

Youth as Volunteer Teachers: A Case Study

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THE PROBLEM

National data related to youth at risk problem behaviors show Nevada to be among the highest for school dropouts, substance abuse, and teen pregnancy. While many different programs have been created to deal with the problems, researchers identify self-esteem as an important variable (Demo, Small & Williams, 1987) when dealing with youth at risk. Self-esteem is important because it is an individual's view of his/her abilities to succeed. Positive feelings about oneself appear to increase successful performance (Bandura, 1982). For example, youth with high self-esteem are less vulnerable to peer pressure related to drinking, taking drugs, or engaging in sex (Glenn & Nelson, 1987). Success in school is also affected by self-esteem. Coopersmith's research (1987) indicates that children with high self-esteem perform better in their school work than children with lower levels of self-esteem.

This article describes an innovative educational program designed to increase self-esteem by involving adolescent youth as volunteer teachers in public schools. The concept for the program was based on peer educator research (Maheady, 1985). The project, called "Volunteer Teacher Program," allows youth an opportunity to experience success as a volunteer and to receive the admiration and respect of younger age students. In the classroom, the youth teachers were the center of attention and a positive role model for children in kindergarten through sixth grades. The older youth teaching younger youth approach was used as a format for a safe, positive, successful volunteer experience resulting in an increase in self-esteem for the volunteer teachers.

Seventy-six youth (ages 12 to 17) were recruited as volunteer teachers. They

taught a series of one hour presentations to 3,500 students in a Nevada mining community of 10,000 school-age children.

VOLUNTEER TEACHER PROGRAM

This description of the Volunteer Teacher Program will include these elements: a) educational presentations, b) pilot testing, c) recruitment and training, d) teaching assignments, and e) evaluation.

Educational Presentations

Nevada Cooperative Extension Youth Development and Education Specialists (Extension Specialists) developed a series of one hour presentations for kindergarten through sixth grade children. Topics included: a) where do we get our food, b) water conservation, c) self-esteem, d) make up your mind about alcohol, e) trees in conservation, and f) dress for success.

Topics for the Volunteer Teacher Program were determined based on the local school district's curriculum. Selection of specific educational presentations were made after receiving requests from individual teachers. The Extension Specialists designed the presentations to include a variety of teaching methods; included were minilectures, slides, role playing, and puppets.

Pilot Testing

Each educational presentation was pilot tested at a local school by the volunteer teachers. The principal of the pilot school evaluated the presentations for content and subsequently recommended to the curriculum development specialist at the local school district that the Volunteer Teacher Program be implemented at other schools.

Prior to testing, the Extension Specialist contacted the curriculum development specialist who reviewed the program

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material for content validity. Based upon this review and the positive recommendation from the pilot school principal, the Volunteer Teacher Program was implemented.

Recruitment and Training

Youth organizations, including 4-H, scouts and Native American youth organizations, agreed to notify their members about the Volunteer Teacher Program. Youth interested in this program agreed to attend a one day training session, rehearse an educational presentation (generally with parents) and conduct a presentation at least once during the year.

The training session included topics such as teaching methods, how to dress, and presentation strategies. During this training, volunteers observed an experienced person conducting a presentation. In addition to the training session, volunteers practiced their presentations at home with family members or with adult leaders from youth organizations with which they are involved. These practice sessions helped to insure consistency in content and provided for quality presentations. Practice sessions also helped to build confidence among the volunteer teachers. Finally, to honor their commitment, volunteers agreed to specific teaching assignments at assigned schools.

Teaching Assignments

Volunteers generated teaching opportunities by contacting "favorite" teachers. They also made use of contacts (leads) from younger siblings' classroom teachers, church youth-group leaders, and other youth organization leaders. Besides these valuable leads, Extension Specialists identified teaching opportunities for the volunteer teachers by sending a sign-up form to each elementary classroom teacher in the school district. In turn, teachers returned the completed sign-up form to the County Extension Office to schedule a presentation by a volunteer teacher. Extension staff matched these requests with appropriate volunteer teachers.

Evaluation

The elements of evaluation for the Volunteer Teacher Program described here are: a)

analysis of data, b) results, c) participant comments, and d) program implementation.

Analysis of Data. A goal of this program was to measure the increase in self-esteem of the volunteer teachers. The study of self-esteem employed a variation of Campbell and Stanley's (1966, p. 47) nonequivalent control group design. The volunteer teachers' pretest and posttest self-esteem scores were compared using a paired t-test. Analysis of co-variables was used to test differences between self-esteem scores of the volunteers who had taught and a similar group of 4-H members who had not participated in the program using each group's scores on the lie scale as co-variables during the analysis.

The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory (1987) consists of four sub-scales which propose to measure four independent aspects of self-esteem and one separate scale which the authors identify as a "lie scale." The lie scale is provided as a measure of one's truthfulness in completing the instrument. Since the Coopersmith Inventory admittedly has high face validity, early research in its development found that some respondents tended to score higher than would be expected because of an apparent "defensiveness" in their character. The lie scale consists of eight statements to which (theoretically) no one should respond affirmatively. (Examples: "I always do the right thing." "I never worry about anything.") These items were distributed throughout the instrument. The lie scale was used as a moderating variable in our analysis of self-esteem in order to control for its effect on subscale scores. By holding lie scale scores constant, one may in essence correct scores which may be "artificially" high.

The four sub-scales of self-esteem developed in the Coopersmith instrument are: "Social Self/Peers," "Home/Parents," "School/Academic," and "General/Self." As implied in each sub-scale name, self-esteem is measured in numerous ways. Items in each sub-scale relate to how the respondents view themselves with regard to social interaction with peers, homelife and parents, school and academic surroundings, and their general self-perception.

Table I
Self-Esteem Scores of Volunteer Teachers Before and After Teaching a Class

Sub-scale	Before Teaching	After Teaching	t
1. General/Self	12.3	14.2	3.64**
2. Home/Parents	4.6	5.4	2.48*
3. School/Academic	5.5	5.7	.58

*p<.05

**p<.01

The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory was administered as a pretest to 76 volunteer teachers (treatment group) during the Volunteer Teacher Program training. A posttest was administered to the treatment group and a comparison group (n=54) six months following the training session. A pretest was not administered to the comparison group. The comparison group was composed of a demographically similar group of youth organization members who had not participated in the Volunteer Teacher Program (e.g., age, sex, ethnicity, locality).

Results. The treatment group showed a significant increase in self-esteem as measured by the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory on both the general/self and home/parents sub-scales (Table I). Although not significant at the .05 alpha level, the school/academic sub-scale scores also increased slightly. The social self/peer sub-scale was dropped from the analysis due to low reliability for this sam-

ple. (Note: Prior to analysis, all sub-scales were reduced to their most internally consistent form using Chronbach's alpha coefficient. Any sub-scale having fewer than five items or an alpha coefficient lower than .60 was not used in the final analysis).

Significant differences were found in the self-esteem posttest scores between the treatment groups and the comparison group when controlling for the effect of lie scale scores (Table II). Statistically significant differences were seen in the general/self and the school/academic sub-scales. The home/parents' sub-scale showed no statistical difference between the two groups. When taking a closer look at the differences in scores between the two groups, volunteer teachers scored higher in all categories. Again, the self/peers sub-scale was not used due to low reliability in the final analysis.

The results of the Volunteer Teacher Program were dramatic. Volunteer teachers taught 3,523 youth (ages 5 to 12), about

Table II
Self-Esteem Scores of Volunteer Teachers and a Similar Group of Youth Club Members After Controlling for the Effects of Scores on the Lie Scale

Sub-scale	Volunteer Teachers	Comparison Group	t
1. General/Self	14.18	12.54	5.00*
2. Home/Parents	5.36	4.91	1.51
3. School/Academic	5.71	4.70	5.66*

*p<.05

one-third of the school age population in the area. In addition, classroom teachers who observed the youth volunteers rated ninety percent of the presentations as excellent.

Participants' Comments. Many people closest to the volunteer teachers have noticed big changes since the teens began training as educators. The mother of one of the participants said that ". . . this (Volunteer Teacher Program) is the best program my son has ever been involved in. I can see a big improvement in his feelings of self-esteem and importance."

One of the volunteers returned to a former teacher's elementary classroom to teach. The elementary teacher had an opportunity to observe the growth of her former student as a result of involvement in the Volunteer Teacher Program. The teacher said, "Her self-esteem is excellent. Lori was a real quiet girl, and now she's really come out." Lori's mother credits her daughter's poise and speaking ability to the program, and believes that being able to get up in front of people will prove a future asset, particularly if she chooses teaching as a career.

Responses from the teachers and students participating in the Volunteer Teacher Program have been positive as well. Students in one classroom that received the program on alcohol prevention wrote to the volunteer teacher stating that they had learned how to say "no" to their friends who wanted them to drink. The classroom teacher stated, ". . . the lesson on the dangers of alcohol abuse is an excellent introduction to a longer course given later by the Sheriff's Department."

"They (the younger students) learn so quickly from a peer," said one elementary school principal. "Because of the warmth generated between them and the teachers, a lot of learning is gained." Further, the principal added, teen teachers are a tremendous help in alleviating teacher shortage in a school with a student enrollment increase of 200 percent in two years.

Besides these valuable comments, the principal of one elementary school commented that ". . . the staff and students look forward to having your volunteer teachers at Mountain View Elementary. . . .

All of the students' (presentations) have been organized, pleasant and (students have been) well versed in their topic. Topics for the different lessons are excellent—covering a varied range of subjects dealing with life and nature."

Program Implications. Two significant implications can be seen as a result of this successful Volunteer Teacher Program. A similar Volunteer Teacher Program was offered to specific high risk youth in early 1990. These high risk youth served as "High Risk Educators" in an adaptation of the Volunteer Teacher Program. A second implication of the program was the participation of the volunteer teachers in outreach programs especially with senior citizens.

High Risk Educators. The High Risk Educators is a group of eight potential high school dropouts. The Extension Specialist worked with a local high school counselor and principal to identify freshman and sophomore high school students who are potential dropouts based on specific criteria. The identified students were encouraged to apply for the program by the high school counselor. They were offered \$100 as incentive to participate in the program. Job Opportunities in Nevada (JOIN), a federally funded work program, provided the incentive grants.

To participate in this program and receive the incentive grant, these high risk educators attended a training program similar to the one discussed in this article. However, several adaptations were made for this audience. First, a teen coach was included as one of the trainers for the high risk educators. This high school senior was selected for her enthusiasm, leadership abilities, and excellent communication skills. She was one of the original pilot testers for the Volunteer Teacher Program. The teen coach served as a role model and motivator for the high risk teens.

The training program was further adapted for this high risk group by working in small groups with intensive adult/teen coach support. The coaching sessions were conducted at the training site instead of home with parents. Teach-

ing activities included self-esteem building activities and discussions about future careers, activities specifically designed for the audience. The training program and coaching sessions were conducted in two-hour sessions after school. The high risk educators attended fourteen hours of training/coaching before they went into the classroom to teach.

After completing the fourteen hours of training/coaching sessions, the high risk educators conducted latchkey safety presentations for students in third grade classes. The high risk teens taught in teams of two. Each team was given a portion of the two-hour presentation. The amount of time individuals taught was based on their ability and enthusiasm to teach. Each high risk teen participated in the presentation and role playing in the classroom with the teen coach on the sidelines for guidance. The latchkey skills they taught included: how to be safe when alone, what to do to avoid problems when walking home from school, and how to answer the phone and door when home alone.

The high risk educators were also involved in the impact evaluation to show the knowledge gain of their students. The volunteer teachers administered a pretest and posttest on latchkey skills to measure their students' knowledge gain. They also conducted a survey of parents to see if the latchkey concepts were implemented at home. The high risk educators presented these results to the principals of the high school and elementary school at a final presentation. Preparation of this impact report and presentation took another six hours of the high risk educators' time after school.

The results of this pilot project are encouraging. The eight high risk teens showed an increase in self-esteem using the Coopersmith Inventory in a pretest-posttest design. Seven of the educators showed an increase in school self-esteem. Three showed an increase in social self-esteem. Comparisons of grade point averages and attendance records before and after the program show trends toward improvement. Initial indicators from teachers, parents, counselors, and self-evaluation indicate observable changes in

these potential dropouts' attitude toward school. These students will be tracked through graduation from high school as a final measure of the project's success.

The results of measuring the knowledge gain of the third grade students taught by the high risk educators has been completed. Comparisons of the pretest and posttest survey of latchkey skills showed a forty-five percent increase in knowledge gain. There was a significant decrease in the most missed questions comparing pretest to posttest. The results of the parent survey showed sixty percent of the children discussed latchkey skills with their parents after the program. These results indicate the effectiveness of the high risk teens as teachers in this win-win situation. The high risk teens showed increases in self-esteem, especially toward school. The elementary students increased their knowledge about latchkey skills.

Outreach Programs. A second implication of the original program is seen as many of the volunteer teachers became involved as volunteers in other outreach programs in the community. For example, a 14-year-old volunteer teaches water conservation at a Senior Citizen's Center. The volunteer teacher said that he likes the interaction with the elderly because he learns from them. It's evident that the learning goes both ways. The seniors are interested in the volunteer teacher's emphasis on the environment as well.

"What's so wonderful about this program is that the seniors think the young people are real important," reports the center director. "The students (volunteer teachers) get immediate approval and, by the same token, they get a sense of continuity from the seniors in a very transient community." Where interaction with family role models is not always possible, these volunteer teachers got a similar kind of support as a result of their experience in teaching seniors at a Senior Citizen's Center.

CONCLUSIONS

Because of the Volunteer Teacher Program, adolescent youth felt better about themselves after having a positive, successful volunteer experience. The 76

teenagers in this program showed a statistically significant increase in self-esteem as measured by the Coopersmith Inventory. Equally important, they were able to teach a series of one-hour presentations to 3,500 elementary age students in this rapidly growing community of 10,000 school-aged children.

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Letters

Dear Anne:

Congratulations to you and to Nancy Macduff, Guest Editor of the Fall 1989 edition of *The Journal of Volunteer Administration*. It is a great issue! Thank you for timely, well-chosen material . . . what a good way to "kick-start" the nineties.

Thank you for your consideration in this regard, and once again "great work"!

Very truly yours,
Terri Adair, Manager
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