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Rachel Faust
Minnesota State University Mankato

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SEA Program Process Evaluation: Improving Existing Evaluation Methods

Rachel Faust
Department of Social Work
Minnesota State University, Mankato



Background

The Student Experiential Education (SEA) Program began in Goodhue County Education District in 1995. The program was created to meet the needs of students with Emotional/ Behavioral Disorders (E/BD). The use of experiential education methods were implemented to break away from traditional intervention models in an effort to motivate students receiving Special Education services to attend and excel in school, as well as increase graduation rates.

The SEA Program typically operates four courses throughout the school year: Challenge Course, Winter Survival, Scuba Diving, and a Habitat for Humanity trip. These courses are designed, in addition to academic benefits, to teach life long skills such as team building, decision making, conflict resolution, leadership, and development of self-esteem and positive relationships.

Purpose

The purpose of this project was to provide a process evaluation to more closely define how the program is currently being monitored, areas of quality assurance, and to create tools to aid in long term data analysis and collection of program outcomes. Staff and stakeholders of the program identified needs related to the program's evolution which has since created transition and instability in how outcomes are tracked.

Due to increasing demands of current and potential funders to provide concrete objectives and outcome measurements, as well as to provide consistency in tracking between multiple schools that participate in the program, the goal was to build a replicable system that would aid in improving existing evaluation methods and enhance future efforts.

Literature Review

Experiential Education

- ❖ The SEA Program was designed rooted in the Native American "Circle of Courage" model, which identifies four universal needs of all children: Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity. (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2005)
- ❖ Experiential education encompasses a wide variety of activities that generally involve problem-solving, group cooperation, and reflection on experience. (Gibbons, Ebbeck, Concepcion & Li, 2010)

Process Evaluation

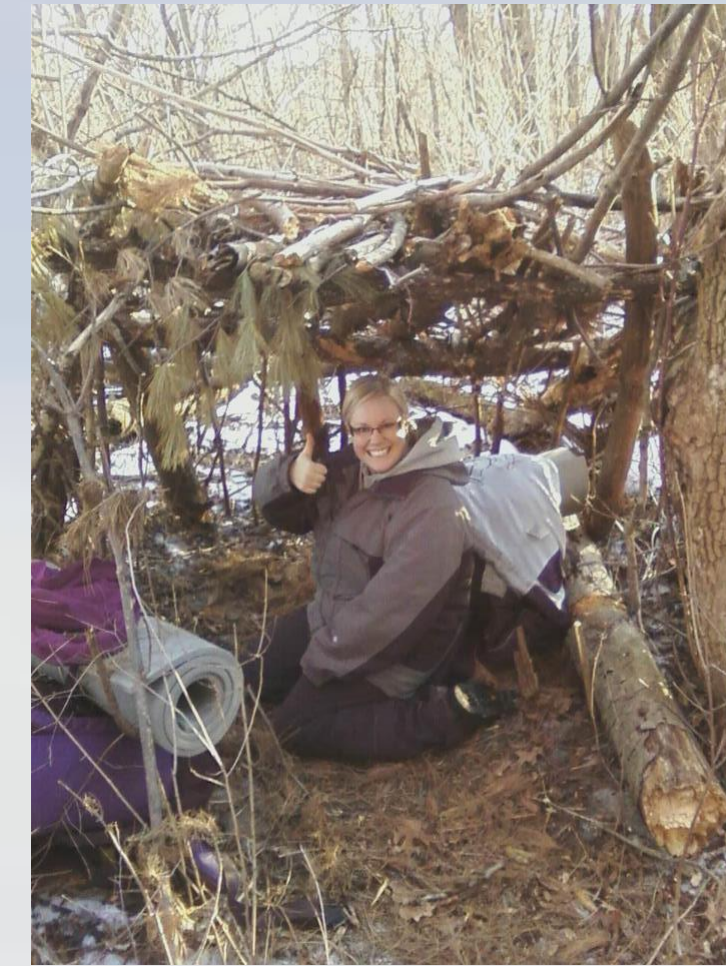
- ❖ A process evaluation can be used to inform others what to expect if launching a similar program, assist in explaining outcomes, and to help define what data should be routinely collected. (Royle, Thyer, Padgett & Logan, 2006)

Diverse and At-Risk Populations

- ❖ Students who may struggle in a traditional academic setting because of emotional, behavioral, learning, health or other disabilities, can create knowledge from experience rather just from received instruction. (Bergsteiner, Avery & Neumann, 2010)
- ❖ "Practical intelligence is defined as the ability to meet pro-social goals by developing one's strengths and overcoming limitations. By that definition, every child can be remarkably intelligent and resilient." (Brendtro, et al., 2005)

References

References are available from the author upon request.



Not everything important can be measured, and not everything that can be measured is important.
-Albert Einstein

Methodology

| | |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Step 1: Concept Development | Use tools such as a Logic Model, an informal needs assessment, and available SEA Program materials such as brochures & grant applications to clarify program goals and objectives. |
| Step 2: Analysis | Use information collected to identify desired primary outcomes and incorporate into developing a measurement tracking system. |
| Step 3: Instrument and Tool Creation | Create survey instruments and data tools to assist in data collection and tracking for a transferrable template for use by participating schools. |
| Step 4: Recommendations | Provide recommendations for further study and implementation of ongoing SEA Program evaluation. |

Results

| Intended Outcome Area | Evaluation Activities | Information Needed | Methods of Data Collection | Time Frame | Person Responsible |
|--------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Educational Priorities | -Grades | -Student grade level -Grades/GPA Improvement -Homework completion | -Grade reports -I-Cue and Case Manager quarterly grade report -I-Cue assignment detail* | -Quarterly | -Case Manager |
| | -Attendance | -Absences/tardies | -Attendance records* | -Quarterly | -Paraprofessional |
| | -Credits earned | -Successful completion of each program -Credits earned through SEA | -Transcript* | -Quarterly | -Case Manager |
| | -High school graduation | -Total SEA Programs participated in -Year of graduation/GED | -Transcript | -Senior year of student | -School Social Worker |
| Developed Relationships/ Mentoring | -Anecdotal | -Student input on program impact/staff and peer relationships | -Student Interview | -Yearly | -School Social Worker |
| | -Positive changes in relationships | -Relationships with role models, development of protective factors | -Survey assessment* | -Yearly (pre/posttest) | -School Social Worker |
| Evidence Intervention Affects Similar Situations | -Anecdotal | -Student input on program impact | -Student Interview* | -Yearly | -School Social Worker |
| | -Repeat # of programs participated in | -Yearly program participation | -Program attendance records | -Yearly | -School Social Worker |
| | -Behavioral offenses | -Number of referrals to planning room, Principal, ISS, Suspension | -Planning room data sheet -Attendance records | -Quarterly | -Paraprofessional |
| | -Post secondary follow up | -Individual life course after graduation from high school | -Post Secondary Follow Up interviews via phone, email, or in person* | -1, 2, and 5 years post-graduation | -School Social Worker |

* Indicates items developed to assist in data collection or tracking. See Product.

Recommendations

After completing a process evaluation of the SEA Program, the following recommendations can be made to further enhance the ongoing efforts for long term evaluation procedures within the program:

- ❖ All school social workers from various schools in Goodhue County Education District that participate in the SEA Program should meet to discuss ongoing evaluation efforts and familiarize themselves with universal evaluation expectations. School social workers should be designated as the leader of collection efforts for their school and student participants.
- ❖ Assessment tools and databases should be evaluated on an ongoing basis in order to determine if they are meeting the needs of the evaluation efforts. Redesign, adaptation, or creation of new tools may be necessary.
- ❖ Program staff and stakeholders should designate a leader of evaluation and data efforts for the SEA Program. This could be one of the school's social workers, or a hired or contracted evaluation specialist. Funding for this position could be added to future grant requests.
- ❖ Current, consistent, and ongoing data for each student and school should be collected and analyzed each school year. This can be done utilizing the additional data collection methods developed as well as tracking databases to assess long term outcomes.
- ❖ Program staff should identify an additional focus for outcomes that will be universally appealing to a variety of funders in order to feasibly replicate requests for funds in order to best sustain the program long-term. Current evaluation methods are designed based on the program's most consistent and substantial funder, but as funding becomes increasingly competitive and sparse, it is important to diversify it's resources and appeal to a wide audience.
- ❖ Strengths and impacts of this program should be shared in the greater community!

Implications for Practice

Upon review of literature, the project's course of study, and consideration of future recommendations, it is evident that experiential education has a significant positive impact on students. While there is a great deal of research on the effectiveness of experiential education, and similarly implementation of such programs in schools today, there is less emphasis on evaluation of these programs.

Due to the fact that many of these programs, particularly within a school setting, are facilitated through grant funded opportunities, it is extremely important that adequate program evaluation process occur in order to note the successes of these programs in appealing to funders. Programs serving children and teens need to develop their own systems for effective research and evaluation, based on best practices (Brendtro, et al., 2005).

Social workers must continue to design and implement effective evaluations of individual program outcomes and objectives in order to continue to support students through experiential education.

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