Exercising Rural Resources and Readiness to Change the Context for Obesity Prevention

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**Introduction**

GROW Healthy Kids & Communities aims to prevent obesity in rural children. The project targets changing family home, school, and community environments to support children’s weight healthy behaviors by “default.” My URAP apprenticeship is at the community level studying residents’ perceptions of the healthy eating and activity resources in rural communities and community readiness to improve the contexts for obesity prevention. My role is to learn qualitative research methods and data management.

**Objectives: Two Aims**

1. Explore and explain the rural obesogenic environment.
2. Plan, implement, and evaluate a multi-level intervention targeting rural home, school, and community behavioral settings to promote healthful eating and increase physical activity, and thus improve the body mass index among rural elementary school age children.

**Background Information**

The obesity rates in the U.S. and in developed countries worldwide have continued to rise and are especially high in under-resourced geographical areas. Rural areas are set apart from urban places because of different social, economic, and cultural aspects, which may lead to differing resources and attitudes in regards to childhood obesity prevention. Researching the differences in resources and readiness to address environmental barriers to healthy lifestyles is vital to understanding how communities must move forward and invoke change in order for childhood obesity rates to plateau and eventually begin to decline.

**Methods**

The community-based participatory research team, which includes community residents as mappers and discussants, collects and analyzes qualitative information in rural communities using community photomapping and reflective dialogue. Residents participate in community conversations and discuss photos that represent available resources. Data sources (i.e., photographs, maps, narratives) are coded as barriers and supports for healthy eating and activity, and analyzed to provide an overall readiness score based on the six dimension community readiness model.

For this project, NVivo 10, a software program that researchers use to organize, analyze, and interpret qualitative data, was employed. The software allows researchers to code data and run queries about common words and themes that emerge from the data. Researchers are also able to code data into certain topic areas within the project model, which helps to organize many sources of data including quotes, polls, transcripts, pictures, maps, or websites.

**Community Readiness Model Framework**

The community is scored on six dimensions of community readiness and overall readiness to address the issue based on the responses during the community gathering to talk about the photo mapping data:

1. **Existing Community Efforts**, includes perceptions of supports and barriers
2. **Community Knowledge of the Efforts**
3. **Leadership** (appointed leaders and influential community members)
4. **Community Climate**
5. **Community Knowledge about the Issue**
6. **Resources Related to the Issue** (people, money, time, space, etc.)

**Examples from the Fairfield Community Narrative**

Our pharmacy serves as our grocery store, the closest grocery stores are over 15 and 18 and 22 miles away. There is varieties of milk, it is 50 cents more per gallon than Costco. Some people don’t take into account the cost of going into town. There is not any whole grain bread or noodles. Those who can afford it can order from Royal Produce, the CBA in Tokia have produce delivered to home.

**Acknowledgements**

I specifically worked on data from communities in Washington: Connell, Makati, Fairfield, and completed a community report for Fairfield. Fairfield is a rural city located about 20 miles southwest of the city of Spokane in Spokane County, Washington. It is on the Palouse Scenic Byway, and is part of the 201 miles of riding trails and recommended that are known as “Paradise.” There are no schools in Fairfield, they were torn down several years ago, students are bussed to 25 miles to the school in Spokane Valley as the Fairfield Trailway shut its doors in 2010. Local recreational opportunities include 2 miles of the Spokane River, a county baseball park and a small wellness center with a pool, 10 miles south in Texas, the nearest neighboring community. Fairfield’s main community event is a Fourth of July Celebration that has been held annually for over 100 years.

**Molalla Community Garden Field Trip Impact**

Molalla is a community that is one of the sites of the GROW research study. The community has taken the information that they generated with the GROW team regarding the community’s resources and readiness for change — they were ready! The Molalla Community Garden is the 500th school garden in Oregon. The 4th Culture Club, made up of multicultural students at the school, hosted the photographed event for their sponsors and supporters.

I valued the efforts that were put into this community project to benefit the overall health of the community members. The students that I met were looking forward to the future improvements in their community. They were excited to be a part of one of the first steps of the community in being in order to combat childhood obesity.

Examples from the Molalla Community Garden Field Trip Impact

This is Upper and Thiel park from different angles. Upper park has tennis courts and no facilities. Lower park does not have multiple things to do for families and is a bit difficult to go to. It would be good if other things were available. Thiel park is open land, it is a bit difficult to tell people that it is here. There isn’t a small trail from school that is gone. You see kids in both park a lot. The space is not used well as it could be.