

Testing feasibility, acceptability, and initial outcomes of a spiritually-based character strengths training curriculum to enhance resilience and reduce substance use among Zambian youth.

Sion K. Harris PhD¹⁻³, Dana Seale MAPP⁴, Yvonne Pande MDS⁵, Troy M. Lewis ThM⁵, Erin B. Gibson MPH^{1,2}, Kristin Hadfield PhD⁶, Jordan A. Levinson BA^{1,2}, J. Paul Seale MD^{7,8}

¹ Center for Adolescent Substance Use and Addiction Research, Boston Children's Hospital, Boston, MA

² Division of Adolescent and Young Adult Medicine, Boston Children's Hospital, Boston, MA

³ Department of Pediatrics, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA

⁴ Global Resilience Oral Workshops (GROW), Macon, GA

⁵ Expanded Church Response, Inc., Lusaka, Zambia

⁶ Department of Psychology, Queen Mary University of London, London, UK

⁷ Department of Family Medicine, Mercer University School of Medicine, Macon, GA

⁸ Department of Family Medicine, Navicent Health, Macon, GA

Purpose:

Character-based resilience training has potential to yield great dividends for youth in low/middle income countries (LMIC). Strategies that promote adolescent flourishing and lower risk behaviors are key to the UN's Sustainable Development Agenda, and critical for LMIC countries like Zambia where half the population is under age 17. Global Resilience Oral Workshops (GROW) is a 24-week curriculum rooted in positive psychology and spirituality, teaching character strengths such as psychological resilience, hope, and grit. We report initial findings from a cluster-randomized trial evaluating feasibility, acceptability, and effects of GROW on youth character strengths and substance use.

Methods:

Twenty-eight classes of youth ages 10-13 were recruited (youth assent/parent permission) from 21 schools throughout Lusaka, Zambia. Classes were randomly assigned to an initial-start (Phase-1 GROW implementation, $n=15$ classes) or delayed-start (Phase-2 GROW implementation, $n=13$ classes) arm. Study procedures were approved by U.S. and Zambian IRBs. Each GROW class is taught weekly by 2 trained leaders addressing one character strength per session using Bible story role models, drama, music/dance, problem-solving, teamwork activities, and spiritual practices. Program feasibility was assessed by class attendance; cultural acceptability through focus groups with parents, school administrators, GROW leaders and students conducted at Phase-1 completion; and program outcomes using confidential self-administered questionnaires completed by all students at baseline (T1), post-Phase-1 (T2), and post-Phase-2 (T3). Items assessed demographics, resilience (Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale), hope (Children's Hope Scale), grit (Grit Short Scale), spirituality (Daily Spiritual Experiences), gratitude (Gratitude Questionnaire), lifetime/past-month alcohol use, and lifetime drug use. The study is ongoing; here we present findings from T1 and T2. We conducted bivariate analysis to assess baseline group equivalence and examined outcomes using generalized linear modeling, adjusting for school effects and baseline differences between groups.

Results:

At baseline, the sample ($N=643$ students; 344 initial-start; 299 delayed-start) had mean \pm SD age of 11.4 \pm 0.9 years; 55.4% were girls; 68.0% lived with two parents/caregivers; 38.6% lived in <3-room homes; 12.5% had <3 meals/day; 27.8%/13.2% reported lifetime/past-30-day alcohol use; 8.2% reported any lifetime tobacco/drug use. The delayed-start group had older mean age (11.5 \pm 1.03 vs. 11.3 \pm 0.9 years, $p=.035$) and a higher proportion reporting <3 meals/day (15.7% vs. 9.6%, $p=.020$). These were entered as control variables in outcomes analyses. Phase-1 program attendance was high (median number of classes attended=23 of 24 max, IQR 20-24). All focus groups strongly affirmed the program's cultural appropriateness and described positive effects on students' school attendance and character at school and home. Quantitative analysis found significant group by time interaction effects for resilience and hope ($p<.01$), with T1 to T2 increases seen in the initial-start group but not in the delayed-start group. We found significantly lower rates at T2 of past-30-day alcohol use in the initial-start group compared to the delayed-start group (10.0% vs. 18.5%, relative risk ratio=0.50, 95% CI 0.31-0.80). We found no other immediate character or substance use-related effects.

Conclusion:

Character training programs such as GROW Zambia show promise for enhancing psychological resilience and reducing risk behaviors among LMIC youth.

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Educational Objective:

Describe a youth character training curriculum rooted in positive psychology and spirituality (Global Resilience Oral Workshops), and its feasibility, acceptability, and initial outcomes of implementation in Zambia.