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Impact of a service learning (SL) experience on the improvement of knowledge in healthy eating habits in teenagers

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Abstract

In this article, we evaluate the results of a service learning (SL) experience, conducted by students of the 4th course of Human Nutrition and Dietetics (ND) degree, trained as health promoting agents (HPA), from the Universitat Rovira i Virgili (URV) applied in a sample of high school teenagers from Reus. The aim of the SL experience was to know of healthy eating habits with special attention to the structure of meals and the health effects of alcohol. We evaluated 533 teenagers, female 52.7%, aged 11 to 15, from 5 different public and charter high schools of Reus in 2015-16 academic year. It consisted in a 1h-activity designed and performed by ND students and developed in the teenager high school classroom using audio-visual support. ND students evaluated the changes in healthy knowledge before and after the only activity by a questionnaire score (100 points). The final assessment of the teenagers was improved 4.85 points respect to the initial and seems to be more effective in younger teenagers, Girls get a better initial evaluation score than boys, but both improved their knowledge after the activity. Public high school teenagers have lower initial and final knowledge about nutrition than charter school teenagers. In conclusion, an only 1-hour SL experience implemented in high school and developed by university HPA is an easy tool to improve healthy nutritional knowledge in teenagers.

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1. Introduction

Service learning (SL) is an educational experience that combines the process of learning and the community service to amend a social problem, articulated in a single project in which participants are trained to work on the real needs of the environment with the aim of improving it.

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This type of learning is a teaching experience and reflection with collaboration of partnerships as institutions and organizations which providing support to SL. The SL produce personal development, institutional changes and improvements to the environment, by formal education and non-formal education used (Puig, Batlle, Bosch & Palos, 2006).

The SL experience in a university context can instil a sense of civic duty in students, make them aware of the inherent value of their contribution to the community, and enrich their classroom-learning experience. Students complete their SL experience with an understanding of the importance of providing a SL and how it enriches their lives, and probably SL training will prepare ND students face success in future professional careers (Heiss, Goldberg, Weddig & Brady, 2012). The Universitat Rovira i Virgili (URV) has institutionalized the SL educational approach and included its characteristics in the Framework Document For The Service-Learning Program (Approved by the University Senate on 23 February 2012).

In ND education, SL engagement in the community can systematically expose students to important public health issue. This training prepare students for the professional world as the nutritionist performs support tasks on food, nutrition and health, make diets properly prepared focused on the general or sick population, according to the principles of human nutrition, and also recommend, advice, inform and educate people in the matter of food and human nutrition. To promote health, ND degree students were trained to become "health promoting agents" (HPA).

Promoting a healthy lifestyle and nutrition is important at all stages of life. However, an important target group is teenagers of high school age, especially when they are old enough to understand what you want to transmit and are sufficient young to be influenced. Nutrition education at high school is an efficient way to reach a large segment of the population, which includes not only young people but also their teachers, their families and the community to which they belong. In European adolescents (including Spanish adolescents) there is an increase in unhealthy dietary habits and a decrease in breakfast consumption before leaving home, which can lead to obesity (Currie, Zanotti, Morgan, Currie, de Looze & Roberts, 2012).

In fact, the URV is involved in several initiative that have been remarkably successful to promote nutritional health in schools in Educació en Alimentació (EdAl) study (Llauradó, Tarro, Moríña, Queral, Giralt & Solà, 2014; Tarro, Llauradó, Moríña, Solà & Giralt, 2014a, Tarro, Llauradó, Albaladejo, Moríña, Arijá, Solà & Giralt 2014b) and in high schools in European Youth Tackling Obesity (EYTO) project (Llauradó, Aceves-Martins, Tarro, Papell-Garcia, Puiggròs, Arola, Prades-Tena, Montagut, Moragas-Fernández, Solà & Giralt, 2015).

From all mentioned comments, the aim of our SL experience was to evaluate the effectiveness of one activity of one hour on healthy eating habits with special attention to the structure of meals and the health effects of alcohol, conducted by university students of the 4th course of Human ND degree from the URV in a sample of local teenagers of high school.

2. Material and methods

To carry out this SL experience, 6 university students of ND degree were trained to become HPA, and created a one-hour activity on the basis of which is a healthy diet, and what it should contain. The target population were teenagers, for this reason, "the influence of alcohol" were added to the objectives of the activity. This SL experience was carried out in 5 high schools in Reus (41 ° 9 '17 "N, 1 ° 6 '31" E): Vila-seca, Domènech i Montaner, Gaudí, Josep Tapiró which were public schools and Puigcerver, which was charter.

For 7 days, the university students, from now HPA, designed and simulated the one-hour activity. This work was supervised by university professors and the programming of those days is detailed in Fig. 1. The background, the content, the methodology, the resources and evaluation of the activity was designed by HPA based on recent literature. The programming unit was supervised and finally approved by professors. The activity evaluation results and reflection on the SL experience was evaluated by professors at the end of the experience.

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