-ethnic socialization messages on children's self-esteem, academic achievement, and antisocial behaviors, Hughes et al. (2009) found a negative relationship between preparation for bias and ethnic affirmation. Hence, preparation for bias should be considered in future African-centered emancipatory education intervention studies examining the ethnic identity of African American youth. While it is impossible to know exactly why ethnic identity went down among this sample, these are two plausible explanations grounded in the theoretical literature. Speculation on these possibilities aides in ensuring that future research takes into account potential pitfalls in designing interventions to enhance youth ethnic identity.

Limitations

Several limitations of the current study warrant further discussion. First, it is possible that other mediation or moderation relationships (e.g., variations in how African American students think about group membership) could have helped explain the ethnic identity findings. The current study used the MEIM to determine whether or not the intervention affected ethnic identity, but it did not include measures to determine the mechanisms through which it did (or did not do) this (e.g., racial identity, attention to bias). Thus, it was not possible to further explain the unexpected findings. Future research should include other mediating/ moderating variables to help explain such findings.

In addition, qualitative evaluation of the student's experience was not conducted; this could yield important information to explain such findings and should be considered in future research.

Another limitation of this study involves the lack of follow-up data. Ethnic identity development is a dynamic process that occurs over many years, with the possibility of holdups and regressions (Phinney, 1992; Phinney & Ong, 2007). Because there were no long-term follow-up measures taken, it is not known how the intervention affected the participants' ethnic identity after the intervention ended. Future research should include follow-up interviews with adolescents over an extended timeframe to study this trajectory more closely.

Additionally, no data were collected on fidelity of intervention implementation, and little information was available on the curriculum delivered to the control group. This makes it difficult to describe features of the curriculum delivery that may have affected the results or more aspects of the control condition that may have influenced ethnic identity. Future research should include more process measures in order to draw conclusions about the cause of outcome measures.

Also, dispelling a lifetime of myths and stereotypes about race and culture with the hope of rebuilding on more solid ground takes time—particularly for adolescents. Had more time been built into the intervention for youth to explore these important cultural content components and processes (individually and as a group), perhaps the intervention would have yielded different results and allowed participants time to shift to higher levels of identity or, at the very least, rebound to preintervention levels.

Finally, these results may not be generalizable to other populations of African American youth outside of Midwestern urban regions of the United States. Because the current intervention was implemented in an urban, low-income school in a Midwestern city, the results may be different with a group of rural African American youth from a different region (e.g., the South) or a more integrated school setting. Replication studies should be conducted in the future to assess the generalizability of the intervention and findings to other populations.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

The findings of the present study illustrate the difficulty of disentangling ethnic and racial identity. While ethnic and racial identity can be distinguished based on their theoretical models and operationalizations, there is still a great deal of overlap between the two constructs in the research literature. This can pose problems when trying to target outcomes for one or the other. The present study specifically targeted ethnic identity change, but the intervention's content could theoretically affect both racial and ethnic identity. More recently

research studies have begun examining the relationship between racial and ethnic identity (Cokley, 2005, 2007; Ponterotto & Park-Taylor, 2007; Worrell & Gardner-Kitt, 2006) and have suggested that more useful information can be gained by considering how they are related and which constructs are associated with them. Examining the ethnic identity of African American youth along with their racial identity would allow researchers to acquire a more holistic understanding of the significance of their group identity. As mentioned previously, it is not enough to know that an intervention has affected the participants' ethnic or racial identity, it is necessary to know *how* it has affected it. Future researchers should have specific hypotheses regarding the interplay of racial and ethnic identity and the mechanisms through which African-centered emancipatory interventions affect each separately and together.

Because of the nuanced similarities and differences between racial and ethnic identity, understanding the impact of both of these constructs together on the psychological development and behavioral outcomes (e.g., self-esteem, academic achievement) among African Americans is important. Examining African Americans' racial identity provides insights into how group characteristics derived from navigating a race-based stigmatized status influences the African American experience; while examining African American's ethnic identity elucidates the influence of self-ascribed communal values, practices, and norms derived from interactions with their respective community members and African heritage (Cokley, 2005).

Despite the short-term findings from this study, it is important to continue developing and testing interventions that target ethnic and racial identity development. African-centered emancipatory education remains a promising approach to influencing African American well-being and buffering their adolescent-related stressors (Lewis, Sullivan, & Bybee, 2006). Not only is there utility in an ecological education and empowerment Ujamaa approach that emphasizes school-based, culturally appropriate education intervention that involves the community (students, teachers, principal, community volunteers, and paraprofessionals) in solving its own problems, but it is also important to bring together schools and universities to create mutual learning environments that can influence systemic change.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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