Impact of a Youth Theological Institute on Moral Development: Findings From Vocati Cohort 2-2

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Purpose:

Globally there are approximately 1.8 billion youth between the age of 10 – 24 representing the largest number in this category to date. Evidence from meta-analyses suggest promoting health and reducing risks in this age group has life-long health and benefits to society. Research further suggests the physical maturation of adolescents is accelerating while the psychological and behavioral dimensions of development in this age group is slowing. These data suggest new challenges and opportunities for promoting health and minimizing risk. Research and proposed theoretical models suggest positive and negative risk-taking behaviors may cluster in this population. Pittman’s Five C’s of Positive Youth Development, Competence, Connectedness, Confidence, Character & Caring have been applied to organize health-promoting and risk-reducing strategies targeting youth. Research on adolescent moral development and decision-making have described morally relevant behavior as being either pro or antisocial. Prosocial behavior has been described as engaging in behaviors that are of benefits to others. In contrast, antisocial behavior is defined as that which results in physical or psychological harm to others. Research suggests adolescents’ emotions, within the context of moral decision-making, to be predictive of behavior. Youth development programs and policy suggest the use of strategies which facilitate adolescent competence in positive, prosocial behaviors including social, cognitive, behavioral, emotional, moral decision-making dimensions. While significant research has been conducted on interventions to enhance the physical determinants of health, a paucity of research exists reporting strategies designed to positively influence the moral development of youth and prosocial behaviors linked to well-being. The purpose of this project therefore is to report the findings from Vocati, cohort 2, a four-year youth theological program designed to engage adolescents in the critical appraisal of theological content on moral development as a strategy to promote positive youth development and well-being.

Methods:

A longitudinal, mixed-methods design was used. A cohort of (n = 25) youth, 14 – 17 years of age, volunteering to participate from 3 southwestern states participated in a week-long summer intensive followed by a series of monthly online discussion though a Google Classroom as a part of participation in the Vocati Theological Institute. The program intervention is designed to engage high-school youth in the critical appraisal of theological content. Considering the central human tenants of “faith,” “hope” and “love” as programmatic themes, youth are engaged in reading, critical appraisal and discussion of seminal works from a wide-range of theologians and philosophers including Aristotle, Plato, Augustine, C. S. Lewis, and other notable intellectuals who addressed human morality. Institutional Review Board approval and informed adolescent assent and parental consent was initially obtained and then renewed annually. Two metrics are used in the study: The Defining Issues Test, Version 2 (DIT-2) administered at baseline and 12 months and the Vocati Instrument Questionnaire (VIQ), administered in-person at time 1 (baseline) and at six months after the intensive in an online format via. The metrics reporting the reliability and validity of the DIT-2 has been well established in youth and reported extensively. The VIQ instrument has six Likert-type questions and seven open-ended questions in which subject complete a narrative response. Content validity index for the VIQ was established using a panel of six content-experts during
the pilot phase of the project and determined to be .94. Reliability of the Likert-style questions in the VIQ were tested using test-retest methods and found to have a Cronbach’s alpha of .86.

Results:

Study data were analyzed using SPSS version 25. Demographic, descriptive data and frequency distributions, and Q-Q plots analyzed and determine to meet assumptions of normality. Thirteen (52%) were male and 12 (48%) were female. Two (8%) were African American, 22 (88%) were Caucasian, and 1 (4%) were Hispanic. Data from the DIT-2 were submitted by scantron to the University of Alabama Center for the Study of Ethical Development. The results of the DIT-2 mean scores at time one and at twelve months were compared to the aggregated national normative (NN) scores (Stage 2/3: T1: 24.43 - T2: 29.00 compared to NN: 27.7; Stage 4: T1 34.74 - T2: 38.25 compared to NN: 35.3; P Score: T1: 31.74 – T2: 28.75 compared to NN: 31.64; and N2 Score: T1: 31.36 – T2: 32.44 compared to NN: 30.97. The N2 score is considered to be the most important measure of moral development. The N2 score is based the level of sophisticated moral thinking and also encompasses the extent to which individuals reject ideas because they are biased or considered simplistic. In cohort 2, this score increased by 32.44 (an increase of 1.08 points) as compared to the national norm, 30.97 (1.47 points greater than the national norm). The VIQ data was entered into SPSS version 25 and analyzed using a paired t-test. Data supported a statistically significant difference in mean scores between T1 and T2 in two areas: 1) I am more familiar with and have a better understanding of the primary thinkers, theology, and wisdom from the Christian tradition (t (20) = 2.358, p < .02), 2) I am better able to understand the wisdom and theological traditions of the Christian tradition (t (20) = 5.850, p < .001). We audio recorded the qualitative data verbatim during the end of program focus group by asking the seven open-ended questions derived from the VIQ. To analyze the data, four members of the research team independently read and reflected on the data using a qualitative interpretive approach. The team noted similar ideas, clustered like concepts and categorized the emerging data thematically. Nine themes emerged during the qualitative analysis. The themes were clustered and examined in relationship to Pittman’s five categories of healthy youth development. The themes of “accepting responsibility” and “taking action” were reflected in the first category of “competence”. The themes of “presence”, “reflection”, and “serving the community” coincided with the second category of “connectedness”. The themes, “faithful” and “exhibiting internal strengths” were consistent with the Pittman’s third category “confidence”. The theme of “purposeful interaction” delineated well with the fourth category of “character.” And finally, the theme of “acceptance” aligned with Pittman’s fifth category, “Caring”.

Conclusion:

The findings from the second cohort of this study suggest a more comprehensive engagement of youth in the critical appraisal of theological content may contribute to positive adolescent moral development and prosocial concepts linked to constructive youth behaviors and well-being. A comparison group has been added to cohort 3, which is now in progress. Additional research is needed to determine the potential mediating effects that targeting moral development may have on adolescent health promotion.

Title:
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Keywords:
adolescent, moral development and theology

References:


Abstract Summary:
The developmental stage of adolescence is prolonging. Evidence suggests an adolescent physical maturity is accelerating while psychological and behavioral development is slowing. This project reports findings from cohort 2 of a program designed to engage youth in the critical appraisal of theological content on moral development.

Content Outline:

1. Trends in adolescent development
   1. Evidence suggesting changing trends adolescent development
   2. Health risks
   3. Behavioral risk and protective factors
   4. Evidence suggesting the clustering of health promoting and risk-taking behaviors

2. Measurement of adolescent moral development
   1. Research on adolescent judgment, emotion and decision-making
   3. Youth development programs and Vocati as a youth intervention.

3. Engaging youth in the critical appraisal of theological content as strategy for moral development
   1. Vocati project longitudinal findings from cohort 2 – DIT-2 measurement
   2. Focus group findings from cohort 2
   3. Pittman’s categories of healthy youth development
   4. Preliminary findings from comparison group and implications for adolescent moral development

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