

All In

A Program Guide for
Advocating for Yourself and Others in a Diverse World

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Session 8

I Celebrate Myself

SEL FOCUS: SELF-MANAGEMENT

Story: “Dashikis and Dreadlocks” by Aishamanne Williams

Story Summary: When Aishamanne changes schools in 3rd grade, the new girls make fun of her dreadlocks. She begins exploring her historical heritage and learns her dreads are a proud “radical expression of my blackness.”

Learning Objectives

Youth will build their SEL by:

- Explaining strategies for celebrating their identity even in the face of negative messages
- Explaining why African hairstyles, clothing, and jewelry affirmed the writer’s experience of her blackness

Youth will increase their literacy by:

- Making meaning of text through group read-aloud and discussion
- Writing to express personal connections and insights

Materials

- Group Agreements and agenda, posted
- All In* anthologies, one for each group member
- Journals or notebook paper, pencils

Preparation

- Read the story and session plan ahead of time.
- Prepare the session agenda.
- Create an open space in the room for the Concentric Circle activity.
- Write up steps for Concentric Circles activity (**in bold**) on chart paper (optional).
- Write the Dear Teen Writer guidelines (**in bold**) on chart paper.

GETTING STARTED

Welcome everyone and have them sit in a circle. Review the agenda (posted):

Agenda: I Celebrate Myself

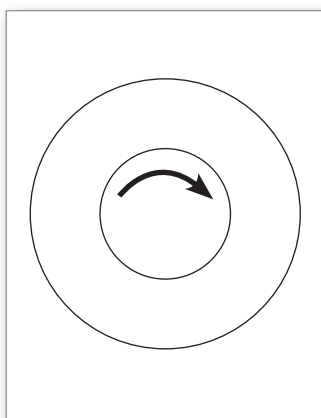
- Review Group Agreements
- Opening Activity: Concentric Circles
- Read and Discuss: "Dashikis and Dreadlocks" by Aishamane Williams
- Explore the Ideas Activity: Dear Teen Writer
- Closing Circle

OPENING ACTIVITY — CONCENTRIC CIRCLES

(8 minutes)

This pre-reading activity will activate background knowledge to boost reading comprehension and set the emotional tone for the story.

1. After reviewing the agenda, tell participants that they are going to do an activity during which they will share their opinions with others.



2. While the group is still seated, read aloud the activity procedure that you wrote on chart paper:
 - You will form two standing circles, one inside the other.
 - Each person will be facing a partner.
 - I will read questions aloud and everyone will have a chance to respond while their partner listens.
3. Divide group members into two equal groups. One way to do this is to have group members count off by twos. (If you don't have two equal groups, you can join one.)
4. Have the 1s stand and move into the open space you cleared and form a circle facing *outward*.
5. Have the 2s stand and form a second circle around the first one, facing *inward*.
6. Then explain to the group that the person they're facing will be their first partner.

7. Review the specific steps of the activity with the group (you may wish to write these steps on chart paper for group members' reference):
 - **You will take turns responding to a question that I ask.**
 - **When one person speaks, the other listens.**
 - **When I say "Switch," the speaker and the listener switch roles.**
 - **When time is up, I will ask one circle to rotate and everyone will have a new partner.**
8. Have partners greet each other by shaking hands and saying "Hello."
9. Ask the group:
 - "What is one thing you really like about yourself?"
10. After both partners have answered the question, ask the inside circle to move two spaces to the right while the outside circle stands still. When new pairs form, have group members greet their new partner.
11. Time permitting, repeat the process using these prompts:
 - **"What is one strength you see in others that you admire?"**
 - **"What is one way you celebrate your identity?"**
 - **"Who is the person you get the most support from?"**
12. Have everyone return to their seats and thank group members for sharing.

READ AND DISCUSS THE STORY (20 minutes)

Practicing active reading strategies while reading aloud and discussing the story as a group will help members build comprehension and support fluency.

1. **Introduce the story:** Explain to the group that you are going to read a story by a young woman who finds pride and validation in traditional African clothes, jewelry, and hairstyles.
2. **Set expectations for reading the story:** Sitting in a circle, group members take turns reading aloud. They should be given the option of passing when it's their turn.



Tell the group to turn to p. 44 in their anthologies.
(See the leader's version in this guide for stories with discussion questions included.)

3. **Read and discuss the story together:** As group leader, you should pause the reading when you arrive at an open-ended question within the text (**in bold**). Ask the group this question and facilitate a short discussion before returning to the text.



Dashikis and Dreadlocks

By Aishamanne Williams

"I've had dreadlocks since I was 5 years old. My mother and father have them, so they were normal for me. I loved when my mother twisted my locks and put them in a ponytail or braided them.

But my grandmother didn't think they were normal. There were times when I'd be at her house, playing by myself but listening to conversations between her and my mother: "If you're not going to perm her hair, at least put some barrettes or bows in it. She needs to look more girly." My mother's responses were firm: "She doesn't need to look 'girly,' she's already a girl. Her hair doesn't need to be straight because she's not white. She doesn't have a problem with it, and it's only when people begin telling her the things like you're saying that she'll start to feel like something is wrong with her."

When my mother was a child, my grandmother combed and braided her hair. When she was a young adult she relaxed it herself. But when she got older, she became a Rastafarian, which is a spiritual movement centered on black empowerment, living a natural lifestyle, and praising Jah (God). That's when she started wearing dreads.

My grandmother was worried that kids would make fun of me. I didn't fear that because I didn't understand it; I had no idea that my hair was something to make fun of.

I usually had it covered under a tam (my school allowed me to wear a hat to observe my religion), but when it wasn't, classmates just asked innocent, curious questions like, "How long have you had locks?" Or, "Do they feel heavy?"

But in 3rd grade, when my parents switched me from private school to public school, that changed.

At my new school, the questions about my hair were judgmental and mean-spirited. The school was predominantly black, just like my previous school, but the students looked at me like I was different. The girls either permed their hair

so it was straight or wore it in weaves. They wanted to know if I ever wanted to cut my dreads, if I felt bad about not being able to pass a comb smoothly through my hair. Even teachers asked me why my parents made me wear locks, as if they had forced me to do something against my will. There was an assumption that I didn't like my hair. They felt sorry for me.

Whenever my friends had conversations about their hair, which was a lot, I didn't join in because I tried to avoid the subject of my own hair as much as I could. But eventually they'd focus on me; they acted as if my hair was something that happened to me, a punishment I was given.

"Would your parents ever let you cut your hair?"

"Yes, but I don't want to."

"Why not? Don't you want your hair to be straight?"

"No, I don't care."

"I would die if I had to have the same hairstyle for the rest of my life."

"I can put my hair into a lot of different styles."

"So why don't you do all those styles?"

"I don't need to. I like it how it is."

"Whatever. I feel bad for you."

For the first time, I became self-conscious. I worried that people insulted me behind my back. I tried to remind myself that my hair was a statement of pride, and my mother reinforced this whenever I spoke to her about it.

"They don't know themselves," she would say, "and you do. They're trying to be something they're not and meet certain beauty standards, but you're not doing that because you know yourself. Don't ever let them make you forget who you are."

She told me that society will try to make me hate my looks and aspire to be like the girls in the media, most of whom are white. Later, I learned that what my mother was talking about is “Eurocentrism,” a focus on European culture or history to the exclusion of a wider view of the world. “Your hair represents strength, spirituality, and your African roots,” she’d say.

**READ-ALoud
QUESTION**

[“How has Eurocentrism impacted Aishamanne? What helps her to keep her pride in her African roots?”]

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When I entered 10th grade last year, a lot changed, both inside and outside. Phrases like “black girl magic” and “black excellence” gained popularity on the internet. New groups and magazines were dedicated to promoting self-love among people of color. Suddenly, it seemed like being black was something to celebrate. Black performers like Amandla Stenberg and Willow Smith were outspoken about learning to love themselves and embracing their culture for its beauty. Learning about what it means to be black and discussing it with other people helped me feel less different.

On platforms like Tumblr and Instagram, I learned the term “cultural assimilation.” The idea that people of color have internalized Eurocentric beauty standards and have thus turned to self-hate began to make sense.

Even from a young age, these standards are embedded into our psyches as children of color; we subconsciously believe that anything related to whiteness is beautiful, and the farther you are from that standard, the less appealing you are. Now I understand why the girls in my school had such a hard time seeing my hair as “beautiful”: my hair is a radical expression of my blackness, and other people simply couldn’t handle it.

The summer before 10th grade, I’d discovered street festivals and fairs where African jewelry, clothing, and other items are sold. Whenever I went to one, I saw beautiful black people. They all looked different but had one thing in common: They were unapologetically black.

Their freedom to express themselves was like an energy that radiated from them; you could see it in their eyes and feel it when they walked. They may have felt it in me too because at every fair I went to, at least 10 people told me

how beautiful my hair was. I didn't look any different at these fairs than I did at school, but the audience was different: I was surrounded by people who were trying to reconnect to their roots and embrace their blackness, so they saw the beauty in me. My friends at school were blinded by Eurocentrism. It wasn't their fault.

Fortunately, my mother helped me to understand that. She'd taught me about the social, political and economic implications of my race, and I knew that most of my friends weren't raised this way. Her words took on deeper meaning as I got older.

I started to express my newfound self-love at school. I wore African head-ties, clothing, and jewelry. My friends complimented me a lot and it helped me make new friends with people in my school who saw that I was celebrating my culture and admired me for it.

**READ-ALoud
QUESTION**

["How did Aishamanne reconnect with feeling good about her clothes, hair, and culture despite Eurocentrism? What did she do? Who helped her?"]

Every May my school has a day called Spring Fling where every grade is assigned a color and we come to school dressed in our respective colors. My grade had green, so I wore a purple-and-green dashiki (a loose, brightly-colored shirt from West Africa), and an African beaded necklace with colorful earrings to match. I styled my hair up into buns. As soon as I got to school, the attention was all positive: "I love this look," "Where did you get that dashiki?" "Your hair is so gorgeous." The comments that really stuck with me were more specific, like, "I love how proud you are of your culture. It's so admirable." Or, "You're so pro-black. That's really cool."

The comments made me feel like loving myself was also about being an example to show others what freedom looks like. Two other girls in my grade started wearing dashikis. We are the minority, but we are being ourselves, causing ripples in the vast ocean of cultural assimilation and self-hatred.

Of course, you can be proud of being black without wearing African clothing or dreadlocks. But by wearing these things, I feel I'm fighting the racist

conditioning we've been subject to for generations. Seeing girls like me who celebrate their roots helps other girls feel more confident in expressing themselves however they want to, and that is important to me.

["Aishamanne takes pride in 'being an example to show others what freedom looks like.' Turn and talk with a partner about how you can be such an example in your own life."]

READ-ALoud
QUESTION

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Aishamanne enrolled at the New School in New York City after graduating from high school. Her high school prom dress, which she designed herself, was decorated with images of famous African-American women.

It was featured in Teen Vogue.

EXPLORE THE IDEAS ACTIVITY — DEAR TEEN WRITER (12 minutes)

During this post-reading activity, group members will make connections, build understanding, and rehearse positive behaviors.

1. Introduce the next activity by saying to the group:
 - “Now that we’ve read the story, we’re going to write a letter telling Aishamanne something we admire about her experience.”

Remind the group that the goal is to communicate their ideas and responses to the teen writer’s story. They shouldn’t worry about spelling or grammar.

2. Explain to group members that they should refer to the story when writing.
3. Read the Dear Teen Writer guidelines aloud from the chart paper you prepared:
 - **Greeting: “Dear Aishamanne, I just read your story, ‘Dashikis and Dreadlocks’....”**
 - **Include what you liked about the story. Be specific.**
 - **Make a connection with the story.**
 - **Share one thing you celebrate about yourself and why.**
 - **Closing: “Sincerely, (Your Name)”**
4. Pass out journals or notebook paper and pencils.
5. Give group members seven minutes to write their letters. Move around the room offering encouragement and support.
6. When seven minutes are up, tell group members to finish their last thought and put their pencils down.
7. Explain to the group that they are now going to do a Group Share.
8. Ask for a few volunteers to share parts of their letters with the whole group.
9. Thank group members for sharing.
10. Then, invite group members to reflect on what stood out to them in the activity and share with the group.

CLOSING CIRCLE (5 minutes)

In Closing Circle, group members make personal connections to the story and share their take-aways with each other.

Guide group members in a go-round share of responses to these prompts:

1. "What stood out for you in Aishamanne's story, 'Dashikis and Dreadlocks,' and our activities today?"
2. Finish this sentence: "To celebrate my identity, I will..."

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LEADER REFLECTION

After leading this session, reflect on the prompts below through writing, discussion with a colleague, or just by sitting and thinking:

- There have been a handful of sessions so far that help group members celebrate their identities. How are group members doing with celebrating themselves? How are they doing with allowing other people to celebrate themselves? Have you seen any growth in this area?
- One of the biggest ways Eurocentrism is communicated to young people is through the curriculum at school and in after-school programs. How can you counteract Eurocentrism in your work with young people? What voices need to be added and what themes can be studied?