

Project BRAVE

Engaging Youth as Agents of Change in a Youth Violence Prevention Project

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In Project BRAVE, high school students write about their experiences with violence and share their stories both in the classroom and with stakeholders in the community. This article discusses preliminary evaluation results on youth and their roles as agents of change. It concludes with challenges faced, facilitating factors, and next steps that are relevant to school- and community-based youth involvement in violence prevention and in health promotion in general.

Introduction

“Building and Revitalizing an Anti-Violence Environment” (Project BRAVE) is a youth violence prevention intervention in New Orleans, Louisiana, guided by a partnership of community- and school-based organizations, public school students and teachers, and public health researchers. Project BRAVE participants view violence as a community-level public health issue created, in part, by conditions in the social and physical environment. Moving beyond an emphasis on individual behavior, Project BRAVE examines and addresses factors that have been identified as social determinants of violence, such as:

- Relationships among individuals and between groups (e.g., adults and youth) in the community (Cotten et al., 1994; Orpinas et al., 1999; Sheline et al., 1994; Reiss and Roth, 1993; Sampson et al., 1997).
- The physical environment in the community (e.g., abandoned housing and vacant lots, street lighting) (Sampson and Lauresen, 1994; Heinzlmann, 1981; Wilson and Kelling, 1989).
- Policy at the local, state, and national levels (e.g., curfew laws, education policy, gun control) (Catalano et al., 1998; Gottfredson, 1988; Wallack, 1999; Sheley et al., 1992).

Project BRAVE takes what some have called a “youth empowerment” approach to health promotion in which youth are seen not as a source of community problems but as a vital resource to communities with the potential to act as catalysts for and agents of change (Holden et al., 2004; Kim et al., 1998; Wallerstein et al., 2005).

Background and Nature of the Problem

Project BRAVE serves three contiguous neighborhoods in New Orleans. The neighborhoods have high concentrations of poverty with an average annual household income of \$26,000, compared to \$36,000 citywide and \$49,000 nationwide. Ninety percent of the residents in two of the three neighborhoods identify themselves as African-American, compared to 67 percent citywide and 12 percent nationwide. Renters occupy over half of the households in the community and 16 percent of homes are vacant. Women head almost 25 percent of households in which children are present. Only half of the adult residents are employed and over one-third do not have a high school diploma. Racially segregated and economically marginalized urban communities such as those described here often experience high rates of violence (Reiss and Roth, 1993; Sampson and Lauresen, 1994; Randall et al., 1999; Sampson et al., 1997).

Youth in particular face a number of challenges in this community. Between 45 percent and 54 percent of the 12- to 17-year-old youth in these communities are living in poverty.¹ In 2001–2002, almost 25 percent of enrolled students dropped out of the school participating in Project BRAVE. There were four expulsions and 95 suspensions. The student body is 99 percent African-American, making the school more racially segregated than the surrounding community.² On average, between 1991 and 1998, 45 percent of all homicide victims in the zip code in which these neighborhoods are located were under the age of 25.³

Despite these challenges, the intervention and school communities possess a number of strengths that are relevant for violence prevention. Even with a high percentage of renters, there is some degree of residential stability; with 60 percent of residents living in the same house for at least five years. There are a number of neighborhood associations, grassroots organizations, health and social service agencies, and research institutions in the intervention community. One grassroots organization, the Crescent City Peace Alliance (CCPA), is the lead community-based organization for Project BRAVE. CCPA has led the community in a variety of efforts such as closing a nightclub where violence was frequent, cleaning vacant lots, boarding up over 30 abandoned homes, and maintaining a positive relationship with the local high school through four administration changes. CCPA also forged the connection between the principal investigator and the lead school-based organization involved in the project, Students at the Center (SAC).

SAC is a collection of teachers, community members, and students who see education as part of a collective effort to improve the community. SAC offers small classes (15 students) that use traditional subjects (e.g., language arts, history) to engage students in community improvement efforts while helping them to develop practical skills such as journalism and digital media production. Students use their skills to raise awareness of community issues and work on neighborhood activities that help them understand the importance of civic engagement (e.g., street clean-ups, assisting with the creation of a civil rights memorial). In 2003, the Douglass Community Coalition (DCC) was formed to further strengthen the relationship between the community and the school. This coalition of individuals and organizations meets regularly, involves community members in school activities, and supports the school in its role as a resource to the community.

SAC and CCPA have a history of working together to integrate school and community improvement projects with learning. Through the DCC community residents, neighborhood groups, and institutions and agencies with a history of activism are also involved. Faculty and students from local universities contribute to research, intervention development, and program evaluation. Thus, Project BRAVE builds on the strengths of the community and the school.

Intervention Strategies

Project BRAVE examines and addresses violence based on the experiences of youth. The Project BRAVE classroom intervention pilot involved two teachers and 15 students. Teachers and school counselors encouraged students to register for the elective class based on previous participation in SAC activi-

ties or, in some cases, simply because the class fit in their schedules. A few students selected the course based on the reputation of the teachers or SAC. There were no grade-point average requirements and student disciplinary records were not considered in recruitment and selection.

The Project BRAVE pilot class began with a “Story Circle” method, in which participants shared life experiences in small groups. Community partners who were active in New Orleans’ civil rights movement introduced this approach to SAC. In our pilot class, students wrote and edited stories during class time about their experiences with violence. Students explored relevant materials such as literature and film and worked with a local actor who visited the Project BRAVE classroom regularly as they refined their stories. In an early class session, the actor performed a series of monologues about violence in the lives of nine female characters. The teachers and the actor then worked with the students to turn their own stories into monologues.

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After several weeks, one student reluctantly shared the story of a friend who had died in his arms after being hit with a stray bullet in a neighborhood park. Other students supported him by sharing their stories of violence at the same park. As a result, the students refocused their monologues to recount their experiences of violence in the park. The instructors introduced new reading material and community guests to complement the themes emerging from the student writings. Participants added movement, sound, poetry, and rap to the monologues, creating a living backdrop meant to evoke the location of the events. All students, even those who did not have stories about the park, performed in each story. The students named their work “Inhaling Brutality, Exhaling Peace.”

The principal investigator, a public health researcher, worked with the students to conduct a critical analysis of their experiences and to identify the factors that contribute to violence in their community. The investigator used a Freirian technique known as “conscientization,” or raising critical awareness (Freire, 1990; Wallerstein and Sanchez-Merki, 1994), which involved the following steps over several weeks:

- Identifying the important events leading to the violent outcomes in students’ stories.

- Discussing the factors that they believed contributed to the events.
- Organizing factors into levels, using a social-ecological framework (McLeroy et al., 1988), from those that were most proximal to the individuals involved (e.g., personality traits, employment status) to those that were more distal (e.g., neighborhood conditions, public policy).

This dynamic process is illustrated in the sidebar entitled, “The Power of Stories” (see page 44).

Impact on Participating Students

Public health students, the two teachers, and the principal investigator conducted participant observations in the classroom and at performances as part of the pilot evaluation. At the end of the semester, the principal investigator conducted and tape-recorded a group interview with the students to reflect on their experiences. Author Adam Becker used the focus-coding method (Chesler, 1987; Zimmerman et al., 1995), to analyze observation notes and group interview transcripts. This coding process involved segmenting the transcript into categories according to predetermined themes of interest—in this case, pertaining to the impact on students of their involvement in the pilot intervention class. Authors Jim Randels and Damian Theodore reviewed and commented on the analysis.

In the sections that follow we present selected themes in four areas related to the project’s impact on the involved youth: classroom attendance, social support among youth and teachers, youth self-perceptions as agents of change, and avoidance of violent behavior.

Classroom attendance. Although it was rare that all 15 enrolled students were present in class, data suggest that students were interested in participating in Project BRAVE and sometimes came to school only to attend the Project BRAVE class. Students who were not registered for the class occasionally came to observe or participate; one asked to transfer into the class. The interest in the Project BRAVE class suggests that similar classes could potentially increase student attendance (and perhaps attachment) in school—an important protective factor related to violence prevention (DHHS, 2001).

Social support. Data from the focus group and observations suggest that social support among students and teachers increased during the semester. The following exchange illustrates one student’s willingness to share a

THE POWER OF STORIES

One Project BRAVE story involved a student's boyfriend, who was killed in a retaliatory shooting while riding as a passenger in a stolen car. Students identified important events that led to the violence—for instance, the theft of the car and the procurement of the gun. Students also discussed contributing factors such as the fact that the youth did not work or attend school, lack of student and parental involvement in schools, educational policy that influences student satisfaction with school, a lack of community or police presence that might have prevented the theft, a lack of employment opportunities, and public policy related to gun sales.

The facilitator asked questions using different levels of analysis to help the students organize the events and factors. For example, when asked about the characteristics of the young men involved, students mentioned lack of interest in school and work as contributing factors. They cited peer pressure among friends as an interpersonal factor that contributed to the events. In response to questions about community and societal factors, students mentioned that businesses rarely hired neighborhood youth and, when they did, they only made minimum wage.

Students used their social-ecological analyses to develop a list of stakeholders who they believed could affect the factors contributing to violence. The list included neighborhood residents, teachers and school administrators, police, business owners, and city officials. Students and community partners invited these stakeholders to a performance of the piece. The principal investigator helped the students develop a facilitation guide to engage audience members in a post-performance discussion about solutions (see “Facilitation Guide Selected Questions”).

One solution that emerged from the discussion was to develop a system for neighbors to take turns monitoring the park. A representative from the city department responsible for parks and recreation programs was present and volunteered to share the idea with her supervisors. Other solutions included training for local police to avoid excessive force and presenting the students' work citywide to motivate other neighborhoods to act.

painful story—the death of his friend—and the emotional support he felt from the class.

Q: What is it that helped you get to the point where you felt like you could have, should have, expressed [your story]?

A: Because I felt comfortable with y'all telling my story. And I felt like I'm closer to y'all as family—[that's] why I can come down and tell you anything that went on.

This student also described how telling his story helped him to express his anger and sadness over the incident, something he hadn't been able to do previously.

Self-perceptions as change agents. Data from the group interview suggest that Project BRAVE helped students to see themselves as change agents, with the ability to motivate people to implement solutions to violence, as highlighted in the following dialogue:

A: [After the performance] the question was, 'How can we best prevent stuff like this from happening?' And the man said, 'Well, all the good people need to not run away from the park and take over the park.' They just like, you know, take control and not [ignore it].

Q: How do you think we can do that?

A: Well, even if you start with this play. And then like organize our own group and do clean up. And just go around the neighborhood just talking to teenagers, their parents, anyone we see.

Violent Behavior. Evidence also suggests that, although emphasis is not placed on individual behavior, involvement in Project BRAVE may help students to avoid violence, as illustrated in these comments:

A: I feel real bad, you guys.

Q: Why?

A: 'Cause yesterday we were doing the play and speaking the peace and I was about to fight right before the play.

This student went on to explain how she decided to walk away from the fight not only to “speak the peace” but to act peacefully as well. At no time in the discussion were the students asked about their personal involvement in violence.

Lessons Learned

The evaluation of this school-based intervention to prevent youth violence demonstrates the project’s positive effect on involved youth and its potential to impact certain determinants of violence. Interest in the class (among participating as well as non-participating students) suggests a potential for improving student attendance in school. Some of this interest is likely due to the small class size along with curricula that are interactive and based on students’ knowledge and experiences. This effect has also been found in other youth empowerment models (DHHS, 2001). The 15 students involved in this Project BRAVE class became more willing to discuss and perform their stories of violence, an indicator of increasing social support among students and teachers. The experience increased students’ perceptions of being supported and valued, and led at least one student to avoid violent behavior during the course of the pilot. The “analysis of events” component helped students organize and think critically about the factors that contributed to violent incidents, and to identify and engage people and organizations that could contribute to solutions. Community members who attended the performance considered actions that might make the neighborhood safer.

Challenges

Project BRAVE encountered a number of challenges in its pilot phase. Funders of school-based violence prevention programs often prefer standardized curricula (Thornton et al., 2002). Some specifics of the Project BRAVE curriculum cannot be standardized, but rather evolve through dialogue as students, teachers, and artists work together to build on students’ experiences. Because Project BRAVE is not based on standardized curricula, it was difficult to find funds for the pilot. The pilot was conducted using minimal funds from the principal investigator’s institutional research funds and funds obtained by SAC for general classroom work, not specifically for Project BRAVE (approximately \$25,000).

Another funding challenge was a typical requirement by funders of youth violence prevention programs to involve very young (elementary school aged) or “most at-risk” youth—those who have dropped out or been expelled from school (Kellermann et al., 1998). Focusing on risk is contrary to Project BRAVE’s asset-based approach (Steuart, 1975; Kretzmann and

McKnight, 1993), in which young people are viewed as potential agents of change rather than as individuals in need of behavior modification. Project BRAVE involves adolescents who may not possess “the malleable nature of young children” (Kellermann et al., 1998, p. 287), and may not be youth who would traditionally be defined as “most at risk”—many of them are motivated leaders and interested in community involvement. Funders who may be reluctant to fund interventions with adolescents who are not deemed most at risk might consider the following: Even youth who remain in school but live in communities with high rates of violence face difficult circumstances and are at risk for involvement in or exposure to violence (Martinez and Richters, 1993).

The conditions and daily events in the school setting also presented challenges. Public schools are increasingly evaluated based on standardized test performance. As already under-funded schools struggle to maintain financial stability, many are pressured to emphasize testing.⁴ School officials may be reluctant or unable to free up class periods for “special” courses. The BRAVE class was disrupted frequently to prepare students for standardized testing.

In addition, students and their families experienced challenges that affected sustained student participation in BRAVE classroom activities. Despite student interest in the program, inconsistent attendance proved challenging to the process, as students sometimes missed crucial steps in the intervention. Students were absent due to family obligations, lack of family support for attendance, or lack of motivation based on negative school experiences. Inconsistent attendance in the Project BRAVE class also slowed the pace of course activities.

Interventions that involve youth in similar communities will need to be flexible and supportive of students and families. Project BRAVE partners, for example, often provided transportation to students involved in after-school project activities; teachers sometimes had to contact a family directly and provide social support (e.g., referrals to needed services) in order to facilitate student attendance.

Facilitating Factors

Several important factors contributed to the pilot’s success:

- *Relationships.* Project BRAVE built on pre-existing relationships among residents, community-based organizations, the school, and local researchers.
- *Support.* This community welcomed Project BRAVE with open arms. In fact, BRAVE joins a long tradition of opportunities for students to

FACILITATION GUIDE SELECTED QUESTIONS

Inhaling Brutality, Exhaling Peace Discussion

For the whole audience:

- What messages do you get from the play?
- How do you relate to these stories?
- Did you know children go through these things at such a young age?
- What other type of input do you have?
- How can we keep the good things?
- How can we prevent the bad things?
- What can you or your group do to contribute to the cause of preventing violence?

For police:

- Are police aware that mistreatment of youth happens?
- What can the police force do about mistreatment of youth?
- Would you/can you intervene if you see a fellow officer mistreating a young person?
- How can we ensure appropriate use of weapons by police?

For domestic violence counselors:

- How can counseling change to increase trust?
- Can counselors relate to people in domestic violence situations so that people would feel more comfortable going?

For New Orleans recreation department:

- Why not have park security?
- How can you improve [staff] training to prevent rough play in parks and pools?

- Can salaries be raised to increase motivation to be more vigilant?

For community organizations:

- What roles can young people play in your work?
- Can young people take positions of influence in the organization?
- How can your organization contribute to young people's lives and future?
- What can you do about neighborhood improvement?
- How can organizations work together?

For media:

- Why are there always negative images and negative statistics of our communities in the media?
- How can media use power and creativity for positive outcomes?
- What kind of community activities can media get involved in?

For businesses:

- Can you hire more young people so that they have better ways to earn money and can learn skills and responsibility?
- How can we resolve issues of conflict between youth and businesses?
- How can wages be made more equitable?
- How can policies be enforced so that weapons don't get into the wrong hands?

- How can we solve the problems associated with selling alcohol, cigarettes, and drug paraphernalia?
- For schools:**
- How can we fight for good pay for teachers?
 - Why are schools of differing quality?
 - What kinds of programs could high-schools offer that would help?
 - How can we encourage more teachers to go beyond just “teaching?”
 - How can we get more order in schools?
- For faith-based organizations**
- How can you help in the community besides providing religious services?
- How can youth reach out to the church or synagogue?
 - How can congregation members that don’t live near the church help the community in which the faith-based organization is located?
- Wrap-up questions**
- Who else should see this performance?
 - Who can help us to organize more performances?

share their experiences and participate in community change. For example, the Douglass Community Coalition provides a context for youth to work with adults on projects related to strengthening the community-school relationship. In addition, SAC graduates return to work with current students, providing young adult role models.

- *Methods.* Project BRAVE built on existing methods (e.g., story circles, community organizing) to address issues that are important to the community. Therefore, the community views Project BRAVE as supporting and complementing other community-based efforts rather than diverting important resources from existing goals.

While the above factors are specific to this community and project, interventions addressing multiple-level factors, which contribute to or protect against youth violence, are more likely to be successful if they identify and build on similar, pre-existing community strengths.

Next Steps

The success of the Project BRAVE pilot suggests that schools and communities can build on pre-existing relationships, use local methods to understand and address violence, and meaningfully involve youth as part of the solution. With future funding, Project BRAVE will be replicated in the school

and a community component will be added to support community-based solutions to youth violence. Additional evaluation methods will include school and community surveys to measure change in student-related variables (e.g., school attachment, social support) and community-level variables (e.g., collective efficacy, community empowerment). Longer-term outcomes (e.g., violent behavior, crime rates) will also be monitored to further understand the project's impact. The preliminary results of the school-based pilot, presented here, are a promising indicator of future success and an example of how community-based participatory approaches can involve youth to address community violence and health.

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1. These census data were compiled by the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center and accessed in January 2004 in the "Bywater District Profile," available at <http://www.gnocdc.org>.
 2. School Information and Achievement Profiles, Frederick Douglass High School. Available at: <http://www.nops.k12.la.us/>. Accessed January 2004.
 3. These data were obtained from an unpublished study conducted by the Louisiana Office of Public Health, Injury Research and Prevention Office in collaboration with the Orleans Parish Coroner's Office.
 4. For a discussion on standardized testing and school accountability, see the National Education Association's article at <http://www.nea.org/accountability/index.html> (accessed March 2005).

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