The Breakaway Project – An alternate path

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Abstract

Those who are socially disadvantaged as adults often have poor education, higher unemployment rates, do not access health services as often as the general population and rely more heavily on social service infrastructure. Indigenous persons in Australia are overly represented in this group. If adolescents can be retained at school for longer periods, and gain the life skills to enable them to make positive choices, their chances of entering the cycle of disadvantage as an adult will be reduced.

The Cowra Breakaway Project stemmed from a request from the Aboriginal community to address behavioural and educational issues amongst teenage girls. A partnership between Cowra Health Service, the Aboriginal Health Team, Cowra High School, NSW TAFE-Western Institute, NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) district office, and the PCYC of the NSW Police developed from a community meeting. The target group was girls aged 13 to 15 years, predominantly indigenous, from disadvantaged families, who had poor school attendance and were at high risk of leaving.

The aim of the project was to develop and trial a community-based interagency approach in providing an alternative, off-campus, program for young female students with poor school attendance. This was to be achieved by: increasing attendance; by students re-engaging in learning activities; by developing life skills including a positive self-esteem and a positive body image; developing communication and assertiveness skills; and by matching these to the school curriculum.

Evaluation measures undertaken included the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory, school and program attendance rates, reflective journals, student portfolios, group discussion and parental perceptions of the program.

Results have demonstrated improved self-esteem, increased school attendance, and an intention to stay at school. The program demonstrated positive outcomes in terms of both student and parental perceptions.

Introduction

The Breakaway Project was an interagency project developed to address the need identified by the Cowra community to work with young girls who were at high risk of leaving school, and hence at risk generally.

TAFE was experiencing demand for access to general education courses from youth at risk and who were less than 15 years of age. Typically the very young students were no longer actively engaged in learning at school and had come to the notice of the Home School Liaison Officer. There was a local concern that the best provision for the students could be within the existing school system.

Once the need was highlighted, a large number of government and non-government agencies, including TAFE, the Cowra Health Service Aboriginal Health Education Officer, the Women's Health Nurse and the PCYC who dealt with youth in Cowra, were invited to come together by the Home School Liason Officer. A working party was formed to address the issue and develop the program. A Memorandum of Understanding was developed which identified and clarified the roles and responsibilities for each participating agency. The PCYC had a grant from the NSW Department of Sport and Recreation to undertake activities and this was used to fund the program.

Literature review

Education has a role in influencing the socio-economic position of an individual. Educational qualifications are an indicator of an individual's position in the workforce, which is linked to income, housing and material resources (Acheson 1998). All are key social determinants of health (Wilkinson & Marmot 2003). Low socio-economic position, poor educational achievement, poor housing, social exclusion, and isolation have been associated with poor adult health (Wilkinson & Marmot 2003). Compared to other Australians, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are disadvantaged on a number of socio-economic indicators including, education, employment and income (AIHW 2003). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders suffer disadvantage from a young age and continue to be disadvantaged throughout their lives (AIHW 2003).

Education has the role of ensuring that young people have the practical, social and emotional skills and knowledge to achieve a full and healthy life, to participate fully in society and in providing an environment that is safe, healthy and conducive to learning (Acheson 1998).

School exclusion and truancy are associated with educational underachievement, increased involvement in crime both as victims and perpetrators and substance misuse in the short term and unemployment, homelessness, teenage pregnancy and crime in the longer term. (Acheson 1998, Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) 1998, DfEE 1999) Many of the factors related to truancy also fall outside the school system such as family and peer influences. (SEU, 1998)

So who is responsible for addressing the issue? Many government departments deal with youth and the consequences of poor school retention. NSW Department of Education and Training both for schools and TAFE clearly target young people from disadvantaged groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and those from low socio-economic backgrounds, with a focus on increased participation rates (DET 2002), as does the Aboriginal Education Policy (Department of School Education 1995). The NSW Police, through the PCYC, support education and personal development to provide skills and enhance confidence in young people, aim to reduce truancy and coordinate a young offenders program (PCYC 2003), while NSW Health has as a key priority, addressing health inequalities and the underlying social determinants of health (NSW Health). NSW Health has developed and implemented a Health Promoting Schools policy and framework, outlining best practice in working with schools which links the school environment or ethos with the curriculum and the

school community (NSW Department of Health 1996, NSW Health Department 2000). The NSW Premier's Department has also introduced the Families First strategy and the Strengthening Communities Strategy (Alperstein & Nossar 2002), yet, to date little appears to target youth at risk in the coordination of programs between departments at local or state levels. Many departments in NSW as in the UK appear to work in silos (National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal 2000). In NSW young people under the age of 15 cannot attend TAFE, yet TAFE may be able to provide the flexible learning environment, with small classes and individual attention required (Centre for Adolescent Health 2003). There exist complexities including the duty of care and accountabilities (Centre for Adolescent Health 2003). The system currently does not easily provide for a joint approach through partnerships in delivery of programs to support at risk young people to engage in the learning process, a critical factor in reconnecting young people to educational pathways (Centre for Adolescent Health 2003).

Alternative programs can provide more intensive support to a small group in a positive environment where they are accepted, feel safe, are treated as people and respected (Centre for Adolescent Health 2003). Undertaking an alternate program while remaining integrated in the school system can only enhance the potential for learning.

The aims of the project were therefore to develop and trial a community-based interagency approach in providing an alternative, off-campus, program for young female students with poor school attendance. This was to be achieved by increasing attendance, by students re-engaging in learning activities, by developing life skills including a positive self-esteem and a positive body image, developing communication and assertiveness skills, and by matching these to the school curriculum.

Research method

Recruitment

Students that participated in the project were identified through the initial concerns raised by parents and through project staff undertaking further consultation with the Home School Liaison Officer and staff at the high school. Ten girls, predominantly Aboriginal, were identified as being at risk.

The Aboriginal Health Education officer undertook visits to the families of the girls. The program was explained, information sheets provided and consent forms signed. The girls signed that they were willing to participate in the project, and committed to attending both the program and school for the duration of the program.

The Breakaway Program

The program was planned as a pilot program for 10 weeks and was delivered one day per week during Term 3, 2003. The program was planned at regular interagency meetings. The program was delivered off site at the PCYC club in Cowra. This allowed the girls to gain individual attention without distractions and to feel

comfortable in an environment not associated with school thereby maximising reengagement in learning.

Each day was structured around three sessions. The ten-week program covered the following themes:
- Introduction, agreements, journals
- Stress management
- Sex education and sexual health
- Drug dangers
- Self-esteem
- Diet
- Life skills (with Centrelink)
- What women want – assertiveness skills
- Anger management
- Make over

Session one focused on the theme of the day. Health staff, welfare staff and others, depending on the issue and expertise required, delivered these sessions. The second session of the day was delivered by TAFE with a focus on literacy. These sessions supported the initial health themes of the day by ensuring that complementary teaching methodologies were used. Health concepts were reinforced through small group discussions and by working closely with individual students. Reflective journals used in each session personalised the particular health issue under discussion. Different text types were planned for use throughout the program. The final session of the day was based on acquiring life skills and was aimed at being more relaxed than previous sessions. These sessions included self-defence, physical activity, cooking, personal hygiene and grooming.

Measures

Individual sessions were evaluated throughout the program. The program was evaluated overall using the following measures:

Self-esteem

The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory was administered at baseline and again post implementation of the program. The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory is a standardised measure assessing the individual in domains relating to home-parents, school-academic, social-self and general self. The Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory was selected above others such as the Piers-Harris, Rosenberg or Harper's SPPC for its readability in terms of sentence length and complexity of language, its length, its ease of administration and relevance to the program delivered. As the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory results in a continuous score, a t-test to detect a difference between two means in dependent samples was used to compare the baseline and post-intervention scores. Analysis was undertaken using data for 8 students present at both baseline and post-intervention data collection points.

School attendance

School attendance data was gathered for the term prior to program implementation, throughout the program delivery period and the term following the program. Data is currently being analysed for Term 4. Data was obtained from the school attendance database with permission from the parents and Cowra High School. The t-test for comparison of two means was used to compare the data for terms 2 & 3.

Reflective journals and portfolios

Journals were used at the beginning of each literacy session as a strategy to engage students in writing their personal thoughts about the health concepts discussed that day and as an opportunity to reflect on the personal life issues that had occurred during the week. Students were also required to keep a portfolio of their written work as evidence of achieving competency in selected literacy skills and text types. Based on a currently successful model of practice with youth at risk, the literacy program was designed to use computers as a mechanism to motivate and maintain students' interest.

Group discussion

In the final week of the program a group discussion was held with participating students to gain their perception of the program, the programs usefulness and to determine if the girls attitude to school had altered.

Parent survey

A brief questionnaire was distributed to the parents of participants to gain their perception of the program, the likes and dislikes relating to the program, asking if there was anything they felt was not covered that they would have liked included in the program or that their daughters would like to know more about.

Interviews of key stakeholders

Interviews of key stakeholders are currently being undertaken relating to the pilot program. The interviews are assessing the usefulness of the program to the students from an organisation's perspective, the relevance of the program to the organisation, the gains the program has brought to the organisation and the barriers encountered during the delivery of the program.

Findings

Self-esteem

Coopersmith Self-esteem Measure
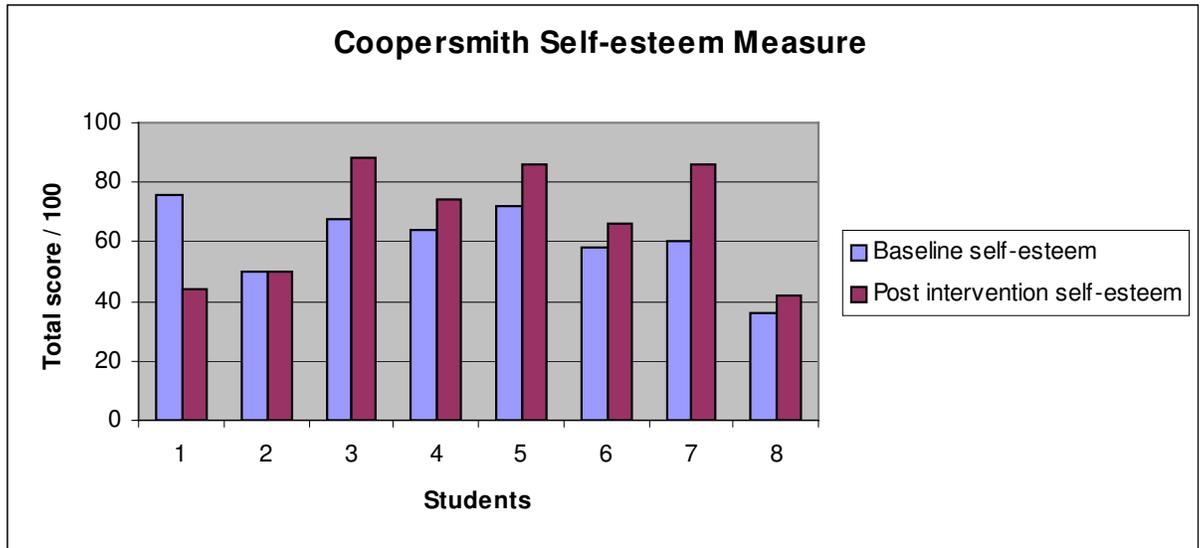
One student showed a decline in self-esteem, one had a score that remained the same, while six students demonstrated improvements. Improvements ranged from 4 points to 20 points. The average improvement was 10 points for those that improved their score.

Although the difference in the mean score for self-esteem between baseline and post-intervention did not reach significance (p=0.32), the self-esteem measures demonstrated an improvement for the majority of students.

School attendance

Absentee days
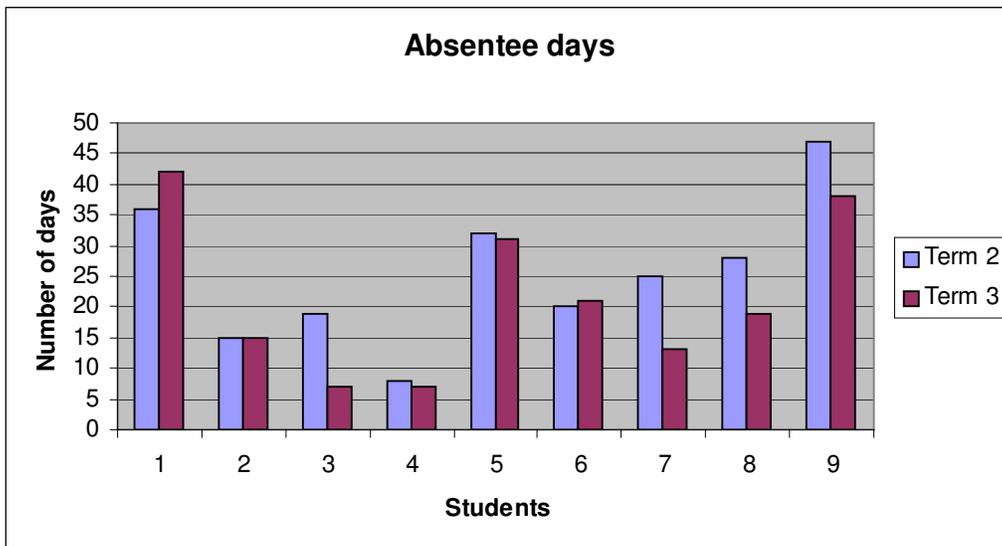
Data for school attendance was available for 9 students. There were 49 school days in each of Terms 2 and 3 in 2003. The number of days absent ranged from 8 to 47 for Term 2 with an average of 25.6 days, and from 7 to 42 with an average of 21.4 days in Term 3. There was a significant drop in absenteeism between Term 2 and Term 3 ($p=0.005$). The above data includes absenteeism for any part of the day. That is reading, morning or afternoon, sport and suspension.

Reflective journals and portfolios

All students participated in the development of a personal, reflective journal to reflect on the lesson content delivered by the health workers however the students demonstrated a reluctance to engage in reflection of a personal nature. Students were willing to draw on existing computer word processing skills to produce the journal but were very reluctant to use any other programs to produce and illustrate creative texts. Students did not demonstrate high levels of competence in the selected literacy skills or in producing different text types. Rather, students adopted a collage/poster approach to recording concepts, ideas and learning outcomes

Group discussion

The key outcomes from the group discussion were that students felt that they had achieved something through the program, that they enjoyed the program, and felt more confident. When asked individually about their attendance at school, the majority of students stated that they would stay at school at least until the end of Year 10, with several intending to stay on and complete Year 12.

Parent survey

All comments received regarding the program were positive. Gains in confidence and increased attendance and performance at school were the main highlights from this survey. A range of topic areas were of interest to the students including sexual health, personal grooming and cooking.

Interviews of key stakeholders

Some of the highlights from the interview process have included the ongoing improved working relationship between partner organisations participating in the program, positive feedback from the school on participation rates and confidence levels of students who undertook the program, a sense of ownership of the program by the local community (including the Aboriginal community), and the motivation and commitment to implement a second phase of the project. The program was in line with the strategic directions of each participating organisation and therefore became core business for the organisation.

One of the key barriers identified while implementing the program was the need for consistency in the attendance of a supervising teacher. Duty of care for the program remained with the school. For this reason the program required someone in attendance at all times. Given the nature of the student attending the program it was thought to be more beneficial for that teacher to be the same person throughout the program whenever possible. This would enhance continuity and enable the participants to feel

more confident in participating fully in activities, as trust in others is a fundamental concept underpinning the program.

Discussion

Poor school attendance is strongly associated with lack of support and the low prioritisation of education by parents and students themselves. Given that parents of truants often encourage or condone truancy, while students become disaffected or bored (SEU 1998), one of the positive aspects of this program has been the willingness of the young girls to participate and the support gained from parents for their participation. Youth with poor school attendance are often seen as "streetwise", yet, through truancy they have missed essential elements of education relating to numeracy, literacy and life skills. They are the very group that are "at risk". Their participation combined with the strong commitment of the young girls to attend both the program and school, has meant that the key aims of the program have been met. This has been demonstrated by the significant improvement in attendance between Term 2 and Term 3, when the intervention program was delivered.

In addition to increased attendance, participants appeared to have increased motivation and group discussion indicated a greater sense of control over their learning and future directions. The participants' change in perspective as to when they will leave school indicates a greater connectedness to school. Students were able to enable to engage with key staff not only from educational sectors involved, but also health and the police. Since implementation of the program participants have increased access to the health service.

The lack of willingness by the students to engage in reflective writing in their journals on their personal lives can possibly be attributed to a perceived risk associated with exposing their innermost thoughts. Perhaps the concept of a reflective journal was either not understood or was too adult in nature. The assumption by TAFE staff that the students would readily use a variety of computer programs to maintain self-motivation and interest and illustrate written work, proved to be invalid for this group. Interestingly students reverted to a proven and less risky method of collage/poster presentation that used colour and artwork, an approach that did not risk failure at demonstrating extensive literacy skills. Participants' behaviour in relation to these activities reinforces the need for further development of these skills within the group.

Another of the successful aspects was that the project proved to be an excellent example of interagency cooperation to pool expertise, personnel, and resources to provide programs for youth at risk. The program fitted within core priorities for each organisation involved which permitted dedication of time for support and implementation. The program provided challenges to both participants and those delivering it which created interest and maintained motivation throughout. Partner organisations have committed to the implementation of a further two programs to date. The program being delivered is in the process of being refined and planning is underway to provide ongoing support for past participants.

There are some challenges that remain for the longer term. Students still need to continue to maintain their level of attendance and to continue to develop literacy and numeracy skills. Teachers within the school system will be required to support these

students. Their skills will be enhanced by involvement in subsequent programs, and ongoing support within the school system, by providing peer support to others, with assistance. The gains made with regard to improved confidence and self-esteem will enhance participants' reengagement in learning.

In the preparation for the continuation of the program more responsibility has been taken on by the school teachers and management. Further development has occurred in matching the content of the Breakaway program to educational outcomes to the PD/H/PE and English syllibi. Improvements are also planned for the administration and information collection regarding the parent survey and post qualitative data from students.

We are encouraged by the evidence of the project success as much as the anecdotal comments of students. As one participant put it to another prospective student:

" Youse'd be stupid not to do it!"

Conclusions

The Breakaway Project demonstrated that agencies have worked together effectively in achieving gains in both attendance and reengaging in learning amongst a group of at risk young people.

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