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Perceived Effects of a Correctional Health Education Service-Learning Program

Amtmann, John

Introduction

Background

The Montana State Prison (MSP) Wellness Program was designed to provide educational and service activities to male inmates for the purpose of improving health status and increasing knowledge on significant health issues relevant to contemporary society. The Applied Health students at Montana Tech of the University of Montana aided in the delivery of the MSP Wellness Program. These services and activities were designed to meet the goals of Healthy People 2010, a national prevention agenda written in a collaborative fashion by governmental agencies and highly regarded health educators.

The Continuing Health Education (CHE) program was one component of the MSP Wellness Program offered to inmates in the low security section of the prison. Class size ranged from 10 to about 25 inmates, and attendance was voluntary. The main objective of CHE was to give inmates an opportunity to learn about pertinent health topics through educational sessions held on a weekly basis throughout the school year. A variety of topics were covered in CHE, including but not limited to:

- * Smoking Cessation
- * Stress Management
- * Yoga
- * Nutrition
- * Cardiovascular Disease
- * Strength Training
- * Training for Cardiovascular Health
- * Sexually Transmitted Diseases
- * Anger Management
- * Hepatitis
- * Meditation

Each session lasted up to two hours, and the topics were chosen based on student interest, inmate interest, and collaboration with professionals within the system, most notably infirmary staff.

Service-Learning

The CHE program was a service-learning program. Service-learning is defined by Ehrlich as a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development (1996). Often, these service-learning opportunities take place when two or more institutions establish a partnership-creating a mutually beneficial relationship.

This service-learning program was a collaborative effort with three main objectives. First, the program attempted to create opportunities for inmates to improve their overall health and fitness levels. second, the program attempted to create an educational component to help teach the inmates not only the benefits of healthy lifestyle choices, but of the importance of self-responsibility in health promotion.

The third main objective was to create a challenging and practical learning environment for the Safety and Health students at Montana Tech. Montana Tech Applied Health Science students were involved in the delivery of the various components offered by the Wellness Program.

Pulliam and Van Patten believed that real learning means that the student must be prepared to change and to risk having his or her prejudices, priorities, habits, and values altered (1995). Service-learning programs provide these opportunities by getting the student out of the classroom and into the real world.

Significance and Purpose of the Study

In order to decide whether or not to continue funding projects such as specialized health education programs for inmates, the outcomes of the program need to be analyzed. This study focused on the inmate students and the college students. The purpose of this study was to determine the subjective college student and inmate perceptions of the effectiveness of the CHE component of the wellness program, and whether or not this program provided a worthwhile educational experience for the college students.

Methods

This mixed methodology investigation was considered a case study making use of open ended interviews and simple surveys. Bogdan and Biklen define a case study as a detailed study of one setting (1992). This case study focused on 2 specific groups of people-the inmate students who attended the CHE sessions and college students who prepared and delivered sessions for the CHE Program.

Subjects

A total number of 9 college students, and 11 inmate students were interviewed. Each of the college students were, at the time of their involvement with this program, students at Montana Tech of The University of Montana. All of these students were enrolled in the Applied Health option of the Safety/Health and Industrial Hygiene Program. Academic credit was given for their participation in the CHE Program. The inmates interviewed were chosen from a group of inmate students who attended the CHE sessions.

Protocols

The interview protocols used for the college student and college inmate participants contained 4 open-ended questions, and the college student participants also had four Leikert Scale type questions. The questions for the college students were related to Conrad & Hedin's notion that students involved in service-learning learn more than their counterparts in more traditional educational settings (1991), and included:

1. What were your perceptions of how your experience would be prior to delivering your educational presentations to the inmates? Please describe:

2. What were your overall feelings after leaving the prison?
3. Did you feel that the inmates appreciated your efforts?
4. Do you feel that this specific program was beneficial for you? How/Why?

(AS = agree strongly, A = agree, D = disagree, DA = disagree strongly) I was intimidated at the thought of coming to the prison for this program.

AS A D DA

The inmates appeared to be interested in their health and my presentation.

AS A D DA

After the experience, I came to believe that this experience was, overall, a positive one.

AS A D DA

Programs like these help me to learn and develop more than I normally would in a traditional classroom setting.

AS A D DA

The inmate student questions were open ended, and the inmates were encouraged to expand on their thoughts. This open-ended approach enabled the respondents to answer in their own terminology and to discuss their experiences with regards to stress, health status, and psychological health more fully (Aday, 1994). Bogdan & Biklen (1992) believed that the researcher who has been involved with the subjects for a prolonged period of time, which was the case in this situation, may be able to extract more rich data if the researcher has developed a good relationship with the subject. They believed that good interviews are those in which the subjects are at ease and talk freely about their points of view. Rich data reveals the subjects' perspectives and is filled with details and examples in the subjects' own language (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The researcher recruited interviewees by asking who would be interested in being interviewed.

The inmate student interview questions included:

1. Why do you come to CHE?
2. Describe the health education in place. Do the CHE sessions add to the existing health education?
3. What are your thoughts about the students who come in to deliver the CHE sessions?
4. Are these health education sessions beneficial for you?

Limitations

As stated above, the researcher who has been involved with the subjects for a prolonged period of time combined with the open-ended approach enabled the respondents to answer in their own terminology and to discuss their experiences more fully (Aday, 1994; Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The author had been directly involved in this program for seven years, since its inception, and attended all of the CHE sessions. The researcher was reliant upon subjects to provide truthful responses during the interviews. However, inmates who were seeking later recommendations for parole purposes, and inmates fearful of program elimination may have said whatever they thought should be said for their own benefits. A similar, "tell the teacher what he wants to hear," attitude may have existed with the students. A non-random method of

selecting the interviewees was used, and Creswell (1994) warned researchers that replication and generalizability may not always be appropriate because of the uniqueness of the demographics of the study. This does not mean that the findings from this study cannot be generalized, however (Eisner, 1991 ; McCaw, 1999).

Results

College Student Perceptions and the CHE Program

Nine college students were interviewed, and three themes emerged from these interviews: fear and apprehension, gratitude and appreciation, and beneficial. These three themes will be discussed separately. Only the first names of the college students and inmates will be revealed, and their exact words will be used to ensure accuracy.

Fear and Apprehension

All of the college students expressed surprise that the inmates appreciated and showed gratitude for their efforts. For obvious reasons, the college students felt various levels of fear, nervousness, apprehension, and anxiety prior to their presentations, but in retrospect all of the students believed they had positive experiences:

Sara (before): At first I was really nervous and very glad that I was working with a partner and that John [the author] would be with us for the entire presentation. I wasn't really sure what to expect and what the inmates would act like.

Sara (after): After the first time, it was a huge relief because it wasn't bad at all. It was just like giving a presentation to a group of people in a classroom. I felt comfortable going back.

Bert (before): I was a little apprehensive at first. I did not know how [the inmates] would react. I didn't know if they cared or if they were smart enough to understand.

Bert (after): My perceptions [preconceptions] were eliminated. I felt that it was possible for me to make a difference in the lives of the prisoners.

Corey (before): I was a bit nervous, but was reassured that everything would be fine before-hand.

Corey (after): I was very happy with the way the presentation went. The prisoners were very interested in my topic and I think what I told them might be beneficial to them in the future.

Sarah (before): The very first time (almost three years ago) I was a bit nervous about talking in front of a bunch of inmates but I had another girl presenting with me which helped keep me calm.

Sarah (after): After leaving the prison I had a pretty good rush going on. Talk about having an intimidating audience to talk in front of - I felt really good that I was able to give a presentation and not be affected by who I was presenting to.

Melissa (before): At first the thought of having to go to the prison was a little scary to me and I wasn't sure that I was going to be able to do it. After talking to some of the others that have had the chance to go out to the prison before helped to calm me. It also helped me to get prepared and to know what to expect.

Melissa (after): After having the chance to go to the prison and to talk, I have a whole different perspective about the whole program. I think it is a worthwhile program and I feel that it is a program that should be continued.

The college students expressed some level of fear or apprehension prior to their experience. However, in every college student's interview, these fears were allayed.

Appreciation and Gratitude

All of the college students expressed surprise that the inmates appreciated and showed gratitude for their efforts. For some of the college students, the inmates showed their appreciation by the thoughtful questions asked during and after the presentations. Kathie said, "For the most part, I feel that their attendance was based mostly on the desire to make positive changes in their lives. And I think this way, again, because of the good questions that they asked." Sarah agreed, "Yes, after the last presentation I did - the inmates asked very pertinent questions and seemed very interested in what I was talking about. I always ask them what they would like me to do my next presentation on - and I always get really good suggestions." "They all ask intelligent questions," Bert said. He agreed with Sarah and Kathie, "Almost all of them shake your hand when they leave and say "thank you."

Some of the students didn't give a reason why they thought the inmates appreciated their efforts. For example, Corey stated, "Yes, I could tell by their reactions and a majority of them thanked me after the presentation." And Melissa agreed, "I really feel that the inmates do appreciate not only my efforts but all the efforts of everyone else that has had the opportunity to go and talk to the inmates. It gives them an opportunity to learn from other people outside of the prison environment."

Many of the college students were impressed with simple expressions of gratitude. The simple "thank you" from so many inmates was confirmation of the worth of their efforts. Two of the college students expressed gratitude for their prison experiences. "It was a very good learning experience and I am glad that I had the opportunity to have this experience," said Melissa, and Kathy agreed, "I am grateful for this experience, as well."

Beneficial

All of the college students stated that their experiences were beneficial in some manner. The subcategories that emerged under the general theme of beneficial included public speaking and academic growth. All of the students stated that their experience with the CHE program helped to develop their public speaking skills. Many stated that their confidence in public speaking had been enhanced because of the experience. The comments related to this theme, include:

I feel this program benefited me greatly because I am not terribly afraid to get up and speak in front of people now.

It also helped prepare me in the public speaking sense and gave me some practice with speaking in front of others.

Any time I can speak in front of a demographically different group I am forced to think about how my topic would best be presented. Each audience is different, and that is never more true than at MSP [Montana State Prison]. It makes me more aware of how I must speak and how I must present myself...it forces me to be a more professional speaker.

If I can speak to a classroom full of male inmates I can speak to just about anybody now. It had definitely helped to build my confidence in public speaking.

Exposure to different populations, types of people, is good for everyone. Exposure to the prison population is an eye opener on many levels, especially to a naïve Montana native.

Sharing the knowledge that I have learned with the inmates enables me to develop my communication skill by presenting my topics with the highest confidence.

Some of the college students also revealed that the experience was beneficial because it required research of the different topics they were presenting, as well as the mode in which it was being presented (PowerPoint). Some experts say that an individual learns a topic best when they have to teach it. That appears to be the case in this situation. For example, Sara said, "It also helped me become efficient in researching and preparing presentations. I have become very familiar with PowerPoint, which is essential these days."

Bert stated, "My growth as a student was 'quadrupled' to say the least. Not only am I able to research interesting health topics but I must also know everything about the topic that I am going to present." Yet another college student, Sarah, agreed, "It...helped to build my confidence...in doing research and preparing presentations. I feel that I have developed a fairly effective manner of research/delivering information now."

College Student Survey Results

The students were asked to complete a simple questionnaire immediately following their experience. Table 1, Survey Responses, shows the results. All nine of the college students agreed strongly that the experience was a positive one, and that these types of programs helped the student to learn more than they did in a traditional classroom situation.

Inmate Perceptions of the CHE Program

The themes that emerged from the analysis of the inmate interviews included the CHE Program as an important part of health promotion within the correctional education system and the college students as non-correctional in nature. Most of the inmates agreed that the CHE sessions were effective in educating the inmates on pertinent health topics. The only formal health education they were receiving was through reading a high school health text.

Health Promotion

Phil stated that the CHE sessions were, "beneficial in conjunction with the exercise classes [offered through the wellness program]-cuz I can ask questions and get answers from someone-not just a book. Also, I've got a sister and brother who've had heart attacks and a brother who had a stroke. Issues of prevention are important, and I try to get as much information as possible, and the classes can be good sources to obtain information." Tom agreed, "It's a lot easier learning from someone in person than sitting and reading a book, it's beneficial to have these classes."

"There are no health classes here," Dave said, "I don't have any health classes. These classes may help when we get out. Even if we can't apply everything we learn [while incarcerated]-we can apply it when we do get out, or apply the knowledge the best we can while we're in." "Are they a good supplement?" Ron repeated, "Yes, I come because there's a lot I don't know, that I can learn from the people coming in. They're very informative. Someone who's into health can benefit from these classes."

"The inmates who choose to come are interested," Dan said, "They're coming because they care about their health. Some come because it's a diversion from day to day activities, but once they come they find it interesting." Holland put it very simply, "I like the classes because it let's me know about stuff I never knew before. My dad is having cirrhosis, and some of the things I learn here may help him."

Non-Correctional

The inmates suggested that one reason for the success of the program, and the popularity of the program is because of the impression they had of the college students being non-correctional in nature. Scott was the first to introduce this concept, "It's a huge plus to interact/communicate with you people on a personal level without threats of disciplinary action. There's so many little games with people on the inside that aren't there with people from outside."

The college students had a choice to participate in the CHE Program, and that was important to the inmates.

"[In prison,] there's so much impersonal activity, you always feel nobody gives a damn about you. But with these classes you feel that people are actually taking time out of their lives for us-like we are actual people...like we're not forgotten" Tom said. Phil, who's been incarcerated for over 20 years, expanded on this concept:

Because you're not considered 'the enemy', and aren't trying to shove it down our throats, there's automatically a good

rapport...we're more willing to learn [as a result]. The students are down to earth, not pre-judging us. We see you in a better light because of that. We know that you guys don't have to be doing this, and we got respect for that. We see it as a partnership-a way to help with your classes and research. All we've done is crimes and pretty shitty stuff, so if we can do something positive it's good for us. All we hear is trash talk...this is the only place we can come to talk to real people about real issues that affect our life [sic] in positive ways.

Dan agreed, "You're here because you care, and that's really important to me."

Some of the inmates used the word "inspiration" to describe the affect the college students had on them. Curtis said, "I can look at the students to inspire me with youthful exuberance." While Dave was reminded of his children and grandchildren, "As I look at some of the students - about the age of my granddaughter - and I think, I hope my granddaughter is bettering her life like this'. Some are the age of my kids. I feel proud for the kids, and their parents, for them bettering themselves like this. They're trying to be a benefit to mankind and society. I can learn from them, I'm inspired by them."

Discussion

Other research focusing on service-learning in the correctional environment demonstrated measured and perceived affects from college students and inmates involved in an exercise program offered through this same wellness program (Amtmann, Evans a Powers, 2003). These affects are important to correctional educators and professionals, to the correctional system in general, and to educators at the university level. This research sought to determine if the college students and inmates perceived a benefit as a result of the educational component of the wellness program, and the results show that both groups did perceive a benefit from their involvement in this program.

Health promotion and wellness programs have become more visible in American society. While they have long been heralded as powerful forces to promote overall well-being and vigor to the general population, it is only recently that they have been considered to promote health within our nation's prisons. For example, Smyer, Gragert, & Lamere (1996) suggested interventions with the elderly prisoner could include emphasis on wellness and preventive care.

Implications for Correctional Educators

Outcomes from this research create two main implications for correctional educators. First of all, educational leaders in the correctional system, as well as the population at large, need to be aware of the benefits of service-learning, and they need to be willing to create opportunities like this for both college students and inmates. This means correctional educators should collaborate with college and university health educators to develop beneficial service-learning partnerships.

Correctional educators are not limited to developing partnerships with college/university health programs. Occupational safety programs could be recruited to deliver educational components on industrial safety. Business programs could be recruited to deliver educational components on money management. Computer science, math and communications programs all have the potential for developing beneficial relationships with correctional educators.

Also, partnerships with other local, state, and regional organizations could be sought. The Department of Health and Human Services, child and family services, and the American Red Cross may be able to assist in offering programs that are beneficial for convicts.

secondly, the educational curriculum should include health topics pertinent to prison life. Correctional educators should play an active role in communicating with health care professionals, including infirmary staff, about what should be included in the health education curriculum. Learning from a book has its merits, but from the interviews conducted in this project, it is obvious that the inmates' philosophy of education was similar to one of the most famous educational philosophers, John Dewey. John Dewey was a proponent of experiential education. He believed that education was a

"process of living and not a preparation for future living" (1998, p.3). The inmates in this study suggested that the active involvement of the students was beneficial to them. There only health education outside of this program was limited to self - paced reading of high school health education texts published in the 1980's. Correctional educators have a vast supply of resources at their fingertips. In addition to the organizations previously mentioned, Internet resources can be very helpful in developing curricula if partnerships are not an option. Some useful Internet sites include:

* www.drugs.indiana.edu/health/k-12.html

* www.nyu.edu/education/hepr/resources/

* chid.nih.gov/

* depts.washington.edu/cherweb/visitors/health_ed_resources/

John Dewey believed education should be a forum for the continuous reconstruction of experience (1938). This is why many professionals believe education is the cornerstone of criminal rehabilitation, and health education should be a part of this.

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