

Title:

A Method In Search of a Theory: Peer Education and Health Promotion

Source:

G. Turner & J. Shepherd, A Method in Search of a Theory: Peer Education and Health Promotion. Health Education Research; Theory & Practice Vol. 12 #2 1999 Pages 235-247.

Email and Web Addresses: None.

Conclusion:

Peer education appears to be a method in search of a theory. Most theories seem to be limited in scope. Peer education application methods vary. They seem to be selected because they are a fit with the target population. Settings chosen are dependent upon outcomes including behavior change, skills development or education.

Attempting to locate some of the theoretical justification for peer education as applied to health topics is far from easy. Because of this lack of justification, one can only draw inferences. Furthermore, the diversity of peer education practice is so considerable that few theories could be expected to explain the effectiveness.

Purpose:

In the field of health promotion, peer education has grown in popularity and practice. However, advocates of peer education rarely make reference to theories in their rationale for particular projects. It was therefore assumed that rather than the practical application of theory, peer education rests on lay principles and assumptions. Using the theories listed below, researchers wanted to investigate the relevance of these theories as it relates to the use of peer education. This is not an attempt to discredit or critique the theories, but to summarize the effect of peer education.

Theories:

1. Social Learning Theory: Subjects that observe behavior taking place and then go on to adopt similar behaviors. Subjects need an opportunity to practice modeled behavior and positive reinforcement if it is to be adopted successfully.
2. Social Inoculation Theory: Social pressures to adopt unhealthy behaviors. Premised on the belief that young people lack the negotiating skills to resist unhealthy behaviors arising from peer pressure and other influences.
3. Role Theory: It's the idea that peer educators will adapt to the role expectations of a tutor and behave appropriately. In addition, through adopting a role, individuals develop a deeper understanding and commitment to it.
4. Differential Association Theory: Crime that is learned in social situations by associating with those who can teach the skills and techniques required. Young people learn "bad" habits, such as stealing, smoking and drug taking by association with others who can teach them.

5. Subculture Theory: Delinquents that developed subcultures which promote values and behaviors which are oppositional to mainstream culture.
6. Communication of Innovations Theory: People who seek out opinion leaders and are influenced by them because they perceived them to be more competent than themselves.

Findings:

The authors mention that most theories had something to offer towards an explanation for why peer education might be effective. They also stated that most theories were limited to particular claims, and with regard to claims, limited empirical evidence is available.

Below is a list of 10 frequently used claims and the theories, (in parenthesis and listed above), which appear to have some relevance.

1. It is more cost-effective than other methods. (6)
2. Peers are a credible source of information. (1), (2), (3), (4), (6)
3. Peer education is empowering for those involved. (1)
4. It uses an already established means of sharing information and advice. (4), (5), (6)
5. Peers are more successful than professionals in passing on information because people identify with their peers. (3), (5), (6)
6. Peer educators act as positive role models. (1), (2), (6)
7. Peer education is beneficial to those involved in providing it. (1), (3)
8. Education presented by peers may be acceptable when other education is not. (2), (3), (4), (5), (6)
9. Peer education can be used to educate those who are hard to reach through conventional methods. (4), (5), (6)
10. Peers can reinforce learning through ongoing contact. (1), (6)

Implications for Prevention:

Peer education has been utilized in health projects seeking to reduce the incidence of smoking among young people. Peer education has also been used to reduce substance misuse. Peer education seems to be gaining popularity in relation to HIV prevention and sexual health promotion. This form of informal network has allowed young people to access other people in places where they tend to congregate. With the use of a good peer program, peer education can prove to be effective.

Summary Provided By:

Joanne McNemar and Prince Covington