Evaluation of Teens in Action: A Social and Emotional Learning Program in a Community Setting with a Service-Learning Component

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Presentation Objectives

- Background
- Teens in Action (TIA)
- Evaluation Questions
- Methods
- Results
- Implications

Background on Social and Emotional Learning

- Definition
  - "Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions."[1, 2]

- Benefits of SEL
  - Significant improvement with social and emotional skills, behaviors, attitudes, and academic performance, as well as reductions in risky behaviors.[3]

Theoretical Foundation

- The theoretical foundation of SEL is rooted in multiple theories including:[4]
  - Social Learning Theory
  - Health Belief Model
  - Theories of Behavior Change
  - Child Development
  - Information Processing
  - Ecological Systems

Risky Behaviors

- Background on risky behaviors (RBs)
  - Risky behaviors can be defined as a behavior that can involve immediate reward from the perspective of the individual (e.g., becoming inebriated/high, or sexual satisfaction) that can lead to negative or harmful consequences.[6]

Risky Behaviors Statistics

- The 2015 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) reported that 1.2 million or about 1 in 20 adolescents ages 12-17 had substance use disorders in the U.S.[7]

- The 2015 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) showed that 61.4% of high school students that drove a car 30 days prior to the survey reported that they had driven under the influence of alcohol one or more times.[8]

Risky Behaviors Statistics

- Research has shown that roughly 21% of adolescents during their most recent sexual experience had been under the influence of substances.[8,9]

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that roughly 20 million new STIs occur each year in the United States, and half of them occur within adolescents and young adults ages 15-24.[10]

Teens In Action

- The Teens in Action program (TIA) is a community-based SEL program with a Service-Learning (SL) component working with participants that are high school aged.
  - Runs during entire school year
  - Monthly workshops
  - Large scale service-learning project
  - Leadership component
  - Graduation ceremony

Lack of Literature

- There is limited literature on SEL programs in a community setting specifically targeting high school aged participants that also incorporates a SL component.

- To date, there have been no "host programs" that have met the standard of having 3 efficacious trials in regards to SEL in an "after-school" or community setting, let alone with a SL component.[11] (p.262)

Purpose

- The purpose of the qualitative process evaluation of the Teens In Action program was to explore the participants experiences with the program, how they define RBs and TIA's influence on them, and if any program modifications could be made.
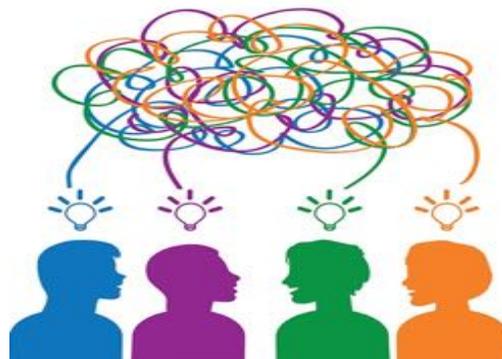
Evaluation Questions

1. What are the participants in Teens in Action experiencing?

2. How do the participants define risky behaviors and has the program affected their decision-making around risky behaviors?

3. Do the experiences of the participants in TIA suggest the potential for modifications aimed at responsible decision-making regarding risky behaviors?

METHODS

Focus Groups

- Six focus groups were conducted with 2 groups of teen leaders and 4 groups with new and returning participants (n=42).

- Sample questions included:

    Section 1-
    - What do you think the TIA program consists of?
    - Section 2-
        - What comes to mind when you hear the term "risky behavior"?
        - In what ways has the Teens in Action program influenced how you make decisions about the risky behaviors, for example drinking alcohol or having unprotected sex?
    - Section 3-
        - What elements or activities could be added to the program to better prepare you for making decisions about risky behaviors?
        - What are your suggestions for the TIA program overall?
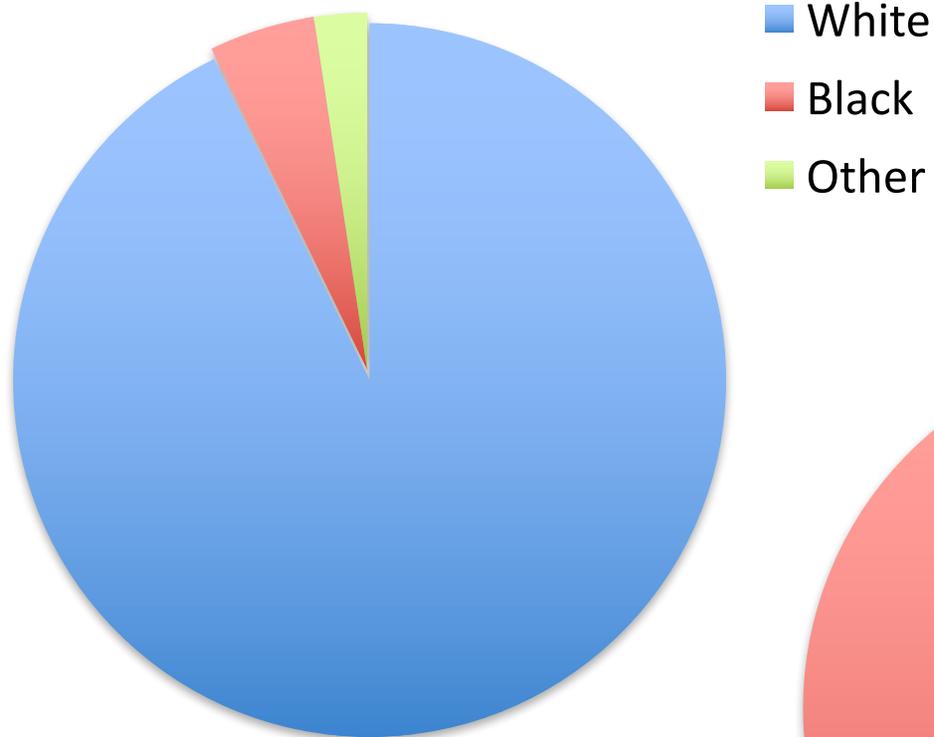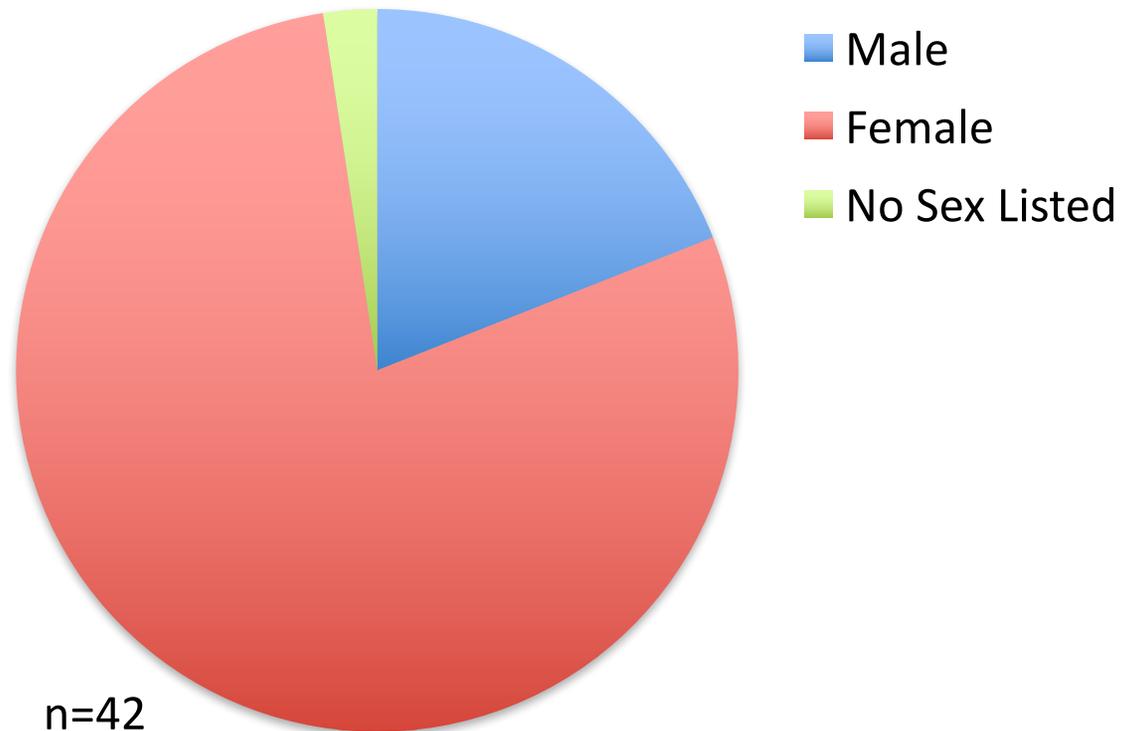
Data Analysis

- After collection of the data:

  -Creation of codebook and major themes agreed upon   by both study team members

  -All transcripts were coded independently by each study team member to ensure inter-rater reliability (.77)

  -MAXQDA (v. 12.3) was utilized to organize and further analyze our results

RESULTS

Results

- Major themes
  - Evaluation question 1
    - Participant experiences –WS, BC, CD, SL
    - Social and emotional skills gained
    - Service-learning experiences
  - Evaluation question 2
    - Risky behaviors defined
    - Perceptions of substance use and risky sexual behaviors
    - Perceptions of consequences of risky behaviors
    - TIA influence on RBs
  - Evaluation question 3
    - Did TIA prepare them
    - Suggestions for program

Participant Experiences

"Yeah when I first joined it, I literally didn't have any idea that it was gonna be about emotional building and how to say no and being open and building characteristics of leadership... I thought it was just strictly, you get community service hours and it looks good on college applications. But now I've learned so much."

- Able to describe experiences and connections to the SL projects
- Engaged in boot camp, workshops and service-learning
- Understood premise of social and emotional learning

Evaluation question 1

Social and Emotional Skills Gained

"I've never liked sharing my emotions with people. Just because I'm a very private person. But just realizing that being emotional doesn't make you weak, has made me be more open to just talking to people about my issues and stuff like that."

- Better ways to communicate
- More aware of their feelings and the feelings of others
- Self-confidence
- Able to step out of their comfort zone

Evaluation question 1

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"I do Teen Court and that helps me open my eyes to a bunch of different people, like different backgrounds and people who might have harder lives than me. And it also helps me see what not to do so you don't end up in that position."

"It teaches you commitment because sometimes our programs are kind of early in the mornings and you're like, oh I don't want to get up and go. But you're like, no. They're depending on me. I committed to this, I need to stick to it."

- Positive personal and social experiences
- Learning cultural competence
- Positive risks and start relationships
- Opening eyes to others experiences

Evaluation question 1

Risky Behaviors Defined

"Behavior that could put you in a bad position where you might have to make a bad decision, like drinking or drugs."

"I'd say drugs, or… driving under the influence."

"Sexual activity if you're not prepared for it."

"Unprotected sex."

- Able to define risky behaviors

Evaluation question 2

Perceptions of Substance Use and Risky Sexual Behaviors

"I think if you're involved in these activities or do it regularly, it can lead you up for your life and then you can get addicted to it as you get older."

"And also people have the mentality that people getting pregnant is never going to happen to them."

"Yeah I think a lot of kids have unprotected sex or not even unprotected, just un-responsible. And that leads to STDs and stuff."

- Understanding that substances and their use could lead to addiction
- "Invincibility clause"
- Understanding of negative consequences from unsafe sex and that it is a taboo subject that is not often discussed

Evaluation question 2

Commonality of SU and RSB

"It's not a shock when you hear (crosstalk: "yeah") someone was smoking in the bathroom at school."

"It's [risky behaviors] becoming a normal thing. If you hear about it, it's not weird."

"It's hard to realize how common it [drug use] is. And going into high school I was kind of shocked at how many people I know that, are really into that stuff and how detrimental it can be to them."

- Unexpected finding
- Participants frequently mentioned how common SU and RSB is among their peers and teens in general, especially SU.

Evaluation question 2

Perceptions of Consequences of Risky Behaviors

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"You're not necessarily thinking about your future when you're under the influence, you're not really aware of everything that's going on and aware of what could happen if you do get pregnant."

"…they don't think about the future per se. …they just kind of think about what's going on right now and don't think how it could impact them or others in the future."

- Understanding that engaging in risky behaviors could have negative consequences on their future, like harm to self or others, unplanned pregnancy, or incarceration

Evaluation question 2

TIA Influence on RBs

"With all the skills we learn it helps us think things through. So if we're presented with a situation rather than making a decision, just based on the irrelevant facts, we really think through what's going to happen and we can, we see the bigger picture."

"That's another thing about Teens in Action, its gives you a place where you can just talk and you don't feel pressured to, that you're gonna say the wrong thing. This is a completely open discussion type thing about any topic if you need help with it."

- Perceptions of consequences of risky behaviors
- Ability to think things through
- Choosing the right people
- Knowing their values

Evaluation question 2

Elements and Activities to Add

"I feel sometimes we talk about things… that we wouldn't really be able to use them in our life. When we're there in the workshop, it's like, oh yeah I'll use this all the time. But in reality we wouldn't."

"But if either a high schooler or a college student came and if they had an experience with a risky behavior that they joined in, and then they had a negative consequence. And they could talk about how they got into it and how it happened and what they learned from it."

- Participants had good awareness of what they liked and disliked about the implementation of the program and the program overall.
- Suggestions for modifications
  – Smaller groups=more interaction
  – Additional workshops/discussion about risky behaviors led by teen leaders or young guest speaker

Evaluation question 3

Comparison between Teen Leaders and New and Returning Students

Teen Leaders

- Deeper level of engagement
- Had complaints that were met with solutions
- More likely to agree that TIA prepared them

New & Returning Students

- Had more general complaints and fewer solutions
- Less likely to agree that TIA prepared them, thought the skills learned did not relate

Similarities

All participants were able to describe the program components including:
Boot camp, workshops, competency domains, and the idea that TIA is so much more than just a community service program.

Implementation

- Appropriate & relevant for this age group? ✓
  - Yes, but more realistic examples needed

- Home-grown program

Implications for Adolescent Behavioral Health

- Evaluation questions
  - 1. What are participants in TIA experiencing?
  - 2. How do the participants in TIA define risky behaviors and has the program affected their responsible decision-making around risky behaviors?
  - 3. Do the experiences of the participants involved in TIA suggest the potential for modifications aimed at responsible decision-making regarding risky behaviors?

- Future research

The Impact on Us

"I think also if in the community service part, even though we are also getting the other benefits of social and emotional learning, I think when we do leave the program it has taught us how to be more involved in the community. So that when we don't have a project or an organization like Teens in Action to help us get those opportunities to get in the environment, I know how to go out and get the opportunities more for myself now."

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