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Integrating Service Learning into a Curriculum to Reduce Health Risks at Alternative High Schools

Jill Denner, Karin Coyle, Leah Robin, Stephen Banspach

ABSTRACT: Service learning has been identified as a promising approach to reduce sexual risk behavior, among other outcomes. This study used qualitative data analysis to offer suggestions for optimally integrating service learning into a program to reduce sexual risks among alternative school students. Data were collected from student participants in the All4You! Project using classroom materials, focus groups, and individual interviews. Project educators and project staff also provided data through summary forms and field notes. Qualitative data analysis revealed 5 strategies for creating positive service experiences for alternative school students: (1) find appropriate service-learning sites, (2) create staff support, (3) maintain appropriate student participation and behavior, (4) enhance student reflection on service-learning experiences, and (5) address students' self-images. (*J Sch Health*. 2005;75(5):151-156)

Sexual risk behaviors declined among many adolescents in the United States in the past decade, but they remained the same or increased among some groups.¹ Relative to their peers in mainstream schools, youth attending alternative schools engage in more behaviors that put them at high risk for pregnancy and contracting human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) or other sexually transmitted diseases (STD).² Alternative schools serve students who do not progress academically in mainstream high schools and who have been in disciplinary trouble or in the juvenile justice system.

Data from the National Alternative School Youth Risk Behavior Survey³ highlight the importance of addressing risk behavior in this population. For example, 89% of students in alternative schools had ever had sexual intercourse, compared to 50% of students in mainstream schools.^{3,4} Fifty percent of students in alternative schools had 4 or more sexual partners, compared with only 16% of youth in mainstream schools. Further, of the students who were currently sexually active, only 46% of alternative school youth and 58% of mainstream students used a condom during last sexual intercourse. Additionally, students in alternative schools were significantly more likely to have been pregnant or gotten someone pregnant than students in mainstream schools (30% versus 6%). Other studies also suggest that students in alternative school settings are more likely than students in mainstream schools to have an STD.^{2,5,6}

Previous studies show it is possible to reduce sexual risk-taking behavior with prevention interventions,⁷⁻¹⁴ although many of these interventions have had relatively modest effects. Given the potential consequences of risky

sexual behavior, it is important to identify and assess additional factors that may influence whether adolescents take sexual risks. Motivation to avoid risky behaviors is one such factor.¹⁵⁻¹⁷

Service learning, a youth development strategy that combines community service with reflection before, during, and after the service, is one potential intervention approach that could affect motivation. Interventions that include community service learning have decreased anti-social and violent behaviors,^{18,19} arrests,²⁰ pregnancy and unprotected sexual intercourse,¹⁹⁻²² and school failure,¹⁹ and have increased youth assets such as motivation to engage in protective behaviors, initiative, problem solving, decision making, self-efficacy, and competency.^{18,23} Service learning may increase youth motivation by increasing their connectedness to adults and communities and increasing protective attitudes and skills through reduced alienation, positive self-identity, peer norms that support protective behaviors, and self-efficacy.^{24,25}

Despite its promise, few studies have explored how to integrate service learning into HIV prevention education or have described the benefits of service learning for students in alternative school settings. This paper describes the experience of staff and students in integrating service-learning activities into a curriculum to prevent HIV, other STD, and pregnancy in alternative schools in northern California. Specifically, strategies are described for creating a positive experience when service learning is integrated into health risk reduction programs for alternative school students.

METHODS

Program Description

Service-learning activities described in this paper were part of a controlled trial testing the efficacy of All4You!, a program implemented at 13 alternative schools in 4 counties in northern California from 1999 to 2002. The study compared students who received the intervention (n = 597) to those in a standard care control group

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(n = 391). Study schools were small (many were single classrooms) with mixed grade levels. Students faced a range of challenges in their personal and academic lives, including learning disabilities, poverty, community and domestic violence, family drug abuse, and gang involvement.

The All4You! program had 2 primary components integrated and delivered as a 14-session program (about 26 hours): (1) a curriculum to prevent HIV/STD and pregnancy and (2) service-learning activities. Trained project educators delivered both the components. The curriculum included 9 classroom lessons (about 13.5 hours) that addressed key risk and protective factors related to sexual behavior, such as essential knowledge, skills, attitudes/beliefs, and norms.

In the service-learning component, students made 5 visits as a class (about 12.5 hours including transportation) to pre-schools and early elementary schools, senior centers, an organization creating a public mural, and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome service organizations. Students led activities and provided services, such as cooking meals, playing games, and supervising student activities or craft projects. Service visits alternated with in-class sessions to allow

time for reflection between visits. Preparation for service was integrated into lessons through small-group planning activities, empathy-building exercises, and an activity identifying the potential benefits of helping in the community.

Reflection occurred immediately following service through brief verbal exchanges and individual work sheets and then again at the beginning of the following in-class lesson (through a 25-minute small-group activity). Reflection included identifying contributions that students made during service-learning visits, identifying and handling challenges using problem-solving skills, connecting service to health behaviors, and discussing the potential benefits of volunteering.

Procedures

Data Sources. Data were collected from student participants in All4You! (N = 597 alternative school students from 59 classes in 13 alternative schools), from 5 project educators who conducted All4You! activities, and through observations by project staff (Table 1). Primary data sources included 114 activity sheets completed by individual

Table 1
Data Sources

Data Source	Participant Type	Number of Responses Analyzed	Questions and Prompts
Activity sheets completed before service-learning component.	Students	2 randomly selected sheets per class (114 sheets from 57 of 59 classes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 things you might get from volunteering to help others. • How volunteering might help you stay safe from HIV, STD, and unplanned pregnancy.
Volunteer tip sheets completed after service-learning component.	Student groups	2 randomly selected sheets per class (118 sheets from 59 classes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Things that may be hard about volunteering are ... • Things you can do to deal with hard situations in volunteering are ... • Things you might get out of volunteering are ...
Focus groups and individual interviews conducted after curriculum completion.	Students	14 focus groups (N = 91) and 10 individual interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was the hardest thing about volunteering? • What did you get out of volunteering? • Why do you think you were asked to volunteer? • How did volunteering fit into the rest of what the project educator was talking about?
Service-learning summary forms filled out after curriculum completion.	Project educators	N = 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe service-learning site. • Describe tasks performed by students. • List student reactions during service visits. • Describe challenges for project educators.
Field notes taken during service-learning visits.	All4You! Project staff	Not applicable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student reactions during service visits. • Factors that might affect student involvement.

students before beginning the service-learning visits (2 were randomly selected from each of the 57 of 59 classes for which completed activity sheets were available) and 118 volunteering tip sheets completed by groups of students after the service-learning component ended (2 of which were randomly selected from each of the 59 classes). Activity sheets were used to identify students' expectations about how they hoped to make a difference. Tip sheets were used to collect data on how students felt they did make a difference and to identify challenges that students experienced, as well as their suggestions for overcoming them.

The decision to randomly sample 2 activity or tip sheets from each class was based on the results of preliminary analyses in which 2 worksheets per class were sufficient to capture the range of students' perspectives. In addition, researchers conducted 14 focus groups (with a total of 91 students) and 10 individual interviews where participants were selected for maximum variation in demographic characteristics to get a range of perspectives.²⁶

Additional data about preparation for service learning, conducting service-learning visits, and reflection on service-learning visits were collected from forms completed by project educators and from field notes taken by project staff. Demographic data come from the baseline survey administered as part of the outcome evaluation. Human subjects review and approval for data collection were obtained through the Institutional Review Boards of Education, Training, Research (ETR) Associates and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Establishing Themes. A multistep process was used in preparing for data analyses.^{27,28} First, the first author and a research assistant read all activity and volunteering tip sheets from a random sample of 6 of the 59 classes (10%) to identify key themes and categories, then noted repeating themes, and grouped them into theoretical constructs. To verify categories and themes, staff reviewed all activity and volunteering tip sheets in 6 other randomly selected classes. No new themes or categories emerged, although staff refined the existing themes and categories.

Analyzing Data. After establishing core themes, staff reviewed each data source to identify the presence of the themes. To assure reliability and validity of data analysis,^{29,26} staff (1) read the transcripts and notes independently and identified key themes from discussion, (2) triangulated data by reading across data sources to identify repeating themes, and (3) employed negative case analysis and revised themes until all cases fit. This process was followed for activity sheets, tip sheets, focus groups, and individual interviews, as well as for additional data from project educators and project staff.

Participants

Table 2 contains participants' background characteristics. These data reflect the youth in the intervention condition only (N = 597) but are representative of the entire study sample (N = 988).

RESULTS

Implementation Strategies

Integrating a service-learning component into a health education curriculum, and implementing it with youth in

alternative school settings, was a success. Observations suggest that individual students gained personal benefits such as a sense of positive contribution, while teachers and other adults saw students in a more positive light, and service sites gained from having additional resources for a limited time. Analysis suggested 5 key strategies for optimizing students' experience: (1) find appropriate service-learning sites, (2) create staff support, (3) maintain appropriate student participation and behavior, (4) reflect on service-learning experiences, and (5) address students' self-images.

Find Appropriate Service-Learning Sites. Potential service-learning sites were identified through volunteer centers and phone books and by project educators canvassing neighborhoods near the schools. Because one goal of service was to build a connection between students and other people, optimal service-learning sites were large enough to accommodate a group of 10 to 15 students but offered one-on-one interactions, such as senior centers and elementary schools or day care centers.

A fluid alternative school schedule caused frequent changes in dates and times at which students could do service. Turnover among students due to absences, and students coming into or leaving the alternative school, made it more challenging for staff to build relationships with youth. Finding sites flexible enough to accommodate changes in schedule and in the youth who attended service-learning visits was challenging. Given the project stipulations of doing service as a group during set hours, the process of finding service sites required an initial investment of time to yield compatible service sites.

Project educators gave preference to service-learning sites that wanted volunteers and to those that had student

Table 2
Student Demographics (N = 597) of Those
Receiving All4You!

Variable	Sample Summary
Age (mean)	16.6 years
Gender (%)	
Male	61.2
Female	38.8
Race/ethnicity (%)	
African American	29.0
Asian/Pacific Islander	16.9
Latino	27.6
White	12.2
Other	14.2
Number of parents/guardians living at home (%)	
None	4.4
1	41.3
2 or more	54.3
Probation (%)	
Ever been on probation	61.9
On probation now	53.4

volunteers in the past. Project educators found sites that could be flexible with schedule changes and in the youth participating. Staff considered excluding new students from service visits to minimize turnover, but that approach was not practical for alternative schools. Once relationships between project educators and service sites were established, staff often could return to the same sites in subsequent semesters.

The sites that most engaged students had specific characteristics. They offered a range of service activities and offered meaningful interactions among students, service-site staff, and residents or children. These sites also had a contact person who provided guidance on tasks, saw the value of service learning for his or her agency, and did not have negative preconceptions about the alternative school students.

Create Staff Support. Getting buy-in from service-site staff and from alternative school teachers was important. It also was important to find a service site that did not have negative preconceptions about a school known to serve youth involved with the juvenile justice system. Some students felt that they were not trusted by service-site staff at the outset, but this attitude changed with time.

Students listed challenges such as "getting along with people that are being ignorant." Project educators also noted the importance of working with service-site staff to help the students feel comfortable. To clarify goals and expectations, project educators and site coordinators signed an agreement stating dates of service and tasks the students would be expected to complete. In addition, project educators created a tip sheet for site staff called "Guide to Joining in Partnerships With Youth and the All4You! Project." This sheet identified ways youth could contribute to the site and suggestions for creating productive partnerships (eg, share mutual respect, offer concrete and worthwhile tasks for youth to do, and provide a thorough orientation). Project educators noted the importance of having additional adult chaperones, as some teachers preferred to remain at school rather than go on field trips.

Educators tried hard to elicit support for alternative school teachers. In many instances, teachers could see their students in a new light—1 teacher even took pictures for students' parole officers to show how engaged students were in service activities. Educators emphasized student benefits and provided mechanisms (such as presentations at staff meetings and photo displays) so teachers could share observations and experiences with their colleagues. This helped foster support, but the opportunity was limited because many alternative schools consisted of 1 classroom, and teachers were isolated from other teachers much of the time.

Maintain Appropriate Student Participation and Behavior. Some students had negative ideas regarding "community service" that resulted in part from service requirements of probation. Students' preconceptions affected their level of engagement in service. Students expressed dislike of sites where they could not communicate with elderly residents and where staff had negative attitudes toward students. Tip sheets written for other students at the end of their volunteer experience suggested that one of their biggest challenges was communication, especially dealing with difficulties at the service-learning

sites or knowing how to interact with elderly residents or very young children. Some also acknowledged that they wanted to set a good example and were aware of the importance of "controlling my temper."

Educators found it important to know in advance the rules and expectations of the service sites. For example, 1 site requested that students not wear clothing that could be considered disrespectful or a poor example, such as low-hanging, baggy pants; baseball hats worn backward; or bandanna. Most students had no trouble meeting these requirements, but it is important to have a clear protocol to respond to inappropriate behavior such as using profanity at a site, scrawling graffiti on a bus, or something as serious as stealing a service-site staff member's cell phone (it was recovered and returned).

Such behavioral challenges were addressed through reflection before and after visits. For example, activities were carried out in sessions before service visits to help students prepare for the visits (eg, discussing preconceived ideas about service, conducting empathy activities, and identifying tasks or activities for subsequent visits) and to convey expectations for appropriate behaviors at the service sites. Educators addressed specific disciplinary issues (eg, inappropriate language) as they arose or immediately following visits. In some instances the problem resulted in an excellent learning opportunity. As an example, the student who stole the cell phone later admitted to that action and wrote an apology letter, which the site acknowledged.

To fully participate in service-learning activities, students needed guidance and support from a trusted adult. Given the range of student personalities, interests, and skills, it was important that a variety of activities be available.

Students benefited most when the ratio of students to trusted adults was low (eg, 3 to 1). Most students needed individual help to connect in a positive way with elders or children, particularly with people who were difficult to understand or reluctant to communicate. Some visits involved group singing, which increased comfort among both students and the elders or children. Because students indicated that communication was their most common challenge, project educators had students role-play challenging interactions before they went on visits. Project educators also provided students with a specific task to help them start talking to elders (eg, writing a name tag, giving students a list of questions they might ask a resident). Although students were provided with similar strategies to communicate with children, educators noted that some students were not yet ready for the responsibility of working with the younger kids.

Reflect on Service-Learning Experiences. Facilitating reflection with the students required some creative strategies. First, students reflected in groups to help them move from a description of what they did, to discussions of why events occurred during service learning, and skills that would enhance their experiences. When asked to comment on the visit in one-on-one interactions or individual journal writing, most students framed their experience as fun or not fun and focused on either praise or complaints. To include students with low literacy levels, staff designed a journal that required only short-answer responses and was written in a fun, graphic format. Working in pairs

and small groups helped students who had trouble reading and writing to participate more actively.

In addition to discussions, reading, and writing, students were asked to play a song and explain how it reminded them of volunteering. In response to feedback that some students did not want to write about challenges because it implied a weakness in the students, they were asked about obstacles, which implied an external challenge. Similarly, students responded more positively to calling their written reflection about service a folder, rather than a journal. Finally, students' willingness to write about their experience depended, in part, on their relationship with the project educator, for whom they perceived they were writing.

Staff used several strategies to help students reflect on their volunteer experience. Staff encouraged critical reflection by prompting them to think before visits about how they hoped to make a difference and asking them afterward how they did make a difference. In order of frequency, students wrote they expected rewards such as good feelings and happiness, acquiring increased job skills such as people skills, gaining general experience, helping others, gaining money or credit, and meeting new people and making friends. After they completed their service visits, students were more likely to describe job skills and meeting new people and making friends as benefits of volunteering and less likely to mention money or credit. In addition, at the end of all the service visits, students wrote for the first time that volunteering could be fun. Responses to these prompts allowed students to reflect, and provided educators with information about the benefits of service learning.

Educators used teachable moments, which consisted of one-on-one conversations while on the bus or walking between the alternative school and service-learning site, to help students make a connection between volunteering and the skills addressed in the curriculum (eg, problem solving and communicating). The focus group and interview data indicate that about one third of the students could articulate the connection between service and reduction of sexual risk behaviors. Responses about why they were asked to volunteer included: (1) distraction because volunteering would keep them busy or from thinking about sexual intercourse, (2) increased awareness of the consequences of having sexual intercourse, and (3) increased skills to avoid sexual intercourse or unprotected sexual intercourse. Students who worked with children thought they were asked to volunteer so they could learn how difficult parenting was. Students who worked with seniors gave two reasons why they were asked to volunteer. One was that we wanted them to see that if they got HIV they might not grow old; the second was that some of the seniors they worked with might have HIV.

Address Student Self-Images. For service to be successful, adults must be skilled at helping students see the value of their contribution. Most students in this study had negative experiences interacting with individual adults and institutions. Some had been through the juvenile justice system, and many of the students faced stigma because of their bad experiences in mainstream schools and because they attended alternative schools.

Although some site staff had negative perceptions of alternative school students, this was not the case for elders

and children who were served at the service-learning sites. Because they typically had never heard of the small high schools, they did not immediately associate the students with failure. Interview and focus group data suggest that service learning led some students to see themselves as people with good qualities who could make a positive difference for other people.

To reinforce these images, educators asked 1 or 2 students to watch for positive contributions by their peers and to share these observations with other students at the end of the visit. The educator expanded on these acknowledgments and made a point of acknowledging all students' contributions. A small-group reflection activity also focused expressly on identifying contributions. Finally, educators encouraged service-site staff to provide formal recognition activities at the end of students' service.

DISCUSSION

This paper adds to the growing body of research on service learning as a strategy in HIV and teen pregnancy prevention programs and to the small body of research on service learning by alternative school students. It is possible to integrate service learning into a sexual risk reduction program with alternative school youth, and it is important to consider the 5 strategies that were indicated through analysis of the data. First, select a service-learning site with supportive staff and a range of activities. Second, provide support for service-site staff by clarifying expectations and bringing adult chaperones. Third, help students maintain appropriate behavior by clarifying roles and expectations and helping them problem-solve challenges. Fourth, provide ample time and support for reflection and include a range of reflection tools. Fifth, assess and address any self-images that will undermine the students' ability to see themselves as making a positive difference.

The 5 strategies have already been described in detail, but 2 crucial points need emphasis. First, the selection of service sites requires an initial investment of time, but it can determine whether students will have a positive experience. Sites with neutral or positive expectations of the students are essential. In addition, sites with enough people to offer one-on-one interactions and a range of tasks will increase the likelihood that students will recognize their own contributions.

Second, facilitating reflection with alternative school students requires a skilled person who can identify informal teachable moments and create a setting in which students are willing to share and think critically about their experiences, both before and after service-learning visits. Alternating in-class program sessions with service visits allows time for reflection and the opportunity for educators to link real-life challenges, such as communicating with elderly residents, to the communication skills they are learning in the classroom. For alternative school students, strategies such as peer observations, writing tip sheets for other students, and verbal reflection are needed due to low literacy levels and high student turnover. To increase the likelihood that service learning will have a positive impact on students' motivation to reduce risk, reflection must focus on helping students identify the contributions they made to the community.

Limitations of this study include reliance on self-reported data from a small percentage of the students and staff. Consequently, the study may have missed some recurrent themes and categories in the data. The use of randomly selected cases independently analyzed by 2 coders suggests, however, that the process identified the majority of themes in the sample. This use of qualitative data was essential for providing insights into how to maximize the use of service learning within prevention education programs. Future research should obtain sufficient and credible data to show the impact of participation in service learning and determine what elements are critical to produce behavior change. For example, research should determine whether service sites should be comfortable places for students or places that pose a challenge tied to principles in the curriculum.¹⁸

The data stemming from the randomized trial on which this study is based will provide evidence regarding the effectiveness of service learning combined with an HIV/STD/pregnancy prevention curriculum. To isolate the effects of service learning alone on sexual risk taking and related antecedents, it is necessary to use a more complex randomized design in which students receive service alone and in combination with a skills- and norms-based prevention education curriculum. ■

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