Exploring the Relationship between the Facilitator and Fidelity

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Background

The role of the facilitator in helping groups achieve outcomes cannot be overstated. Facilitators are responsible for keeping groups goal oriented, on task, and are key in the development of a group into a team (Kitson, Harvey, & McCormack, 1998). Another important task for facilitators is to implement programs with a high level of fidelity. Fidelity refers to the degree to which facilitators implement programs as designed by the program developers (Dusenbury, Brannigan, Falco, & Hansen, 2003).

Maintaining fidelity has been shown as an important factor in the success of different types of programs, including drug abuse prevention (Dusenbury et al., 2003), violence prevention (Mihalic, Fagan, & Argasmo, 2008), employment training (Becker, Smith, Tanzman, Drake, & Tremblay, 2001), and classroom management (Webster-Stratton, Reinke, Herman, & Newcomer, 2011). However, in experiential education there has been significantly less attention given to the importance of fidelity. Tucker and Rheingold (2010) noted this discrepancy in a recent paper, pointing out that “fidelity has received little attention in the adventure education and adventure therapy literature, yet experts in the field stress that it should be included when developing, implementing, or evaluating adventure programs” (p. 260).

Several factors influence fidelity of implementation, including the level of program-specific training received by the facilitator, the level of facilitator buy-in into a particular program (Cunningham, McCalister, & MacVicar, 2011) and facilitators’ broad level of experience in leading groups (Mihalic et al., 2008). The roles of training and buy-in are clear in the literature; adequately trained facilitators are better able to understand program theory and goals as well as the links between those goals and specific program objectives (Tucker & Rheingold, 2010). Similarly, facilitators who have “bought in” and believe in program goals have demonstrated higher levels of fidelity in program delivery (Stein et al., 2008). The connection between a facilitator’s experience and fidelity are less clear; some research has demonstrated that facilitator experience could lessen fidelity (Dusenbury, Brannigan, Hansen, Walsh, & Falco, 2005). This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How are facilitator characteristics associated with program fidelity?
2. Does experience moderate the association between buy-in and fidelity?
Methods

In the current study we examined four factors that have been identified as predictors of fidelity: facilitator experience, education level, buy-in, and training. Data was collected during a 1½ day leadership development program for first semester college students from both the program facilitators and student participants. Data relating to student outcomes is not presented in this abstract as the focus was solely on the facilitator perspective. The program consisted of various group games, initiatives, and low-elements with an intentionally designed program plan behind each activity. Prior to program implementation, a total of 28 facilitators received a minimum of 14 hours of training specific to the leadership development program and the desired participant outcomes of that program. All facilitators were university employees with an interest in student life with varying levels of facilitation experience and education.

Data collection involved facilitators completing a pre and post assessment. Pre-assessment occurred two days prior to the implementation of the leadership development program. In addition to garnering demographic information (i.e., education level, gender, etc.) and general group facilitation experience, the initial assessment also evaluated facilitator buy-in (6 items, $M = 6.01$, $SD = 1.21$, $\alpha = .89$; I believe in the goals of the program I am about to facilitate), beliefs about program fidelity (4 items, $M = 5.35$, $SD = 1.20$, $\alpha = .86$; It is important to deliver this program as designed) and beliefs about program-specific training and experience (6 items, $M = 5.77$, $SD = .93$, $\alpha = .96$; I have enough training and experience to deliver this program). Items utilized a 7-point Likert response format in which facilitator responses ranged from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7). Upon completion of the leadership development program, facilitators addressed a series of items aimed at assessing their fidelity to the program design (4 items, $M = 5.14$, $SD = 1.27$, $\alpha = .75$; I deviated from the program plan), also on 7 point Likert scale.

Results

Data analysis initially involved running Spearman’s correlations as a means of examining the relationship between certain facilitator characteristics and specific variables of interest. Level of education appeared to have a strong positive relationship with program specific trainings attended, $r_s(28) = .646$, $p \leq .0005$, and challenge course specific trainings attended $r_s(28) = .476$, $p = .010$. Conversely, increased education was negatively correlated with program buy-in, $r_s(28) = -.389$, $p = .041$, and reported fidelity $r_s(25) = -.424$, $p = .035$. Among those variables that were continuous in form, data analysis involved running Pearson’s correlations (see Table 1). Results from these analyses indicated a strong negative relationship between facilitator experience (in terms of facilitation hours) and beliefs about fidelity ($r = -.58$, $p < .01$). As well, correlational analyses demonstrated a strong positive relationship between facilitator experience and beliefs about program specific training experience ($r = .40$, $p < .05$). Finally, results revealed a strong positive relationship between facilitators’ program buy in and reported fidelity scores ($r = .46$, $p < .05$).
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facilitator Characteristic Relationships</th>
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<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. CCSTA (Hours)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.205</td>
<td>.423*</td>
<td>-.399*</td>
<td>-.592**</td>
<td>.423*</td>
<td>-.167</td>
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<td>-.329</td>
<td>-.354+</td>
<td>.311</td>
<td>-.407*</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Experience Level (Hours)</td>
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<td>-.582**</td>
<td>-.187</td>
<td>.400*</td>
<td>-.195</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Belief about Fidelity</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.463*</td>
<td>-.013</td>
<td>.349+</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Buy-in</td>
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<td>.159</td>
<td>.456*</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Beliefs about Training &amp; Experience</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>7. Reported Fidelity</td>
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(PSTA) Program Specific Training Attended by Facilitator
(CCSTA) Challenge Course Specific Trainings Attended By Facilitator
* (p < .05); ** (p < .01); + (Level approaching significance; p > .05 < .1)

**Discussion**

The following study aimed to examine the relationship between facilitator characteristics and fidelity. To that end, the study obtained evidence to suggest that certain facilitator characteristics (i.e., education level, experience level) may influence the degree to which a facilitator implements a program as intended. This information is noteworthy on many levels, with one primary consequence tied to the possible contribution such evidence could make to the improvement of programs and outcomes for those participating. The knowledge gained from the understanding of facilitator characteristics and their relationship with each other can also aid in both facilitator fit and program training. With this information, organizations and agencies may be able to develop training to meet a facilitator where they are at, rather than a one-size fit all approach.

One of the major findings obtained in this study seemed to suggest that as facilitators become more educated, they are less likely to have ‘buy-in’ about program specific outcomes. Possible explanations for this finding are twofold. Advanced education could influence a facilitator’s perception of the program in that facilitators of this type may perceive certain shortcomings that less educated facilitators have yet to notice. A second possible explanation for this particular finding may revolve around the capacity to adapt. More educated facilitators may make adaptations to a program under the supposition that making adaptations will improve the quality of the program. A second major finding from the present study indicated a strong positive correlation between facilitators’ beliefs about fidelity and reported fidelity. While more research into facilitator beliefs is needed, it may be important in the future to consider how facilitators’ implementation beliefs have an impact on how programs are delivered. Future development into how facilitator beliefs and characteristics influence fidelity and participants could lead to programmatic improvement in outcomes for participants and enhanced training for facilitators. Additionally, given the recognized importance of fidelity in many fields of social science research, this further investigation into these constructs will enhance the statements that can be made about the benefits and viability of these types of facilitated programs.

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References


