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Title: Addressing Engagement, Anger and Aggression Through The Rock Water Program (RWP): Rural Adolescent Males' Perceptions

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Addressing Engagement, Anger and Aggression Through The Rock Water Program (RWP): Rural Adolescent Males' Perceptions

Abstract

Objective

The Rock and Water Program (RWP) has been implemented in some Australian schools as a means of addressing school disengagement, anger and aggression, which are significant determinants of mental illness. However, much of the evidence supporting the RWP is anecdotal. This project explored rural adolescent males' perceptions of the RWP.

Design

Questionnaires were used to gather data about the students prior to their commencement in the RWP. Focus group interviews were conducted with students at weeks five and nine of the nine week program. Data were analysed using thematic analysis.

Setting and Participants

The RWP was facilitated in four schools in rural NSW over three terms for a total of 12 program deliveries. 187 rural adolescent males participated in the focus groups. The participants were identified by their school as disengaged in schoolwork and either perpetrators and/or victims of anger and aggression.

Main Outcome

Participants liked the 'learning by doing' action-oriented approach, and reported learning strategies that could reduce aggression in the school and wider community

Results

The focus groups provided insight into why these adolescent boys engaged with this program when generally engagement in school overall was reported as poor. Suggestions for program improvement included more or longer sessions, and the inclusion of girls.

Conclusion

This study found that the RWP engaged rurally-based boys, who spoke positively about the action-oriented program. Future research could examine if this translates into reduced incidents of anger and violence at school and improved school engagement and overall physical and mental health.

Keywords: rural; adolescents; mental health; engagement, anger; Rock Water Program.

What is known?

- The Rock and Water Program (RWP) has been used with over 2 million school children worldwide as a tool to reduce anger and aggression in youth.
- While reports on the RWP are positive they are largely based on anecdote, case studies and small studies ($n < 20$), and little information exists to guide the use of this program with rural Australian adolescent males.

What this paper adds?

- This large study ($n = 187$) found that rural adolescent males enjoyed the RWP, and engaged with useful lessons in managing anger and aggression.
- Participants liked the ‘learning by doing’ action-oriented approach, and reported learning strategies that could reduce aggression in the school and wider community.

Introduction

The Rock Water Program (RWP) aims to address school disengagement, anger and aggression, which are determinants of poor mental health and anti-social behaviour that have life-long negative consequences for young people.¹⁻⁶ Although there is a paucity of specific Australian research, what there is indicates that this disengagement, anger and aggression appears less likely to be addressed in rural settings.⁷⁻⁹ Educational researchers have identified the concept of a small ‘e’ and big ‘E’ engagement. Small ‘e’ engagement, or ‘e’ngagement, is defined as “substantive engagement with the learning processes at hand, as distinct from merely complying with teachers’ wishes and instructions” (Munns et al., 2006b, p. 10). This level of engagement is more than students just following rules, it relates to an active participation where students have positive feelings and are interested in the task they are doing, seeing value in the activity (Munns et al., 2006b, pp. 10-11). Positive learning experiences may present the opportunity to help student to see a wider value in learning and could be a key to progressing them to ‘E’ngagement or a more enduring commitment to the broader education process (Martin, 2010).

Studies suggest that factors contributing to community violence and related mental health issues are complex and that prevention should focus directly on youth via school-based interventions that target classroom teaching strategies and peer mediation.^{10,11}

The RWP address boys’ physical and social development by linking physical exercises to mental and social skills, and offers a framework for challenging masculine stereotypes and the role that aggression plays in society. Around 2 million students have engaged in the program worldwide,¹² and the program is also popular in Australia.¹²

The literature on the RWP is largely comprised of anecdotes and case studies, and is constrained by small samples ($N < 20$) and a lack of detail,¹³ providing a limited evidence-

base in support of the RWP as an anger management process, especially for young men in rural settings. This study adds to the growing body of knowledge about the RWP by exploring Australian rural adolescent males' perceptions of, and experiences with, the RWP. Specific research questions were:

1. What do participants think about the RWP?
2. How would participants change the RWP to improve it?

Methods

Sample and setting

A purposive sample of rural adolescent males was recruited via a written invitation disseminated by four secondary schools in rural North Coast NSW that included an explanation of the research aims and processes, and potential benefits and risks. Participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw at any time. Consent was obtained from participants and their parent/guardian.

Inclusion criteria

Rural male students aged 12-17 (Years 7-10) who were identified as disengaged from school learning, had experienced either problem anger episodes or been involved in aggressive incidents as victim or perpetrator, and who agreed to share their experiences were included.

Ethics and safety

Approval to conduct the study was obtained from the NSW Department of Education and Training (SERAP number 06.225). Ethics clearance was obtained from Southern Cross University's Human Research Ethics Committee (ECN-06-22). The risk management plan for conducting the RWP adhered to departmental guidelines.¹⁴

Design and method

The mixed methods approach included a questionnaire to collect demographic data and focus group semi-structured interviews. Sample interview questions are listed in Box 1.

RWP procedure

The RWP uses physical activity, contests, role-play and discussion to engage boys in critical reflection that challenges their views of masculinity.¹⁵ In this project, the RWP was run over three successive school terms at four schools resulting in a total of 12 RWP groups. Each program was run in school time, in one 90-minute session per week, for nine weeks for each group of ~20 boys.

Data collection and analysis

Questionnaires were administered during the first RWP session to obtain descriptive information. Focus groups were held at the end of RWP sessions five and nine. During week nine, participants were provided feedback from their week five comments for verification. The discussions were audio-taped, transcribed, de-identified and analysed using thematic analysis. The thematic analysis used in this study was inductive and informed by the literature that had reported on an equivalent type of study.^{15,16}

A coding manual was utilized to record codes from the transcripts. Each code was given a description with quotes included as exemplars. Code descriptions were read and re-read to reflect upon their accuracy in conveying the meaning of participant responses. Patterns in the codes were used to develop themes that described, organised and interpreted the information.¹⁷ The codes and themes developed by PE were reviewed and confirmed by TM and JS.

Results

One hundred and eighty-seven rural adolescent males participated. Participants' ages ranged from 12-17 (Mean=13.6±0.96 S.D.) years. Year 8 students represented 42% of the cohort, 45% lived with both parents, 24% had been diagnosed with an emotional or mental health problem and 12% identified as indigenous. Sixty-seven percent identified they 'never' or only 'sometimes' got along with their teachers, 16% 'often' or 'very often' had difficulty with their reading and writing, 18% had been involved in a physical fight at school 'often' or 'very often' while 14% identified that they had 'often' or 'very often' been bullied. The analysis revealed themes of engagement and negative promotion of the RWP.

Theme - Engagement

Participants evidenced engagement in the RWP, describing it in terms such as *fun*, *good*, *exciting*, *excellent*, *fantastic*, *cool*, and *educational* and stated that they would highly recommend the program to others. Participants liked that the program was action-oriented, they learned by doing and described this as an effective teaching strategy. Participants were unsure what would happen each week, which they felt created positive anticipation and they felt that topics related directly to their real world experiences.

Fun learning experience

Participants went beyond simply complying with program rules to fully participating in, and enjoying, the learning experience, for example:

- *a fun and enjoyable learning experience*
- *I don't learn cause I'm bored, so like here we're actually having fun so it helps you take it in.*

Different to initially thought

The initial perceptions of the RWP demonstrated how participants viewed programs they had been involved with previously, for example, *I thought it was going to be all writing and teachers giving us all lectures and stuff*. Participants liked the RWP because:

- *you don't have to write stuff down in a book all the time*
- *it's not just talking about it, it's actually doing it and having fun with it.*

Learning by doing

The use of games and competitions to promote discussion, self-reflection and model assertive but non-violent behaviours was seen as a major strength by participants, for example:

- *in Rock and Water...you get to have a say and listen to other people*
- *[you learn] how to be flexible and strong at the same time... teaches people how to like defend themselves so that they don't have to go to violence*
- *if you do it physically you know what it will feel like and not only what it will look like*
- *you do it in an activity, it helps you to learn when to do it and when not to do it*

Connected to their real world

Participants could see how the learning was making a difference to them. Issues of masculinity, anger and aggression were real concerns that participants wanted to learn about and address. Many now realised that they can choose not to escalate confrontations:

- *I got hit in the face yesterday and I just kept eye contact and walked away*
- *it teaches you to like calm down instead of getting aggro... just to ignore it and walk away.*
- *my step-brother he always does annoying stuff...but now I am getting less reactive...before I would get him and hit him and stuff*

Participants described the skills they were learning in the RWP:

- *teaches us like how to help ourselves and control our anger*
- *learning not to react*
- *how to avoid physical fights*

They commented that at school - *they don't teach us [assertive communication skills] cause they don't think it's school teaching* - and identified the RWP as the place where they had learned these skills - *I haven't learnt anything except for here*. Students felt that doing the program could result in *more tolerance, less verbal and physical confrontations and less fights at school*, and potentially more friendships at school and reduced community violence.

Theme-Negative promotion of the RWP

Stigma

Stigma was an issue at the beginning with a perception promoted by others that the RWP was only for students who struggled academically and behaviourally, which exposed how they believed they were viewed by authority, for example:

- *some teacher told my friend that Rock and Water is for retards*
- *it's like are you the dumb kids or something?*
- *cause we're bad*
- *they don't like us*

Suggested improvements

Suggestions to improve the RWP included:

- *more than one period a week*
- *longer*
- *heaps of games*
- *I reckon you should get girls in to do this 'rock and water' because they end up getting into as much fights as we do.*

Discussion

The body of literature on the RWP is largely anecdotal and constrained by small samples and lack of detail. This study provides new information on how Australian rural adolescent males perceive the RWP. Participants appeared engaged by the RWP. They liked that: 1) it was action-oriented; 2) they learnt by doing; 3) games and competitions were used to teach; and 4) it was a fun learning experience that provided opportunities to explore how anger and aggression impacted their day-to-day lives. They also provided examples of where they had used what they had learnt through the RWP to walk away from aggressive incidents. There are different levels of user involvement in a service or program: the user can be a recipient of communication/services, the subject of consultation or the agent of control.¹⁸ Engagement

may have been high, in part, because students were consulted about their experiences and their feedback was used to modify the program where possible, perhaps giving them the sense of being an agent of control.

Adolescent males are difficult to engage in counselling or group work.¹⁹⁻²¹ Martin³ points out that engagement appears to be the key to unearthing the full potential of our students and positive learning experiences present an opportunity for young men to see a wider value in the education process. He suggests that this increased sense of value evidences an individual's drive to learn and grow, which potentially progresses them toward a more enduring commitment to the broader education process. Additionally, user engagement can be therapeutic in itself and can lead to improved social inclusion and better outcomes.¹⁸ Our results suggest that RWP has the ability to engage young men.

Participants in this study were exposed to a negative promotion of RWP. Peers and teachers had talked about the RWP as being either for bad or dumb students, despite not knowing what the program involved. The stigma attached to RWP had the potential to disengage this cohort from what was a positive learning activity once it was experienced. This suggests that education for teachers on the program is important prior to implementation, and that the RWP may be regarded more positively if marketed appropriately to its target audience.

Participants suggested that certain teaching methods previously employed had failed to engage participants even though the topic of learning skills to manage their anger did interest them. It was the 'physical, learning by doing' aspect of the RWP that was different to how participants had viewed boys' programs in general and anger management programs specifically. The evidence from the literature suggests that interventions for aggressive youth must be action-oriented, concrete, hands-on, able to capture their attention quickly and sustain it once the novelty wears off.^{5,6,19,24} RWP appears to incorporate these suggestions in

its curriculum and the experiences of the participants seem to support the literature. These findings suggest that RWP may provide adolescent boys with ways to better manage engagement, anger and aggression and potentially by implication their mental health.

Limitations

The main limitation of focus groups is the risk that one or two participants may dominate the conversations.¹⁹ The focus group facilitator identified dominant voices and put strategies in place to draw upon diverse input. This study also did not directly measure any mental health outcomes and impacts of other variables such as age, parental marital status, medical diagnoses or ethnicity were not examined. These limitations make for a blueprint for future research.

Conclusions

This paper investigates the use of the RWP in rural adolescents who had identified problems with engagement, anger and aggression. Their feedback suggested it was a positive program that engaged adolescent males because of its physical approach. How this actually translates into: 1) reduced incidents of anger and violence at school and 2) improved school engagement and physical and mental health could be the basis of future exciting research in this field.

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Box 1. Sample focus group questions.

What do you think of the RWP?

Has it been what you expected?

Do you think any differently about it now you have attended 5 (or 9) sessions?

How would you change the RWP?

If you had to describe the RWP to someone what would you say?

What sort of things have you learned?

What parts of it were most helpful?

Table 1. Themes, codes and exemplar quotes.

Theme	Codes	Quote
Engagement	Fun learning experience	<i>'a fun and enjoyable learning experience'</i> <i>I don't learn cause I'm bored - so like here we're actually having fun so it helps you take it in</i>
	Different to initially thought	<i>I thought it was going to be all writing and teachers giving us all lectures and stuff</i> <i>You don't have to write stuff down in a book all the time</i>
	Learning by doing	<i>it's not just talking about it; it's actually doing it</i> <i>Cause the stuff that you say doesn't sound like it's going to work but when you do it, it works</i> <i>It's practical learning</i> <i>How to be flexible and strong at the same time... teaches people how to like defend themselves so that they don't have to go to violence</i>
	Connected to real world	<i>[doing the program would result in]...more tolerance, less verbal and physical confrontations and less fights at school</i> <i>When you go out into the big world there won't be as many fights or raping and stuff</i> <i>I got hit in the face yesterday and I just kept eye contact and walked away</i>
Negative promotion of RWP	Stigma	<i>Some teacher told my friend that Rock and Water is for retards</i> <i>It's like are you the dumb kids or something?</i>