(Excerpts from)

Through the Eyes of Experience:

Perceptions of Three Educators About a New Life Skills Curriculum for Hard-to-Reach Youths and Adults

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the research question: “What are educators’ perceptions of a new interactive life skills curriculum called *Tackling the Tough Skills: A Curriculum Building Skills for Work and Life™*?” I interviewed three educators who teach hard-to-reach audiences using the *Tough Skills* curriculum (pseudonyms used): 1) Barb, 26, a white female in St. Louis who has used the *Tough Skills* curriculum with both males and females, youths and adults; she has worked with adults transitioning from welfare to work, adults in a construction trades program, and high school juniors and seniors; 2) Charles, 58, an African-American male extension educator from New York who has used the curriculum for about a year with male prisoners in a county jail and federal prison; he recently began using the curriculum with youths in the county jail; and 3) Melissa, 37, an African-American female in the St. Louis area who is youth coordinator for a nonprofit organization offering employment services and vocational skills training to youths and adults; she chose the *Tough Skills* curriculum as a primary resource for periodic high school workshops and for individual counseling targeted at in-school and out-of-school youths. I conducted the first interview in person and the other two by phone. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, then analyzed to look for emergent categories and themes. Themes emerging from the three interviews include: 1) the curriculum is improving the lives of men and women, youths and adults, in many different life situations; 2) interactive role plays and activities help to interest and engage participants in active learning; 3) the curriculum is effectively teaching the concept of responsibility, which is especially hard to teach; 4) not all hard-to-reach audiences respond to the curriculum; and 5) the length of educational program and the amount of time educators have to teach the curriculum affect a program’s ability to teach attitude, responsibility, communication and preparing for the workplace concepts.

Overall Themes

Each of the educators I interviewed in this study has had unique experiences using the *Tackling the Tough Skills* curriculum with his/her particular audiences.

As an educator, Barb has worked with both male and female teens and adults. She has taught primarily female adults who are transitioning from welfare to work, as well as primarily male adults who are exploring work options in the construction trades. She has also worked with both male and female high school students in an alternative construction trades program, designed to help keep them in school until they graduate.

Charles, an ex-offender who is now a committed educator, is using his own life experience to better understand and meet the educational needs of current prisoners. He has taught some of the toughest individuals any educator could possibly work with: adult male prison inmates at both state and federal institutions. In addition, he has worked with teen offenders in a county jail.

Melissa has worked with male and female high school youths to help teach them pre-employment skills that will help them be successful not only in school, but also in summer jobs and later employment.

As educators, all three have confronted challenges in both attracting the attention of hard-to-reach individuals and overcoming attitudinal barriers put up by their respective audiences.

All three are using the *Tackling the Tough Skills* curriculum as a resource to help them be more effective in reaching their target audiences.

I think there are some commonalities among the three that stand out as overall themes emerging from this study:
1. The *Tough Skills* curriculum is improving the lives of men and women, youths and adults, in many different life situations. Many of these people are considered hard-to-reach or difficult audiences who typically do not respond to more traditional type of educational curriculum.

2. The interactive role plays and activities in *Tough Skills* help to attract the interest of participants and engage them in active learning. For hard-to-reach audiences in particular, these role plays and activities seem to be helping to meet deep-felt needs and to open the door to discussing topics that many of these participants have never learned. These activities also appear to help break down existing barriers between participants and others in their lives relating to attitude, responsibility and communication in particular.

3. Evidence from this study indicates that *Tackling the Tough Skills* is effectively teaching the concept of responsibility to hard-to-reach individuals. This is despite the fact that the concept of responsibility seems to be one of the most difficult to teach and the most challenging for participants to tackle.

4. Not all hard-to-reach audiences respond to *Tackling the Tough Skills*. The only negative comments Barb said she has received about the curriculum came from individuals who were “really not open to looking at themselves.” The limitations of this study restricted learning anything about those individuals that would help to explain their resistance. Perhaps future research could explore this area more fully.

5. The length of educational program and the amount of time educators have to teach *Tackling the Tough Skills* affect a program’s ability to teach attitude, responsibility, communication and preparing for the workplace concepts. This study provides a glimpse of a comparison of educational experiences using *Tough Skills* in the intensive three-week WorkWays program, in which participants met for six hours daily; the six-week classes offered in a prison setting, in which inmates attend two-hour classes once a week; and a periodic workshop setting, in which high school students attend a one- to two-hour workshop three to five times a year.

   The evolution of attitudes about assuming responsibility, which Barb said happened to several individuals in the WorkWays program, is significant, I think, because it points to the participants’ need for time to “let things sink in.” Even Charles’ description of the change in attitudes among prison inmates shows the benefit of repeated educational experiences over time with the same instructor. Both these situations are in contrast with the less-detailed accounts that Melissa provided based on three to five workshops, held for one to two hours, spread out over an entire school year.

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In closing, here is one more of Charles’ quotes that I did not include in the body of the paper. I think Charles has described the real purpose of *Tackling the Tough Skills* in a simple and effective way. His answer below is what he said he answered when questioned by his fellow educators as to what he does in the prisons with the *Tough Skills* curriculum:

> What I basically do is *prepare* the guys to *want* to eat healthy, and to want their families to *want* to eat healthy. It’s like the domino effect, you know, what affects me affects my family. You know, if I respect myself enough to go out and get a job, you know, automatically my family is going to benefit from it. So I deal with the real person, the first line stuff, you know. And I don’t go back to the nutrition and parenting and bunch of stuff like that, no. I try to prepare these guys so that they will *want* to go out and budget their money, you know.