

## **YOUTH A.V.E.: A PROGRAM FOR EMPOWERING YOUTH IN COMMUNITY SERVICE SETTINGS**

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**ABSTRACT:** This article presents a short description and evaluation of the Youth Achieving Volunteer Excellence (Youth A.V.E.) program. It illuminates the myriad factors involved in the development and implementation of a project designed to help a multi-cultural group of young people reach their potential as students and leaders through participation in a community service program focusing on substance abuse prevention. From the standpoint of both the organization and staff, Youth A.V.E. had both positive (i.e., improved interpersonal skills and unity of participants) and negative outcomes (i.e., inability to provide stability and trust). While the youth recognized several of the project's successes, they were more inclined to view it negatively, focusing on the program's inability to fulfill its promise regarding scholarships, thereby confirming their lack of trust towards adults and society.

### **INTRODUCTION: THE YOUTH A.V.E. PROGRAM**

Worcester Fights Back's Youth Achieving Volunteer Excellence (Youth A.V.E.) program was a community service and substance abuse prevention program designed by and for Worcester youth with an underlying goal of recognizing youth achievement. It was developed to engage young people in their communities in three ways; by 1) providing them with the opportunity to experience healthy and productive lifestyles through community service employment, 2) offering assistance in creating substance abuse prevention projects, and 3) guiding the implementation of these projects in community service settings. Youth A.V.E.'s first nine-month program started in 1992. All youth were chosen on the basis of their interest in community service, their leadership potential, and their desire to work with others from various cultures and socioeconomic classes. Among the project's other attractions were GED tutoring, college preparation, stipends funded by local corporations and foundations, and scholarship assistance.

### **THE PROGRAM'S RATIONALE: CONTEXT AND OVERVIEW**

A brief glance at the literature shows a significant increase in substance abuse and antisocial behavior in today's youth (Eron & Slaby, 1994; Loeber, 1990). This is a critical social problem with devastating repercussions because antisocial behaviors have been linked to academic failure, truancy, and high dropout rates (Henggler, 1989; Kazdin, 1987, 1994). Antisocial

behaviors in youth have also been associated with early sexual activity and promiscuity (Robins, 1986), substance abuse (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992; Donovan & Jessor, 1985), involvement with delinquent peers (Elliott, Huizinga, & Ageton, 1985), and a lack of bonding to conventional social institutions (Donovan & Jessor, 1985).

On the other hand, factors that have a protective influence have also been identified in the literature. For example, good interpersonal relationships and task accomplishment (Rutter, 1990), extracurricular activities accompanied by recognition (Rae Grant, Thomas, Offord, & Boyle, 1989), and support from significant adults in the community (Werner & Smith, 1992) positively influence self-esteem, self-efficacy, and lead to prosocial behavior. WFB staff attempted to merge these theoretical frames by creating a program which would promote healthy behavior, and foster "protective factors" such as care, support, self-esteem, high expectations, and social competence skills. Staff's desire to transmit to youth a sense of belonging and responsibility for one another and society led to a program design that would provide young people (particularly those at-risk) with an alternative to deviant behaviors, and opportunities to participate in their communities. By encouraging their participation in Youth A.V.E., the staff also hoped to develop peer role models who would promote healthy behavior, and influence other youth through their associations (Bandura, 1977; Steinhausen, 1983).

In an attempt to serve both the needs of Worcester and the youth, the staff implemented a program with community service as its main component. They believed that youth who have established links to their neighborhood through community service projects experience heightened self-esteem, positive attitudes, a belief in the ability to change, and a sense of belonging (Kurth-Schai, 1988). The fact that taking leadership roles in the community encourages responsibility and citizenship, fosters achievement, and promotes empowerment (Benard, 1990, 1991) was also influential in the program's design.

From Monday to Thursday, the participants traveled to shelters, schools, nursing homes, day care facilities, and community centers. In two teams, they worked on projects developed with agency staff that served children, young mothers, the elderly, and the homeless. Each site lasted six weeks, and involved the youth in projects focusing on substance abuse prevention.

The second program component was an educational/social curriculum. Part of the curriculum stemmed from the program designers' desire to include participants representative of Worcester's multi-cultural population, and the need for this diverse group of young people to establish good working interpersonal relationships. Staff believed that cross-cultural connectedness would allow the community to better address and potentially solve some of its problems, and reasoned that youth could serve as community ambassadors in promoting this process. By engaging a diverse set of youth in socially and economically useful tasks, Youth A.V.E. design-

ers sought not only to create an awareness in the community of youth as a resource, but also to promote youth development through increased political activism, and the ability to create and maintain complex relationships (Kurth-Schai, 1988).

Every Friday, the youth met for activities and workshops in prevention, cultural awareness, leadership skills, teamwork, and communication. The workshops provided knowledge for working with diverse groups of individuals, and an arena to discuss issues relevant to young people such as gender differences, teen pregnancy, substance abuse, and violence. They were designed to raise self-esteem, enhance group interaction, and train the participants to better serve the community. In these workshops, conflicts were worked out with staff assistance, and group members were encouraged to take an active role in resolving their differences. Time was also allocated for personal feedback. The staff tried to create a nonthreatening atmosphere where positive and negative criticisms could be exchanged. In these settings the youth could learn about themselves through reflection on feelings and behaviors. According to Swinehart (1990), individual reflection time is a key ingredient for a successful program. Consequently, participants were asked to keep weekly journals of their thoughts, ideas, and facts acquired throughout the week. In addition, time was allotted on Fridays for visits to area colleges where youth met university staff in order to develop an understanding of collegiate life.

### THE PARTICIPANTS

The WFB staff recruited eight young people and two Team Leaders representative of the cultural and economic diversity of Worcester (a city of some 167,000 people located one hour west of Boston, with a large minority population). For a sampling of city youth, job descriptions were posted in high schools, community centers, and other locales such as arcades. Participants were also recruited by WFB staff.

The participants' ages ranged from 17-22. There were four men (three Puerto Rican, and one African-American), and four women (one Puerto Rican, one African-American, and two Caucasian) who came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Two participants had children. One lived with her husband, three lived with girlfriends, two lived with their families, and the remaining two had other arrangements. Six completed high school, and two were working towards their GEDs. Two of the women left the program early for personal reasons.

### IMPORTANT ELEMENTS IN THE PROGRAM'S DEVELOPMENT

This section contains a discussion of two components explored and evaluated during the nine-month project. They were chosen as illustrations of the value of involving youth in constructive activities in their communi-

ties. With a concern for brevity, most of the programmatic elements contained in a final program evaluation sent to WFB were omitted.

### **Relationships between adults and youth**

Bruce Swinehart (1990) suggests that successful prevention programs are those in which common goals are achieved with young people and adults collaborating together. From a developmental perspective, youth need positive, supportive relationships with other adults besides their parents or authority figures. These relationships provide an opportunity for youth to test adult roles, and internalize the values, expectations and norms of the community and society (Swinehart, 1990).

Youth A.V.E. participants had better working relationships with the site staff when their sites were interesting, engaging, and challenging, and when their supervisors were supportive, responsive, and available. Respect and trust were also keys to developing good relationships, such that the youth responded best to adults who were consistent, set boundaries, shared responsibility, and allowed the youth to express their opinions. Working together as colleagues and not adhering to rigidly defined adult/child roles proved beneficial to both the youth and staff. Adults saw how empowering the youth encouraged hard work while the youth developed ownership in their projects. In two day care centers, teachers reported the youth as being helpful, charismatic, and engaging, and one Site Supervisor acknowledged that, "I learned a lot about how society views these kids, and how they feel about adults who don't respect them."

### **Healthy Activities**

According to Kurth-Schai (1988), a number of cross-cultural studies point to an association between a lack of participation in social and economic institutions and the expression of antisocial and self-destructive behaviors such as drug abuse, depression, promiscuity, premature parenthood, and delinquency. Youth A.V.E.'s designers were committed to providing young people with a chance to participate in social institutions through community service. At their work sites, the youth developed and then presented substance abuse prevention projects. These projects included videos, comic books, skits and posters, and were meant to impart knowledge and create awareness of the problems of substance abuse in the community. Participants also worked on a number of newsletters sent to various Worcester agencies and community members which described the program and their numerous activities. They also participated with other organizations in workshops and conferences, and spent three days in New York visiting similar youth programs. These gatherings created opportunities for the youth and members of the community to intermingle. As one participant stated, "people might have a certain perspective on youth but when we work with them, they see we're responsible and can get the job done." Another felt that engaging in healthy activities "was cool 'cause it

kept us off the street." The youth regarded many of their projects as "challenging and fun," and claimed that involvement in all the activities had more to do with the meaning the youth derived from substance abuse prevention than did the numerous factual presentations given on Fridays.

## EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

This section contains a brief description of the ethnographic methodology used in the program evaluation. This methodology entails an assessment driven not by what the author found to be important, but by the relevant questions and issues meaningful to all those involved in the program. The evaluation involved year-long, in-depth, on-sight observations written up as narrative field notes which formed the database for the evaluation (Levine, 1985). The understanding of this information was achieved through participation in the activities, and the dialogue between the program evaluator and all those involved (Burawoy, 1991). Job applications and surveys distributed at the outset provided background information on the youth, which included their personal histories, basic familiarity with drugs and substance abuse, and their attitudes about their community and working with diverse groups of people. Feedback was solicited by sharing field notes with the youth, and their responses were incorporated during small group discussions.

Interactions between the youth and WFB staff were also observed and recorded. Packer and Addison (1989) suggest several ways to ensure validity, including seeking consensus in and out of the group, examining the evaluation's relationship to external evidence, and assessing the interpretation's relationship to future events.

Consequently, staff interviews and discussions of the field notes occurred, combined with weekly analysis of the youth, the work environment, and the field notes with WFB's Manager of Research (during the first half), and Youth A.V.E.'s Project Manager (during the second half). Finally, Team Leaders and Site Coordinators provided information about events and actions that transpired during the evaluator's absence.

## FINDINGS

### Positive Outcomes

In spite of the experimental nature of the program and a number of programmatic and organizational failures, Youth A.V.E. had some measure of success. Considering that the youth lost two participants, dealt with mismatches between the group's and community's interest, had the entire Youth A.V.E. staff replaced, and learned that they would not receive four-year scholarships for college, they proved remarkably resilient. During a number of the more severe crises, the staff expected to lose participants,

believing that the youth's inability to control their surroundings, the failure of the program to provide consistency, and their view of a society incapable of meeting their needs would prove unacceptable. However, when the program lost two participants, the reasons were completely unrelated to the crises.

The most apparent success was the youth's dedication to one another and the development of unity forged during the year-long process of building healthy relationships. This solidarity and mutual support created an atmosphere where they could accept and deal with the frustration and change wrought by the many challenges they faced. Defending one another and a sense of group justice indicated that they had created a sense of belonging. Evidence also suggested that individual responsibility stemmed from this unity as several youth mentioned that their sense of group commitment prevented them from quitting. In addition, they encouraged responsibility in each other by holding themselves accountable when anyone violated established rules or norms.

The program also had some success in regard to the youth's sense of empowerment and ownership. They participated in the interview process of future members and a new Team Leader, and chose a number of their sites. The continuous negotiation of their relationships with one another and with those in the community with whom they worked also built resiliency for future interactions with friends, family, and society. Moreover, they were informed that many of their recommendations were utilized in the final program evaluation.

Youth A.V.E. provided the participants with an opportunity to become acquainted with their communities in a way not available to most youth. They learned a number of social competence skills that helped them develop relationships with their peers and adults (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992), and made connections that led to jobs after the program. Those that needed tutoring or GED assistance received it, and several weeks were spent assisting the youth in submitting college and financial aid applications. During their nine months, they went to movies, parks, the woods, New York, and a number of other places, engaging in healthy and fun activities, and staying off the streets.

### **The Program's Limitations**

Unfortunately, the participant's understanding of a successful program was based on their belief that Youth A.V.E.'s benefits would be measured in the receipt of scholarships for college. This view prevented them from grasping its other advantages, so they were ill inclined to acknowledge the program's positive outcomes. (It is worth mentioning that a settlement was reached providing \$1,500 for those youth accepted into university.)

Another complaint expressed by the youth was the lack of workshops training them as drug counselors. (This fact arose towards the end of the

program.) Their interest was in acquiring practical skills that would later earn them money, while working hands-on to prevent drug abuse. It was a challenge to convey to them that the workshops were beneficial for their own resiliency, and development as peer leaders, even if they did not lead directly to employment opportunities.

The youth did not appear to have internalized the interpersonal and individual skills they received from the nine-month program. This might have resulted from a number of reasons: 1) their inability to use the language with which adults measure positive outcomes of prevention (like self-efficacy, leadership, and management); 2) their inability to find any of their experience valuable after losing their scholarships; or 3) the lack of staff training necessary to run an effective program. In any event, the program's success was measured mostly by the evaluator's and staff's impressions and these views somehow fall short. The results suggest that these youth are at a point in their lives where their goals are somewhat commodified; they want life to provide "enough to have a house, some food, and a little bit extra to enjoy the good things."

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In light of the program's evaluation, a number of salient points were identified. Below, several significant features are listed for those wishing to design and implement similar youth programs.

- 1) From a program's inception, it is essential to have a clear idea of the population one wishes to serve, and an understanding of their personal goals and objectives.

- 2) Programs must clearly specify to entering participants what its own objectives are, and what benefits it hopes the youth will receive.

- 3) Better organization and structure from the outset is essential, including longer periods for training both staff and participants.

- 4) Youth need to plan more social and athletic events with the community.

- 5) A program must be able to provide referrals for direct service to those in need.

- 6) The youth should have the power to evaluate their own program and make recommendations at the end of the year for those participants who will succeed them. This will further develop the youth's ownership over a program.

- 7) A program must provide some kind of alumnae activities to keep participants involved in the community, and contribute to the continuity of the program (i.e., allow program alum to work for the project or be related to it in some capacity).

It is important to understand that "children need to experience themselves as resources from early childhood on" (Benard, 1990). Communities

must support the growth of young people by building resiliency in the form of social competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy, and a sense of purpose and future (Benard, 1991). Worcester Fights Back's Youth A.V.E. program attempted to facilitate this developmental process. Yet, in order for it and similar programs to succeed, they must have support from the community. It is essential that a program's staff remain committed to hearing young people, and working together with them to create common objectives from the outset, establishing and enforcing rules, planning activities, and implementing fun, challenging, and rewarding projects.

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