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Research In Brief

An Analysis of the Impacts of the Ready, Set, Go! Program on Program Participants and the Ability to Build Community Capacity

Abstract

The ultimate goal of community capacity building is that communities will be able to deal with their own problems without relying on resources external to their community. The study reported here examined the impacts of the Ready, Set, Go! training program on building community capacity of its participants. Through a survey administered to 110 participants, survey data revealed that perceived utility correlated to future community involvement while knowledge gained did not determine future community action.

Carrera Romanini
AgResearch
Formerly Operation Military Kids Coordinator
The University of Tennessee
Knoxville, Tennessee
carrera@utk.edu

Introduction

Since the inception of the United States War on Terrorism (WOT), the need to support military families has become increasingly important. According to 2008 data from the Pentagon, more than 800,000 parents have deployed since September 1, 2001, with most deploying to Iraq or Afghanistan (Glod, 2008). During 2008, approximately 1.98 million youth had one or both parents enlisted in the military, with 1.25 million in Active Components and 728,000 in Reserve Components (Chandra et al., 2009). For many young people, deployment means living without one or both parents for extended periods of time, taking on extra responsibilities, and worrying about the safety of their parent(s) (Huebner & Mancini, 2005). Reintegration and reunion present their own unique challenges of reassigning roles within the family system (Kelley, 1994) or dealing with illness, injury, or death of a parent (Cozza, Chun, & Polo, 2005). Overall, the WOT presents many challenges and stressful conditions to military personnel and their families.

From the growing of victory gardens to collecting scrap metal during WWII, 4-H has a history steeped in supporting war efforts. One 4-H led response to the WOT has been the collaboration between U.S. Army Child and Youth Services and 4-H in the creation of Operation: Military Kids (Ferrari, 2005). The Operation: Military Kids (OMK) program aims to support military youth through

its four core components: the Hero Pack program, Speak Out for Military Kids (SOMK), Mobile Technology Laboratory (MTL), and Ready, Set, Go! (RSG!) training. Hero Packs provide recognition to military kids, SOMK teaches them public speaking skills, and MTL teaches them technology skills. The objective of the RSG! initiative is to provide support to military youth by increasing community members' understanding of the unique issues facing military youth and their families. The program also educates community members about military culture, the deployment cycle, and how to get involved in the OMK program. Community training is provided to various groups across the state (Allen et al., 2010). The study reported here was designed to evaluate effectiveness of the RSG! program in achieving its goals.

Purpose of the Study

The quantitative study was conducted to determine the relationship between perceived utility of information and participant's knowledge gain in the RSG! program and participants' likelihood to become involved in supporting military youth (community activity).

Objectives were:

1. To determine the relationship between utility of an RSG! training and participant's likelihood to become involved in OMK community activity; and

2. To determine the relationship between knowledge gain and participant's likelihood to become involved in OMK community activity.

Theoretical Framework

Adult Learning

The theory of andragogy provides a framework for understanding learning in adulthood. Andragogy, as defined by Merriam and Caffarella (1999), is the "art and science of helping adults learn" and is contrasted by pedagogy, the "art and science of helping children learn" (p. 272). There are five basic concepts of andragogy, as defined by Merriam and Caffarella (1999), including the following.

- Adults' self-concept moves from dependency toward self-direction.
- Experiences of adults provide a "rich resource for learning."
- "The readiness of an adult to learn" is congruent to their social role.
- As adults mature, they seek problem-centered learning versus subject centered learning.
- "Adults are motivated to learn by internal factors rather than external ones" (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 272).

Building Community Capacity

Community can be understood by identifying its components: community and social capital. An operational definition of community is, "a group of people who, regardless of the diversity of their backgrounds, have been able to transcend their differences, enabling them… to work together toward goals identified as being for their common good" (Foundation for Community Encouragement, 2011, p.2). Communities exist in a variety of shapes and sizes: geographical communities (town, city, neighborhood), social networks (friendship, kinship, online community), and interest groups (religious, government, civil rights) all constitute types of communities. Each community has social capital, which is the "sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p.119). These two definitions inform the meaning of community capacity building.

Community capacity building (CCB) is defined as the process through which communities develop "skills and expertise to manage their environment" (Foundation for Community Encouragement, 2011, p.2). The ultimate goal of CCB is that communities will be able to deal with their own problems without relying on resources external to their community. The function of community activity is to encourage communities to identify and build skills and capacities to better deal with problems that their members may face (Atkins & Willis, 2005).

Atkins and Willis (2005) indicated that there are two stages to building community capacity: mapping existing assets and identifying goals for action. The first step in building community capacity is to identify existing social capital (community assets) and determine what problems need to be addressed. Community assets consist of talents, skills, networks, institutions, physical assets such as land and buildings, and knowledge (Atkins & Willis, 2005). The second step is identifying needs of the community and specific actions to help resolve the problem. Key steps in this process are to include local people and reach out to as many community members as possible. Community groups should not be pushed into getting involved, but instead participation must be group driven. Finally, good CCB projects must take time to evaluate their progress (Atkins & Willis, 2005).

Community capacity building is of special importance to programs such as Operation: Military Kids, a program designed to support military kids. The program does not have the staff or the resources to provide continuing support in every community, so it must rely on community members to support military families. Operation: Military Kids aims to build community capacity through the RSG! program to best serve military families of each community.

Methods

In 2011, 110 adult RSG! participants were surveyed at the conclusion of their training to determine if there was a correlation between knowledge utility or knowledge gain and community action. Records indicated that 446 individuals participated in 18 trainings during 2011; a convenience sample of 110 individuals was surveyed. All of the 110 participants completed the survey. The survey, which was comprised of multiple choice and short answer questions, was adapted from Gwen Willem's "Optimizing Conditions for Success: An Extension Case Study in Cross-Program Surveys" (2010).

The questionnaire consisted of 29 questions and contained seven sections: instruction satisfaction, general learning and change, specific learning outcomes, specific practices, satisfaction with

workshop, demographic information, and comments. For example, one survey question asked respondents the following question, "Families often describe which of the following stages as the most challenging of the deployment cycle?" Data were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 19 (SPSS 19) obtained from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Office of Information Technology. A test of Spearman's rho was used to determine the relationship between perceived utility and participant's likelihood to get involved. A second test of Spearman's Rho was conducted to determine the correlation between participant's learning outcome scores and likelihood to get involved with OMK. Spearman's Rho is a formula used to describe the correlation between data that are ranked (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2009).

Findings

The population that was surveyed had slightly higher female participation (55%), about half were full-time students (53.6%), most did not respond or chose "other" to describe their affiliation with the military (79.3%), and almost 75% described their race as white. Half lived in a town or suburb with populations between 10,000 and 50,000 (50%).

Research Objective One

There was a strong correlation between utility of training information and likelihood to tell others about the program and fill Hero Packs (Table 1). On the other hand, if a participant believed the training information to be usable, they would not conduct a Hero Pack ceremony or provide programming to support OMK.

Table 1.

Correlation Between Perceived Utility and Participant's Likelihood to Get Involved in OMK Community Activity (N = 100)

	B1	D1	D2	D3	D4
B1-I have a situation in which I can use what I have learned in this session	–	0.249	0.226	0.101	0.127
D1-Tell others about Operation: Military Kids		–	0.621**	0.494**	0.572**
D2-Fill Hero Packs to support military youth			–	0.720**	0.725**
D3-Conduct a Hero Pack ceremony to honor military youth				–	0.776**
D4-Provide educational programming for military youth in your community					–
* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01					

Research Objective Two

There was no correlation between the specific learning outcomes and telling others about OMK, filling Hero Packs, conducting a Hero Pack ceremony, or providing educational programming (Table 2).

Table 2.

Correlation Between Knowledge Gain and Participant's Likelihood to Get Involved in OMK Community Activity (N = 100)

	C	D1	D2	D3	D4
C- Specific Learning Outcomes Percent Correct	–	0.249	0.226	0.101	0.127
D1-Tell others about Operation: Military Kids		–	0.621*	0.494*	0.572*
D2-Fill Hero Packs to support military youth			–	0.720**	0.725*
D3-Conduct a Hero Pack ceremony to honor military youth				–	0.776*
D4-Provide educational programming for military youth in your community					–
* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01					

Summary

Research Objective One

Information utility is the greatest indicator of future behavior. These findings are congruent with andragogy's first concept that adult learners move toward being a self-directed human being (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Adult learners seek out nonformal education to meet their needs. The RSG! program provides education to communities about how to support military kids. These findings also support andragogy's fourth concept that adults move toward learning that is problem centered versus theoretical or conceptual (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). The RSG! training provides the theoretical framework and background information about the Operation: Military Kids program, the military as a changing force, and effects of deployment on military kids. The training goes a step further and offers suggestions for community members who want to get involved and provide support to military kids.

Research Objective Two

Participants will not change their behavior if they do not perceive the information to be usable. These findings are supported by Atkins and Willis' (2005) process for developing community

capacity. One step in developing community capacity is to identify a problem that needs to be addressed and then solve the problem through community activity. Participants in the study reported here who did not perceive that military families were in need of support did not indicate that they would get involved in community activity to support them. As the study findings indicate, there is a correlation between participants' perceived utility of the RSG! training and likelihood to become involved in OMK community activity.

However, it should be noted that RSG! participants who planned to get involved in one activity were more likely to get involved with all offered activities. This emphasizes that getting buy-in for one of the OMK activities will increase the likelihood that a participant will get involved with all of the activities.

Implications

Educational trainers need to evaluate the audience more closely to stress the importance of this information. Future trainings should focus on presenting material that underscores the importance, immediacy, and utility of this material. One suggestion from the comment section of the evaluation indicated that audience members would like military youth to be involved in the RSG! program. Bringing in a youth who is personally experiencing the stress of being a military kid might bring to light the importance and utility of the RSG! training information. Participants somewhat agreed that they would change their practices based on what they had learned. This could be improved by adjusting the existing program to help audience members understand the utility of this information.

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