What Adolescents Bring to and Learn from Relationships Education Classes: Does Social Address Matter?

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ABSTRACT

The current study examined the effectiveness of a youth-focused relationships education curriculum in a sample of 1,430 adolescents attending health classes across 39 public high schools. The evaluation consisted of pre-, post and one-year follow-up data collections for intervention and control samples. Growth curve models were fit to test the general effects of the curriculum and to examine the influence of social address indicators. Results indicated that the intervention group, but not the control group, changed in the desired direction in terms of the faulty relationship belief and the relationship skill that were the focus of this study. Desired improvements on the faulty relationship belief occurred independent of social address, but desired improvements in conflict management skill appeared only for the less socially or economically advantaged groups (e.g., lower socioeconomic status and minority status). Participants living in stepfamilies also significantly improved their perceived skills. Adolescents living in single-parent family structures appeared to benefit least from the program.

INTRODUCTION

The primary aim of universal youth-focused relationships education classes is to influence adolescents' beliefs about what makes relationships healthy and unhealthy and to enhance their skills for promoting healthy relationship patterns. Content believed to be relevant to adolescents from diverse backgrounds is the focus of these classes. It is meaningful to determine whether such programs offer adolescents useful information regardless of their past experiences and current circumstances.

Using data from the larger Healthy Couples, Healthy Children: Targeting Youth (HCHCTY) project (Kerpelman et al., 2009), the current study is a short-term longitudinal examination of the effectiveness of a high school-based relationships education program for adolescents of varying social address backgrounds.

Of the many content areas targeted in the curriculum, this study focused on its effectiveness in:

• Reducing the faulty relationship belief, "love is enough to sustain a healthy relationship," and

• Strengthening the conflict management skills necessary for fostering positive outcomes when couples experience disagreements.

• As faulty beliefs are dispelled and realistic understanding of relationships is clarified, adolescents need to learn the skills, such as effective conflict management, that will help them in forming and maintaining healthy relationships.

We explore whether adolescents' social address influenced the knowledge and skills they brought to the relationship classes or the extent to which they benefitted from the classes (i.e., showed sustained improvements in the intended direction).

• If social address is associated with different beliefs or skills prior to program participation, it suggests that the curriculum may need to be tailored to anticipate different biases or skill deficits in some groups relative to others. Similarly, if social address indicators are related to different degrees of change following program participation, this could indicate that adolescents from different backgrounds may not benefit similarly from a program intended to be universal. Program tailoring may again be required to better meet the disparate needs.

• However, where social address shows no relation to pre-program beliefs and skills or rates of change after the program and at a one year follow-up, the universal relationships education program was effective for diverse youth.

METHOD

Participants: public high school students (N= 1,430; 55% female, 54% European American, 35% African American and 11% other ethnicities). 52% eligible for free or reduced price lunch, 57% had at least one parent with more than a high school education, 42% in original intact families, 32% in stepfamilies, and 26% in single-parent families. Students were enrolled in health classes that either received the Relationship Smarts Plus (RS+; Pearson, 2007) curriculum or participated as control classes during the same time period.

Procedures: Data were collected from intervention and control participants at three points in time: immediately prior to (pre-test) and immediately following (post-test) the implementation of the curriculum for the intervention group (or, in the case of the control sample, 6.5 weeks after the pre-test), and one-year later (follow-up). The RS+ curriculum consisted of 12 lessons that addressed areas such as: self-knowledge, values, accurate knowledge about the nature of romantic relationships, understanding love and intimacy, decision making, managing conflict, recognizing dating abuse, and effective communication strategies.

Measures

Demographic indicators of social address: eligibility for free or reduced price lunch at school, majority versus minority ethnic group status, parental education, and family structure.

Faulty relationship beliefs: Love is enough. Cobb, Larson, and Watson (2003) was measured with the four items of the Love is enough subscale (e.g., "In the end, our feelings of love should be enough to sustain a happy marriage"). Items were answered on a scale ranging from 1 = Strongly Disagree" to 5 = Strongly Agree. Higher scores represented more faulty beliefs. For the current sample, reliability coefficients for the three waves of data were, respectively for pre-test, post-test, and follow-up, α = .70, .77, and .74 (See Table 1 for descriptive statistics).

Healthy relationship skills: Conflict management. The interpersonal competence area of perceived conflict management skill was measured with five items from the Buhrmester, Furman, Wittenberg, and Reis (1988) conflict management subscale. This subscale assessed perceived ability to manage conflict effectively in close relationships (e.g., "Being able to take a close companion's perspective in a fight and really understand his/her point"). Respondents evaluated each item using a scale ranging from 1 = I am poor at this to 5 = I am extremely good at this. For the current sample, reliability coefficients for the 5-item subscale, respectively for the pre-test, post-test and follow-up, were α = .76, .83, and .78. (See Table 1 for descriptive statistics).

Table 1. Means, standard deviations and sample size for "Love is Enough" and "Conflict Management" by test versus control group at each wave of data collection.

	Love is Enough					
	Test Group			Control Group		
	Mean	sd	n	Mean	sd	n
Pre-test	3.89	0.84	778	3.89	0.80	635
Post-test	3.50	0.91	762	3.72	0.90	632
Follow-up	3.30	0.87	149	3.46	0.76	139
	Conflict Management					
	Test Group			Control Group		
	Mean	sd	n	Mean	sd	n
Pre-test	3.54	0.82	788	3.53	0.76	640
Post-test	3.57	0.84	771	3.52	0.85	638
Follow-up	3.53	0.65	149	3.33	0.76	142

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tables 2 and 3 present the results for all models fit for this study. Fit statistics indicated the models had adequate fit to the data.

Table 2 "**Love is Enough**."

• Participants eligible for free or reduced lunches at school endorsed the faulty relationship belief more strongly than those ineligible. Importantly, however, the effect of the treatment did not differ by free-reduced lunch eligibility.

• Only one group did not show effects from pre to post for the curriculum: youth from single-parent families. For these participants, treatment and control groups revealed no change across one year. These adolescents did not change their belief after the intervention. Adolescents living in single-parent families may have less access to role models needed for reinforcing the concepts learned in the relationships education classes. Although additional research is needed to determine why this is the case, it is an important exception to the overall pattern of findings and suggests that youth living in single-parent families may need greater assistance in dispelling faulty beliefs and in developing a more accurate understanding of healthy dating and marital relationships.

• Participants from family structures with two parents (original intact families and stepfamilies), however, did show significant treatment effects.

• Overall, social address factors had few effects on the views participants brought to the study or to the rate at which they changed in terms of the faulty relationship belief, love is enough. Thus, for reducing faulty relationship beliefs, the curriculum generally appears to be universally effective.

Table 3 "**Conflict Management**."

• Only one discrepancy was seen and it was again found between those eligible for free or reduced lunch at school and those not eligible. The eligible group reported significantly lower conflict management skill. In addition, for perceived improvements in conflict management, differential effectiveness of the curriculum seemed ubiquitous.

• Across the comparisons, it appeared that the curriculum did not significantly improve perceived conflict management skill for those ineligible for free or reduced lunch, for those belonging to the majority ethnic group, for those with a parent educated beyond high school, and for those in original, intact families or in single-parent families. This pattern is interesting because it suggests that, the youth most positively affected through the curriculum were those belonging to the relatively disadvantaged side of the social address factors. Participants eligible for free and reduced lunch, those in minority ethnic groups, those with less well educated parents, and those from step-families reported gains in their abilities to manage conflict. When social address mattered for responsiveness to the intervention, adolescents with greater needs were benefitted the most.

• This is not to say that those from more privileged or less stressed contexts received no benefits toward conflict management skills. It may be for these adolescents that their skills were reinforced, although not increased, by the curriculum. In the case of building conflict management skills, it may be necessary to do some program tailoring to meet different needs.

Taken together, this study illustrates a way to test an important question that evaluation research needs to be asking: Is a curriculum effective for different types of recipients? It also raises important questions for future program development and evaluation research as relationships educators and researchers move toward greater effectiveness in their efforts to understand and enhance what youth need for healthy relationships in the present and in the future.

Table 2. Unstandardized parameters and fit statistics for base model and social address comparisons for outcome variable "Love is enough."

	Base Model	Free/reduced lunch		Majority racial group		Parent education exceeds HS		Original intact family		Stepfamily		Single parent family	
		No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Intercept	3.89**	3.831**	4.003**	3.903**	3.886**	3.935**	3.860**	3.930**	3.865**	3.889**	3.892**	3.868**	3.983**
Slope	-.195**	-.216**	-.173**	-.157**	-.209**	-.222**	-.175**	-.200**	-.192**	-.205**	-.165**	-.184**	-.243**
Treatment-> Intercept	-.006	-.085	-.165*	-.014	-.007	.038	-.043	-.051	.034	-.051	.079	.060	-.223*
Treatment-> Slope	-.161**	-.173**	-.145	-.192**	-.155**	-.193**	-.141**	-.154**	-.173**	-.112*	-.268**	-.212**	-.009
χ^2	6.33*	14.04**		7.50		11.58*		9.87		7.51		7.54	
DF	2	4		4		4		4		4		4	
CFI	.992	.981		.993		.985		.989		.993		.993	
TLI	.975	.944		.980		.956		.966		.980		.980	
RMSEA	.039	.060		.035		.052		.046		.035		.035	

Table 3. Unstandardized parameters and fit statistics for base model and social address factors for outcome variable: "perceived conflict management skill."

	Base Model	Free/reduced lunch		Majority racial group		Parent education exceeds HS		Original intact family		Stepfamily		Single parent family	
		No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Intercept	3.450**	3.514**	3.359**	3.385**	3.478**	3.416**	3.477**	3.469**	3.434**	3.431**	3.498**	3.455**	3.428**
Slope	-.040	-.037	-.040	-.099*	.021	-.053	-.032	-.018	-.063*	-.035	-.048	-.057*	.031
Treatment-> Intercept	-.102*	.061	-.133*	-.140*	.064	-.135*	-.043	-.157**	-.012	-.093	-.132	-.063	-.175*
Treatment-> Slope	.093**	.005	.146**	.206**	-.012	.186**	.022	.106*	.050	-.063	.152*	.099**	.041
χ^2	7.30*	11.80*		20.59**		9.31		7.99		7.61		8.55	
DF	2	4		4		4		4		4		4	
CFI	.988	.983		.965		.988		.991		.992		.990	
TLI	.965	.948		.894		.965		.973		.976		.970	
RMSEA	.043	.053		.076		.044		.038		.036		.040	