Increasing Adolescent Girls’ Self-esteem through Cultural Awareness

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By:

Sabrina Skeens

Chair: Amy Foell

Reader: Katie Dorn

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Abstract

This literature review discusses the importance of enhancing self-esteem among adolescent girls through cultural awareness in the school setting. Research is presented to discuss how ethnicity affects self-esteem among adolescent girls within the school setting and outside of a school setting. Achieving a positive self-esteem among adolescent girls leads to satisfying relationships, higher academic performance, and a more likelihood of attending a postsecondary school setting. This paper also discusses implications for school counselors to enhance their own multicultural counseling skills. Multiple recommendations are discussed on how to improve adolescent girls’ self-esteem. From these recommendations, interventions are presented for school counselors to utilize as curriculum to enhance self-esteem in adolescent girls through cultural responsiveness.
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Increasing Adolescent Girls Self-esteem through Cultural Awareness

**Introduction**

Researching self-esteem in adolescents is becoming an important topic in response to the explanation of adolescent mental health and development. Self-esteem is described as an overall reflection of an individual’s self-worth, and encompasses beliefs about oneself that correlates an emotional response to those beliefs (McClure, Tanski, Kingsbury, Gerrard, & Sargent, 2010). In addition, self-esteem represents the capacity to feel worthy of happiness and the ability to successfully address life challenges (McClure et al., 2010). The development of a healthy self-esteem among adolescents positively influences how the adolescent makes decisions (Nassar-McMillan & Cashwell, 1997). Many adolescents, however, suffer from low self-esteem that causes negative thoughts and behaviors, which may cause life-long problems and unhappiness.

Adolescence is a period of identity development and exploration (Evans, Copping, Rowley, & Kurtz-Costes, 2011). Peer relationships become a key variable at the adolescent age group. Research has found that peer relationships become salient during adolescence, where attachment to friends can have an effect on mental health (LeCroy, 2004). In addition, adolescence is a transitional period where youth move from elementary school to middle school, and then from middle school to high school. Through this transitional period, adolescents are also experiencing hormonal changes caused during puberty (Adams, Kuhn, & Rhodes, 2006). In response to the intensive changes that occur, self-esteem can have a profound impact on adolescents.

Self-esteem can positively or negatively affect an adolescent. Bachman, O’Malley, Freedman-Doan, Trzesniewski, and Donnellan (2012) suggests that positive self-esteem is associated with goals, expectancies, coping mechanisms, and behaviors that promote effective
achievement. Adolescents with positive self-esteem have been found to have fewer emotional problems, such as anxiety and depression; more appropriate interactions among peers; lower levels of delinquent behaviors; and less at-risk suicide attempts (Nassar-McMillan, & Cashwell, 1997). In addition, there is evidence of a positive correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement (Booth & Gerard, 2011). Furthermore, positive self-esteem correlates with adaptive social behaviors with lower levels of socially valued achievement and antisocial behavior (Duys & Hobson, 2004).

On the adverse side is negative self-esteem, which has been shown to influence adolescent development and transition to adulthood with psychological, physical, and social consequences, including depression, anxiety, disordered eating, violent behavior, and substance abuse (McClure et al., 2010). Additionally, recent research suggests there may be unfavorable long-term outcomes for adolescents with negative self-esteem, such as fewer years of post-secondary education, greater likelihood of joblessness, and financial difficulties (McClure et al., 2010).

Based on the information provided, there is a need to increase adolescent self-esteem to build confident, intelligent, and working citizens who will be able to positively cope with life struggles. Research has found that there is a need for adolescent girls to increase their self-esteem in response to them being less likely than adolescent males to provide high positive self-evaluations (Bachman et al., 2012). In addition, research on ethnic minority girls and self-esteem is increasing due to the growing percentage of ethnic minority youth in the United States adolescent population (Greene & Way, 2005).

Duys and Hobson (2004) discuss that self-esteem does not respond quickly to brief interventions as a result of self-esteem being a component of the self that is resistant to change,
changes slowly over time, and is affected by long-term exposure to social situations. In response, school counselors play a key role in affecting self-esteem for students through implementing a comprehensive counseling curriculum that is compiled of research on how to positively increase self-esteem for adolescent girls using cultural awareness (Duys & Hobson, 2004).

**Adolescent Girls**

Research in Western countries have determined that adolescent girls have a lower self-esteem than adolescent males (ACT for youth, 2003). Greene and Way (2005) mentioned that gender differences become more dramatic with age, as girls often experience a decline in self-esteem throughout adolescence. A meta-analysis investigating self-esteem in Western industrialized countries found the greatest difference of self-esteem levels between boys and girls occurs around age 16, with boys exhibiting higher self-esteem than girls (Booth & Gerard, 2011).

One causation is girls today are much more oppressed (LeCroy, 2004). They are growing up in a more dangerous, sexualized, and media-saturated culture. There is an abundance of pressure to be beautiful and sophisticated, which causes many girls to engage in negative behaviors, such as eating disorders (LeCroy, 2004). Adolescent girls idealize and internalize thin-ideal models, who are typically 15% below the average weight of women, and judge their bodies after them. In response to adolescent girls internalizing thin-ideal women, their personalities are being shaped in a negative way, especially affecting their self-esteem levels in an unfavorable way (Javaid & Ahmad, 2014).

In addition, there is tremendous pressure for girls to explore their sexuality at an earlier rate, leading to sexual intercourse, unwanted pregnancy, or sexually transmitted disease (LeCroy,
Ten percent of girls between the ages of 15 and 19 become pregnant. Additionally, they are three times more likely than boys to have experienced sexual abuse, which is a pathway to delinquency (Steese et al., 2006). Furthermore, adolescent girls are overrepresented with problems that are more “invisible,” such as negative self-image, depression, eating disorders, and poor body image. In response to these hidden problems, girls who need help may successfully conceal them until they have reached a precarious level (LeCroy, 2004).

In response to adolescent girls navigating a more dangerous world, they are less protected, and less equipped at learning positive coping skills. Adolescent girls need to develop acceptance of the self as a stable person of worth. Many girls, however, set themselves up for failure by aspiring to unattainable goals and self-criticism (LeCroy, 2004). In response to the negative feelings adolescent girls’ experience, this leads to a loss of interest in school, which can result in school failure and dropout. Furthermore, it can cause poorer relationships among families and peers, resulting in isolation and an increase in depression and suicidal thoughts (LeCroy, 2004).

Although increasing adolescent girls’ self-esteem is critical to build strong and successful women, each girl is unique in their own way, and will respond to various interventions differently. It is the school counselor’s responsibility to identify how a student’s sense of self has become frozen or damaged (Duys & Hobson, 2004). One way to accomplish this task is to take into account that self-esteem can have different levels based on gender as well as ethnicity (ACT for Youth, 2003).

**Ethnicity**

It is estimated that by the year 2056, the Hispanic population in America will increase by 21%, Asian Americans by 22%, and African Americans by 12% (Querimit & Conner, 2003).
Furthermore, by the year 2050, it is estimated that almost 60% of school-aged youth will be of color (Querimit et al., 2003). This highlights the importance of researching how self-esteem affects an ethnically diverse adolescent girl as a result of gender and race being the prominent social identities in American society (Evans et al., 2011).

Vera et al. (2011) defines ethnic identity as an individual’s belonging to a minority ethnic group with common traits within that group that distinguishes themselves within the larger society. Ethnic identity is incorporated into one’s self-concept. When an adolescent is committed to their ethnic identity and has a sense of belonging and pride for their group, they experience ethnic identity achievement, where they have a positive view of who they are and where they came from (Greene, Way, & Pahl, 2006). The impact of racism and discrimination that many adolescent girls face may negatively affect their self-esteem as stereotypes and negative opinions about one’s ethnic group are often internalized in the self-concept (Greene et al., 2006).

Although the association between ethnicity and changes in adolescent girls’ self-esteem is not yet fully understood, there are some consistent patterns that have been discovered (Adams et al., 2006). Adams et al. (2006) investigated how self-esteem interacts for adolescents between ethnicity and gender. It was established that African American girls have the highest self-esteem compared to European Americans and Hispanic American girls as well as higher self-esteem than African American boys. In addition, European Americans and Hispanic American girls had significantly lower self-esteem compared to boys from their same ethnic group (Adams et al., 2006).

Additionally, Greene and Way (2005) conducted research comparing African American girls, Hispanic American girls, and Asian American girls, and found that Asian American girls
had the lowest self-esteem of these three subgroups. In congruence with Adams et al. (2006), Greene and Way (2005) also found that girls experience a decline in self-esteem throughout adolescence, while boys have an increase in self-esteem throughout the years. Boys reported higher self-esteem than girls among Hispanic and European American adolescents, while the opposite was true for African American girls who reported higher self-esteem than boys (Greene & Way, 2005).

Although future research should focus on comparing all four ethnicities, Bachman et al. (2012) found that African Americans score higher on measures of self-esteem than European Americans. Asian Americans report the lowest levels of all subgroups, and Hispanic Americans fall somewhere between European Americans and Asian American adolescent girls. Additionally, in response to American families integrating different ethnicities, many children are growing up in biracial families. Future research could be done to look at self-esteem among biracial children and adolescents to discover how their family dynamics and ethnicities affect their sense of self-concept. For the purpose of this literature review, African American, European American, Hispanic American, and Asian American adolescent girls will be compared and contrasted regarding how self-esteem affects them based on their ethnicity. Discovering the reasons for low or high self-esteem among ethnically diverse adolescent girls will allow school counselors to implement the right interventions that will improve their self-concept and their abilities.

**African American Girls**

African American adolescent girls have been found to have higher self-esteem than European, Hispanic, and Asian American adolescent girls. It may appear surprising that African American girls have high, stable levels of self-esteem given the societal prejudice and the
negative portrayal of African Americans in the media (Adams et al., 2006). One possible explanation may in part result from strong family and community ties that provide a sense of “group autonomy,” which may shield them against the effects of racism found in the larger society (Greene & Way, 2005).

Parents often actively teach their children to cope with negative feelings that occur by ignoring societal images of their ethnic group through the support received from family members (Adams et al., 2006). African American girls derive their personal self-worth from their sense of community, family, and responsibility for younger siblings (Adams et al., 2006). The use of social support has demonstrated an important coping strategy for African American girls, where they use those social networks to cope with stressors that might otherwise negatively affect self-esteem (Greene & Way, 2005).

McClure et al. (2010) conducted a mediation analysis that showed self-esteem was internally motivated for African American girls compared to other racially diverse female peers, and focused less on external motivators, such as other’s approval, physical appearance, and competition with others. It has been consistently shown that African American girls are not subjected to the same vulnerabilities as other racially diverse female peers because they do not have a decline in body image (ACT for Youth, 2003). Greene and Way (2005) found African American girls had higher levels of attractiveness and confidence in popularity, and lower levels of concern about their weight and social self-consciousness compared to their white female peers.

**School setting influence.** Although African American adolescent girls have consistently been shown to have higher self-esteem compared to their European, Hispanic, and Asian American female peers, they are still susceptible to low self-esteem, especially in the school
setting. In response to race and gender discrimination, African American girls confront these obstacles the most in their academic careers (Opportunities for African American Girls, 2015). African American adolescent girls are disproportionately enrolled in schools that lack quality resources, such as credentialed teachers, rigorous course offerings, and extracurricular activities. In addition, they have limited opportunities to enroll in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) courses (Opportunities for African American Girls, 2015).

African American adolescent girls have been found to overcome race and gender issues in the school setting, but that occurs in girls who feel a sense of belonging along with a strong support system (Greene & Way, 2005). When an African American girl focuses on the negative stigma that possibly surrounds their academic setting, they lack a sense of belonging, or a lack of social connectedness. This leads to perceived bias, stereotype threat, or a sense that their own race does not belong in an academic setting (Love, 2008). In response to the stereotype threat, they have a fear that their academic performance or behavior will reflect on their entire group, which may be one explanation for the achievement gap (Love, 2008).

It is important for African American adolescent girls to develop a sense of belonging in their school setting to diminish the inferiority feelings that occur when there is a lack of belonging causing alienation and isolation (Griffith & Powers, 2007, p. 9). Helping African American girls feel belonged in school may produce feelings of empowerment to achieve a self-respecting view of themselves and a sense of academic self-efficacy (Love, 2008).

**European American Girls**

Adams et al. (2006) found that European American adolescent girls derive their self-esteem based on their physical appearance. In addition, they believe how others view them and their appearance is an important basis for how they self-evaluate themselves. This view of
appearance is the strongest predictor for low self-esteem in European American adolescent girls (Clay et al., 2005).

The American cultural beauty ideal comes from the media, magazines, TV, films, advertising, where females’ self-worth are emphasized through the use of their appearances (Clay et al., 2005). These beauty ideals are even more powerful for adolescent girls as they encompass puberty where their body changes (weight gain, acne), which moves them away from the cultural beauty ideals (Clay et al., 2005). As adolescent girls fight to achieve beauty ideals, their self-esteem takes a hit of not achieving those unrealistic goals. In response, many adolescent girls struggle with body image, which leads to negative behaviors and eating disorders (Steese et al., 2006).

European American girls are raised in an individualistic culture whereas African American, Hispanic American, and Asian American are raised in a more collectivistic culture where they put their family and community above their own needs. European American girls focus more on themselves where they fixate on their appearances and how others judge them. Compared to other ethnicities, European American girls lack the concept of social interest, which is an individual’s awareness of belonging in the human community and understanding their responsibility to their community that ultimately shapes their actions (Griffith & Powers, 2007, p. 11).

Although European American girls do not experience the same amount of racial discrimination that other ethnic groups experience, they do struggle with gender stereotyping that may affect their self-esteem. Boys in the European American culture are encouraged to express self-reliance and independence that promotes feelings of competence and higher levels of self-
esteem. In contrast, girls are encouraged to develop nurturing behaviors where they exhibit submission to avoid confrontation (Adams et al., 2006).

**School setting influence.** In an academic setting, there has been shown a gender stereotype among European American adolescent boys and girls. Disalvo (2012) found in high school classrooms, there is a stereotype that math and science are easier for boys than it is for girls. There is a misconception that girls cannot handle math “Because the idea that men and women are different in this regard is considered natural and not discriminating” (Disalvo, 2012, para. 7). In response, girls have an increase in sensitivity and adherence to gender stereotyping in schools (Evans et al., 2011). In response, there are lower reports of academic competence, less school liking, and performing poorly on math achievement tests (Benner, 2011).

The school setting for all adolescent girls is a time for socialization among peers. This time is especially important for European American adolescent girls’ self-esteem. In response to girls developing feelings of personal self-worth based on their physical appearance, it is important they develop positive relationships with individuals who can improve their mindset (Adams et al., 2006). When a girl has a strong support system at school, it can be a buffer against life stressors, and promotes health and wellness (Steese et al., 2006). When a girl lacks positive relationships, their self-esteem decreases by comparing themselves to other girls where inferiority feelings about themselves develop, causing them to lose interest in school and display negative behaviors (Steese et al., 2006).

**Hispanic American Adolescent Girls**

Hispanic American adolescent girls in particular have elevated rates of school drop-out, early pregnancy, low self-esteem, depression, and suicide attempts (Kaplan, Turner, & Badger, 2007). Hispanic American adolescent girls have significantly lower levels of self-esteem
compared to European and African American adolescent girls (Adams et al., 2006). This relationship fluctuates depending on the specific Hispanic subgroup under investigation. For instance, Mexican Americans show lower levels of self-esteem than Cuban Americans. In contrast, Puerto Rican adolescents exhibit similar levels of self-esteem when compared to European American adolescents (Adams et al., 2006).

A number of studies have found a relationship between the stressors of adjusting to the American culture and discrimination that Hispanic American adolescents face (Kaplan et al., 2007). Girls in particular are fearful of displeasing their parents as they incorporate the American culture to their lives. They need a broader range of coping skills in order to deal with the demands of negotiating two distinct cultural groups (Kaplan et al., 2007).

One contributing factor for low self-esteem found in Hispanic American adolescent girls is while adjusting to the American culture, they begin to measure themselves to the American beauty ideals (Adams et al., 2006). Hispanic American adolescents not only hold onto their culture values, but they have to incorporate a new culture, which causes socioemotional distress. When their distress is not treated, they are more likely to report depressive and physical symptoms as well as anxiety and anxiety-related symptoms (Benner, 2011). When Hispanic American adolescent girls are provided the necessary tools to increase their self-esteem, they were found to cope better with stressors, and reported less socioemotional distress symptoms (Kaplan et al., 2007).

School setting influence. Feelings of belonging and connection to others are of critical importance to adolescents, especially for Hispanic American adolescents. Benner (2011) found that almost a quarter of Hispanic American adolescents struggled to find their place in the school setting, which resulted in increased feelings of loneliness and caused detrimental consequences.
for their later educational success (Benner, 2011). Compared to European American adolescent girls, feelings of school belonging was steeper among girls from Hispanic American backgrounds (Gillen-O’Neel & Fuligni, 2013).

One study found that while teacher support is an important factor in predicting higher self-esteem among adolescent girls, Hispanic American girls perception of lower teacher support and higher family stress resulted in lower self-esteem and dislike of school (Kaplan et al., 2007). Specifically, Hispanic American adolescent girls need interventions in the school setting that encourage them to develop social relationships, school connection, and school engagement, which ultimately promotes more positive life outcomes for the girls. The protective power of building positive relationships enables girls at risk from feeling alienated from their schools and dropping out, and instead remaining interested in learning and staying connected to school (Kaplan et al., 2007).

Asian American Adolescent Girls

Asian American adolescent girls are often found to report the lowest self-esteem of any other ethnic minority group (Greene & Way, 2005). Kim and Yeh (2002) found that Asian American adolescents reported more depressive symptoms, withdrawn behaviors, and social problems compared to European American adolescents. They also had poorer self-images and reported more dissatisfaction with their social support. In addition, Greene and Way (2005) found that Asian American adolescents often report more peer discrimination than Hispanic American and African American adolescents. Kim and Yeh (2002) also found higher levels of distress from peer discrimination, such as being threatened, called racially insulting names, and being excluded from activities in Asian American adolescents compared to African American, Hispanic American, and European American adolescents. Recent research has linked the
importance of peer discrimination with low self-esteem among ethnic minority adolescents (Greene & Way, 2005).

In response to peer discrimination, Asian American adolescent girls are less likely to report problems and seek help from adults. There is a cultural barrier that exists between Asian Americans and the dominant American society that influences how Asian Americans cognitively evaluate their situation, and the coping choices they make when personal and emotional problems arise (Zhou, Siu, & Xin, 2009). Asian Americans adopt avoidant coping skills and focus on “secondary control,” which is accepting a life situation and not conducting oneself in an action to change the situation. In contrast, the American culture focuses on “primary control,” where an individual takes action to enhance their life by influencing other people, life events, and environments (Zhou et al., 2009). This may be one causation for low self-esteem in Asian American adolescent girls who believe they cannot change their life circumstances causing them to engage in negative thought processes.

School setting influence. Asian Americans are identified as one of the fastest growing student populations entering the American educational system (Zhou et al., 2009). One might reasonably predict Asian American students achieve relatively high self-esteem scores because they report the highest average GPAs, college aspirations, and parental education; however, Asian American adolescent girls have the lowest self-esteem score than any other ethnic minority group (Bachman et al., 2012). Asian Americans are often perceived as a “model minority” and are said to experience hardly any social and psychological problems in their adjustment to the American culture. There is tremendous pressure for Asian American students to live up to the model minority status, and recent studies reveal that they do suffer from a range of mental health problems, as previously mentioned (Zhou et al., 2009).
In response to the model minority status Asian American students have acquired, peer discrimination is seen most often in the school setting. Each ethnic group is faced with a stereotype in schools. Asian Americans are considered to be academically competent whereas Hispanic and African Americans are considered incompetent (Greene et al., 2006). This results in the adults working in the schools to present preferential treatment towards Asian American students, which creates feelings of frustration by Hispanic and African American students. Those frustrating feelings contribute to the high levels of discrimination that Asian Americans experience by Hispanic and African American peers (Greene et al., 2006). In addition, Kim and Yeh (2002) found that high- and low-achieving Asian American students experienced anxiety to hold onto the expectations of the model minority stereotype. They were unable to perform well academically, felt depressed, and were embarrassed to ask for help. Without seeking help for their academic and emotional problems, they had resulting feelings of helplessness and loneliness (Kim & Yeh, 2002).

To better serve the social, psychological, and educational needs of Asian American adolescent girls, teachers, school counselors, and administrators must effectively communicate that they care and want to help (Kim & Yeh, 2002). School counselors can especially teach Asian American adolescent girls to acquire the courage to be imperfect. School counselors can provide those skills through individual and group counseling activities that promote the girls to accept that making mistakes is a part of life, and ultimately guide them towards accepting who they are, which will increase their self-worth (Griffith & Powers, 207, p. 19).

**Summary of Key Points**

Clearly, there is a need to create a stronger sense of self for adolescent girls. Each adolescent girl is unique in their own way, including their ethnicity. Although all adolescent
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Girls may develop poor self-esteem for an abundance of reasons, there are similarities found across American ethnicities. European American, Hispanic American, and Asian American adolescent girls compare themselves to unattainable American beauty ideals, which causes poorer self-image of themselves (Adams et al., 2006).

Although African American adolescent girls do not compare themselves to beauty ideals, they can have poorer self-esteem if they lack a positive support system. Additionally, lack of support in the school system disengages them, which causes academic problems and effects how they perceive themselves (Love, 2008). In addition, Hispanic American adolescent girls also lack a sense of belonging in the school setting, which negatively effects their self-esteem (Brenner, 2011). Asian American adolescent girls feel a large amount of pressure to be the model minority resulting in victimization by peers, which creates isolation and a feeling of insecurity about themselves (Zhou et al., 2009).

Moving outside of the school setting, many of these adolescent girls struggle with outside stressors, such as low economic status, homelessness, lack of parental support, or overly aggressive parents who set unrealistic goals for their children. Hispanic American and Asian American adolescent girls are trying to not only please their parents and hold onto their culture, but they also have to integrate the American culture into their lives (Adams et al., 2006; Zhou et al., 2009). This provides extra pressure to satisfy family members while establishing who they want to be in American society.

There is also racial discrimination and gender inequalities adolescent girls face on a daily basis. Aggression and victimization among adolescent girls has increased in recent years. Adolescent girls with low self-esteem report having fewer friends, having poorer peer
relationship quality, and feeling less liked by their peers, which correlates to being more likely to be victimized through physical harm or relational aggression (Powell & Jenson, 2010).

Highlighting these points is important for school personnel, especially school counselors, when putting together an effective intervention to increase self-esteem among adolescent girls. There are some common themes that adolescent girls need to build a strong sense of self, such as feeling belonged in the school setting, being able to critically think about the unrealistic beauty ideals that the media portrays, enhancing positive relationships, and learning coping strategies to exhibit in the school setting and outside of school (Steese et al., 2006; Gillen-O’Neel & Fuligni, 2013). School personnel play a key role in not stereotyping students and providing a safe place. In particular, school counselors are important when providing services to diverse adolescent girls who struggle with self-esteem issues through the use of multicultural counseling.

**Multicultural Counseling**

The importance of perceptions and evaluations of significant others impacts adolescent girls’ self-concept and self-esteem. Family relationships, friendships, and school are the three primary contexts where evaluations occur during adolescence (Greene & Way, 2005). The quality of connections that adolescent girls build determines their overall psychological health, self-image, and relationships (Steese et al., 2006). In the school setting, school counselors play a vital role in fostering positive relationships with students where they can contribute to enhancing self-esteem. They provide the empathetic listening and attentiveness that adolescent girls need to build healthy connections (Steese et al., 2006).

School counselors make a positive impact on students’ self-esteem on a daily basis. They accomplish this through individual counseling, in groups that focus on improving self-esteem, and in personal-social awareness of classroom guidance lessons (Duys & Hobson, 2004). It is
the school counselors’ responsibility to identify how a student’s sense of self has become damaged. Self-esteem can be established and wounded in different ways, which means school counselors must commit to uncovering student needs by developing their skills, competencies, and academic abilities (Duys & Hobson, 2004).

School counselors also play a prominent role in advocating for ethnically diverse students to help them build positive identities where they can achieve success transitioning into adulthood rather than failure (Querimit & Conner, 2003). School counselors can conduct multicultural counseling techniques to better serve all students who come from diverse backgrounds. School counselor activities can enhance multicultural development by including discussions of diversity, equity, and multicultural understanding in both individual and group counseling sessions (Ponterotto, Mendelowitz, & Collabolletta, 2008). A productive approach is designing and implementing programs that are aimed at enhancing cultural identities that promote ethnic pride to foster resiliency in adolescent girls who face stress. Understanding the importance of multicultural differences is critical when reducing the experiences of discrimination-related stress, which may be accomplished through enhancing ethnic identity and promoting positive relationships (Vera et al., 2011).

School counselors have a responsibility to provide multicultural competent services to students from different ethnicities. Counselors have the ability to use their influence within the school to advocate for underrepresented groups (Love, 2008). Multicultural skills are developed through curriculum and role-modeled by the school staff (Ponterotto et al., 2008). School counselors role model these skills by being culturally aware, sensitive, and competent (Love, 2008).
In regards to the abundance of diverse adolescent girls who need services in increasing their self-esteem, European American school counselors need to actively engage in multicultural counseling to become competent in leading individual and group counseling sessions with ethnic minority students (Love, 2008). Love (2008) discusses the importance of European American school counselors maintaining awareness of white privilege as well as their own cultural influence, biases, and sentiments. Through the use of multicultural counseling, school counselors can build positive relationships and successfully empower all diverse adolescent students.

**Improving Self-Esteem**

It is important to develop interventions to prevent and enhance self-esteem in adolescent girls (McClure et al., 2010). School counselors play a rewarding role in helping adolescent girls build their self-esteem. Improving self-esteem can be a complicated process in response to self-esteem continuously changing throughout the adolescence years (Duys & Hobson, 2004). School counselors can provide the right services to adolescent girls to foster the skills needed for them to become successful adults. Fostering resiliency and coping skills can provide the tools needed to help adolescent girls in the school setting and outside of school. In addition, providing an encouraging school atmosphere and a sense of belonging can help adolescent girls feel integrated and important in the school setting. Combining these attributes allows a school counselor to implement empowerment programs or interventions to help ethnically diverse adolescent girls build positive self-esteem.

**Resiliency**

Resiliency is “the capacity to spring back, rebound, successfully adapt in the face of adversity and develop social, academic, and vocational competence despite exposure to severe
Resilience is a process, not a trait. It is how individuals navigate through the resources that help them thrive, and how individuals move on a positive trajectory of success in the midst of hardships (Truebridge & Benard, 2013). Educators working in the schools have been inspired by the possibility that programs promoting resiliency are used as preventative interventions that outweigh the risk and adversity many students and their families face (Doll & Lyon, 1998).

Resilient children and adolescents do not appear to possess mysterious or unique qualities. Instead, they have secured important resources representing basic protective factors in human development (Doll & Lyon, 1998). The three major protective factors that lessen adversity and foster personal growth are caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities to participate and contribute (Truebridge & Benard, 2013). In addition, positive identification with one’s own cultural ethnic group increases resiliency traits as well (Steese et al., 2006).

Resiliency research maintains that children and adolescents who have supportive and caring relationships with at least one adult are likely to succeed despite severe stress or trauma (Doll & Lyon, 1998). In response, school plays an important role in creating opportunities to foster academic, personal, and social competence. For students, such as adolescent girls with low levels of self-esteem, schools may represent one of the most protective environments by encouraging the development of good problem-solving and academic skills, individual talents, and other positive activities and social competence (Doll & Lyon, 1998).

Adult caring and support is essential for school counselors, which promotes the single most important protective factor when fostering resiliency (Galassi & Akos, 2007, p.34). The resiliency theory offers a framework for school counselors to develop resiliency and academic,
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Social, and college competencies within students. Galassi and Akos (2007) discuss the resiliency wheel that addresses six themes that are identified from research to provide a strategy for fostering resiliency. Three are protective factors—prosocial bonding, clear and consistent boundaries, and life skills—all of which lessen risk factors in the environment.

Prosocial bonding consists of increasing connections for students by providing a positive individual, such as a mentor, or activity in the school environment (Galassi & Akos, 2007, p.34). Implementing clear expectations for students combined with consistent consequences provides clear and consistent boundaries for students in the school setting. This is especially important for diverse students in response to African American and Hispanic American students who are more likely than other ethnicities to receive punitive and exclusionary discipline practices (Opportunities for African American Girls, 2015; Kaplan et al., 2007). School counselors can provide life skills by implementing inventions that touch on conflict resolution, assertiveness, and communication skills. In addition, problem-solving, and decision-making skills, and stress management skills can be applied (Galassi & Akos, 2007, p. 34).

The other three factors on the resiliency wheel are providing care and support, high expectations, and opportunities for meaningful participation (Galassi & Akos, 2007, p.34). These factors focus on increasing resiliency through building and strengthening protective factors in the environment. Establishing and communicating high expectations for academic performance encourages students to apply themselves. Providing students with opportunities to participate in meaningful activities include giving students some responsibility for problem solving, decision-making, planning, and goal setting. In addition, providing opportunities to help others, such as peer tutoring or peer mediation (Galassi & Akos, 2007, p. 35). These opportunities allow adolescent girls from all ethnicities to feel important in the school setting and
encourages them to apply themselves, which increases their view of themselves. The resiliency wheel allows school counselors to apply these approaches to better serve adolescent girls who have low self-esteem.

**Coping Skills**

In response to the daily stress adolescent girls face, especially ethnic minority girls, providing positive coping skills is essential to create the building blocks they need to increase their perception of themselves. Vera et al. (2011) define coping as ways an individual attempts to manage internal and external demands. Examples of positive coping strategies are problem-solving, use of social support, emotional regulation, and emotional expression. Unfortunately, adolescent girls with low self-esteem engage in negative coping strategies, which includes blaming others, wishful thinking, social withdrawal, and self-criticism (Kaplan et al., 2007). In addition, adolescent girls with low self-esteem engage in more avoidant coping where they avoid confronting problems, such as actions that block out the stressor or avoid exposure to the stressor. It is important that adolescent girls identified with low self-esteem to engage in active coping where they actively manage a stressor, such as direct problem solving, and seeking to understand why a problem occurred (Vera et al., 2011).

One of the most important ways to build strong characteristics for adolescent girls of color is to develop a healthy racial, ethnic, and gender identity. A strong identity combined with positive coping strategies can serve as protective strengths for adolescent girls of color (Querimit & Benard, 2003). Along with building a strong identity, the use of support coping can increase self-esteem among adolescent girls. Support coping is where an individual emphasizes achievement of specific skills and goals, and encourages initiative. It encourages adolescent girls to approach difficult situations with the goal of overcoming them rather than avoiding the
problem (ACT for Youth, 2003). School counselors can be a key player in support coping by establishing a positive relationship with the adolescent girls they meet with who have low self-esteem. Additionally, in response to low self-esteem correlating with school disengagement, the positive relationship combined with successful coping enables girls who are at risk of feeling alienated by their school and dropping out, to instead remain interested in learning and stay connected to their learning environment (Kaplan et al., 2007).

When designing intervention or prevention programs, school counselors should determine the nature of stressors that adolescent girls experience. Also, counselors should help them assess if the stressors are out of their control, or within their control, and teach coping skills that address situations that are either within their control or out of their control (Vera et al., 2011). A variety of coping skills need to be taught to reach each individual, such as emotional skills (positive self-talk, controlling impulses, reducing stress), cognitive skills (self-awareness, problem solving, decision making), and social skills (nonverbal communication and verbal communication with an emphasis on assertiveness and action taking) (Galassi & Akos, 2007). In addition, a productive approach for school counselors would be to implement programs aimed at enhancing cultural identities, which promotes ethnic pride. These approaches can also help adolescent girls understand and value multicultural differences, reducing the experiences of discrimination-related stress (Vera et al., 2011).

Adlerian Perspective

Encouragement. When designing intervention or prevention programs for ethnically diverse adolescent girls, the use of encouragement can be a powerful application when trying to improve their self-concept. Encouragement is a major component of Adlerian psychotherapy and counseling because encouraging an individual results in promoting and activating a sense of
belonging, value, worthwhileness, and welcome within the human community (Griffith & Powers, 2007, p.20). When an individual is feeling discouraged, they have inferiority feelings about themselves where they feel incomplete, weak, and unworthy of success or respect (Griffith & Powers, 2007, p.20). Ethnic minority adolescent girls often experience these feelings at home and in school. School counselors are able to promote encouragement and train school staff to become competent in expressing encouragement to help girls feel belonged, and build positive adult relationships.

Instead of placing too much emphasis on the student as an individual, encouragement focuses on the social or functional value of the student’s behavior. It recognizes their effort more than their result. Encouragement is still given even when an adolescent fails or has problems reaching their goal (Oberst & Stewart, 2002). Encouragement is task-oriented. Adolescent girls with low self-esteem already criticize themselves, so encouragement avoids criticism, and emphasizes positive aspects. Galassi and Akos (2007) discussed that low-income and minority adolescent girls improved their performance on standardized tests through the power of positive messages that helped reduce the anxiety-inducing effects of stereotype threat that can be seen in schools.

In the academic setting, adults have a tendency to focus on what a student did wrong, or where the student failed. To successfully implement encouragement to help improve adolescent girls’ self-esteem, the adults have to pay less attention to the girls’ shortcomings and focus more on their strengths, which means developing a basis for a girl’s strong point (Oberst & Stewart, 2002). This means teachers and school staff that work with the adolescent girls must get to know the girls and build a positive rapport in order to exhibit their strengths. In addition, it is vital to
believe that an adolescent girl has the capacity to constantly improve. Without this belief, it is nearly impossible to encourage another person (Oberst & Stewart, 2002).

**School belonging.** The third concept of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is belongingness and love. As a basic need, Maslow asserted that individuals need to feel that they are part of a group that is larger and more powerful than themselves; they need to belong (Oberst & Stewart, 2002). Alfred Adler also focuses on the importance of belonging. The desire to feel belonged by others is central to human motivation (Griffith & Powers, 2007, p. 9). Individuals try to find a place among people, and answer the question, “How can I fit in and also be all that I can be?” (Oberst & Stewart, 2002).

Adolescent girls with low self-esteem lack that feeling of belonging because if they had achieved that feeling, they would not exhibit inferiority feelings (Griffith & Powers, 2007, p. 91). With the right tools, school can be a great place to help adolescent girls feel belonged. School belonging is focused on student’s social and emotional connection with their academic school, or the people within their academic school (Gillen-O’Neel & Fuligni, 2013). Many minority adolescent girls lack feelings of belonging in the school setting, which negatively affects how they perceive themselves among their peers.

Gillen-O’Neel and Fuligni, (2013) found that over the course of high school, girls school belonging tended to decline whereas boys remained the same. Two possible explanations are access to extracurricular activities and the importance of student-teacher relationships. Many high schools offer more extracurricular opportunities for boys than girls, and those activities foster connections at school. In addition, girls may find the quality of student-teacher relationships more important than boys, and if there is a declining relationship then girls feel less belonged in the classroom (Gillen-O’Neel & Fuligni, 2013).
In response to adolescent girls feeling less belonged in a school setting, school staff can support school belonging by promoting a learning environment that is responsive to a girl’s unique needs (Kiefer, Alley, & Ellerbrock, 2015). Many theories of academic achievement include the idea that students who have personal connections to their school setting support internalization of academic values, encourage academic-supporting behaviors, and therefore play a role in academic success (Gillen-O’Neel & Fuligni, 2013). This knowledge may benefit school personnel when looking at minority adolescent girl students who need those personal connections to be academically successful. Teachers and school counselors can promote personal connections by engaging in supportive teaching, and providing adolescent girls with appropriate autonomy, support, structure, and involvement (Kiefer et al., 2015).

When an adolescent girl student has a high-quality relationship with at least one non-familial adult in school who understands their developmental needs and enjoys working with them, their sense of feeling cared for will increase, which leads to a heightened positive self-concept (Kiefer et al., 2015). School counselors can build positive rapport with adolescent girls who have low self-esteem and who are ethnically diverse, and develop empowerment or intervention programs to instill the positive esteem they need to become successful women.

**Empowerment Model**

Based on the information provided, it is important for school counselors to develop interventions to prevent and to enhance adolescent girls’ self-esteem (McClure et al., 2010). There is also a cultural need to enhance self-esteem in minority adolescent girls. In response, school counselors may use an empowerment model, which is a social change, advocacy, and therapeutic intervention that focuses on promoting assets and fostering strengths (Querimit & Conner, 2003). The model focuses on internal and external assets that promote positive
experiences and qualities, which in turn aids adolescent girls to attain a healthy development of self. External assets include support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time. Internal assets encompass essential skills and beliefs, such as commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity (Querimit & Conner, 2003).

Along with an empowerment model, school counselors can instill cultural empathy with adolescent girls, which may reduce the peer victimization many minority adolescent girls face in the school setting (Ponterotto et al., 2008). Cultural empathy refers to building skills where an individual emphases the thoughts and feelings of those who are culturally different from oneself. In addition, it promotes open-mindedness, emotional stability, and flexibility (Ponterotto et al., 2008). The combination of cultural empathy and an empowerment model can create curriculum for school counselors that focus on educating girls about negative societal messages, promoting positive attributes, fostering health and well-being, and focusing on internal and external strengths (Querimit & Conner, 2003). School counselors can promote these skills and qualities in individual counseling sessions; however group counseling in the school setting made up of diverse adolescent girls has been shown to increase positive relationships and self-esteem (Girls Only, 2016).

**Group Intervention Programs**

Group counseling within schools is the most effective means to provide counseling, and help students learn developmental skills that are appropriate (Love, 2008). Group counseling has been shown in multiple research analysis of increasing adolescent girl’s self-esteem. Girls Only was designed as a preventative education program, but can be implemented as an intervention for girls who are already in need of help (Girls Only, 2016). It provides adolescent girls a safe place
where they can discover similarities among each other. In addition to celebrating similarities, they also learn to appreciate their racial, cultural, religious, body size, and ability differences. The curriculum focuses on building self-esteem by teaching adolescent girls to deconstruct media images (Girls Only, 2016). Women of color are often shown in negative and stereotypical roles in the media. As a result, doing activities that critically analyze and deconstruct media images will help girls feel empowered by who they are. Another curriculum component is teaching girls to love their bodies. The curriculum consists of activities that teach girls to accept and appreciate their bodies as they are, how to give and receive compliments, and presenting positive role models who embody a variety of sizes, abilities, and appearances (Girls Only, 2016).

Another intervention that was developed is the girls’ circle, which is a support group for adolescent girls that focuses on increasing connections, building empathic skills, and developing resiliency (Steese et al., 2006). The aim is to serve diverse populations to counteract social and interpersonal forces that impede a girl’s growth and development. An example of a girl’s circle activity is an adolescent girl identifies a negative self-statement, such as “I am terrible at school,” and then must re-state the statement in a positive way, such as “I can pass my classes, I can ask for help if I need it.” Results from pre- and post-test scores showed adolescent girls participating in a girl’s circle had a significant increase in body image scores, perceived social support, and levels of self-efficacy (Steese, et al., 2006). In addition, Steese et al. (2006) found positive changes for girls in regards to their sense of belonging, their perception and acceptance of their own bodies, and their belief in their ability to accomplish meaningful tasks and goals in their lives.
Research suggests that preventative and intervention programs promoting social and emotional wellness in adolescent girls should focus on group success, and the ability to develop and maintain supportive friendships (Steese et al., 2006). In addition, it is valuable to include conversations about racial topics throughout the group session (Love, 2008). The more a group is diverse, the better the cultural experience will be where adolescent girls from all ethnicities band together instead of engaging in peer victimization and being against each other. Curriculum may also focus on being a girl in today’s society (gender role identity), establishing independence, when to use resources, and planning for the future (LeCroy, 2004). All of this will provide adolescent girls from all backgrounds the support and skills needed to build and increase a strong self-esteem. Going beyond self-esteem, group counseling allows adolescent girls to resolve interpersonal problems, provide feelings of universality, improve attitudes toward school, and develop aspirations toward a future college degree (Love, 2008).

School counselors have the knowledge and training to build and facilitate a successful girls group. When conducting a diverse girls group, it is important school counselors provide a safe and accepting atmosphere. School counselors must remain nonjudgmental and aware of their own biases and stereotypes (Love, 2008). If a school counselor remains open, honest, and not defensive throughout the group session, the adolescent girls will remain congruent to those actions in-group as well (Love, 2008).

**Conclusion**

The fourth need of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is self-esteem, which is viewed as the outcome of occupying a meaningful role relative to others. It is finding a way to make a unique contribution while taking a place among others (Oberst & Stewart, 2002). Developing a positive self-esteem in adolescence is critical for an individual’s future success. A positive self-esteem
indicates a personal sense of self-respect and self-worth (Nassar-McMillan Cashwell, 1997). When an adolescent feels good about themselves and their place among the community, they are more likely to overcome life obstacles than an adolescent with low self-esteem who engages in negative behaviors to cope with life struggles (Griffith & Powers, 2007).

There is a need to help adolescent girls increase their self-esteem in response to the decline of their self-concept in transitioning from childhood into adolescence that is more predominant than adolescent boys’ self-concept. In addition, as the United States becomes more culturally diverse, there needs to be a focus on increasing self-esteem in adolescent girls from different ethnicities (Ponterotto et al., 2008). Although each adolescent girl is unique, there are consistent findings about specific ethnicities, such as African American girls exhibiting the highest levels of self-esteem, European American and Hispanic American girls exhibiting about the same levels of self-esteem under African American girls, and Asian American girls exhibiting the lowest levels under all ethnicities (Greene & Way, 2005). There are an abundance of reasons for different self-esteem levels, such as the pressure the media puts on girls, cultural pressures, school disengagement, peer victimization, trying to live up to unrealistic goals, and so on (McClure et al., 2010).

The school setting is where many of these adolescent girls spend a majority of their time. Many adolescent girls from different ethnicities struggle to fit into their school among peers and school staff. Schools have the ability to promote academic performance, career success and satisfaction, and socio-emotional health in adolescent girls from every background (Ponterotto et al., 2008). When an adolescent girl feels engaged in the academic setting, they are shown to succeed in classes and be more engaged. This is especially true for Hispanic American and African American adolescent girls who predominantly feel disengaged from the school climate.
and feel unsupported (Opportunities for African American Girls, 2015; Kaplan et al., 2007). In response, school counselors have the rewarding task of providing the support and services adolescent girls need to develop a positive self-esteem.

School counselors are trained to be culturally sensitive, and must continue to engage in multicultural counseling. They also should provide the knowledge and skills to conduct in-service trainings for school staff to become multicultural competent (Duys & Hobson, 2004). Schools that encourage the development of a healthy self-esteem will have the rewarding experience of seeing increased student engagement within the classroom walls, and adolescents engaging in positive behaviors that will lead them to a post-secondary education and a career they will be passionate about (Booth & Gerard, 2011). School counselors can help by providing personal-social awareness classroom guidance lessons and individual counseling services (Duys & Hobson, 2004). One of the most powerful interventions school counselors can provide for adolescent girls is group counseling. Group counseling allows adolescent girls to feel belonged among other girls, and empowers them to instill self-worth and perseverance within their life situations.

There will continuously be a need to research the affects self-esteem has on diverse populations, especially among adolescent girls. What is known is that adolescent girls from different ethnicities can increase their self-esteem with the right tools and services. When an adolescent girl has successfully achieved a healthy self-esteem they will perform better academically, effectively adjust to the school culture, develop adaptive social skills, and experience positive self-worth (Duys & Hobson, 2004). In response to self-esteem changing slowly over time, school counselors have the ability to provide the patience and tools necessary to implement effective interventions resulting in adolescent girls from each ethnicity becoming
successful citizens, engaged in their community and exhibiting positive behaviors because of the healthy self-esteem they have achieved.
References


