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The Use of Service Learning to Promote Understanding of Gang-Related Issues Faced by Adolescents

by Patrice Paul, Kathy Sexton-Radek, Janina Adickas, and Bridget Fousek

Service learning provides an opportunity for college students to experience classroom curriculum in a real-life setting. In addition, service learning provides the community with services otherwise not available. Such a program has been designed to assist with reduction of violence in the schools while simultaneously allowing college students to experience, hands-on, the people and issues they are studying. In this program, students in an adolescent development course were trained in a six-week group intervention aimed at building skills for positive communication, resolving differences, and preventing violence. A specific protocol involving skill-building exercises, role-plays, discussion, and at-home assignments was followed. Specific issues of program design and implementation, its benefits, outcome information, student commentary, and future directions for this project are discussed.

BOTH COLLEGE STUDENTS and the community (e.g., businesses, schools) benefit from close ties that are initiated and maintained between them. College students can bring to the community services otherwise not available, while the community provides a real-life classroom experience not available in the immediate academic setting. To that end, service learning programs are becoming an increasingly important component to college course curriculum. Service learning is the integration of service with learning (Howard, 1998). Such programs have "the potential to enhance knowledge, facilitate self-understanding, and promote active engagement with community concerns" (Brandenberger, 1998, p. 68).

One area of concern to many communities is a reduction in violence in the schools. Nationwide, it is estimated that there are 400,000 gang members active in over 700 U.S. cities (Office of International Criminal Justice, 1998). In the metropolitan Chicagoland area, there are about 125 street gangs currently in operation. The Chicago Police Department's Gang Investigation Section estimates that "there are between 30,000 and 50,000 hard core gang members in the city." These numbers are nearly doubled if marginal gang members and gang member

"wannabes" are included. These strikingly high numbers reflect a critical need for intervention. Vulnerability to gang recruitment relates to school and is associated with age factors, low self-esteem, ineffective problem solving, need for affiliation, desire for structure, and sensitivity to peer pressure (Cunningham, 1998).

For college students in certain psychology courses, issues of gang-related violence are important to understand. Many students enrolled in courses that cover adolescent development are taking these courses due to an interest in pursuing a career involving adolescents (e.g., secondary education teacher, pediatric nurse, psychology service technician, social worker, program coordinator). Gang-related violence is one of the issues faced by many developing adolescents that these professionals would undoubtedly encounter. Discussing such issues in the classroom lays the foundation for a general understanding; however, it does not provide the application component that is afforded through service learning. The abstract nature of human behavior theory is rapidly translated to student learning with "real world" service activities. Due to the complexities of this topic, it is best served, again, with hands-on exposure. In addition, it has long been recognized that schools

have more influence on the development of children than any social institution other than the family (Caplan, 1961; Chaskin & Rauner, 1995; Lawrence, 1971). To that end, a service learning program where students are involved in an intervention program with this population can facilitate learning and promote a richer understanding of this population. What follows is a description of such a program implemented with a high-risk population in the city of Chicago.

Program Description

Faculty members of a local suburban college developed a service learning opportunity through a special educational program to serve the aforementioned need through an intervention-based approach. The program was designed to (1) promote an understanding of adolescent development and subsequent psychosocial issues related to violence and (2) help ninth-grade students who have been identified as at-risk for gang involvement.

College students (middle- to upper-class Caucasian suburbanites) were enrolled in a variety of psychology courses (e.g., Child and Adolescent Development, Adolescent Development and Learning) that offered this service learning component as an optional course assignment.

The course curriculum is designed to disseminate information regarding issues faced by adolescents and promote discussion of such issues. Teen psychopathology, teen violence, and parent relationships are examples of the issues presented in class. Diversity issues are also discussed. The service learning program provides an opportunity for students to develop a perspective of individual differences (diversity) within the framework of a hands-on, structured program designed to address several salient problems facing today's youth. The program (described later) reflects many issues discussed during lectures regarding the developing adolescent.

The ninth-grade students were enrolled in a non-traditional academy that offers a special program to enhance education. Prospective students to the academy must apply for entry into the program. Applications are accepted based on (1) at-risk status for gang/domestic violence, substance abuse, and early sexual activity, and (2) potential to benefit from the special programs. This academy services a primarily Hispanic and African-American population.

The program was designed to meet the Illinois State Board of Education Goal #24, Part A. This goal focuses on building skills for positive communication, resolving differences, and preventing violence. To meet this goal, a six-session group intervention/educational program was created. College students came to the academy to run the one-hour sessions once per week during regular school hours. Academy students were divided into groups of 4-5 each. One college student served as a leader for each group. Academy students were given workbooks that focused on skills for planning, dealing with stress, and handling aggression. College students used a teacher's version of this workbook to facilitate the group process. The workbooks were based upon two curriculums: *The prepare curriculum: Teaching prosocial competencies* (Goldstein, 1988) and *The Walker social skills curriculum: The ACCESS program — adolescent curriculum for communication and effective social skills* (Walker, Todis, Holmes, & Horton, 1988). Each section of the booklet contained skill-instruction sets, discussion questions, and role-play exercises. Along with the group work, the academy students completed

homework assignments that encouraged them to apply the lessons to situations outside of school.

Table 1 outlines the topics, specific session content, and homework assignments for each session. Each session comprised four basic components. First, group members worked through discussion activities. These activities were skill-based and focused on learning ways to identify feelings, thoughts, and problem-solving techniques. Second, students participated in role-play activities with their fellow group members. Some role-plays displayed incorrect ways to handle oneself in a potentially conflict situation, and academy students had to learn the appropriate steps for handling these situations correctly. They were asked to identify where the situation went wrong and how it could have been resolved more effectively. Other role-plays demonstrated healthy alternatives to conflict resolution. Third, group members participated in an open discussion of problem scenarios faced in their lives. Group members brainstormed effective solutions to these problems based upon what was learned in the earlier two components. Lastly, the homework assignment for that week was discussed. These assignments required the academy students to document situations during the week where they practiced using the skills learned in that lesson. At the beginning of the next session, the previous session's homework assignment was reviewed. College students served to facilitate the group activities and group participation throughout the program.

Program Goals and Benefits

Academy Students

For the academy students, each state goal was met through the program's design. Each session was designed to provide concrete steps making skill acquisition easier as compared to an abstract discussion of pro-social concepts. Academy students appreciated receiving something they could concretely learn how to apply to their own lives. The homework assignments provided them with an opportunity to practice these skills.

The foundation for building skills for positive communication was met most closely with the skill-building lessons and

problem-solving role-plays. The skill-building lessons specifically stated steps for communicating effectively in various situations (e.g., saying "no" to peer pressure, apologizing for one's actions). The role-plays outlined miscommunications and inappropriate interactions between various individuals in many different types of situations. Academy students had to identify in each scenario what went wrong and how to fix the interaction so it reflected a pro-social interaction. In addition, academy students had to work together to solve these problems. This collaborative/team learning approach also served to facilitate positive communication among the group members. College students were instructed to reinforce the demonstration of positive communication skills in an effort to provide additional feedback beyond that offered in the structured program.

Resolving differences in a pro-social manner was also reflected through the role-plays and discussion groups. Many role-plays outlined a scenario where individuals were in conflict over some issue (e.g., ownership of an item, borrowed items that get broken). The role-plays, as mentioned above, provide students with examples laden with miscommunications where they must then identify the errors and provide an effective solution. In addition, the discussion questions allowed them to share personal situations with their group in an effort to stimulate discussion and appropriate resolutions. As the sessions and the comfort level grew, more open and frank discussions resulted.

We anticipated that the combination of all the content areas of the six-session program would result in prevention or reduction of violence involving teens. The protocols this program is based upon have shown effectiveness in communication and social skills building. Note in Table 1 that the program is organized to begin at the very basic level of understanding feelings in oneself and then progresses to more complex emotional situations that could be negatively affected if one lacks or has poor pro-social skills. Each session builds upon the previous one so that all skills are practiced continually as one progresses through the sessions. The combination of all these skills should, in theory, provide the foundation for better social competencies, more effective com-

Table 1. Session outline

Skill Building Exercise(s)	Role-Play Exercise	Discussion Question	Homework Assignment
Session 1: Skills for dealing with feelings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • knowing your feelings • expressing your feelings • understanding the feelings of others • apologizing 	<i>Accepting the consequences of your actions</i> Steps for success <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) admit mistake 2) apologize 3) find out consequences and accept them 4) think about how to avoid repeating mistake 5) get beyond mistake 	Your parents catch you violating curfew	Accepting the consequences of your actions
Session 2: Skill alternatives to dealing with aggression <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • article review: "Perfect driving record marred" • negotiating 	<i>Negotiating with others</i> Steps for success <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) state your position calmly 2) let others state their position 3) evaluate fairly the other person's position 4) compromise 	Negotiating with parents for later curfew	Negotiating with others
Session 3: Skill alternatives to dealing with aggression <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • using self-control and standing up for your rights 	<i>Expressing anger</i> Steps for success <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) stay in control of your behavior 2) be firm but fair in stating your position 3) be respectful and polite 4) try not to injure people or hurt their feelings 	You control yelling at your teacher when your teacher harshly criticizes you in front of others	Expressing anger
Session 4: Skills for dealing with stress <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • responding to teasing • avoiding trouble with others • keeping out of fights 	<i>Coping with aggression</i> Steps for success <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) decide whether someone might get out of control 2) think about the consequences 3) leave the situation or drop the discussion 4) get help when needed 	You tell classmate you want to talk out your differences instead of being pressured to fight	Coping with aggression
Session 5: Skills for dealing with stress <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • standing up for a friend • responding to persuasion • dealing with an accusation • getting ready for a difficult conversation • dealing with group pressure 	<i>Handling pressure from peers</i> Steps for success <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) ask yourself, "Is this something I should do or really want to do?" 2) if it is something you shouldn't or don't want to do, choose a way to say "no" <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • give a reason • suggest something else to do • change the subject • stall • give permission to someone else 3) if you are still feeling pressured, say "no" and leave the situation 	You deal with friend's persuasive argument to try drugs	Handling peer pressure
Session 6: Planning skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • deciding what caused a problem • gathering information • arranging problems by importance • making a decision • article review: "Learning center curbs truancy" 	Independent wrap-up	General discussion	No homework

munication skills, and effective conflict resolution skills, and as a consequence, a reduction in violent tendencies.

An additional benefit of the program was that the groups were facilitated by college students, who appeared to provide a less-threatening format for academy students to share their thoughts and feelings. Using college students rather than older adults to run the groups provided a unique format. As the college students are somewhat closer in age to the academy students, some academy students felt freer to open up and discuss these sensitive topics. Through their dialogues a noticeable respect developed between the academy and college students. As a result, the last session was emotionally laden for some academy students. Several expressed feelings of sadness that the program was ending as they felt the college students were genuinely interested in what they had to say and how they felt about their situations in life.

Throughout the program, academy students expressed to the college students an interest in their own advancement through a college education. Those academy students who faithfully completed their homework assignments were later invited to an open house at the college. This was the first exposure for many of these students to a college environment. During their visit, the academy students toured the campus, various classrooms, and student housing; participated in a luncheon that was hosted by college students in the college cafeteria; and participated in some fun, hands-on demonstrations with psychology professors. During the luncheon, academy students openly discussed their career goals which included such occupational fields as Landscape Architecture, Civil Engineering, Computer Engineering, Physical Therapy, Social Work, and Vocal Arts.

College Students

As we noted, the state goal also corresponded with the information imparted to the college students during lecture and discussion. Many college students stated that this experience made the lecture material come to life, and, therefore, made it easier to understand. For example, lecture material covers such areas as psychopathology (e.g., conduct disorder, depression, oppositional defiant disorder), par-

ent-child relationships, and racial/cultural differences. Through this program, the college students (a) interacted with adolescents who presented some symptoms representative of these disorders, (b) used role-plays and discussion questions to better understand this group's experience in their relationships with their parents, and (c) worked with those they perceived as different from themselves. Since the overwhelming majority of college students are middle- to upper-class Caucasian suburbanites, for many, this was their first opportunity to work with a population other than the one in which they belong. Post-session discussion between the college students and faculty supervisors focused on tying the experience to lecture/course material.

In addition, the college students gained a better understanding of clinical skills, such as empathy and reflective listening. Although these skills are not part of the curriculum for these courses, the college students were taught how to use them in our training sessions. As a result, college students noted feeling a bond developing between themselves and some of their group members. For some college students the last session was marked with a sense of sadness as they felt connected to the academy students. For others, this experience solidified career goals to continue working with this population within a clinical framework.

Future Directions

Future programs will include pre- and post-assessment procedures to measure quantitatively the efficacy of this program. For example, an exam reflecting the concepts covered in this program will be administered pre- and post-intervention to assess how much information was retained by the academy students. Homework assignments will be more closely scrutinized. Due to the differences in racial and socioeconomic make-up between the college and academy students, additional outcome research will focus on the interplay with these differences as related to program effectiveness. In addition, we plan to collect more in-depth demographic data, as well as IQ and achievement information, in an effort to address any potential problems with the reading and conceptual levels of our program. Additional instruments looking at student styles and

vocational interests, depression/anxiety, and teacher perceptions are also under consideration. Finally, data will be collected outlining this groups' individual reasons for potential gang involvement (e.g., low self-esteem, ineffective problem solving, peer pressure sensitivity) as outlined by Cunningham (1998).

Also, many of the role-plays and discussion questions provided by our program are not completely representative of the issues faced by this particular group of adolescents. For example, one role-play on conflict resolution focused on an argument about going to a waterslide. The adolescents in our program found this to be unrepresentative of the types of conflicts in their lives and made suggestions (e.g., conflicts resulting from peer pressure; conflicts with parents regarding peer groups) which we will be incorporating in our re-write of the manual. Providing more applicable situations may help to draw the academy students more quickly into discussion of these various problems. There was a noticeable difference between the quickness, quantity, and quality of their participation depending upon their identification with a particular role-play situation or discussion question.

In addition, this project is expanding to include an after-school site founded through United Way. This program will be among several others available to children and adolescents in an effort to keep them off the streets during the after school hours while simultaneously providing them with experiences necessary for them to develop pro-social skills which will hopefully help decrease teen violence in their neighborhoods. The expansion of this program to other facilities will enable more powerful outcome studies as a result of the larger sample size. We also anticipate receiving additional feedback regarding the role-play and discussion questions as they pertain to a suburban population as compared to academy students in a large city environment.

This program provided a new and exciting learning experience for two very different populations. The college students received an opportunity to experience course material in "the real world." This additional component of actual application related to the learned material helps drive these issues home in a fashion not soon forgotten. Most of the college students in

our program were from backgrounds where exposure to other cultures was somewhat limited. This experience opened their eyes to additional issues related to minority teens. The academy students received an opportunity to discuss sensitive issues in their lives with others closer to their age and in a format free from judgment and prejudice. As testament to the impact of our project, we often return to the academy. As the academy has a somewhat small student population, we often encounter those who participated in our project. We are almost always approached by these students with warm, friendly greetings and questions about when we will return to do this again with them. It is rewarding to know that this project is something they look forward to participating again in the future.

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