

Title:

Defining Peer Education

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Conclusion:

The term “peer education” is quite broad and is used to describe a large range of activity. The peer process focuses on individuals becoming interactive participants instead of traditional educational approaches. It is important to discuss the specifics of what a peer relationship is. This relationship can be based on age, race, church affiliation, social class or even sex.

Before selecting peer educators it is important to define what the relationship will be between them and the target group. It is also necessary to be specific in defining their roles. Will they serve as a counselor, educator, facilitator, or role model? What type of support, incentives, and training will they receive? Overall, the projects in this paper supported the notion that there is a definite link between community-based settings having a stronger focus on supporting the educator and the actual peer-delivery vs. the school setting focusing on the betterment of the school. Best practices would include finding the approach that best fits the community needs, location and ability of the educators.

Purpose:

Peer education has become a “buzz word” with many groups working in schools or youth prevention programs. We assume that young people learning from each other is a naturally occurring process. The process would then be a great opportunity for educating masses of youth. There are many problems associated with this idea. Peer education programs have not been evaluated thoroughly and lack clear definition of what the term really means.

There are peer helpers, peer leaders, peer support counselors, etc. that makes the meaning of the titles and the programs associated with them very broad. The gap between these definitions and the effectiveness of peer educators was the purpose for the literature review on this topic.

Examples of existing peer education programs were also cited to show that successful programs may utilize various approaches in “peer delivery” and “peer development”.

Findings:

The evaluation of three completely different peer-lead programs discussed the likenesses and differences of each of the programs. Case studies were conducted after watching the training sessions and having in-depth interviews with everyone involved in the project.

The projects included school based drug prevention programs as well as community-based efforts that focused on sexuality, racism, and mental health. The target populations were similar but the methods of selecting the peer educators differed. The school based project leaders were selected by teachers based on “suitability” and age. The community peer leaders were selected based on ethnicity, group likeness (identity), or past experiences. An example would be that a

straight “A” student council member who could model “good” behavior would be selected as a “suitable” school based peer educator. A community program tended to have folks involved that mirrored and lived closer to the target audience; such as, a former prostitute educating HIV drug users in a café on the wrong side of town.

Peer education is much different than teaching as an expert. Some educators felt that they weren’t given enough training where as others found great support from the organizations hosting the projects. School testing, scheduling, and day-to-day mandates restricted the amount of training and support that the peer educators were able to receive within that particular setting.

One project was discontinued because they felt that their ideas were not valued and that they felt deceived and weren’t involved in the program process as having a voice. The community based educators received incentives such as child care and benefit assistance as well as extensive training and planning input on a regular and long- term basis. This improved their individual performance developing a sense of ownership and contributed to the success of the program as a whole.

Implications for Prevention:

In developing prevention programs it is necessary to identify the target population, determine need and then address those needs with available resources. Peer education can be used as a cost-effective and positive way to deliver good information to different audiences. We need to be aware that school based programs may have limitations based on mandates that cannot be changed. Community based efforts have witnessed great successes as long as training, personal support, skill development, and incentives are included in the process. Clear expectations of the educator and the organization are necessary to help define any gaps that could cause problems for the program.

Summary Provided By:
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