

JUST SIX
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH
SUMMARY



Back to the basics: identifying positive youth development as the theoretical framework for a youth drug prevention program in rural Saskatchewan, Canada amidst a program evaluation

Key Details

KEY WORDS

Youth drug prevention program, outreach worker service, rural school, positive youth development, program evaluation, 40 developmental assets

POPULATION GROUP

Rural youth

STEPPING UP THEMES

Health and Wellness

RESEARCH ORIGIN

Canada

SOURCE

Academic

LINK

https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Colleen_Dell/publication/258035076_Back_to_the_basics_Identifying_positive_youth_development_as_the_theoretical_framework_for_a_youth_drug_prevention_program_in_rural_Saskatchewan_Canada_amidst_a_program_evaluation/links/5421478e0cf203f155c62a2c.pdf?origin=publication_detail

“If time does not permit for the establishment of evidence-informed goals and objectives at the start-up of a program, obtaining insight and expertise from program personnel and school staff and administrators can bring the program to a point where this can be achieved and theoretical linkages made after a program has been implemented”

1. What is the research about?

This research describes how a school-based health promotion program designed to work with youth (age 12 – 17) to prevent mental health and substance abuse issues, used a process evaluation as an opportunity to better understand its goals, service objectives, participants, and program theory. The Outreach Worker Service (OWS) provides skill-building activities and basic counseling for youth and referrals for youth who need more care. Its goals are twofold: 1. Decrease risk of substance abuse and mental health issues; and, 2. Build on protective factors, including community strengths. It had been running for three years and the organization wanted to do a process evaluation but in order to complete one, the researchers needed to do “preparatory” work. This research describes that process and how understanding program theory importantly supports youth program evaluation.

2. Where did the research take place?

This evaluation took place in the Prince Albert Parkland Health Region in eight rural schools, in communities with high levels of poverty, and where there are limited extracurricular activities available for youth.

3. Who is this research about?

This research is about the OWS program.

4. How was the research done?

Data was collected in a variety of ways. Researchers conducted four in depth focus groups with OWS staff, which lasted approximately 180 minutes. Focus groups were held with school staff, including eight principals, two superintendents, and 23 school staff. These interviews typically lasted 90 minutes. Each interview was semi-structured and guided by an interview and focus group guide.

5. What are the key findings?

The evaluation research process clarified the OWS’s primary program goals, service objectives, program participants, and theoretical framework:

Program Goals

1. To promote the wellbeing of youth, schools and communities by increasing youths’ 40 developmental assets to prevent/minimize the problematic use of alcohol and other drugs and substances, and related mental health concerns with four groups of youth through building therapeutic relationships, asset development and application, education and community involvement.

2. To be part of the culture of the school by connecting with youth, families, the school and broader community. This includes community development, recognizing that communities within the Outreach Worker Service are at different stages of engagement.

Service Objectives

1. Build therapeutic relationships with youth
2. Develop youth assets
3. Educate youth, staff and community
4. Develop the community

Program Participants

OSW staff struggled with the tension between a positive youth development (PYD) approach that focuses on youth assets and the characterization and assessment of the youth as 'at-risk'. OSW staff work most with youth who have low developmental assets, but also with youth experiencing minor mental health issues, and youth with low social life skills. Males and females have different needs, as do on-reserve and off-reserve Aboriginal youth.

Program Theory

Researchers identified PYD as a theoretical framework that aligned with the program because of it can be applied to all youth (not only 'at-risk' youth), it recognizes that development occurs in different interconnected contexts, sees youths as resources, and works to promote youth assets.

6. Why does this research matter for youth work?

Youth programs often lack the time and resources to fully develop a program theory prior to implementation. This evaluation research describes a process for identifying a program's goals, service objectives, participants, and theoretical framework which are key to conducting a full program evaluation. The researchers found that an evidence-base does support the OWS model and processes. This process evaluation enabled OWS staff to come to a clear and shared understanding of their program.

It also enabled them to document the rationale for changes to their program that are based being responsive to program participants. This research demonstrates that a program theory can be developed after a program is running. It also demonstrates the value of flexibility in programming in order to allow for responsiveness and adaptation. Finally, the process enabled the program to align itself with the PYD framework and draw on its significant evidence-base.



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