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Evaluation of the People Empowering People Program Within a Prison Population

Abstract

The People Empowering People (PEP) Program was administered to an incarcerated population. The PEP program teaches life skills and empowerment with the goal of improving personal life skills, parental and family relationships, and community engagement. The results of an evaluation, based upon a pre-test, post-test, and follow-up survey design, indicated that participants reported significant changes in all three targeted domains following completion of the program.

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Extension educators have increasingly focused on the difficulties faced by incarcerated parents trying to maintain connections with their families and children (c.f., Kazura, Temke, Toth, & Hunter, 2002; Reilly 2003). This has been prompted, at least in part, by several earlier studies that found that parents who received family support and developed new personal and social coping skills were more likely to make a positive re-entry into the community following release and less likely to recidivate (Carlson, 1995; Jancic, 1998). A large number of promising educational and parenting programs for incarcerated parents have emerged in recent years (Park & Huser, 2005). However, research on the effectiveness of these programs remains limited (Debord, Head, & Sherrill, 2004; Maiorano & Futris, 2005).

This article reports the results of an evaluation conducted on the People Empowering People (PEP) program within a prison population. PEP is an innovative training program designed to build on the strengths of adults and older adolescents with limited financial resources who come from a variety of community-based, social programs and prisons (Czuba & Page, 2000). PEP is based upon the concept of empowerment, a process that fosters power (the capacity to implement action) in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important (Nanette & Czuba, 1999). PEP emphasizes the unique strengths, life experiences, and capacities of each person and stresses the connection between the individual and community in order to promote individual assets and coping skills, relational skills, and community engagement.

Program Description

The PEP program is modeled after the University of Massachusetts Cooperative Extension Master Teacher in Family Life Program (Slinski, 1990) but has been modified by Cooperative Extension Educators at the University of Connecticut (Czuba & Page, 2000). Although the basic structure (10-session format, topics covered) of the Master Teacher program was retained, PEP places greater emphasis on community development. Furthermore, program content was altered to emphasize the concept of personal empowerment rather than barriers faced by families in poverty.

The program is based upon an ecological model that views individuals as embedded in a system of ongoing reciprocal interactions between themselves and their social environments (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The key influences focused upon in PEP are the individuals' own personal assets (strengths) and relationships with significant others (e.g., children, other family members) and the local community (Lerner & Benson, 2003). PEP training programs are flexibly designed to be customized to meet the needs of diverse groups of participants and the facilitators who conduct the training are well versed in assessing the needs, strengths and weaknesses of the group's members.

The program involves 10 two-hour interactive life skill training sessions on the following topics: values, verbal and nonverbal skills, active listening skills, problem solving skills, parenting styles, and understanding child development. The final four sessions focus on connecting individuals to their communities by learning how to assess community needs, work with community leaders, and design projects to enhance the quality of life in the community.

Following completion of the initial 10 sessions, participants attend workshop sessions for 1 to 3 months, in which they work together to implement the selected community project. Examples of past community projects include developing a children's lending library, conducting parent leadership workshops, a mentoring project for teen moms, collecting items for women's shelters, voter registration drives, literacy projects, domestic violence programs, town clean-ups, and offering art and musical activities in nursing homes.

The program targets participant changes at three levels: individual (e.g., self esteem, confidence, problem-solving, communication skills), relationships (e.g., parent-child, family, co-workers), and community (e.g., engagement). Because the PEP program described in this evaluation was conducted with a prison population, the community project was tailored to participants' current prison environment. For example, one incarcerated group developed, printed, and distributed a booklet of letters to incoming female inmates to give them encouragement and support. Another group made 1,000 origami paper cranes and sent them to Hiroshima, Japan for Peace Day. A third group crocheted a flag for a New York City firehouse located at Ground Zero.

Facilitators of the sessions were volunteers. All completed the required training offered by the Cooperative Extension System prior to offering the program. This involved a 2-day training that included information on the conceptual foundations of the program, the target population (i.e., generally individuals with limited income), steps to follow in conducting the program, content of the 10 sessions, modifications of the program for youth and prison populations, structuring follow-up sessions, ideas for community projects, and project evaluation. Facilitators received ongoing support and education through telephone and emails, and 2-hour facilitator training sessions held four to six times annually. In addition, facilitators submitted monthly project reports that were received by the project director to insure program integrity.

Over the course of 13 years, PEP has reached over 800 people in a variety of community settings, including prisons. The number of programs offered in prisons has steadily increased from one in 1999 to four in 2006. In 2000, a 200-page manual to guide the program was published, a presentation was made at a national conference, and facilitator training and support sessions were held within Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and New Mexico, which led to increased implementation of the program

Previous Research

To date, evaluation data on the effectiveness of the PEP program has been limited. Extension educators at the University of Maryland found the program produced positive changes between pre-tests and post-tests in feelings of self-esteem and empowerment, clarification of educational and career goals, and parenting knowledge and skills among seven women who completed the program (Bradley, Ludy, & Walker, 2001). Participants also successfully completed a community action plan. A subsequent follow-up indicated that participants were able to maintain positive personal, family and career changes (McClintock-Comeaux, Walter, & Ludy, 2003a).

Two other studies involving small samples (n=4 and n=7) revealed similar short-term gains on all three targeted dimensions: individual skills (ethnic identity), relationships (parent-child relationships, teamwork, communication and problem-solving skills), and community (sense of empowerment as a community) (McClintock-Comeaux & Walker, 2003; McClintock-Comeaux, Walker and Ludy, 2003b). Although these results are impressive, their conclusiveness and generalizability is limited due to the small sample sizes in all three evaluations.

Czuba (2002) asked 116 participants to complete feedback forms at the end of the 10 sessions and after the 3-month community project. Participants reported improved communication skills (74%, n=86), problem solving skills (56%, n=65) parenting skills (43%, n= 51) (some groups did not teach parenting skills), team work to accomplish project goals (58%, n=67), knowledge of

community resources (66%, n= 77), efforts toward economic self-sufficiency (42%, n= 49), political involvement (45%, n= 52), and socially active (54%, n= 63). Again, the results were promising but limited due to the absence of pre-test data and reliable evaluation instruments.

Evaluation Methods

Procedures

The program evaluation that is the focus of this article was conducted between October, 2002 and April, 2004. Self-report data were collected via survey instruments that were administered by workshop facilitators to all program participants at three different points in time--prior to starting the program, at the end of the 10-week structured workshop sessions, and 3 months later after participants had completed a community-related project.

The survey included demographic information, a number of questions designed to assess participants' satisfaction with the program, and several outcome measures consistent with the program's goals. The surveys were essentially the same at each administration except the demographic information included on the pre-test survey was not duplicated on subsequent surveys. Also, the post-test and follow-up surveys included a series of items that asked participants about their satisfaction with, and reactions to, the program.

Participants

A total of 89 individuals from four prisons in Connecticut participated in PEP during the evaluation period. All participants (100%) completed the pre-test. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 51 years, with an average age of 34. All participants were incarcerated when they completed the PEP program. The majority of participants (85%, n= 76) were male. Thirty-seven percent (n= 33) identified themselves as black or African American, 27% (n= 24) Hispanic, and 11% (n=10) white. Nine percent (n=9) checked "other" on the survey and the rest left the question blank.

Participants reported a range of educational levels from some high school (18%, n=16), to completed high school (26%, n=23), some college (33%, n=29), college degree (5%, n=4), and graduate degree (3%, n=3). Thirty-nine percent (n= 35) stated they were single. The other most frequently cited relationship categories were married and living together (16%, n= 14), divorced (14%, n= 12), unmarried and cohabiting (9%, n= 8), or married and separated (4%, n= 5). Eight-two percent (n= 73) reported having one or more children.

Survey Instruments

The outcomes included in the participant surveys were selected to represent each of the three levels of social functioning (individual, relationship, community) targeted by the PEP program.

Individual Level

- **Self-Assertive Efficacy** (Bandura, 2001). Self-assertive efficacy is defined as the ability to stand up for oneself or to express opinions even when they are unpopular with others. Enhancing assertiveness is a central goal of the PEP program. The average Alpha reliability over the three administrations of the scale in this study was .70.
- **Mastery Scale** (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978) is a seven-item scale that assesses the extent to which the forces that affect one's life are viewed as being under one's personal control. This measure is one of the most extensively used scales in health research and consistently has been shown to produce internal reliabilities in the high .70's (Seeman, 1991). Mastery has been shown to be one of the most important coping resources for dealing with stressful life circumstances (Thoits, 1995). Average Alpha reliability over the three administrations of the scale in this study was .67.

Relationship Level

- **Kansas Parental Satisfaction Questionnaire** (James, Schumm Kennedy, Grigsby, Schectman, & Nichols, 1985). This three-item scale is designed to measure satisfaction with oneself as a parent, the behavior of one's children, and one's relationship with one's children. Average Alpha reliability over the three administrations of the scale in this study was .62
- **Family Problem-Solving Communication** (McCubbin, McCubbin, & Thompson, 1996). This 10-item scale measures respondents' perceptions of the quality of communication within the family. The total scale score incorporates items that assess both positive ("We respect each others feelings") and negative qualities of communication ("We yell and scream at each other"). The authors reported an Alpha reliability of .89 for the total scale. The average Alpha reliability over the three administration of the scale in this study was .72.

Community Level

- **Community Assets Survey-Individual Mobilization Scales** (Jakes & Shannon, 2002)

provides both a total community involvement scale and separate subscales scores in the following areas: Human Capital ("I have the skills needed to make improvements in my community"), Self-efficacy ("I can influence community members to take action on important issues"), Motivation ("I have the desire to be active in my community"), and participation ("I am involved in my community"). This instrument was selected because most scale items emphasize participants' perceptions of having the requisite abilities and motivations to make a difference in their communities. The instructions were modified slightly by asking participants to respond to the participation items as they related to the prison community. The average Alpha reliability for the total score over the three time periods in the study was .80. Internal reliability coefficients for the subscales were inconsistent, ranging from .75 to .40, so only the total scale score was used in the data analyses.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in three steps. First, we looked at the percentages of participants who reported satisfaction with the PEP program following completion of the 10 structured sessions. Second, we examined the changes participants reported on the outcome variables. Separate repeated measures analyses were conducted with each outcome measure as the dependent variable and pre-test, post-test, and follow-up scores as within subjects factors. When the overall test was significant, this was followed by post-hoc analyses to determine which pre-test, post-test, and follow-up scores significantly differed from one another. Finally, we looked at the responses of those who completed the follow-up survey in terms of their level of satisfaction with the program and their open-ended comments about how they found the program to be helpful.

Results

The 70 participants who completed the post-workshop survey reported a very high level of satisfaction with the program. Participants' ratings averaged 9.3 on a 10-point scale. One hundred percent (n= 70) reported that they felt accepted and supported in the program, were involved in stimulating and engaging activities, and that their group leader really cared about them. Ninety-eight percent (n= 69) reported feeling like they belonged to the group.

Results of the repeated measures analyses indicated strong support for the benefits of the PEP program. The results are summarized here and additional details about statistical significance are presented in Table 1.

- Participants reported significant pre-test and post-test changes on **self-assertive efficacy**. That is, participants reported increases in their ability to express themselves confidently toward others. Self-assertive efficacy also was found to have significantly improved further at the time of the follow-up testing.
- Several additional positive changes were found when participants' scores on the pre-test survey were contrasted with the follow-up surveys completed 3 months after workshop sessions had ended and when participants had completed their community projects. Participants reported significant increases in the **sense of mastery, parenting satisfaction, and family problem-solving communication**. As noted above, a sense of mastery refers to a feeling of control over oneself and one's environment as opposed to feelings of helplessness. Parenting satisfaction denotes one's personal satisfaction in the parental role. Family problem-solving communication refers to the overall quality of communication in the family.
- A final set of findings indicated significant changes between post-testing and follow-up on the **community mobilization scale**. Changes on the community involvement measure would be expected to occur during this time because that is when the community project was completed.

Table 1.
Significant Changes on Post-Test and 3-Month Follow-Up Survey Following Participation in the PEP program

Variable	df	Pretest	Posttest	Follow-Up	F	Sig. (p<)
Self-Assertive Efficacy	1,67	20.97	23.31		17.12	.001
Self-Assertive Efficacy	1,29		23.03	24.57	4.92	.05
Self-Assertive Efficacy	1,29	21.47		24.57	13.30	.001
Mastery	1,69	22.17	21.91		.23	ns

Mastery	1,29		22.70	23.93	4.25	.05
Mastery	1,29	21.93		23.93	6.70	.01
Parental Satisfaction	1,60	13.62	12.90		1.56	ns
Parental Satisfaction	1,29		13.59	16.93	21.31	.001
Parental Satisfaction	1,29	13.93		16.93	14.97	.001
Family Communication	1,54	27.80	27.13		.36	ns
Family Communication	1,29		27.79	31.37	13.90	.001
Family Communication	1,29	26.50		31.37	21.43	.001
Community Mobilization	1,69	74.73	72.77		.47	ns
Community Mobilization	1,29		69.57	80.37	7.55	.01
Community Mobilization	1,29	80.13		80.37	.01	ns

The results based upon the follow-up data must be interpreted with some caution due to the fact that only 30 of the original 89 participants (33%) completed the third and final survey. However, those who did respond indicated that they found the PEP program experience to be highly satisfying, stimulating, accepting, and supportive. They reported several areas of personal change, including an increased sense of confidence in expressing themselves toward others and improved mastery in coping with their personal environments.

In response to an open-ended question that asked participants, "what changed for you as result of being part of this program?", one respondent noted that, "my attitude toward myself and others, went from negative to a positive outlook in general." Another indicated, "change for me was how I communicate, parent and listen to others."

These skills are clearly important for all individuals to achieve. However, they may hold even greater importance for those who are presently incarcerated in the state's correctional facilities as these individuals were. This was evident in one respondent's comment, "getting to know other inmates, seeing the effort we achieved, putting into this program, makes me want to really focus on what's going on in group and get something out of this program."

As indicated above, some participants also reported significant changes in their views of their parenting. This was somewhat surprising given the fact that many of the incarcerated participants probably had limited interactions with their children. One inmate stated, "I learned communication, problems solving, coping skills, as well as a better understanding of myself as a father." Thus, this result may say more about participants' attitudes toward parenting than about actual behavioral changes in the parent-child relationship. It is nonetheless significant that participants reported change in the area of parenting because the PEP program curriculum emphasizes this dimension.

The evaluation also indicated significant changes in participants' engagement in, and commitment to, their communities. As noted by one respondent, "a lot of people can have different views but come together and work out a problem and speak with one voice." Others also touched upon the importance of community: "I learned that I could have an effect on my community; I realized I can speak very well in front of people." Another participant indicated, "I am looking at changing a lot of things in my life, maybe start community service, and definitely with my children and how I react to them."

This result might also seem surprising given that the program was offered to incarcerated individuals. However, anecdotal reports from group facilitators indicated that the community projects were tailored to participants' environments and that the incarcerated participants

interpreted the survey questions as pertaining to the prison community.

Conclusions

All three areas targeted by the PEP program (individual assets, parent/family relationships, and community engagement) were found to be significantly improved following completion of the program. However, given the emphasis in this evaluation on groups offered in correctional settings, little can be said about the effectiveness of PEP in community-based settings. Future evaluations of the PEP program will require assessing community-based program applications, adding comparison or control groups to more clearly identify program effects, and enhancing efforts to minimize attrition and maximize follow-up responses.

Implications for Extension Educators

Results of the present evaluation and earlier evaluation efforts suggest that the PEP program may be a useful intervention model for other Extension educators to consider. It appears to be especially well suited for those working with prison populations. Those who are interested in learning more about PEP are encouraged to contact the first author for a copy of the PEP manual. We also would be interested in learning about evaluation results that others may collect when PEP is applied in community settings.

Finally, the present results suggest that interventions targeting individuals' personal strengths, their connections to significant others in their lives, and engagement in the broader community, may be especially promising. Our findings are consistent with a basic premise of contextual models that highlights the importance of influencing multiple contexts within which individuals are embedded.

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