

Critique of “‘It Gives Me Purpose’: The Use of Dance with People Experiencing Homelessness”

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In the article, “‘It Gives Me Purpose’: The Use of Dance with People Experiencing Homelessness, Knestaut, Devine, and Verlezza (2010) discuss their use of a recreational dance program in a homeless shelter in an effort to decrease stress, encourage self-determination, and increase positive feelings. In this paper I will summarize the article, point out the strengths and weaknesses of the article, talk about possible applications of the article, and present my personal reaction to it.

Summary

The article begins by explaining the prevalence of homelessness and the unique problems that come with being homeless. “On any given night in the United States, nearly 1.35 million people are homeless” (Knestaut, Devine, & Verlezza, 2010, p. 290). The authors discuss that being homeless essentially makes people go into survival mode and as a result, their leisure needs are not met. Knestaut, one of the authors, got in contact with a homeless shelter in Ohio where 35 people can stay while they look for work and a home. She observed that there were many things at the shelter given to meet the resident’s basic needs, but that “very few leisure opportunities existed to encourage coping skills, increased quality of life, and autonomy for the residents” (Knestaut, Devine, & Verlezza, 2010, p. 290). Knestaut then proposed a biweekly dance class to improve the residents’ quality of life.

There were a total of eleven people, ages 18-50, who participated in the dance class. Although the class was offered twice a week for eight weeks, the maximum amount of attendance was two people who came to four classes (Knestaut, Devine, & Verlezza, 2010, p. 294). Knestaut performed an assessment and planned accordingly. Before and after each class, Knestaut would have the participants fill out a questionnaire, asking them to rate themselves on a

scale of 1-5 how happy/stressed/motivated they felt, among other things. She would ask questions during the class to evaluate how the participants were feeling and make changes as need, and then would conclude with a casual debriefing.

The purpose of the study was “to explore the efficacy of a structured dance class to decrease stress, increase positive feelings, and encourage social connections and self-determination for adults and children experiencing homelessness” (Knestaut, Devine, & Verlezza, 2010, p. 298). Their findings were proved successful as participants reported that they had more positive feelings and felt less stressed after participating.

Strengths of the Article

The article had many great components to it. It was easy to read and understand what the authors wanted to convey. The thing that stood out to me most was that the APIE process was used and thoroughly explained in the article. Although they didn't have the most scientific ways of gathering data, they did have a consistent assessment tool and I appreciated that they included the questionnaire in the article. Another thing that impressed me was that Knestaut based her class plans off of AAPHERD Standards (Knestaut, Devine, & Verlezza, 2010, p. 295) and was very purposeful in her time she had with the residents. The authors also were very upfront and acknowledged that their findings were not scientifically based and suggested excellent ideas for future studies to learn more about the use of recreation as therapy for those who are homeless.

Weaknesses of the Article

Although there were many good aspects to this article, there were some things that could have been improved. The first drawback is that, as stated before, there was not much weight to their data because of its lack of being scientifically based. The sample size was small, with only eleven people participating, and none of them were able to attend the dance class more than four

times. Similarly, the location of the dance class was not ideal as it was in a public area of the building where many people would walk by and distract the participants. Along with that, a lot of potentially relevant information was not provided because of confidentiality restrictions. Another weakness of the article was the presence of several typos. Typos always make me feel that an article is not as reliable as it may seem at first.

Application of the Article

This article could be very useful to future therapeutic recreation programs. I think that more studies like this should be done in more locations and with more participants, who are able to participate more often. It would be helpful to be able to have more longevity as well and to follow those who were experiencing homelessness to see how their participation in the recreation dance classes effected them, if at all, later on. I think there are also likely some better assessment tools that could be used to gather data and evaluate the effectiveness of the programs.

Personal Reaction

I found this article to be quite interesting and it gave me a new perspective on many things. On my mission, I worked with a family who was in and out of homelessness. When I met them, they were living in a shack-like apartment and would go out to gather fire wood daily in order to heat it. They didn't have food, didn't have clean clothes, but were happy to at least have some sort of roof over their head. I remember being frustrated when they would tell us about the "fun" things they had been doing, because I felt that they should be spending that time going out and looking for a job. I realize now, however, that those "fun" moments were likely essentially to their well-being. They were always overwhelmed with stress and in a deep state of depression. I wish that I had known then what I do now and could have assisted them in those areas so they could better cope with their circumstances.

Another thought I had about this article was that according to stereotypes, homeless people often turn to drugs and alcohol. After reading this article, maybe a big reason why so many homeless people use drugs and alcohol is as a way to decrease stress and to avoid the problems they are facing. If they were offered a new way to cope, through recreational activities, they would be able to decrease their stress and hopefully be more motivated to get something done and more hopeful about the future, rather than stuck with a hangover. I think the use of recreation with people experiencing homelessness could be tremendously beneficial and I hope that more research can be done to see if it will be.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Knestaut, Devine, and Verlezza (2010) have published an excellent article on their experience with homeless people and the use of a dance class to improve their overall quality of life. Although the article has a couple areas that could be improved, it has the potential to have significant impact on the therapeutic recreation discipline and those who do or will struggle with homelessness.

References

- Knestaut, M., Devine, MA, CTRS, & Verlezza, B. (2010). "It gives me purpose": The use of dance with people experiencing homelessness. *Therapeutic Recreation Journal*, 44(4), 289-301.