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THE EFFECTS OF A SPIRITUALLY-BASED CHARACTER STRENGTHS TRAINING CURRICULUM ON ALCOHOL USE AMONG ZAMBIAN YOUTH: A RANDOMIZED CONTROLLED TRIAL

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Objective:

Global Resilience Oral Workshops (GROW), a 24-week curriculum rooted in positive psychology and spirituality, seeks to teach character strengths and bolster psychological resilience. Studies in higher income countries found lower alcohol consumption in youth with higher spirituality and resilience measures. We report alcohol use outcomes from a cluster-randomized trial of GROW with Zambian youth.

Methods:

Twenty-eight classes of youth ages 10-13 were recruited from 21 Lusaka schools to a wait-listed randomized controlled trial. Classes were randomly assigned to initial-start (Phase 1, $n=15$) or delayed-start (Phase 2, $n=13$) arms. GROW leaders taught one character strength per week over 24 weeks using stories, drama, music/dance, problem-solving, and spiritual practices such as meditation, gratitude, and forgiveness. Questions from the Global School-based Student Health Survey, administered at baseline (T1, $N=643$), post-Phase 1 (T2, $N=611$), and post-Phase 2 (T3, $N=518$), assessed alcohol consumption. We examined intervention outcomes using multiple logistic regression with GEE, adjusting for within-school clustering and any baseline group differences.

Results: The baseline sample ($N=343$ initial-start; 300 delayed-start) had mean \pm SD age 11.4 \pm 0.9 years; 55.4% female; 4.8%, 49.8%, 43.9% in grades 4, 5, 6, respectively. The delayed-start group had higher proportion reporting <3 meals/day (15.7% vs. 9.6%, $p=.020$). We controlled for

meals/day, sex, age, and grade in outcomes analyses. At baseline, 27.8% of participants reported lifetime alcohol use and 13.4% reported past-30-day use, with no group differences. At T2 and T3, initial-start students reported lower past-30-day alcohol use compared to delayed-start students (T2: 10.0% vs. 17.9%, adjusted relative risk ratio[ARRR]=0.65, 95%CI 0.41-1.05; T3: 4.2% vs. 11.2%, ARRR=0.44, 95%CI 0.20-0.95). At T3, initial-start students showed lower rates of experiencing any problems in the past 6 months associated with alcohol use, compared to delayed-start students (4.1 vs. 9.4%, ARRR=.43, 95%CI 0.20-0.91).

Conclusions:

Spiritually-based character strengths training shows promise as an alcohol prevention strategy for youth in sub-Saharan Africa.

References:

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