

Engage to Change? Development and Field Trial of a Youth Engagement Program

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Youth engagement, defined as a sustained involvement in meaningful activities with an external focus forms, an important aspect of positive youth development. The present study aims at development and field testing of a youth engagement program for urban college youth in India. A program named "Engage to Change" was developed to provide space to youth to reflect on their connection to society, importance of their active engagement with the society, while helping them to discover ways of doing so, by providing exposure to four youth relevant social causes. It comprised of a five-hour structured workshop followed by a two-month extended support and implementation phase for carrying out activities around one or more social causes. A pre-post follow-up control group design with a sample of 116 college youth was utilized. Significant and positive changes in the intervention group were observed on self esteem, sense of mastery and competence and frequency of connections. High perceived impact went hand in hand with higher scores on self-esteem and three psychological wellbeing sub-scales at post assessment. Awareness of social issues, enhanced social skills, confidence and sense of social-contribution efficacy were the three top gains reported at follow up. Overall findings indicate that Engage to Change program holds potential as a universal youth promotion program.

Keywords: Youth engagement, positive youth development, promotive intervention, Indian youth, youth volunteering

Indian demographics show a clear youth bulge and India is forecasted to become the youngest country in the world by 2020 (Prakash, 2013). This makes youth development research a national priority. Positive youth development (PYD) is a recent approach in the history of youth studies. Instead of a deficit and risk-centered assessment, it focuses on plasticity in youth development, importance of youth-environment interaction and identification and promotion of strengths and resources (Lerner, 2009). Youth engagement is a PYD concept built on the hypothesis of youth-context alignment as a vital source of development. It is defined as a meaningful participation and sustained involvement of a young person in an activity with a focus outside of himself/herself (Pancer, Rose-Krasnor & Loiselle, 2002). Youth engagement may involve a variety of activities such as youth volunteering, use of media for social action, citizenship behaviors etc. (Gray & Hayes, 2008).

There exists a large global body of empirical evidence on positive youth development and youth engagement (Bowman, Brandenberger, Lapsley, Hill, & Quaranto, 2010; Ferrari, Lekies, & Arnett, 2009; Wilson, Allen, Strahan, & Ethier, 2008), though there is paucity of research from India. Although there are many governmental and non-governmental programs at the community level in which youth can participate; only a small proportion of youth (22% of young men and 31% of young women) reported familiarity with these programs (International Institute for population Sciences, IIPS and Population Council, 2010). On the other hand, in a state survey on youth conducted by Karnataka Knowledge Commission (2011), 57% responded that contributing to society was very important to them in terms of life's priorities.

In an evaluative study on National Service Scheme (Parasuraman, 2009), volunteers reported increased confidence, communication

skills and awareness of social issues as outcomes of volunteering. Bhangaokar and Mehra (2012) examined youth civic engagement in the Indian context, and explored the personal and environmental enablers, through in-depth interviews with 19 civically engaged youth. Changed perspective/ideological transformation, skill building, and comfort with identity were some of the gains reported. A survey of college youth in an urban Indian metropolitan city highlighted the beneficial role of trusting, authentic youth-adult connection for enhancing youth engagement (Michael & Mehrotra, 2015). It also brought to focus the need for building awareness among youth about opportunities for meaningful engagement. The 2017 report on state of youth volunteering in India (published jointly by Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, UN volunteers & UNDP) documents numerous case studies of youth volunteering across Indian states and across social causes (UN Volunteers, 2017). It describes findings of a large survey of a nationally-representative sample of youth volunteers. The survey highlighted that while lack of information was perceived as a major barrier in volunteering, volunteering was leading to personal development, acquisition of interpersonal skills and enhanced confidence.

Rationale:

Though there are several programs at national and local levels to enhance youth volunteering, there is insufficient published empirical research on their outcomes. The India has been on documenting benefit for the society. Positive consequences for the youth themselves have been insufficiently examined empirically. Moreover, the available data indicate low awareness in youth about opportunities for engaging in social causes. There is a dearth of easy-to-implement programs designed specifically to enhance awareness, exposure, and motivation for youth engagement in the Indian context. The present study aimed to develop a brief youth engagement program for college going youth and examine its short term psychological outcomes.

These small groups were expected to choose maximum two social causes and plan awareness drives and campaigns around the same to be carried out in the subsequent 2-months implementation phase. Brief meetings were held (as needed) in the college campuses to guide and support the participants in the process of implementation.

2. Field Trial

The study was carried out after obtaining approval from Institute's Ethics Committee. A total of 13 colleges running regular degree courses or professional courses in Bangalore city were contacted out of which 11 were open to participate in the field trial. Out of these, five were selected for the field trial based on 1) availability of students during the trial time frame 2) availability of support from the college administration. A pre-post follow-up control group design was used. Three of these colleges were randomly assigned for enrolling participants for intervention groups and the other two were assigned to serve as recruitment-setting for the control group.

In keeping with the principles of positive youth development, it was considered critical to allow a sense of autonomy and voluntary participation. Program participation was solicited through display of announcement posters. Minimal sample selection criteria were used as it was a universal intervention program. All youth who were doing a full-time course and expressed an interest were eligible to participate.

A total of 116 participants enrolled across these venues during the enrollment period of about two weeks. Written informed consent was taken from each of the participants. Baseline assessment was conducted before the initiation of the workshop in the intervention group and post assessment was carried out two months after the baseline assessment for both the groups. During these two months period, the intervention group participated in the extended support phase. Follow up was conducted one month after post assessment. The intervention program was conducted in the three venues in three batches and the data from these venues were collated as intervention data.

The control group data were similarly based on the data obtained from two control settings. The control group participants were offered the youth engagement program after the completion of post assessment, on ethical grounds.

Measures

Basic Data Sheet: This was used to document socio-demographic details such as age, gender, religion, course of study, prior involvement in volunteering for any social cause and /or exposure to such activities through involvement of family members or friends at any time in the past/currently etc.

Psychological Well-being: This was assessed by using a twenty-item psychological well-being measure (PWB-20; Mehrotra, Tripathi, & Banu, 2013). It consists of the following factor-based subscales: sense of engagement and growth, positive relationships with others, self-acceptance and sense of mastery and competence.

Self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965): This scale is a simple brief ten-item measure. It uses four-point likert type ratings to provide an overall index of level of self-esteem. Frequency of connections: this was tapped by asking participants to indicate the frequency of connecting (absent/ rarely/occasionally / frequently) to eight groups (immediate family, relatives, peers, teachers, family friends, longtime friends, neighbors, religious/other community groups). Participants depicted frequency by drawing of arrows from a circle (self) to the rectangles (groups). Higher scores reflected greater frequency of connection to multiple groups (Michael, 2016).

Post-workshop feedback: A feedback form was used at the end of the workshop. This included items on gaining of any new information, gaining of specific ideas on how college youth could contribute to society and an inclination to recommend the program to one's peers.

Perceived program impact: The self-reported impact of participation in the youth engagement program was assessed at post assessment and at follow up assessment using five items, with a 6-point likert scale to capture the degree of impact ('not at all' to 'a great extent'). These

items required different kinds of potential impact as follows: Increase in self-confidence and interpersonal skills, development of social network with volunteering youth; development of job-related skills, enhanced awareness of community needs and enhanced involvement in other opportunities in the community for engagement.

Analyses: Paired t-test/Wilcoxon signed rank test was used for within group analysis. The between group analyses were carried out using independent sample t-test/Mann Whitney U test depending on the normality of the respective score distributions. Changes in outcomes for the subgroup of intervention participants who completed follow up assessments were examined using repeated measures of analysis of variance. Effect sizes were calculated in terms of correlations. Qualitative data in the form of responses to open-ended questions as well as feedback were content analyzed to document emergent themes.

Results

Table 1: Basic overall sample characteristics (Field Triat, N=116)

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	44	37.9
Female	72	62.1
Education level		
Under graduation	63	54.3
Post-graduation	53	45.7
Religion		
Hindu	78	67.2
Muslim	19	16.4
Christian	14	12.1
Others	5	4.3
Current Living Arrangement		
Alone	8	6.9
With colleagues	14	12.1
Hostel	47	40.5
With Family	47	40.5
Age Range: 17-25	Mean (SD): 20.49(1.99)	
Years of Formal education	Mean (SD): 14.96(1.62)	

Table 2: Comparisons between intervention and control groups on various measures At post assessment

Measure	Intervention Group (N=71) Mean (SD)	Control Group (N=45) Mean (SD)	t/ Mann Whitney Z value	Effect size (r)
Frequency of connections	16.46(2.85)	15.16(4.14)	2.00*	0.19
Self- esteem	19.68(3.44)	18.95(3.91)	1.04	0.10
Psychological Well-Being	89.20(13.24)	86.43(13.69)	1.08	0.10
	Psychological Well-Being (subscales)			
Positive Relation	20.99(4.95)	19.76(5.21)	1.29	0.12
Self Acceptance	19.85(3.11)	19.71(4.33)	0.50#	0.05
Sense of engagement & growth	25.96(3.54)	26.72(3.53)	1.34#	0.12
Sense of mastery & competence	22.39(5.69)	20.24(5.71)	1.98*	0.18

#. Mann Whitney values; *p <0.05

Table 3: Within group changes from baseline to post assessment in the intervention group on various measures (N=71)

Measure	Baseline Mean (SD)	Post assessment Mean (SD)	t/ Wilcoxon- sign-Z	Effect size (r)
Frequency of connections	15.69(3.88)	16.46(2.85)	1.78	0.21
Self- esteem	18.21(3.42)	19.68(3.44)	4.85**	0.50
Psychological Well-Being	87.37 (12.21)	89.20(13.24)	1.46	0.17
	Psychological Well-Being (Subscales)			
Positive Relations	21.07(4.79)	20.99(4.95)	0.14	0.01
Self-Acceptance	20.28(3.29)	19.85(3.11)	1.17#	0.10
Sense of engagement & growth	25.78(3.70)	25.96(3.54)	0.15#	0.01
Sense of mastery & competence	20.27(5.62)	22.39(5.69)	3.33**	0.37

#Wilcoxon Z; **p< 0.01

carried out to understand the overall pattern of results on this variable. It was noted that there was a significant decline on one of the items from baseline to post assessment in the intervention group ("By and large I am proud of who I am and the kind of life I lead"; Wilcoxon signed rank Z value: 2.09, p <0.05).

Feedback:

Most of the participants (90.09%) provided the feedback at the end of the workshop that they had gained new information on the core themes (namely road safety, mental health, and disability and environment issues). A majority (95.5%)

also endorsed that through the workshop, they derived specific ideas about ways in which college youth can contribute to the society. In the follow up session, all the participants, except two, endorsed that such programs have positive impact on youth and that they would recommend this program to their peers. This indicates that the positive feedback received immediately following the workshop phase remained stable at the end of the extended support phase.

Impact of youth engagement program:

As far as self-perceived program impact is concerned, increased awareness of community

Table 4: Within group differences from baseline to follow up assessment in intervention group (RMANOVA) (N=39)

Measure	Baseline assessment	Post assessment	Follow up	F value	Significant Post hoc differences
Frequency of connections	15.35 (0.71)	16.81(0.50)	15.54(0.46)	3.85*	2>1, 2>3
Self-esteem	17.94(0.50)	19.47(0.58)	19.52(0.67)	9.19**	2>1, 3>1
Psychological Well Being	85.63(1.81)	86.99(2.29)	84.03(2.26)	1.57	
Psychological Well Being (Subscales)					
Positive Relations	20.79(0.78)	21.19(0.71)	19.97 (0.83)	1.28	
Self-Acceptance	20.51(0.53)	19.19(0.59)	19.19(0.63)	4.42**	2<1
Sense of engagement & growth	25.74(0.59)	25.36(0.67)	25.31(0.64)	0.53	
Sense of mastery & competence	19.48(0.72)	22.15(0.86)	19.78(0.72)	5.42**	2>1, 2>3

Notes: **p <0.01; *p < 0.05. The means shown are estimated marginal means with the figures in parentheses indicating standard error.

needs was endorsed as the most impacted domain by the largest proportion of participants (39%) at post assessment. Increased confidence and interpersonal skills (32%), increased involvement in other opportunities in the community (25%) were the other top domains of perceived impact (endorsed as impacted to a large extent). In fact, 70% or more participants endorsed these to be high impact domains (endorsed as impacted to quite an extent/large extent).

The overall impact score did not change significantly from post assessment [Mean, SD: 20.72 (5.95)] to follow up assessment [Mean, SD: 21.69 (5.20); t=1.22, p >0.05] indicating maintenance of perceived gains between these two points of time.

High and low impact subgroups were formed by a median split of impact scores at post assessment. The high and low impact groups at post assessment were not significantly different from each other at baseline in reporting frequency of involvement in community activities ($\chi^2=0.02$, p=0.97) or in terms of involvement in formal volunteering by significant others ($\chi^2=0.64$, p=0.42). Supplementary analyses also revealed that the impact scores (post assessment) were uncorrelated with age (r=0.14, p=0.27). Males and females did not differ from each other on impact scores at follow up [(means and standard

deviations: 19.88 (6.66); females: 21.53 (5.80) respectively; t=1.06, p=0.29].

Correlations of impact scores with other measures at post assessment

While the impact scores were uncorrelated with any baseline measure, these exhibited significant correlations with scores on self-esteem (r=0.29, p < 0.05), overall psychological well-being (r=0.39, p < 0.01) and three of its subscales namely, self-acceptance (r=0.24, p < 0.05), positive relations (r=0.41, p < 0.01), sense of engagement and growth, (r=0.32, p < 0.01) at post assessment.

Important learning/gains: An open-ended item on important learning/gains was used in the follow up proforma to be at the extended support and implementation phase. The content analysis of the responses to this item generated six themes as mentioned. Awareness of social issues and ways of dealing with them (33%), enhanced social skills and confidence (33%) and a sense of social contribution efficacy (confidence about the capacity of youth to contribute in some ways to the society; 15%) were the three top categories of learning/gains reported. Enhanced self-awareness, improved civic sense and changed behaviors and enhanced sense of connection to society were the other learnings reported.

Discussion

The present study aimed at developing a youth engagement program and examining its short-term outcomes in college-going, urban Indian youth. The results suggest beneficial psychological outcomes on self-esteem and sense of mastery and competence.

There is scarcity of empirical Indian studies on a motivational program for providing structured space for youth to reflect about connecting with social causes and providing a guided exposure to volunteering, although potentially beneficial effects of youth engagement on positive youth development have been noted (e.g. Bhangaokar & Mehra, 2012). Observations on dearth of motivational programs, low awareness about volunteering opportunities in Indian youth (e.g. IIPS and Population Council, 2010; Innovations in Civic Participation, 2010); potential cognitive/mental barriers to engaging in social causes (e.g. Hindustan Times Youth Survey, 2013; Michael & Mehrotra, 2015) on one hand and available research on the beneficial impact of early exposure to volunteering (e.g. Holdsworth, 2010; Irby, Ferber, Pittman, Tolman, & Yohalem, 2001) on the other hand fueled the development of the youth engagement program and its field trial.

A majority of youth who enrolled in the program were not regularly involved in any community-based program/events. This indicates that the program announcement served its purpose in attracting a significant proportion of youth who were not actively engaged in community-based activities. About three reported engagement of a family member/friend in formal volunteering. It is possible that this indirect familiarity/exposure to others who volunteer may enhance inclination/mental readiness of youth to join a program of this nature (Law & Shek, 2009).

The intervention group reported significantly higher scores on frequency of connections as well as sense of mastery and competence subscale of psychological well-being at post assessment and these statistically significant gains can be considered meaningful in magnitude as indicated by the effect sizes. The planned activities that were implemented by the intervention group most likely explain their higher scores on the frequency of connections at post assessment.

The experience of translating intentions and plans (developed during the workshop) into actions (during the implementation), while simultaneously negotiating the routine academic demands may explain the finding of higher sense of mastery and competence observed in the intervention group at post assessment level. Prior studies suggest that intentional activities especially those which involve devoting effort to meaningful causes may have beneficial impact on well-being (Snyder & Omoto, 2001).

Further, group analyses revealed a significant and stable rise in self-esteem in the intervention group. Qualitative data suggested an increase in a perceived sense of self-confidence and interpersonal skills. These reports along with rise in sense of mastery and competence may have contributed to stable gains in self-esteem. Engagement in meaningful activities, beyond a narrow focus can contribute to positive youth development, which is characterized by the five C's namely competence, confidence, caring, connection, and character (Lerner, 2009). Contribution has been named as the sixth C. A sense of contribution through active engagement may in turn foster a positive youth development, apart from a reverse relationship wherein positive youth development is seen as leading to contribution as the sixth C. Morton and Montgomery (2011) in their review of studies on youth empowerment programs had reported insufficient evidence about impact on self-esteem/efficacy. Stable gains noted in self-esteem following a brief intervention program in the present study are promising.

It was interesting to note a differential pattern of outcomes in the intervention group, when the follow-up assessment data are taken in account to examine the stability of gains. While the rise in self-esteem scores remained stable, the rise in sense of mastery and competence as well as in frequency of connections was not maintained at follow-up level. This phenomenon underscores Lyubomirsky's theorization on the role of intentional activities in achieving sustained levels of well-being (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2004). The gains in sense of mastery and competence as well as frequency of connections were observed during the period when the youth were actively engaged in carrying out their plans.

On the other hand, the period from post assessment to follow up did not involve continuation of activities due to the end of the extended support phase as well as the logistic difficulties. The findings suggest that sustenance of gains on these variables may require sustained efforts of the youth in meaningful causes and a variety of activities related to such causes. As self-esteem scores did not decline during the follow up period, we hypothesized that self-esteem gains/maintenance may be mediated mainly via cognitive processes that unfolded during the workshop as well as during the implementation phase, while the gains on sense of mastery and frequency of connections may depend more heavily on sustained engagement in meaningful activities beyond post assessment.

An intriguing and rather unexpected finding in the present study was notwithstanding the various positive changes observed and the feedback obtained at various points; there was a declining trend on 'self-acceptance' one of the sub-scales of psychological well-being over time. This trend was not significant in the larger group of intervention participants who completed the baseline and post assessment but emerged as significant in the subgroup of participants who could be assessed at both post assessment and follow up assessment points. The program primarily aims at motivation building for enhancing youth engagement with society in general and social causes in particular. It involves a significant extent of collective reflections (e.g. how are we touching the lives of others in the society? How youth can contribute to society? What are the mental barriers college youth experience to investing efforts in social causes?). The nature of these questions is evocative and likely to result in some level of cognitive dissonance. Festinger (1957) defined cognitive dissonance as an aversive state produced by inconsistent cognitions that people have about oneself, others or the environment and it is often considered a key element in motivation enhancement for attitudinal and behavioural changes. Shifts in one's focus away from self-preoccupations to the larger social world were desired in the framework of youth engagement which formed the basis for

the program. The process of such mental shifts could lower one's sense of self-acceptance as a by-product as implicated in the findings noted on supplementary analysis. This may happen when youth begins questioning the nature of their current/past engagement with the social world on one hand while realizing the potential for widening the sphere of their meaningful actions on the other hand. Further studies are required to examine replicability of this observation in larger samples and the nature of changes in self-acceptance, (if any) over-time when the youth participates in programs that are inspirational and motivational in nature and propel social actions beyond self-focus.

Increased awareness of social issues, increased involvement in opportunities for engagement in the community as well as increased self-confidence were the most commonly reported impact domains. Gains in empathy and sensitivity to others' needs have been documented in various studies on the impact of engagement in volunteering (e.g. Dass-Brailsford, Thornley, & de Mendoza, 2011). Wilson, et al. (2008) had documented the utility of a brief educative, inspirational, 80-minute intervention for enhancing the intention to engage in volunteering. An overwhelming majority of the present study the participants reported an inclination to recommend the program to their peers and this is suggestive of the receptivity of youth to this program.

As the differences in the program impact could not be explained through baseline variables, it seems highly likely that the variability in impact may have been shaped by individual differences in the intensity and consistency of actual engagement during the extended support and implementation phase. However, this cannot be confirmed due to lack of availability of individual level data on the extent of engagement of each participant during the implementation phase. Overall self-reported impact of program participation remained stable from post assessment to follow up assessment. Studies have produced evidence for a bottom-up perspective about gains in well-being by showing that accumulations of need-satisfying daily experiences overtime (needs such as competence, relatedness, and autonomy lead

to enhanced global well-being (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000; Sheldon, Ryan, & Reis, 1996). In the present study, the participants who reported higher levels of overall impact (perhaps related to higher levels of actual engagement during the implementation phase) also reported higher levels of beneficial psychological outcomes on multiple measures.

The study has several limitations. Its findings may be generalizable only to youth in urban higher education settings. Individual level of engagement during implementation phase was not documented and the measures were limited to self-report. Longer term follow ups are needed to examine stability of gains over time in the volunteers and the cascading effects on peers who are engaged by them during the implementation phase. Its utility as a preventive program for at-risk youth is also worth exploring.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the limitations, it is one of the first studies that document the development and field testing of a brief youth engagement program for youth in institutes of higher education in India and the findings suggest its potential utility as a universal promotive intervention.

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