

Young, Empowered, and Black: Exploring the Perception of Harambee Among Freedom School Children

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Introduction

Abstract

Tallahassee, Florida, one of the country's most economically segregated cities, is the home of two Freedom School sites operating during the summer to serve children while celebrating diversity and making meaningful contributions to social change. Freedom Schools, a national six-week summer program and product of the Children's Defense Fund provides children with examples of enacting change, while challenging the historical "disempowering" of students of ethnically diverse backgrounds in the K-12 system. Children participate in transformative and culturally relevant learning experiences which seek to empower children through reading and daily affirmations.

Harambee, a Swahili word meaning "all pull together", is a daily activity that scholars participate in which encompasses peer to peer affirmations and recognitions. The aim of this activity is to encourage children to think of themselves as agents of social change. Children who participated in this study demonstrated the ability to connect the messages of Harambee regarding perseverance during turbulent times to their everyday lives. Children in the Level Three group of the program (14 year olds) struggled to comprehend their ability to make change as an individual working against a system that they are steadily beginning to recognize. Level Two children (9 year olds) showcased a more positive outlook on their abilities to evoke change on a wide scale.

Aims of the Research

The purpose of this study was to investigate factors contributing to a child's ability and desire to advocate for themselves. Specifically, the researcher sought to understand what happens when children ages 9-14 participate in a ritual of daily affirmations at a summer camp. The researcher was interested in learning about the impact of the Harambee activity both inside and outside Freedom Schools, as well as the linkage of the latter to their perceptions of empowerment.

Research Questions

What is the impact of six weeks of daily affirmation on Freedom School Scholars ages 9-14 years old?



Method

Research Design

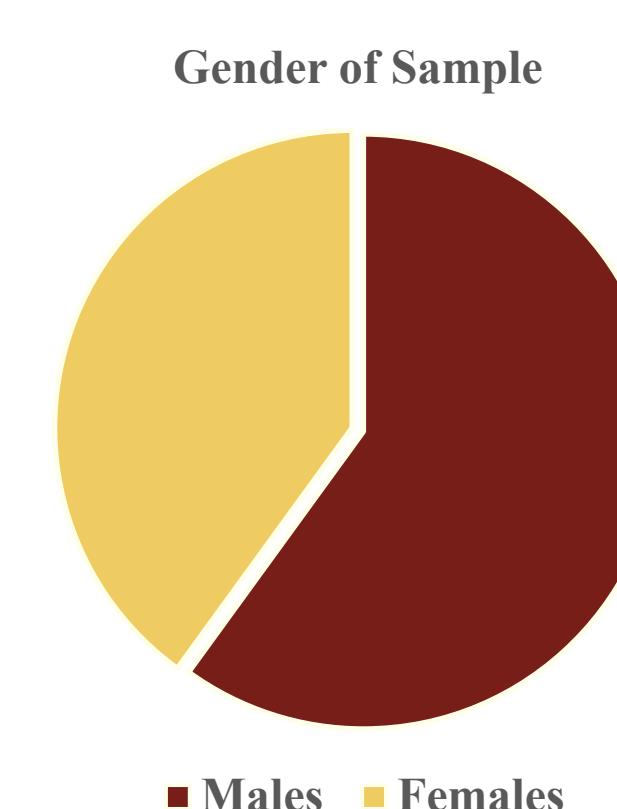
This mixed methods study used criterion sampling to determine the sample based upon the researcher's perceived level of the child's engagement with the Harambee activity. Qualitative data was collected through interviews during the fourth and fifth week of the six-week program. Quantitative data was collected through data from the Prosocial Efficacy Survey administered to students at the beginning and end of Freedom Schools. The survey asked students to rate their efficacy levels in their perceived abilities to evoke change.

Sample items:



Participants

The sample for this study consisted of a majority of African American children, two aged nine years old (Level Two), and three aged 14 years old (Level Three). The sample consisted of two girls and three boys. Of the five participants, four were natives of Tallahassee. The fifth participant was a child residing with family members during the 2018 summer.



Data Collection and Analysis

Freedom School children were observed participating in Harambee throughout the first week of the summer program and were chosen for the sample through criterion sampling during the second week, based upon their level of engagement. Students selected for the sample continued to be observed during Harambee, as well as during the Integrated Reading Curriculum (IRC) portion of the camp for the duration of the six-week summer program. During the last two weeks of the summer program, the sample was interviewed and asked about their perception of the impact of Harambee. Analysis was conducted through an analysis of prosocial efficacy pre and post survey data observation, as well as an analysis of common themes from the sample regarding their perception of Harambee and the impact of the daily activity.

Results

Conclusion

Children in the sample were able to identify the messages of Harambee regarding liberation, strength, and perseverance in turbulent times, and apply it to their everyday experiences. Data from the post prosocial efficacy survey illustrated that Level Two children became more confident in their ability to enact positive change and behavior. Post survey data of Level Three children indicated a decrease in their belief in their ability to make a difference in the lives of others, try new things and not fail, and to promote peace. Data also showed an increase in bullying among Level Three children. A common theme affecting Level Three children dealt with bullying due to participation in Harambee, which caused an urge to give in to social expectations.

While all students participated in the same Harambee ritual, Level Two and Level Three children ultimately received different messages during IRC regarding what it means to be an African American child in today's world. While the Level Two's reading material focused on the "fables" of the Civil Rights Movement, Level Three children tackled conversations regarding how their identity currently impacts the way others see them, abuse, peer pressure, and the realities of the Civil Rights Movement both past and present. Due to this, as well as conflicting messages from outside Freedom Schools, Level Three children held a more skeptical view of enacting change at the end of the program.

Discussion

This study has implications for how Freedom Schools can continue adapting their methods to meet the needs of scholars, particularly those who are older within the program. While all children receive the same Harambee experience, their experiences outside the Harambee activity ultimately affect the reception of the content of the program and reception of the ritual. While level two children are receiving the message and applying it to their aspirational outlooks of social change, level three children are wondering "where they get in" and how their actions as one person can enact change in accordance with the realities of their everyday lives. Future research may include longitudinal studies of returning Freedom School children in order to observe possible changes in perceptions of Harambee over time.

Key References

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