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Psychosocial Impact of Training and Work Experience on EFNEP Paraprofessionals

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Abstract: Although considerable data has been gathered documenting impact of local EFNEP programs on enrolled participants, little documentation exists concerning the effect of EFNEP on paraprofessionals conducting these programs. The qualitative study reported here identifies types of psychosocial change in paraprofessionals resulting from EFNEP training and work experience. Identified areas of change include skill development, community status, relationships with family/community, ways of viewing others, increased caring for others, and increased self-esteem. Factors contributing to change include paraprofessionals' indigenous status, personal identification with work, training, support, and work experiences. These findings have implications for the hiring, training, and support of paraprofessionals.

Introduction

The strength of the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) is its unique approach to reaching families through the use of paraprofessionals indigenous to the target population. Extension professionals train these paraprofessionals in a specific nutrition education curriculum, and they in turn teach these nutrition concepts to low-income families at the community level.

More than 100 studies have been written about the EFNEP program since its inception in 1968 (Scholl, 2004). However, most of these studies have focused on nutrition knowledge and/or behavioral aspects of nutritional change. Furthermore, these studies have focused on the EFNEP students, or *participants*. There is little documentation concerning the effect of EFNEP on the *paraprofessionals* who conduct these programs.

The research study reported here explored the role of the EFNEP paraprofessional and the changes that individual paraprofessionals experience as a result of their involvement in the program. Specifically, the study focused on psychosocial aspects of changes in EFNEP paraprofessionals and factors that influence these changes. The study was conducted with paraprofessionals of the University of Georgia Cooperative

Extension EFNEP. This article describes the methods, findings, and implications of this research.

Methods

A qualitative study was conducted through four focus groups with 20 EFNEP paraprofessionals. Participants were asked to respond to questions from an interview guide that was approved by the University Institutional Review Board. Each of the four groups was audiotaped.

In qualitative research, data collection and analysis correspond as a simultaneous activity. Because of this, the constant comparative method was chosen for data analysis. This is a systematic process for analyzing data that involves constantly comparing occurrences in the data in order to develop themes or categories (Merriam, 1998). Analysis was begun by listening to the four tapes and developing a transcript of each focus group. By methodically reviewing the transcripts, and using a cut and paste process, themes began to develop by which entries could be grouped together. With this visual approach, it was feasible to break the data into manageable chunks and reach logical conclusions and recommendations.

Focus Group Profiles

The four focus groups took place in Extension offices. Supervising Extension agents helped with arrangements but did not participate in the focus groups. Demographics of participants are described in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1.
Personal Characteristics of Study Participants # 1

Participant Characteristics	Range	Mean (n = 20)
Age	31 - 66	49
Years in their community	1 - 60	49
Years in EFNEP	<1 - 20	5

Table 2.
Personal Characteristics of Study Participants # 2

Participant Characteristics	Frequency (n = 20)
Gender	
Female	20
Male	0
Location	
Rural	7

Urban	13
Education	
High school graduate	3
Some Tech school	1
Tech school graduate	2
Some College	13
College graduate	1
Race	
African American	11
White	9
Ethnicity	
Hispanic	5
Non-Hispanic	15

Findings

An earlier study found that EFNEP *participants* experience changes outside the realm of nutrition education that may be considered psychological, affective, or social in nature (Hernecheck-Buck, 1986). More than 20 years later, the study reported here concludes that EFNEP *paraprofessionals* also experience psychosocial change. Specific findings were related to six categories of change:

- Development of new skills
- Heightened community status
- Relationship changes
- Change in viewing others
- Increased caring for others
- Increase in positive self-esteem

In order to give examples of the qualitative data, quotes from focus group participants are included. All names have been assigned pseudonyms.

New Life Skills

The data revealed that paraprofessionals developed a variety of skills as a result of working in the EFNEP program. These included public speaking skills; teaching skills; increased positive food behavior; increased knowledge about nutrition; better resource management related to food purchasing, storing, and preparation; and the ability to deal with difficult situations that arose on the job.

"If you were about to become a public speaker, or wishing to be, EFNEP is a wonderful place to start your training".

- Sally

EFNEP paraprofessionals are educators, but most lack public speaking skills when they begin the job. Many of the paraprofessionals in the focus groups said they were afraid to speak in front of a group when they were first hired. Fourteen of the 20 participants attributed their improved speaking and teaching skills to their EFNEP experiences. They learned to take control of a class situation and keep discussion on track. To improve their effectiveness as teachers, they implemented creative strategies to make classes interesting and fun for the learners.

"EFNEP has helped me change the way I live - my lifestyle. To make healthy eating choices and to look for the best bargains you can to help your family."

- Lacey

Other skills that EFNEP paraprofessionals gain on the job include improved behavior related to food and increased knowledge of nutrition. One hundred percent of focus group participants stated that they experienced changes in some aspect of food behavior, nutrition knowledge, food resource management, or improved food practices. This indicates that the paraprofessionals improved in the same practices they taught their students. This also affirms the findings of Chiza-Muyengwa and Ebert (1991) in a study to measure the nutrition knowledge of EFNEP paraprofessionals.

"There was this one time when something crawled across my finger and it was a roach, and I just brushed it out of the way."

- Wilma

Data show that paraprofessionals change in their ability to handle difficult situations. Examples included dealing with disruptive class members and maintaining confidentiality. Furthermore, the paraprofessionals gained desensitization to things they saw, heard, and even smelled.

Heightened Community Status

"I've found out that I'm somewhat of a celebrity."

- Wilma

A second finding of the study was that paraprofessionals gain heightened status within their communities as a result of EFNEP experiences. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) point out that change in adulthood is determined more by sociocultural factors than by individual maturation. Such factors are reflected in the increased respect and positioning in the community that the paraprofessionals experience, leading to

community leadership and partnership opportunities. Paraprofessionals also talked about encountering their students in grocery stores and restaurants, and the delight they felt in being recognized.

Relationships with Family or Community

"My family thinks I'm a fanatic about food safety."

- Sally

Data show changes in relationships within the paraprofessionals' family or community. However, it was surprising to find that these changes centered almost exclusively on their newfound knowledge of safe food handling. Their awareness of the potential for harmful bacteria in food affected the paraprofessionals' interactions with family and community members related to meal service. At one end of the continuum, the paraprofessionals gained increased respect due to their expertise in this area. At the other end, they evoked feelings of discomfort in others, who sometimes viewed them as food safety fanatics.

How They View Others

"You know, sometimes when you're not in a situation you can be judgmental. And, I think EFNEP has really helped me to not be judgmental when it comes to our clients. You know, anybody could be put in that situation."

- Olivia

Mezirow's theory of adult transformative learning recognizes that change has both personal and social dimensions, with the basis centering on life experience (Mezirow, 1996). The experiences of the paraprofessionals triggered transformation that broadened their minds, broke down barriers, and reduced stereotyping of people different from themselves. They reported being less judgmental and more willing to embrace cultures that are different from their own as they came to realize that food and family are human conditions shared by all regardless of race, socioeconomic level, or culture.

Increased Caring for Others

"EFNEP makes us more compassionate because we see all the different situations that people are in."

- Nancy

The study found that EFNEP paraprofessionals developed an increased caring for others. This manifested itself in increased compassion, bonding with and mentoring students, and advocacy for individuals and families they teach. Compassion for their students led the study participants to go beyond their job description to help them. Collazo et al. (1993) also found that EFNEP paraprofessionals provide valuable help to families. The bilingual paraprofessionals who worked with Spanish-speaking students were deeply concerned for the welfare of the Latino families. Recognition of this caring led members of these communities to trust the paraprofessionals.

Some of the paraprofessionals worked with teenage mothers as an aspect of EFNEP programming. They served as mentors to ensure that the girls knew how to care for their children and provided support and encouragement for the young mothers to complete high school educations. The paraprofessionals also advocated for the young mothers in the community for resources and with elected officials to influence policy. The paraprofessionals credited EFNEP with giving them the empowerment to feel comfortable in

these mentoring and advocacy roles.

Increased Positive Self-Esteem

"I'm just real proud of myself. EFNEP has helped me and changed me."

- Lacey

As a result of training and work experiences, paraprofessionals' positive self-esteem increased. They felt good about themselves and were proud of the work they did. They indicated that since coming to work with EFNEP, they felt more confident and knowledgeable, and they had improved their lifestyles. Their EFNEP experiences also led them to be more thankful for what they have. Several of the paraprofessionals reported that they are working on college degrees and are appreciative that they can do so through the employee tuition assistance program.

Factors Contributing to Change

Efforts to integrate learning and development in adulthood have generally focused on how we age physically, our psychological makeup, and more recently on how social and cultural forces shape our development (Tennant & Pogson, 1995). In this regard, the study found five factors that led to psychosocial change in the lives of the paraprofessionals. These are:

- An indigenous staff
- Personal identification
- Training
- Support
- Work experiences

Indigenous to Community

"I was raised really poor. So I think that when you've been there you understand what low income means...and I can relate because of that...my daddy worked and my mama did too but there were nine kids in my family. So I can relate to having lots of kids and not having money to do."

- Jane

Paraprofessionals changed because of their indigenous relationship with the people and the community in which they work. Shared ethnic and racial backgrounds make EFNEP paraprofessionals well adapted to providing nutrition education for multicultural groups. Having such backgrounds gives the paraprofessionals insights crucial to program development and delivery, and thus helps inspire trust from the community.

Love and Gardner (1992) describe individuals who are indigenous as those with an "insider orientation." Being indigenous to the EFNEP audience means that the paraprofessionals often had firsthand knowledge of the circumstances they saw in their students. Paraprofessionals, like their students, had experienced growing up poor, raising children as a single parent, or even coming to this country to work in the fields so they could provide a better life for their family.

Personal Identification

"Everybody in my family said, "Well that's right up your alley. You love to talk.... I love cooking, gardening, being creative, and being able to work with people in the community."

- Daisy

Paraprofessionals cited personal identification with the EFNEP mission as a motive for entering the program, as well as an important factor in the changes that they experienced. Often EFNEP gave them an avenue to incorporate a preexisting interest in helping others and a love of talking with people into their work. Many of the paraprofessionals exhibited a sense of mission and verbalized this by indicating that they had been "called" to the job.

Training

"I've only been in this position for a year, and when I first came I just wondered what I was going to do, and how I was going to do it. And these trainings have helped me so much, and I really do appreciate the training."

- Lucida

The paraprofessionals received extensive training. Many paraprofessionals came to work for EFNEP with only a high school education, no previous knowledge of nutrition, and limited skills in appropriate food behavior and resource management. Training began the day they were hired; the supervising agent provided orientation training and then continued with weekly or monthly in-service training. In focus group discussions the paraprofessionals acknowledged training as a key factor in their success.

Support

Data show that resources available for paraprofessionals to use in their classes are a factor in their change. The paraprofessionals talked about their pride in using the multitude of visuals and other props provided for teaching. Resources to enable recipe demonstrations were also cited as important factors.

"I have good mentors and they help me out a lot...I observe and I take a little bit from each one...and I always try to do things I've learned from them."

- Shawna

The encouragement they gave each other also served as valuable support. The study documents that the paraprofessionals offered themselves as mentors to their students and mentored each other as well. This occurred not only within a county unit, but also across the state as they interacted with each other at trainings and conferences. Teamwork was another form of support that the paraprofessionals gave each other. Seasoned staff nurtured less experienced coworkers and "took them under their wing." Team members helped each other prepare for classes, and they considered each other not only colleagues but as friends. This

supports Franz's (2003) finding that Extension staff partnerships transform the individual, the partnership, and the organization as well.

Work Experiences

Through their stories the paraprofessionals indicated that EFNEP work experiences were a factor in the changes they underwent. Their experiences positioned them to act on behalf of others and placed them in leadership positions in the community. In talking about their EFNEP experiences, the study participants linked them to changes in relationships, increased positive self-esteem, and the ways they viewed others. Additionally, they revealed skills that they acquired in their EFNEP work.

Conclusions

Although considerable data has been gathered documenting impact of local EFNEP programs on enrolled participants, little documentation exists concerning the effect of EFNEP on paraprofessionals conducting these programs. The qualitative study reported here identifies two broad categories of conclusions drawn from the data analysis. First, EFNEP paraprofessionals undergo psychosocial changes as a result of their training and work experience. Second, these changes are attributable to factors unique to EFNEP.

Implications for Theory

The study adds to the body of current adult education theory. For example, the concept of change as an impact from the workplace comes under the definition of situated cognition, which ties social interaction and experience to learning (Hansman, 2001). Situated cognition applies to the study because informal education within a community setting, such as EFNEP education, is a social interaction.

EFNEP paraprofessionals described themselves as people who were fulfilling their destiny. This supports the work of Rosenberg (2003), which ties social change and spiritual growth to life experiences, and Mezirow (1996), which ties life experience to adult transformation. The social interaction and experiences of EFNEP paraprofessionals lead to personal transformation.

Theories of emancipatory learning also have theoretical implications for the study. Emancipatory learning examines a process by which individuals with the least power in society gain more autonomy and independence, and are empowered to bring about change (Imel, 1999; Thompson, 2000; Tisdell, 1998). EFNEP experience forms a base for empowerment that can be examined through the lens of emancipatory learning.

Implications for Practice

Selecting the appropriate individuals for EFNEP paraprofessional positions, as well as providing effective training and support, is critical to the success of the program. By better understanding the changes in paraprofessionals that result from EFNEP experience, EFNEP can better recruit, select, train, support, and retain staff. Program administrators can use the cited factors to develop interview questions that will offer insight into a candidate's suitability for EFNEP work.

Meeting the need for training and support can increase staff retention. Training curriculum should include content that not only provides nutrition knowledge, but also prepares staff for psychosocial aspects of their work. Paraprofessionals need teaching strategies; they also must deal with difficult situations, work in environments that may lack proper sanitation, maintain client confidentiality, act as role models or mentors

to students, and maintain the public persona of representatives of their university and Extension.

Better staff retention can also be achieved by creating an internal mentor system so that paraprofessionals can support each other. A paraprofessional new to the job can benefit immensely from being paired with a more experienced paraprofessional in a formal mentor situation. Before being sent out to teach classes on their own, new staff should be given the opportunity to attend and assist with classes taught by the mentoring paraprofessional. Peer mentors also give new staff members opportunities to ask questions and address issues that they may not freely discuss with the supervising agent.

The materials and visuals provided to the paraprofessionals are important and give them the confidence to teach the nutrition concepts as well as the credibility needed to become successful teachers. Supervising agents and program administrators should strive to place cutting-edge and highly visual teaching materials into the hands of the paraprofessionals and be sure they are trained to use them. Additionally, program administrators should manage budgets to ensure that funds are available for recipe demonstration supplies and equipment.

Finally, the study reported here has implications for reporting EFNEP program impacts. Administrators can note changes that occur in capacity building both within the lives of the paraprofessionals and in the greater community. EFNEP's positive impact at the *client* level is already established, and the study provides documentation of positive impacts at the *paraprofessional* level as well.

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