



Adding Focused Life Skills Training to a Civic Engagement Program to Boost Life Skills Competencies in Youth

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Abstract: This paper highlights the impacts of a revised curriculum which incorporated a strong life skills focus into an existing civic education curriculum (for 4-H youth). The revised curriculum resulted in actual youth gains in life skills competencies. The study also explored the effect of volunteer facilitators in the implementation of an added life skills training component. Despite some significant limitations to the internal and external validity of the study, preliminary indications were that adding explicit life skills training content does in fact lead to an increase in life skills competencies. This was clearer in cases where volunteer facilitators fully implemented the additional content versus implementing none or only part of the life skills training. The limitations of the study and suggestions for future research are outlined in the conclusion.

Introduction

Some researchers have cited the lack of youth civic engagement as a critical concern for society (e.g., Putnam, 1995), while other researchers have challenged the seriousness of this situation (Smith, 2012). For example, Roholt, Hildreth & Baizerman (2014) hold that even though studies show a decrease in youth voting in elections, youth civic engagement is active beyond voter turnout and can focus on "everyday civic engagement." This everyday engagement is broad, up to including youth volunteering in their community. Regardless of the debate surrounding its specific application, we should acknowledge that civic engagement of youth is important. Supporting youth in civic engagement is key to a culture's success (Bennet, 2000; Putnam, 2000), and civic engagement is helpful for healthy youth development (Flanagan & Christens, 2011; Sherrod & Lauckhardt, 2008; The World Bank, 2007).

There is another ongoing debate about what steps, from family responsibility to colleges, should be taken to develop civically-involved youth including, exactly how civic involvement should be defined (Sherrod, 2015). In an effort to support the development of civic engagement in youth, Washington State University's (WSU) 4-H Extension created the *Know Your Government (KYG)* program. KYG is a civic education program with four-year rotating topics: Legislative System, Judicial System, Elections and Party Platforms, and Politics and the Media. The program entails pre-conference meetings which familiarizes students with the topic. The students take this knowledge and apply it to the activities at the three-day conference held at the Washington State Capital. Beyond gaining a basic understanding of legislative, judicial, and political systems, 4-H's KYG program is about learning life skills participants will need to be responsible citizens and productive adults. The conference is an opportunity for participants to practice skills they have learned during pre-conference meeting, apply their knowledge of civics topics to unknown, novel situations, and reflect on how they performed in developing life skills for that civic topic. The program utilizes the state legislative session by having youth attend hearings and meet with legislators and other stakeholders.

KYG participants report increased gains in civic knowledge and life skills using the WSU Life skills retrospective pre-post survey. The intention in this study was to examine if an added formal meeting structure, with focused life skill reflections, would increase the skills over and above what KYG was accomplishing before. This idea was encouraged by a meta-analytic study conducted by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) group (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). This review supported the notion that the intentional addition of life skill content to after-school programs tends to contribute to an increase in life skill competencies. The implementation by volunteers varied, due to skill level, which allowed for comparing the impact, when the new curriculum was followed, versus the original curriculum.

Methods

Participants

Participants were high school youth from Washington state 4-H programs across 27 counties active in the program. Youth participants were in high school grades 9-12 from across the state of WA, representing rural, suburban and urban environments. Most participants were involved in the traditional 4-H club program. Because there are not enough paid staff to implement such a far reaching program as KYG, volunteer facilitators are used to teach the KYG lessons. These

volunteer facilitators and the instructors in the control group both had the minimum of KYG training, online 1.5 hrs to in-person 3 hours. The KYG curriculums of 2011 and 2012 had a sampling of volunteer facilitators who used the curriculum received during orientation which included the added activities addressing formal meeting structure and life skills. The 2013 curriculum was written into the original KYG curriculum for all facilitators and included an orientation to the activities. In 2013 there were facilitators who self selected to not use the additions. Those self selecting to use the new curriculum became the volunteer facilitator pool similar to the 2011 and 2012 studies, those who didn't became the sudo control group.

Procedures

The Program. The basic structure for all KYG curriculums is to prepare youth for a simulation of one of the four topics; Legislative System, Judicial System, Elections and Party Platforms, and Politics and the Media. The changes to the old curriculum were the addition of a stronger life skill focus. We selected life skills proposed by the Positive Youth Development (PYD) model (Lerner, et al., 2005) according to which life skills help develop civic engagement in youth (competence, confidence, character, connection, and caring).

Another consideration for the delivery of the content was gathered from theory and research that suggested the following recommendations for delivering civic programs:

- Action-oriented, experiential learning approaches to civic engagement;
- "Reflection" or focused review of one's experience during the exercises;
- Ensuring relevance to one's personal situation and own interests
- Providing a wide range of skills ranging from leadership to interpersonal communication and teamwork;
- A youth-led model that encourages youth empowerment and ownership; and
- Adult mentoring (Brady, et al, 2012)

Any curriculum needs to be carefully planned, as some curriculums have been shown to work against youth engagement. One example is promising youth have a political voice when they actually are not welcomed to share their voice (Amnå, 2012). Another consideration was to keep the program simple, because evidence exists that complex lessons for volunteer facilitators can be taught poorly, which work against programs goals (Brandt, 2014).

In this study, a subset of KYG participants experienced additional curriculum sections, adding components of character development, connection, and caring from the PYD model. It also included experiential learning, reflective practices, relevance questions, youth empowerment, social skill development, teamwork, and adult mentorship. Experiential education, reflective practices, and relevant questions were added to make it engaging and get youth to discuss what civic engagement they could do as a result of the KYG. Youth empowerment was achieved through youth choice on how to apply learning. Social Skill development was included to offer youth chances to talk about how they could improve and set daily goals. Teamwork was developed through the group setting goals and adult mentorship was achieved by having volunteer facilitators share their civic engagement plans. See "How to Run a Structured Meeting: A Toolkit for Field-Trip Volunteer facilitators" WSU publication at <https://pubs.wsu.edu/ItemDetail.aspx?ProductID=15726>.

Sections added to the KYG curriculum included:

- Community Building

- Group Agreement
- Compliments
- Debriefing learned content
- Debriefing life skills.

The sections listed above were added into the preconference meetings and the four day KYG evening meetings. Table 1 outlines the additions to the curriculum and how they relate to PYD. The last meeting at the KYG event includes focused reflection questions on how individual participants intended to apply their learning in life skills and civic content after the KYG program.

Table 1

How Additional Program Sections Incorporate PYD (Lerner, et al, 2005)

Additional sections	PYD Factors <i>(Lerner, et al, 2005)</i>
Community Building ("ice breakers")	Connection, caring
Group Agreement (created by group members - setting self-imposed behavior norms)	Character, connection, caring
Compliments for behaviors that support group success	Character, connection, caring
Debriefing learned content and plans for future applications	Competence, connection, contribution
Debriefing life skills and plans for future applications	Competence, character, connection, caring, contribution

There are debates around what life skills (social-emotional skills) need strengthening in civic programs (Conner & Strobel, 2007). Since there is no constancy on which to select, the life skills of decision making, accepting differences, job skills, and communication were selected to be the focus during the reflections. The rationale used to select was that decision making and communication skills are used in many situations. Accepting differences helps when youth are sharing rooms and job skills related to skills they could use in future job success. All life skills relate to character development in PYD. The life skills are introduced to the participants as key one focused on and are brought up in the reflection questions. For each of the three years in which the program was studied, the primary content measured was specific to that year's civic theme. The themes were Legislative System, Judicial System, and Elections and Platforms.

The first two years during which the PYD content was added to the KYG program (2011 & 2012), the use of the additional content was voluntary. Volunteer facilitators used a card set to select different activities for each of the added sections. Those not volunteering to include the additional sections were considered quasi-control groups.

In 2013 the activities were incorporated into the KYG lessons in advance, therefore not intended as a choice. Regardless, the only way to know whether volunteer facilitators followed the curriculum as intended was through surveying volunteer facilitators and youth following the completion of each program. Some volunteer facilitators did not cover any, or only some of the additional sections, due to time limitations, lack of skill, or lack of desire to deliver the modified

sections. Also, there were sites that did not conduct surveys and those sites were not included in the final 2013 analyses, these are listed as unknown in Table 2.

Table 2
Sample of WSU Retrospective pre post questions

Because of my participation in 4-H Know Your Government, I am able to:	Back...before I participated in 4-H Know Your Government- (Circle one for each statement)				Now...after I participated in 4-H Know Your Government- (Circle one for each statement)			
	No	Sometimes	Usually	Yes	No	Sometimes	Usually	Yes
Think about what might happen because of my decision.	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Evaluate decisions I have made.	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Use my time wisely.	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4

Pre-Post Survey. The WSU 4-H Retrospective Pre-Post Evaluation uses a Likert scale to assess the degree to which respondents agree with statements that tap the different life skills. Loeser, et al. (2004) assessed content and construct validity through a review of literature and expert feedback. Internal reliability was deemed adequate ($\alpha=.81$).

KYG content questions were different each year because the content changed, see Table 3.

Table 3
Examples of different content questions.

Year	Civic Topic	Content Questions
2011	Politics and the Media	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Understand how media is used to represent information. 2. Recognize bias in media. 3. Learn the 5 Media questions to evaluate media.
2012	Elections and Party Platforms	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Discover the purpose of political parties 2. Learn how to get a candidate elected through building peer support. 3. Create resolutions that develop a political party platform.
2013	The Judicial System	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Have knowledge of the WA State Judicial System. 2. Understand how a citizen functions within the judicial system. 3. Develop an awareness that the law may differ from personal feelings and these feeling do not outweigh evidence when deciding the verdict of a case.

Results

The consistent result, throughout all three years, is in the greater level of growth youth reported pre to post with the youth who participated in the PYD activities, see Table 4. Those differences were calculated and then calculated as how much greater percent change occurred in the curriculum group compared to non-curriculum use. The N represents the total number of individual youth in each group. Response rate is how many completed the post evaluations.

Table 4
Variations between Years

Year	Values (N and n)	Implementation Level	Notes
2011	Curriculum: (N=30) 90% response rate (n=27). Non-use (N=300) 32% response rate (n=96)	12% used curriculum	Voluntary facilitator participation. Volunteer facilitators selected activities.
2012	Curriculum: (N=19) 95% response rate (n=18). Non-use (N=196) 89% response rate (n=175)	9% used curriculum	Voluntary facilitator participation. Volunteer facilitators selected activities.
2013	Curriculum: (N=100) 85% response rate (n=85). Non-use (N=75) 48% response rate (n=36) Unknown: (N=30) Evaluations incomplete.	49% confirmed to have used	Activities incorporated into the curriculum.

Results showed that the KYG+PYD participants experienced greater increases in life skills and content growth than did the control group. Youth who were exposed to *all* of the PYD add-ons reported more significant gains in both life skills and knowledge than those who experienced none or only some of the add-ons (see Table 5), measured by percentage greater.

Table 5

Average percentage differences between modified curriculum and original curriculum (control)

Group	Life Skills (Social-emotional Skills) and KYG Content				
	Decision Making	Accepting Differences	Job Skills	Communication	KYG Civic knowledge
Modified 2011	17.9	8.1	8.6	13.5	13.7
Control 2011	11.5	7.6	6.8	10.9	11.3
Percentage difference	+56%	+7%	+26%	+24%	+21%
Modified 2012	20.5	19.4	11.6	16.7	20.7
Control 2012	14.1	8	7.1	16.7	17.1
Percentage difference	+45%	+143%	+63%	No Difference	+21%
Modified 2013	59	29	35	71	11
Control 2013	40	29	30	46	9
Percentage difference	+48%	No Difference	+17%	+54%	+22%

Discussion

Though the content and method of program delivery for each year was different, all three years provide a picture of the impact that social-emotional programming (teaching life skills) had on these particular participants. This curriculum's focus on life skill development is supported by the meta-analytic study conducted by the CASEL group (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). This review supported the notion that the intentional addition PYD activities to after-school programs does tend to lead to an increase in life skill competencies. Also, the idea that program volunteer facilitators sometimes work against the goals of the program, by not supporting intentions (Wood, 2010) was supported -- in that some facilitators choose not to use the additional section included in the 2013 curriculum, which resulted in youth scoring lower. This reinforces the importance of volunteer buy-in to the curriculum and continued focus on training.

A key contributor to this result was volunteer control over curriculum. Volunteer facilitators had a choice of whether to deliver the curriculum (KYG+PYD) or follow the KYG lessons only. Those who chose not to incorporate the PYD content had youth who reported lower outcomes in life skills and civic knowledge. This suggests that the modified curriculum had an impact on youth perceptions of learning. This finding further suggests that regardless of curriculum design, volunteer facilitators can have an impact on the youth experience.

There are significant limitations to the ability to generalize from this study:

1. Annual curriculum differences resulted in variations in the intensity a life skills focused on. For example, in one year, the focus might have been on Accepting Differences while in the following year Decision Making may have been the focus. Also, each subsequent year's

program resources were improved based on feedback and observation from the prior year. This hampers year-to-year comparisons. Perhaps foremost in this regard is not being able to verify if volunteer facilitators at the weekend KYG program even used the PYD sections that were offered to them.

2. The retrospective pre-post youth surveys have disadvantages due to their self-report nature and self-selection biases. Simply stating that one has improved in a particular life skill is not the same as when one must perform a task which *exemplifies* actual changes in that life skill. Also affecting recall during post surveys could have been volunteer facilitators who implemented some life skill activities (e.g., Appreciations) without telling the youth this is what they were doing.
3. There was not consistency in the percentage of improvement across the different life skills between groups. The only life skill that showed consistently was Decision Making.
4. Several sites choose not to participate in evaluations, which may have resulted in self-selection bias in the first two years.

Conclusion

It was hypothesized that youth self-reports of gains in life skills and civic knowledge are higher when participating in a modified KYG curriculum with the addition of focused life skills training content. While this study had several design limitations, there appeared to be some preliminary support for this hypothesis. This also follows Sherrod and Lauckhart's (2008) contention that an important part of civic development includes tolerance for others and connectedness to the group. Also, the curriculum focused strongly on reflection activities which, according to Conner and Strobel (2007), is important to youth civic development. Some of the gains that were made may have been due to the inclusion of this important process.

The second major conclusion is that volunteer facilitator implementation of, and compliance with curriculum plans has a definite impact on the outcomes of the training. A quality curriculum program will only maximize learning outcomes when the facilitators fully implement it. Furthermore, in order to reliably assess the ability of a curriculum to deliver positive learning outcomes, there should be reasonable consistency in implementation across facilitators.

Future research should consider the following improvements:

1. Consider a follow-up survey to assess the reasons some volunteer facilitators chose not to implement the added PYD sections; and, solicit feedback about the PYD content from volunteer facilitators who did implement them. Did the implementers perceive the PYD programming as relevant? Easy or hard to implement? Did they understand the intentions of the programming?
2. Similarly, a retrospective analysis of the program implementation could more specifically determine the duration and intensity with which the civic lessons were implemented.
3. Standardize the year-to-year programming so that it is directly comparable. Integrate the PYD content into half the KYG programs so that volunteer facilitators assigned to the PYD groups are *required* to implement that content as a matter of fact/inclusion. This would allow for clearer assessment of the impact of the full use of PYD material across all pre lessons and 3 day weekend event.

4. In order to truly examine which parts of the PYD curriculum have the most impact on learning life skills, future research would ideally have enough groups that the life skills could be isolated by group, and perhaps combined in separate groups. For example, this research could look more closely at whether the addition of appreciation impact life skill development more than only including a reflection process – or whether the inclusion of a group agreement process makes any difference in the acquisition of life skills in youth.

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