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Improving the Self-Esteem of Early Adolescent Girls

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Improving the Self-Esteem of Early Adolescent Girls

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Abstract

Self-esteem varies throughout an individual's life and influences a person's overall wellbeing and self-efficacy. A reduced self-esteem is associated with depression, anxiety, and substance abuse amongst other negative outcomes that impact the individual's quality of life. A known decrease in self-esteem occurs in early adolescence and is more pronounced in females. There is an abundance of factors that influence self-esteem, such as body image, social support, and physical activity. Programs such as Free Being Me have been created to improve body image and self-esteem in young adolescent girls. The Free Being Me program was implemented in the afterschool program at Dodge County Middle School in Eastman, Georgia. This 5-session program provided activities for students to do in an effort to build self-esteem and body confidence. Students completed pre- and post-surveys of body image and self-esteem along with a demographic to determine the effects of the program. Overall, the program improved both self-esteem and body image, however not with statistical significance. Upon additional examination, there was a statistically significant finding of improved self-esteem in the non-African American participants. Sample size was a limiting factor in this research. Future studies would benefit from a larger sample size.

Keywords: self-esteem, adolescent girls, body image

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Improving the Self-Esteem of Early Adolescent Girls

Self-esteem begins developing in early childhood, and fluctuates throughout the lifespan. It is identified as a person's self-worth or confidence in their abilities (Blattner, Liang, Lund, & Spencer, 2013). Evidence suggests that a significant decline in self-esteem occurs during early adolescence (Adachi & Willoughby, 2014)(Troshikhina & Manukyan, 2016) (Zook, Saksvig, Wu, & Young, 2014). This decline is associated with the many changes occurring during the early adolescent stage of development. Specifically, a decrease in physical activity, negative body image, social structure development, and brain development are large contributors to this decline (Blattner et al., 2013). Additionally, self-esteem has been reported as being higher in males than females at baseline (Troshikhina & Manukyan, 2016). These findings demonstrate a vulnerability to physical and mental health abnormalities for females in early adolescence, and can have a lifelong impact on their health and wellbeing (Troshikhina & Manukyan, 2016) (Bi, Ma, Yuan, & Zhang, 2016). A lower self-esteem in adolescents is closely associated with many comorbidities, such as depression, anxiety, and substance use disorder (Taylor, 2014) (Tirlea, Truby, & Haines, 2016)

CHAPTER 1

Problem Statement and Background

Adolescence is a time of great transition in a person's life (Diedrichs et al., 2015) (Sebire, Haase, Montgomery, McNeill, & Jago, 2014). Children are going through many changes in the school setting, changes in the social setting, and physical and emotional changes (Bi, Ma, Yuan, & Zhang, 2016). A decrease in self-esteem is commonly found during early adolescence (ages 11-14) and is associated with the transitions that occur during this phase of life ("Focus On," 2012) (Sebire et al., 2014). Body image has been found to have influence over the self-esteem of adolescent girls (Corning & Heibel, 2016). An examination of how a program to promote positive body image can affect adolescent self-esteem can be used to determine if it can be used as a strategy to improve adolescent self-esteem (Diedrichs et al., 2015). Achieving the goal of preventing the decline in self-esteem, or improving the self-esteem of young adolescent girls, should subsequently reduce the associated co-morbidities in this age group and thereby improve the general health of the female adolescent population.

Self-esteem is how one feels about oneself, or one's self-worth. It is a construct that is not static in a person's life. While it can temporarily fluctuate depending on life circumstances, the underlying level of self-esteem rests on beliefs and environment. It can be enhanced through positive feedback and success in different life events. Positive feedback and success build confidence and thereby increases self-esteem (Blattner et al., 2013). A low self-esteem has been correlated with children diagnosed with anxiety and depression as well as suicidal ideation and eating disorders. A healthy self-esteem is associated with higher academic performance and increased resiliency (Halliwell & Diedrichs, 2014).

Free Being Me is a program developed through a partnership by the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS) and the Dove self-esteem project. It has differing tracks based on age groups, a track for co-educational setting, and a track for an all-female setting. Free Being Me specifically addresses body image and body confidence. The content will be delivered as a means to improve body image and therefore self-esteem in the group of early adolescent girls choosing to participate in this DNP project (<https://free-being-me.com/downloads/>).

Purpose of the Project

This project will attempt to determine if participating in the Free Being Me program leads to a positive effect on self-esteem for the participating early adolescent girls. If so, efforts will be made to ensure the program can continue upon completion of the DNP project.

This DNP project is a nurse-run initiative attempting to improve the self-esteem of at-risk girls that participate in the afterschool program at Dodge County Middle School. While there is a solid infrastructure within the afterschool program, no activities of this nature currently exist in this setting. The afterschool staff will be educated on the program and principles applied, so that it may continue upon the study's completion. Additionally, this project could easily be replicated for future projects for further translation into practice.

Clinical Question

Self-esteem is the state of one's self-worth or confidence in one's own abilities (Adachi & Willoughby, 2014). It is influenced by many factors over the course of an individual's life. During adolescence, self-esteem is influenced by physical activity, body image, social support, and emotional support (Tirlea et al., 2016). This DNP project is focused on improving self-esteem through the delivery of a body image program created by WAGGGS and Dove. There is a noted decline in self-esteem occurring in girls during early adolescence that can be carried into

adulthood without intervention (Hunter, Barber, & Stolz, 2015). Implementation of self-esteem maintenance or improvement strategies could assist in mitigating the decline of self-esteem in female students at Dodge County Middle School. A Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) Project will be completed to answer the following questions:

1. After a 5 session Free Being Me intervention, is there a statistically significant improvement in participants' body image and self-esteem as measured by the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale and a body image survey?
2. What demographic factors are associated with poor body image?
3. What demographic factors are associated with poor self-esteem?
4. Post intervention, are there demographic factors associated with greater improvement in self-esteem and body image in participants?
5. What were the participants' overall satisfaction of the Free Being Me program?
6. What is the feasibility of implementing the Free Being Me program in the school systems throughout the state?

Self-esteem

Self-esteem is how an individual regards himself or herself. Self-esteem can fluctuate throughout the course of an individual's life, and is influenced by many environmental factors. A positive self-esteem is associated with better academic performance, successful relationships, a positive outlook on life, and a willingness to try new things. A negative self-esteem is highly correlated with depression, anxiety, substance abuse, eating disorders, suicidal ideation and more. Negating the adverse effects of losing self-esteem should reduce the incidences of depression, suicide, and substance abuse in the adolescent girl population (Frisen & Anneheden, 2014).

Physical Activity

Physical activity is using energy to move the body. It can also be described as exercise. Physical activity can positively influence self-esteem through the release of endorphins in the body. Additionally, goal-setting and achievement of goals related to physical activity supports an improvement in self-esteem (Galeotti, 2015).

Body Image

Body image is how an individual views his or her own body. How people perceive their bodies can be directly related to size, but other factors can influence it as well, such as hair type, skin color, and height. Body image is largely influenced by environmental factors and culture (Diedrichs et al., 2015).

Social Support

Social support is the support provided to an individual from those he or she interacts with. For adolescents, social support comes largely from peers, teachers, and family members. Social support can exist through inclusion in activities by friends as well as concrete actions such as logistic support from parents (Hunter et al., 2015).

Emotional support

Emotional support is when an individual is provided support from another by listening, being empathetic, or other emotionally supportive actions. In adolescents, this is typically provided by friends, family members, and at times teachers or coaches. Emotional support is more relational than social support and is particularly needed when someone is going through a personally challenging time (Hunter et al., 2015).

For the purpose of this DNP project, self-esteem as it relates to body image will be examined.

CHAPTER 2

Review of Literature

A review of literature in English was conducted to evaluate the self-esteem and body image in adolescent girls. Search terms utilized for this search were “body image,” “self-esteem,” “adolescent,” “students,” “females,” and “girls.” Limiting factors for this search were peer-reviewed articles dated after 2014 that addressed self-esteem and body image in adolescent girls. A secondary search was conducted to search all articles referenced in the research Dove and WAGGGs used to develop the Free Being Me program that will be utilized for this DNP project. The literature search included articles in which a Dove program was implemented with an adolescent population. Any self-esteem or body image program that was not created by Dove was excluded. A final search was completed to include the evaluation of both self-esteem and body image programs in students. Factors that excluded research articles from this review were those that studied body image and self-esteem programs for males only, studied programs that were created for adult women who are not students, and studied programs that were delivered to early elementary school aged children. Upon collecting these articles, the abstracts were reviewed to determine which articles would be suitable to be included in this review. Research articles were then further reviewed and divided into four categories; Self-esteem and Body Image, Dove Campaigns, Dove Self-esteem and Body Image Programs, and Other Self-esteem and Body Image Programs.

Self-esteem and Body Image

Body image is how a person feels about his or her body and is one of the factors that influences a person’s self-esteem. A decreased or lower body image can also be referred to as body dissatisfaction and is often associated with weight (Zinovyeva, Kazantseva, & Nikonova,

2016). Research has demonstrated that females are more effected by body image than males (Golan, Hagay, & Tamir, 2014). In fact, as much as 40% of girls experience body dissatisfaction (Agam-Bitton, Ahmad, & Golan, 2018). Having a low body image can negatively influence self-esteem, and therefore, be related to co-morbidities such as substance abuse, eating disorders, anxiety, and depression (Troshikhina & Manukyan, 2016). Adolescents with a high self-esteem have been found to have fewer problems with anxiety and depression. Consistent with this finding, research also supports the idea that a good body image can positively influence emotional and mental health. The promotion of positive body image and self-esteem protects adolescents from the aforementioned comorbidities, and others (Veldhuis, Konjin, & Seidell, 2014).

A poor body image influences many aspects of an adolescent's life. Studies have found that adolescents with poor body image view themselves as weak and inactive. It can influence many aspects of daily life such as social media usage, interaction with peers, and eating habits. Additionally, body image is influenced by peers, the media, and culture. Improving body image not only improves self-esteem, but also decreases the likelihood of eating disorders in adolescents (Corning & Heibel, 2016) (Vanderkruik, Strife, & Dimidjian, 2017)(Veldhuis et al., 2014).

The development of self-esteem is a human need that begins at birth and fluctuates throughout an individual's life. A number of factors influence an individual's self-worth and perception of competence, which make up self-esteem (Frisen & Anneheden, 2014). A high self-esteem is associated with positive outcomes such as improved academic performance, stronger relationships, and greater participation in social activities. While a having a high self-esteem has been linked with many positive attributes, one study found that having a high self-

esteem was less protective against substance abuse in young adulthood (Adachi & Willoughby, 2014) (Bi, Ma, Yuan, & Zhang, 2016).

Dove Campaigns

Dove has created a variety of campaigns and programs focusing on the self-esteem of women and girls. Their efforts have been both criticized and heralded in research. Critics note the apparent contradictory nature of a beauty company campaigning for positive self-esteem and body image while selling products for women and girls to enhance their beauty. This contradiction, along with the marketing of women's empowerment, has caused Dove campaigns to come under scrutiny. The research of the Dove campaigns has been largely qualitative (Diedrichs et al., 2015).

Researchers have found that the promotion of beauty products to gain confidence can be a detriment to women and girls; making them feel reliant on beauty products to feel good about themselves. Additionally, research participants noted the focus of some of the campaign branding to be directed toward a feminist view point of breaking the societal norms regarding beauty. However, study participants noted that while Dove uses women of different sizes and races in advertising, it does not consistently use models who are average in size for the U.S., size 14. Studies also have noted that the Dove's marketing is aimed largely at middle class white women, not reflecting the diversity it touts (Taylor, Johnson, & Whitehead, 2016).

Other research has found Dove to be highly regarded among participants for their ban of photo altering their marketing materials and use of more average-sized models. The company has also received praise for the contribution to research related to self-esteem and body image in women and girls. In 2006, the National Organization for Women awarded Dove the Image award for its efforts to oppose traditional beauty standards. Dove's efforts

have been found to be supportive of self-esteem and body confidence, with research noting women and girls feel more confident in themselves because of the advertising they viewed from Dove. Studies suggest that in utilizing the social comparison theory, the comparison of study participants themselves to the models who are more average sized, helps give them an improved self-image (Bissell & Rask, 2010).

While the results of the perceptions of Dove campaigns are mixed, many of the findings support the notion that Dove has elevated the conversation of beauty standards. Despite the contrasting results in research, it is found throughout the literature reviewed that Dove has challenged societal norms of beauty and the marketing of beauty products. Dove has created a way to market their products and challenge global beauty standards simultaneously (Millard, 2009).

Self-esteem and Body Image Programs

Self-esteem and body image programs have been developed and delivered in a variety of ways. Some programs seek to directly impact either self-esteem or body image. Other have addressed both self-esteem and body image through specific intervention programs, such as those designed to reduce or prevent eating disorders (Taylor, 2014). Some programs are developed and evaluated in a mixed gender setting, but most programs reviewed are intended for a female audience of varying ages (Agam-Bitton et al., 2018).

Overall, programs designed for self-esteem and body image improvement demonstrate success in the intended outcome (Sunvisson, Moller, & Duberg, 2016). Participants consistently demonstrate improvement in body self-esteem and body image following completion of a program. However, there are some findings that impact the success of a program, such as program length. For instance, programs that were short, one day trainings,

do not demonstrate long term improvement in self-esteem and body image. Courses structured for program delivery over several weeks yielded higher levels of long-term improvement in both self-esteem and body image (Taylor, 2014) (Tirlea et al., 2016) (Vanderkruik et al., 2017).

Findings also suggest that the course instructor can impact the long-term effects of the program. One study found that teacher-led programs had greater longevity for improvement of self-esteem, which could be due to the pre-existing relationship between participants and teachers (Diedrichs et al., 2015). While no studies were found related to the impact of peer-led training on participants, one study discovered that in college aged students the leaders of peer-led programs experienced improvement in self-esteem and body image (Vanderkruik et al., 2017). In mixed gender studies, females were found to have greater improvement in self-esteem and body image over male participants as well. There was improvement in self-esteem and body image for the group overall in mixed gendered program delivery (Kilpela et al., 2016). Self-esteem and body image programs benefit those who participate in them. These programs can aid in reducing the ill effects of a low self-esteem and poor body image, such as eating disorders.

Theoretical Framework

The Social Comparison Theory contends that humans innately compare themselves against others in an effort to make determinations about themselves. In essence, the theory suggests that we judge ourselves based on what we see in others. Not only do people make determinations about themselves physically, they also determine their abilities and opinions based on others. It also suggests that there is less comparison when the individuals or groups have many differences (Festinger, 1954).

Social comparison does not solely exist on an individual basis. The theory also asserts that members of groups use comparisons to make determinations about the group they are a part of as well as other groups. According to the Social Comparison Theory, individuals and groups define themselves based on the how they compare to others. Furthermore, the Social Comparison Theory suggests that while opinions may be influenced by social comparison, abilities will not change by comparison alone (Festinger, 1954). Group members can and will form more similar opinions and interests by making comparisons. However, ability to perform in tasks and activities does not change based solely on the ability of other group members (Stein, Krause, & Ohler, 2019).

The theory makes other important points. For instance, it suggests that nonsocial means of comparison, school grades for examples, are available to provide an objective measure of ability, however if those means were not available, humans would solely make determinations based upon one another's abilities. Social comparison allows for a self-evaluation that encourages a drive for self-improvement, which can create both positive and negative results (Festinger, 1954). For example, a drive for self-improvement via physical exercise can improve self-esteem, which would be a positive result of social comparison. Developing an eating disorder in an effort to improve one's body image is an example of a negative result of social comparison.

The Social Comparison Theory suggests that social comparison exists in both upward and downward directions. That is, individuals and groups use social comparison to determine whom they are "higher than" and whom they are "lower than." Once again, this can spur both positive and negative changes within the individual or group (Festinger, 1954).

When considering the Social Comparison Theory, there is a clear alignment with body image and self-esteem in early adolescent girls. This DNP project will include the administration of a program that directly addresses body image and self-esteem, disrupting the idea of social and physical comparison as a means for making determinations about oneself regarding the way they look.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

This DNP project is aimed at improving and/or maintaining the self-esteem of early adolescent girls. The Free Being Me program was offered during the afterschool program for middle school children attending Dodge County Middle School. A pre- and post-assessment of self-esteem was completed using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale to determine if there was a statistically significant improvement in each participant's self-esteem after taking part in the Free Being Me program. This knowledge helped to determine if Free Being Me should be used in the after-school program in the future to support young adolescent female students.

Partner Site

The partner site for this DNP project was the Dodge County School System. The Dodge County School System has approximately 3,000 students and is composed of two elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school (J. Brewer, personal communication, September 24, 2018). In 2017, 4.3% of children in Dodge County did not have health insurance, which is lower than the reported rate for the state of Georgia of 7.8%. In 2018, 2,978 Dodge County children received Medicaid or Peachcare. The county has a teen birth rate of 28.4 compared with the State of Georgia's rate of 21.8. Teen birth rate is based on teens aged 15-19. There is also a higher rate of sexually transmitted disease in this age group, with a rate of 37.6 in Dodge County and a rate of 31.4 in the State of Georgia. Reports of alcohol use in ninth grade students is lower than the state average (Georgia Family Connection Partnership, 2019).

The percentage of students who graduate on time in the Dodge County is higher than those of the state. Conversely, the high school dropout rate is 15.1% in Dodge County, compared with the high school dropout rate in Georgia of 4.9%. Additionally, the percent of teens who are not in school and not working is 22.1% in Dodge County. Georgia's rate of teens not working or in school is 8.6% ("U.S. Census," 2016).

Dodge County is a rural county located in the eastern part of central Georgia. The population of Dodge County is 21,063 with 20.5% of the population being children under the age of 18. The county is predominantly white at 65.3% with 27.8% of the population being black and 3.4% of the population being Hispanic. The median household income is \$36,067 with 21.8% of the population living in poverty ("U.S. Census," 2016). This rate is significantly higher than the national average of 12.7% and the poverty rate in of 15.1% in Georgia ("U.S. Census," 2017). Of those living in poverty, children make up 29.3% of the population in Dodge County. Families, with children, with annual incomes less than 150% of the federal poverty threshold make up 45.7% of the population of Dodge County. This rate is significantly higher than the state rate of 30.7% (Georgia Department of Health [GDPH], 2016).

The rate of single parent households in Dodge County is 39.6% while the state rate is 34.3%. Abuse and neglect rates in the county are high, as well, with an abuse rate of 4.6 per 1,000 children and a neglect rate of 7.3 per 1,000 children. The rate of abuse in Georgia is 1.9 per 1,000 children and the rate of neglect is 3.0 per 1,000 children. Over one thousand children in Dodge County are food stamp recipients, accounting for approximately one quarter of the children in Dodge County (GDPH, 2016).

In 2017, 83% of adults in Dodge County were high school graduates and 14.6% of adults hold a Bachelor's Degree or higher. The unemployment rate in Dodge County is 6.3% which is

more than two percentage points higher than the Georgia rate. The crime rate in Dodge County is significantly higher than state rates, with the violent crime rate being 9.7 per 1,000 people and other crimes being 31.7 per 1,000 people (Georgia Department of Public Health, n.d.).

The lack of financial resources limits opportunities for students to participate in programs that assist in building self-esteem, such as Girls Scouts. It is common in the county for parents to work more than one job (J. Brewer, personal communication, September 24, 2018). This limits their availability to provide emotional support for their children.

Dodge County School System received a grant in 2014 to provide an afterschool program for middle and high school students (Norris Consulting Group, Inc. [Norris], 2017). This program targets at-risk children within the school system and provides afterschool services such as help with homework, subject-based tutoring, enrichment opportunities, and skill building opportunities (Norris Consulting Group, Inc. [Norris], 2017). The majority of the children served in the afterschool program are middle school students.

Students participating in the after school program most likely meet the following criteria in order to qualify for inclusion: being home alone after school, being deficient in reading or math, having failed two classes in the prior school year, reduced access to community involvement activities, deficiencies in social skills, issues with attendance, socio-economic status, participation in foster care, and/or homelessness. This DNP project took place at Dodge County Middle School, at which all students receive free lunches. The participants were recruited from the afterschool program at this site. During the 2018-2019 school year, 36 girls were able to participate in the afterschool program at Dodge County Middle School. Eight of the female participants are currently enrolled in the special education program at Dodge County Middle School as well.

The afterschool program is staffed with community volunteers and other trained staff members (Norris Consulting Group, Inc. [Norris], 2017). A Project Director oversees the program and Site Coordinators are assigned to both the middle school and high school. Site Coordinators work with teachers at the schools and to identify needs both overall and for individual students. All volunteers and staff annually receive training and ongoing development provided and organized by the afterschool program's Project Director. The afterschool program also has an Advisory Council that meets twice a year to review progress and assist in goal setting.

Funding for the afterschool program is provided by the 21st Century Community Learning Center grant. Community funding has also been established in order to assist in maintaining sustainability in the future. All funding and community resources are managed by the Project Director.

With regard to self-esteem, the afterschool program has some activities that support self-esteem, such as physical fitness and nutrition lessons. The students also work on service projects and other enrichment activities (Norris Consulting Group, Inc. [Norris], 2017). Including the Free Being Me program may offer needed additional support to self-esteem in the early adolescent girl population participating in the afterschool program.

The Dodge County School System had many resources that supported implementing a DNP project to build the self-esteem of female middle school students. The space and technology needed for this DNP project was available and readily accessible. A robust afterschool program is a resource that provides a structure and organizational framework to provide a self-esteem program to an identified at-risk group.

Free Being Me Program

The Free Being Me program was created to help girls improve self-esteem and build leadership skills through growing confidence in their bodies (<https://free-being-me.com/downloads/>). It was developed through a collaboration of WAGGGS and the Dove self-esteem project. The goal of the Dove self-esteem project is to help girls and women realize beauty and build self-esteem. Dove has completed extensive research on self-esteem and is committed to delivering self-esteem enhancing programs to young girls throughout the world. WAGGGS is the “world’s largest voluntary movement dedicated to girls and young women.” The mission of WAGGGS is to “enable girls and young women to develop their fullest potential as responsible citizens of the world.” WAGGGS programs are utilized worldwide and have reached girls in more than 145 countries (<https://www.waggs.org/en/>). Together, WAGGGS and Dove are striving for a world in which a lack of body confidence does not hold any girl back from reaching her full potential.

The goal of the Free Being Me program is to deliver information and spur body confidence in a fun, informal environment. Participation in this program allows for girls to be a part of a worldwide movement toward increased body confidence and self-esteem. There is a badge option available for girls who participate in the Free Being Me program through a scouting organization (<https://free-being-me.com/downloads/>).

The focus of the Free Being Me program is improving the self-esteem through improving body confidence. Body confidence is accepting one’s body and appreciating it for what it can do. It is highly correlated to self-esteem. When an individual has body confidence, she does not worry about how she looks. Having body confidence allows a child to more willingly engage in activities with friends and participate in sports. Children with body confidence are more likely to express their opinions freely and have close relationships with friends and family. In contrast,

children without body confidence often worry about their appearance, and tend to withdraw from situations that may potentially show their bodies (ex: swimming), expressing opinions, or participating in sports. Physical activity and social support are correlated with self-esteem. A higher self-esteem is more likely to occur in people who regularly participate in physical activity and have a good social support network (Galeotti, 2015). Conversely, these findings show that a withdrawal from physical activity and social support can occur due to decreased body confidence and body image resulting in a lower self-esteem (Troshikhina & Manukyan, 2016).

The Free Being Me program focuses on three main messages for its audience. First it encourages the examination of beauty standards as defined by society. Noting that those standards are impossible, these beauty standards are labeled the “Image Myth.” The second message of the program is the negative consequences of trying to live up to the “Image Myth.” Free Being Me explores the costs attempting the “perfect look” as it pertains to friendships, school, and society. Lastly the program focuses on what the participants like about themselves and their bodies. It examines the way the participants think and talk about themselves and how those thoughts and words can improve their own body confidence and the body confidence of those around them (<https://free-being-me.com/downloads/>).

Participants in Free Being Me have the opportunity to discuss the “Image Myth” and are provided opportunities to challenge it in their own unique ways. Participants can gain a sense of control over how they view themselves. This program allows adolescent girls the opportunity to use their voices for the betterment of themselves and those they have influence over. The empowerment felt by the participants helps to combat the “Image Myth” and gives rise to body confidence (<https://free-being-me.com/downloads/>).

Free Being Me has proven to have lasting positive effects on girls' well-being. A report completed by The Body Project states that as much as three years later, girls who participated in Free Being Me had maintained improved body confidence, were more confident at school, and had better relationships with their peers and families. The skills gained through Free Being Me have a long-term impact on girls' ability to resist the pressure to conform to the "Image Myth," as well as build leadership skills to influence others (<https://free-being-me.com/downloads/>).

Program Delivery

The Free Being Me program consists of separate packs of activities for participants dependent on age and gender. For the purpose of the DNP project the activity pack for girls ages 11-14 were utilized. The program is divided into five 60-minute sessions, each one building on another. Each of the sessions has a key message, and the program culminates with the group participating in a Take Action Project. Free Being Me also includes parents by providing them with information on what the girls learned in the session and activities they can do at home to support their daughter (<https://free-being-me.com/downloads/>).

The DNP researcher was the Leader of the group participating in Free Being Me. Roles included for the Leader were: organizing and planning sessions, supplying necessary materials, content delivery, communicating with students and families, and any follow-up needed. The Leader also took into account any limitations in ability of the participants, as well as cultural considerations while planning and implanting the group sessions.

Prior to beginning Free Being Me, participants were assigned a secret friend who they tried to encourage throughout the program. Additionally, a Free Being Me wall was be created for the participants to share inspiring quotes, positive statements and pictures, and encouragement (<https://free-being-me.com/downloads/>).

The first session lasted longer than the other sessions included in program. During the first session, ground rules were developed by the group to ensure that everyone has a voice and felt safe to have discussion. The ground rules were agreed upon by all of those in the group. Additionally, a time out zone was be created so that participants could step out if they needed a break. The girls also received their Free Being Me workbooks. These workbooks were be distributed at the beginning of each session and retrieved at the close of each session. Participants created treasure boxes. The boxes and decorating materials were supplied. The girls were encouraged to add a positive message to the other participants' boxes anonymously. Following this activity, the first session material was covered. Participants were asked to take the Take Part Pledge, which was repeated during each session. Additionally, the activities in this session on focused on what beauty means in different parts of the world and defining the Image Myth. The students defined the "perfect girl," discussed the reality of the "perfect girl," and reviewed the costs of trying to live up to that image. Finally, the girls received their personal challenge. This challenge was to be completed prior to the next session of Free Being Me. Each girl was asked to become a Media Detective and find an example of the Image Myth to report back to the group. They also answered two questions related to why the Image Myth is fake and why it is not an example to live up to (<https://free-being-me.com/downloads/>).

The second session of Free Being Me included following up on the Media Detective personal challenge from week one. The students shared the images they identified throughout the week and discussed the image myths associated with the pictures. This activity provided the girls the opportunity to not only identify the Image Myth, but to challenge it and discuss why it is not possible to achieve. The next activity was working with a partner to create a press statement for a magazine highlighting unreachable body standards. The girls had 15 minutes to create the

press release and 15 minutes to present it. This activity was followed by making their own media in the form of a magazine cover. The students chose pictures, headlines, and a magazine name. This activity allowed students the opportunity to determine for themselves what is valuable. Finally, the personal challenge of the week was a friendship note. The girls wrote a note encouraging other participants to not believe in the Image Myth (<https://free-being-me.com/downloads/>).

Session three began one week later and started with a review of the friendship note personal challenge. The students broke into groups and read their friendship notes to their group. This activity allows students the opportunity to reflect on how it felt to write and receive the letter, as well as come up with new ideas about the negative aspects of the Image Myth. The next activity is called the Friendship Mission. It included four missions for the students to complete with a group. The first mission was to respond to a text or email from a friend with a statement describing why they feel badly about their appearance. As every student did not have a phone available to her, the texts and emails were written down and handed to the girls. The students read the texts or emails aloud and responded by explaining that a certain appearance is part of the Image Myth and why it is impossible to live up to that ideal. The students then shared their responses with the group (<https://free-being-me.com/downloads/>).

Mission two included in the third session allowed each participant to create a speech bubble and write down their own personal challenge to the Image Myth. Students presented their speech bubbles to the group and discussed their thoughts. Mission three involved developing quick comebacks. For this activity, the girls read statements aloud, and their job was to come up with a comeback that challenges the Image Myth. This activity allowed the girls to prepare themselves to break down the Image Myth when they see it in the real world. The final mission

included having the participants identify a role model and then write down the three best qualities of the person. Students were reminded that these qualities should not be appearance-based, but rather based on the character of the person. Using these three qualities, the girls stood in a circle and said the characteristics they identified one at a time. If they matched with other participants, they were out of the game. The goal was to develop a long list of unique characteristics that role models can have. The personal challenge for the week is called Mirror, which had students practice saying positive things to themselves in the mirror. The participants identified three things they like about their character, three body parts they like for what those parts can do, and three body parts they like because of the way those parts look (<https://free-being-me.com/downloads/>).

Session four began with a follow up from the Mirror personal challenge. The girls were directed to get into groups and share some of the things they love about themselves. This exercise gave the girls an opportunity to improve their body confidence by saying aloud the things they like about themselves. The next activity, No More Body Talk, provided an opportunity for students to learn how to challenge body talk that can support the ideas in the Image Myth. Even compliments can sometimes reinforce the Image Myth. Students received different scenarios in which the leaders demonstrated examples of body talk for the girls to point out and consider ways to manage the conversation. The next part of the activity is centered on discussing, and giving examples of, true compliments. Participants will then be allowed to practice giving each other true compliments, with a discussion of how it feels to receive and give a true compliment. This exercise was also good practice for how to receive compliments, and demonstrates that girls can build up their friends' self-esteem without supporting the Image Myth. Finally, the personal challenge of the week is called Spread the Word. The group worked

together to compile a list of ideals that come along with the Image Myth. The list was then used by the girls to keep themselves free of the Image Myth, and to help share the concept of the Image Myth with peers (<https://free-being-me.com/downloads/>).

The final session of Free Being Me was focused on a Take Action Project. This portion of the curriculum allowed the girls to lead a project with the information they have obtained throughout the Free Being Me program, and to spread the message of body confidence. The Take Action Project is divided into four sections. The first section is titled See the Change. The students created a mind map with ideas promoting body confidence in their community. The girls presented their ideas to the group. During the Plan the Change section, the group determined the main points they learned in the program. They then designed a t-shirt with key phrases to share their messages with others. The students drew out their t-shirts and share the t-shirts with the group. Following the t-shirt design activity, the girls were broken into small groups to work on their plan to share what they have learned in Free Being Me. The challenge at the end of this session was for the girls to go into the community and put their plan into action. The students were encouraged to document how they put their plans into action. This documentation allowed them to share their accomplishments, and to demonstrate leadership to themselves and their peers. Finally, the participants completed a pledge card to themselves to remind them of what they have committed to do. The session concluded with a celebration of the group's accomplishments (<https://free-being-me.com/downloads/>).

Tools

The Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (RSES) is a ten-item survey that measures global self-esteem and was the tool used to measure self-esteem in this DNP project. The scale was created in 1965 by Morris Rosenberg and has been found to be a reliable scale to measure self-esteem,

with a Cronbach's alpha range of .79-.93. It has also been determined to be a valid means for evaluating self-esteem (McMullen & Resnick, 2013). It has been primarily utilized in psychology, psychiatry, and sociology, but can be found as a tool used for research in a variety of disciplines. Additionally, the tool has been used to evaluate self-esteem across many age groups and in both males and females. The original testing of the RSES was in high school students ages 15-19 (Supple & Plunkett, 2011).

Self-esteem is identified as the attitude toward self, or how an individual perceives himself (Classen, Velozo, & Mann, 2007). The RSES is one of the most widely used measures of self-reported global self-esteem (Vasconcelos-Raposo, Fernandes, Teixeira, & Bertelli, 2011). It utilizes a four-point Likert scale with responses that range from strongly disagree to strongly agree. It is easy to administer and requires less than five minutes to complete. The RSES is an ordinal level of measurement, meaning that the data is systematically ordered without being able to specify the distance between the two responses.

The secondary tool that was used is a body image survey developed as part of the compendium of assessment tools created by the Center for Disease Control in 2012 (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 2005). It has not been tested for reliability and validity, but was used as a comparison of body image of the individual both before program initiation and after program completion. The students were asked for their opinions on the tool and how it assessed what they believe makes up body image. This tool has been labeled the Modified CDC Body Image (MCBI) Survey for the purposes of this DNP project (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 2005).

A demographics form was also distributed to gather information such as age, ethnicity, grade level, education level of parents, frequency of physical activity, and household

information. The survey administration and results calculations were tested prior to delivering the surveys to the participants. The staff of the Dodge County Middle School after school program and the investigator will test all tools administered in this study. All surveys will be administered in paper format.

Data Collection Methods

Data was gathered by paper surveys measuring both body image and self-esteem. The participants received two surveys along with a demographics form to complete prior to beginning the Free Being Me program. The surveys were interpreted and recorded by the investigator along with the demographics. Upon completion of the program, the participants then received the body image and self-esteem surveys again for completion. All surveys were distributed and collected by the investigator. The investigator will then interpret and record that data for analysis.

Data Security

Each participant was assigned a number. The numbers were used in place of names on all surveys. The master list of which number each participant is assigned was housed separately from completed surveys so as to reduce the risk of discovery of protected information. Finally, the surveys are stored by the investigator in a locked office.

Sampling Plan

Since the Free Being Me Program is designed for work in small groups, the participants were divided into small groups to complete the sessions (<https://free-being-me.com/downloads/>). All subjects included in the DNP project were middle school females ages 11-14 who qualify to participate in the afterschool program at Dodge County Middle School. Those students wishing to participate in the research associated with this study were eligible following the completion of

the consent form by the parents and an assent form by the student. The only exclusion criteria were students who were non-English speaking, students with disabilities that prevent participation, students with late completion of consent and assent. Information regarding the program being offered in the study was provided in the first few weeks of the afterschool program during the 2019/2020 school year. After the last session of Free Being Me, all students who participated, regardless of being in the study were invited to a pizza party to celebrate completion.

CHAPTER 4

Analysis

This program evaluation utilized a repeated measures design to determine the effectiveness of the Free Being Me program. The data demonstrated here includes pre- and post-intervention surveys along with participant demographics.

All data was entered into IBM SPSS 26 and verified twice by the researcher. Data was screened prior to beginning statistical analysis. All data including interval and ratio variables was examined for central tendency and Fisher's exact for skewness and kurtosis. Normal distribution was noted for each variable. No missing data was identified during the cleaning of the data.

The sample studied here were female students that participate in the after-school program at the Dodge County Middle School. There were 14 total participants who completed parental consent, student assent, a demographics survey, and pre- and post-surveys. Table 1 depicts the demographic information collected from the participants.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Age		
11	2	14.3
12	5	35.7
13	3	21.4
14	4	28.6
Grade		
6	4	28.6
7	5	35.7
8	5	35.7
Ethnicity		
White	2	14.3
Black	9	64.3
Hispanic	1	7.1
Other	2	14.3
Number of siblings		

1	1	7.1
2	2	14.3
3	3	21.4
4	1	7.1
5	1	7.1
6	3	21.4
7	2	14.3
8	1	7.1
Frequency of physical activity		
1 per week	2	14.3
2-3 per week	3	21.4
4+ per week	7	50.0
none	2	14.3
Lives in home with		
Both parents	5	35.7
Mom	8	57.1
Dad	1	7.1
Member of a club or team		
Yes	9	64.3
No	5	35.7
Member of a religious organization		
Yes	11	78.6
No	3	21.4
Follow a special diet		
Yes	5	64.3
No	9	35.7

Results for Research Question 1

Research question 1: After a 5-session Free Being Me intervention, is there a statistically significant improvement in participant's body image and self-esteem as measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and the Modified CDC Body Image Survey? All data collected from the pre- and post-surveys was tested utilizing a paired t-test. The measurement of self-esteem via the RSES was not significantly impacted by the Free Being Me program. There was not a significant improvement determined between the initial RSES scores for self-esteem

($M=17.57$, $SD=6.548$) and the post completion RSES scores for self-esteem ($M=18.93$, $SD=6.580$); $t(-1.721)$ $p=.109$.

The measurement of body image via the Modified CDC Body Image survey was not significantly impacted by the Free Being Me program. There was not a significant improvement determined between the initial MCBI scores for body image ($M=34$, $SD=8.228$) and the post completion MCBI score for body image ($M=36$, $SD=7.666$); $t(-1.504)$ $p=.157$.

Students showed improvement in both self-esteem and body image from participating in the Free Being Me program. The improvement for each, however, was not statistically significant. This finding could be due to small sample size.

Results for Research Question 2

Research question 2: What demographic factors are associated with body image?

Results of the Pearson correlation demonstrated a negative correlation between initial body image and having a special diet ($r=-.564$, $p=.036$) prior to participating in the Free Being Me program. Additionally, results of the Pearson correlation also demonstrated a negative correlation between body image and having a special diet ($r=-.626$, $p=0.17$) following participating in the Free Being Me program. These findings indicate that following a special diet is associated with having a lower body image.

Results for Research Question 3

Research question 3: What demographic factors are associated with self-esteem? Results of the Pearson correlation did not find any correlations between demographics pre-intervention. Following the Free Being Me program, however, the results of the Pearson correlation demonstrated a negative correlation between the number of siblings the participant had and self-esteem following participation in the Free Being Me program ($r=-5.63$, $p=.036$). This finding

suggests that the more siblings the participant had, the lower the self-esteem. The effects of the number of siblings were only present after the completion of the Free Being Me program.

Results for Research Question 4

Research question 4: Post intervention, what are the demographic factors associated with greater improvement in self-esteem and body image in participants? The only demographic variable that showed any significant correlations was ethnicity. The participants were split into two groups according to ethnicity. The dominant group of participants were African American with a total of 9 participants. Therefore, the groups were divided into African American (N=9) and non-African American (N=5).

In examining the overall effects of the Free Being Me program, self-esteem demonstrated statistically significant improvement in the non-African American group ($M=-3.2$, $SD=.837$); $t (-8.552)$, $p=.001$. There was no significant improvement in self-esteem in the African American group ($M=-3.33$, $SD=3.24$); $t (-.309)$, $p=.76$. Also, within ethnicity groups, the Pearson correlation revealed a positive correlation between initial body image and age ($r=.910$, $p=.032$) as well as body image and grade ($r=.951$, $p=.013$) in the non-African American group. In the African American group, the Pearson correlation revealed a negative correlation between body image and having a special diet ($r=-.751$, $p=.020$). The Free Being Me program was effective in improving the self-esteem of the non-African American participants.

In examining self-esteem in relation to ethnicity, the Pearson correlation determined a positive correlation between initial self-esteem and age ($r=.988$, $p=.001$) as well as initial self-esteem and grade ($r=.953$, $p=.012$) for the non-African American group. There was a negative correlation as well in this group between initial self-esteem and having a special diet ($r=-.921$, $p=.026$). Post intervention, Pearson correlation demonstrated similar correlations between self-

esteem and age ($r=.971$, $p=.006$) and self-esteem and grade ($r=.969$, $p=.007$) in the non-African American group. Again, a negative correlation was determined in this group between post intervention self-esteem and having a special diet ($r=-.942$, $p=.017$). In the non-African American group, the higher grade and age, the better the student's self-esteem is both before and after participating in the Free Being Me program.

In the African American group Pearson correlation indicated a negative correlation between initial self-esteem and grade ($r=-.740$, $p=.022$) as well as initial self-esteem and the number of siblings the participant had ($r=-.749$, $p=.020$). Post intervention, self-esteem and grade were found to have a negative correlation ($r=-.741$, $p=.022$). In the African American group, the higher the grade level and the more siblings each participant has, the lower the self-esteem.

The pre- and post-survey results following Free Being Me implementation did not indicate a significant change in self-esteem or body image overall of the participants. There was, however, an improvement in both self-esteem and body image in general. Additionally, the non-African American group had a statistically significant improvement in self-esteem. This finding suggests that ethnicity influences self-esteem and the efficacy of the Free Being Me program.

Although the sample size is small, the Pearson correlation determined significance within some groupings. The findings presented here suggest that having a special diet negatively impacts an adolescent girl's body image. The question did not address what type of special diet participants required, but having a special diet negatively impacted body image both before beginning and following completion of the Free Being Me program. When divided into groups related to ethnicity, having a special diet also negatively correlated with self-esteem in the non-African American group both before beginning and following completion of the Free Being Me program. A special diet also negatively influenced body image in African American participants.

Overall, this information suggests that having a special diet puts early adolescent girls at risk for a decreased self-esteem and body image.

The findings suggest that self-esteem is influenced by the number of siblings an adolescent girl has. The more siblings an early adolescent girl has, the lower the self-esteem will be. This finding was more prevalent in the African American group.

In the non-African American group, a relationship was determined to exist between age and both self-esteem and body image. The data also demonstrated a relationship between grade and both self-esteem and body image. This information suggests that the older the participant, the better the body image and self-esteem.

The data presented here represents the effects of the Free Being Me program and student demographics on early adolescent girls in an afterschool program in rural middle Georgia. Free Being Me created a positive effect on self-esteem in the non-African American participants. Findings also suggest that an increased age and grade is associated with a higher self-esteem within the non-African American group. Having more siblings contributes to a lower self-esteem in the African American group. Finally, having a special diet negatively impacts body image and self-esteem in both ethnic groups.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

This study was conducted at Dodge County Middle School in Dodge County, Georgia. Dodge County is a rural county in central Georgia that has a high rate of poverty compared with the state and national average. The afterschool program at Dodge County Middle School is grant funded and provides services such as tutoring and enrichment programs in the afterschool setting.

The Free Being Me program was developed in a collaboration between Dove and WAGGGS to promote positive body image and thereby influence self-esteem in a positive way (<https://free-being-me.com/downloads/>). Dodge County Middle School chose to adopt the program as curriculum for the afterschool setting for the fall 2019 semester. This five-session program was designed to teach early adolescent girls about the Image Myth seen in media and society. A total of 42 students participated in at least one of 5 sessions. While the program was open to all female students that attend the afterschool program, only 14 completed consent and assent and returned them to the investigator.

All sessions were held in the school library. If available, students would meet in the library and participate in the session. The students worked in small groups to complete the missions in each session. Following that, they were dismissed to the busses for transportation home. Evaluations were provided at the close of the program. Feedback from the Free Being Me program, demonstrated that the participants enjoyed the program, but preferred more sessions. The students appreciated the environment and the supplies provided for the program. The evaluations showed that the students overall were comfortable with the environment and the activities. The program was well received and had great participation during the sessions.

The Free Being Me program demonstrated an increase in both self-esteem and body image in the population studied. The increase was only statistically significant, however, in the non-African American group. A larger sample size could alter these findings. There are cultural considerations that may have had an effect on these findings as well. Prior research has determined that African American women have a higher self-esteem and body image than other ethnicities (Bachman, O'Malley, Freedman-Doan, Trzesniewski, & Donnellan, 2011). This study supported that notion by the African American group having higher baseline scores of self-esteem and body image than the non-African American group.

Chronic conditions, such as diabetes and celiac disease, require that an individual eat a special diet. Prior research has noted that adolescents who have a chronic condition often have reduced body image. This research supported that finding with a negative association between special diet and body image. Oftentimes in adolescence, an individual is trying to assimilate with peers. Following a special diet can make them feel different than others and not as confident in their bodies as others (Curry, 2016).

Another finding of this research was a negative correlation between the number of siblings and self-esteem. An increase in the number of siblings can lead to a reduction in self-esteem. This reduction could be in part due to the important role parents play in the building of self-esteem. Additional siblings reduce the time and attention that a child receives and could be related to this outcome from the study.

Within the group studied, students who were older and in higher grade levels were found to have higher self-esteem and body image. Since it is known that early adolescent girls have a decrease in self-esteem between the ages of 11 and 14. Perhaps the older students were exhibiting the rise of self-esteem that follows the decline in early adolescence. Prior studies have

found that female students experience an increase in self-esteem once they reach their high school years (Jiloha, 2017).

The student evaluations of the program were overall positive. The evaluation showed satisfaction with the setting and length of the sessions as well as the content presented in the session. The one need for improvement was for an increased number of sessions. There were sessions that were rushed in order to get all the activities completed in time to get the students on the buses to go home for the day.

This study could be easily replicated in a variety of settings and with varying populations. The Free Being Me program is free to use, and includes curriculum for co-educational groups and an additional track for younger age groups (<https://free-being-me.com/downloads/>). The sessions of the Free Being Me program can be formatted to be delivered over two days as well. Previous research has demonstrated mixed results as to the effectiveness of who delivers the content. There have been positive findings when the content is delivered by a school staff member that has a pre-existing relationship with the students. This study could very feasibly be delivered in the same format or in an alternate format to best accommodate the school staff and participants (Diedrichs et al., 2015). The supplies needed largely consist of paper, poster board, markers, and magazines. While the students who participated in this study appreciated the pizza party at the conclusion, there are alternate low-cost ways to celebrate all that has been gained through participating in the Free Being Me program.

Limitations

Perhaps the most significant limitation of this DNP project is the small sample size. At the time of the study, there were approximately 40 female students enrolled in the afterschool program at Dodge County Middle School. These students have several afterschool activities

available and some activities hindered consistent participation from the students. Inconsistent participation alone did not eliminate students from participating, however students had to be present at the first and last session in order to complete the necessary surveys. During two of the sessions, the students had soccer tryouts after school, which likely impacted the overall sample size.

Another limitation of the study is the lack of existing information on the effectiveness of the Free Being Me program. While there is extensive research on factors that influence self-esteem, the Free Being Me program's approach to influencing self-esteem by way of encouraging a positive body image has not been specifically researched.

A final limitation of this study is the lack of an existing valid and reliable tool for measuring body image in this population. While the MCBI was checked for validity with a group of middle school girls prior to utilizing it for the DNP project, it has not been extensively researched.

Implications for Future Research

The level of one's self-esteem can have great influence on a person's life. While it can fluctuate throughout the lifespan, a positive global self-esteem can aid in preventing health care concerns such as substance abuse, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Corning & Heibel, 2016). Providing programs to improve self-esteem in the school setting allows students the opportunity to improve self-esteem and thereby reduce the likelihood of experiencing the aforementioned health concerns (Diedrichs et al., 2015).

Providing programs such as Free Being Me in the school setting allows for all participating students to receive consistent information that may impact both self-esteem and body image in a positive way. It also allows for the opportunity to provide this information to

students who may not have access to resources to receive it outside of the school setting.

Considerations for additional research on the effects of programs such as Free Being Me in the school or afterschool setting could be focused on males in this age group, differing age groups, or the programs' effects on students in urban and suburban settings.

Conclusion

The management of self-esteem is important for early adolescent girls as they grow and develop. Possessing a healthy self-esteem has been linked with a reduced incidence of depression, anxiety, substance use disorder, and eating disorders among other comorbidities (Corning & Heibel, 2016). While self-esteem is influenced by many factors, programs targeted at improved self-esteem and body image can aid in improving self-esteem in middle school girls (Veldhuis et al., 2014). Programs such as Free Being Me can be offered in the afterschool setting to assist students in improving self-esteem, especially in certain demographic categories. This study has contributed to the existing body of knowledge of self-esteem in early adolescent girls. It supports data that finds that children on special diets due to chronic diseases have a decreased body image. This research also identifies that both age and grade influence self-esteem and body image, which suggests that early middle school students may be at more risk for a decline than older middle school students.

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