

School Personnel Experiences with the SPARK Curricula

A Report to
The SPARK Initiative
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January 2019

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School Personnel Experiences with the SPARK Curricula

Executive Summary

In 2018, The SPARK Initiative engaged an external research team from Group Victory, LLC to conduct a qualitative evaluation of the SPARK Curricula. The SPARK Initiative is a nonprofit organization in Brandon, Florida focused on cultivating human potential and resilience by providing education, mentoring, and coaching that increases individuals understanding of the mind. Group Victory LLC is an organization development firm in Fort Lauderdale, Florida that provides program evaluation support. The SPARK Curricula is a mentoring curriculum created by the SPARK Initiative to promote youth resiliency, emotional well-being, and academic success.

Together, The SPARK Initiative and the Group Victory evaluation team designed a qualitative study to assess the implementation and impact of the SPARK Curricula from the perspective of school personnel. This report documents the essence of school personnel's experiences with and perceptions of SPARK Curricula delivery and benefit to youth.

In January 2018, six schools participated in the SPARK Curricula. In September 2018, five schools engaged in the SPARK Curricula. Participating schools included high schools, private schools for students receiving special education, and career centers categorized as "alternative education" schools by the Hillsborough County School District.

Ten school personnel participated in this qualitative study representing five schools where the SPARK Curricula is being delivered. All school personnel reported familiarity with the SPARK Curricula ranged from one to five years. All personnel indicated being present and observing SPARK Curricula delivery, youth participation, and student reaction.

Results from this qualitative SPARK Curricula study indicate the following school personnel experiences with and perceptions of the SPARK Curricula:

- Students participating in the SPARK Curricula are at-risk youth
- SPARK Curricula content is relevant to students' lives
- Facilitators are consistent and effective in their delivery of the SPARK Curricula
- Youth engage in SPARK Curricula activities
- Students benefit from SPARK Curricula participation

Based on study participants' responses and evaluation findings, the SPARK Curricula is being delivered in a consistent manner with at-risk youth. SPARK Curricula content is pertinent and meaningful to participating students who engage with facilitators and in curriculum activities. Furthermore, facilitators are effective with curricula delivery which is impactful in developing youth.

Program Description

The *Speaking to the Potential, Ability, and Resilience inside every Kid* (SPARK) Curricula is a mentoring curriculum designed to reduce risk factors, build resiliency, promote emotional well-being, and facilitate school success in elementary, middle, and high school students. The SPARK curricula consist of a Child Mentoring Curriculum for children ages 6 to 10 years old, a Pre-Teen Mentoring Curriculum for youth ages 10 to 13 years old, a Teen Mentoring Curriculum for adolescents ages 13 to 22 years old, and a Sex Education and Teen Pregnancy Infusion Program for students ages 13 to 22 years old. This research evaluates the SPARK Pre-Teen and Teen Mentoring Curricula delivered in a group format by SPARK facilitators in hourly sessions over 13 weeks covering relevant and relatable topics that help youth better understanding themselves and others, develop vital social and emotional skills, and access their leadership and creativity to foster academic achievement and healthy community functioning.

The SPARK Pre-Teen Curriculum consists of the following 17 sessions:

- Connections and Goals
- Your Experience, Unlocked
- Decision Making, a Chain Reaction
- Understanding Your Feelings
- Finding Your SPARK
- Growing Your Creativity and Potential
- Understanding Your Community
- Self-Confidence
- Dealing with Stress and Anxiety
- Communication and Reactions
- Appreciating the Diversity Among Us
- Relationships
- Bullying, Inside-Out
- Academic Stress to Academic Success
- Using your SPARK To Be a Good Role Model
- The Future is Yours
- Graduation

The SPARK Teen Mentoring Curriculum is comprised of 21 core and 2 supplemental lessons. The 21 core lessons include the following sessions:

- Overview and Introduction
- The Principles Behind Your LIFE and Finding Your SPARK!
- The Power of Thought
- Your Personal Guide to Decision Making
- Community Engagement
- How State of Mind Influences Judgment and Reasoning
- Surviving Mood Swings
- Finding Success in the Midst of Stress

- Feeling Fear and Insecurity Without Fear and Insecurity
- The Inside-Out Nature of Self-Esteem
- Separate Realities
- Cultivating Meaningful Relationships
- Dating and Healthy Relationships
- Mentoring and Leading From the Inside-Out
- Bully Prevention from the Inside-Out
- Academic Success
- College and Career Readiness
- Financial Stability
- Parenting from the Inside-Out
- Creating the Life Designed for You
- Graduation

The 2 SPARK Teen Mentoring Curriculum supplemental lesson topics include the following:

- Habits
- Using your SPARK to Make Decisions

The SPARK Curricula was created in 2010 by The SPARK Initiative. The SPARK Initiative released the SPARK Pre-Teen and Teen Mentoring Curricula in 2016. The SPARK Initiative certifies SPARK facilitators through a comprehensive four-day professional training program. The Pre-Teen and Teen Mentoring curricula are intended to be delivered once a week and taught by certified SPARK facilitators.

Program Adherence

Fidelity refers the degree of adherence and accuracy associated with maintenance to an intended program approach and model. Measurement of fidelity compliance is critical to the assurance that program design and delivery are maintained by all individuals administering the intervention as intended. In addition, the higher the program fidelity, the more likely there will be consistency in impact.

The SPARK Initiative developed SPARK Curricula based on guiding principles and values, relevant age-specific topics and content, and associated subject matter and activities. SPARK curriculum lessons are specially designed and intentionally created to promote positive target population development and coping. As such, The SPARK Initiative seeks to ensure that all curriculum facilitators consistently adhere to SPARK Curriculum fidelity to yield the maximum benefit among participating youth.

By measuring fidelity, the following questions can be answered:

- Is the SPARK curricula being delivered as intended?
- Are participants receiving the intended program dosage?

- Is the quality of program delivery acceptable?

Through this qualitative study, fidelity compliance among SPARK facilitators was measured by inquiring about the consistency and effectiveness with which facilitators delivered the SPARK Curricula from school personnel who were present and observing SPARK Curricula delivery.

Classroom Sites

In January 2018 to May 2018, six schools, involving 17 classrooms, participated in the SPARK Curricula. In September 2018 to December 2018, five schools, comprised of 18 classrooms, engaged in the SPARK Curricula. Participating schools included high schools, private schools for students receiving special education, and career centers categorized as “alternative education” schools by the Hillsborough County School District. The following tables represent participating school and classroom descriptions:

January 2018 to May 2018
Data Collection Sites: School and Classroom Specifics
6 schools, 17 classrooms

	School	Classroom code and teacher initials	Random Assignment (RA) and condition (intervention or comparison) or Non-RA	Classroom curriculum if SPARK not delivered
1	Livingstone/ Seffner	1 - K. F.	RA to Intervention	Gen Education curriculum modified for Special Ed population
		2 - A. C.	RA to Comparison	Gen Education curriculum modified for Special Ed population
2	Livingstone/ Riverview	3 - J. P.	RA to intervention	Gen Education curriculum modified for Special Ed population
		4 - K. R.	RA to Comparison	Gen Education curriculum modified for Special Ed population
3	South County	5 - B. H. Class Period 7	RA to Intervention	Career Center - 2 nd opportunity to graduate at an accelerated pace. Class and Curriculum Family Consumer Science.
		6 - R. K. Class period 6	RA to Comparison	Career Center - 2 nd opportunity to graduate at an accelerated pace. Class and Curriculum in Science.
4	Lennard	7 - V. A. Class Period 7	RA to Intervention	"Student Success" Curriculum for students with low grades
		8 - V. A. Class Period 6	RA to Comparison	"Student Success" Curriculum for students with low grades
5	Blake	9 - P. W. Class period 3	RA to Intervention	Curriculum in Cosmetology - skill building class
		10 - P. W. Class period 1	RA to Comparison	Curriculum in Cosmetology - skill building class
		11 - G. W. Class period 4	NOT RA Intervention	Curriculum in Urban Teachers Class - skill building class
		12 - G. W. Class period 5	NOT RA Comparison	Curriculum in Urban Teachers Class - skill building class
6	Simmons	13 - A. L. Class period 2	RA to Intervention	Career Center - 2 nd opportunity to graduate at an accelerated pace. Class and Curriculum in Intensive Reading/English.
		14 - G. H. Class period 2	RA to Comparison	Career Center - 2 nd opportunity to graduate at an accelerated pace. Class and Curriculum in Intensive Reading/English.
		15 - A. L. Class period 3	RA to Intervention	Career Center - 2 nd opportunity to graduate at an accelerated pace. Class and Curriculum in Intensive Reading/English.
		16 - G. H. Class period 3	RA to Comparison	Career Center - 2 nd opportunity to graduate at an accelerated pace. Class and Curriculum in Intensive Reading/English.
		17 - A. H. Class period 4	NOT RA Intervention	Career Center - 2 nd opportunity to graduate at an accelerated pace. Teen Parent - skill building.

September 2018 to December 2018
Data Collection Sites: School and Classroom Specifics
5 schools, 18 classrooms

	School	Classroom code and teachers' initials	Random Assignment (RA) and condition (intervention or comparison) or Non-RA	Classroom curriculum if SPARK not delivered
1	Livingstone/ Seffner	1 - K. F.	RA to Intervention	Gen Education curriculum modified for Special Ed population
		2 - S. W.	RA to Comparison	Gen Education curriculum modified for Special Ed population
2	Brandon Alternative	3 - J. M. Class period 6	RA to intervention	Alternative School - Class and curriculum for students that have been exited from traditional schools
		4 - J. M. Class period 7	RA to Comparison	Alternative School - Class and curriculum for students that have been exited from traditional schools
3	South County	5 - R. K. Class period 8	RA to Intervention	Career Center - 2 nd opportunity to graduate at an accelerated pace. Class and Curriculum in Reading.
		6 - R. K. Class period 7	RA to Comparison	Career Center - 2 nd opportunity to graduate at an accelerated pace. Class and Curriculum in Reading.
4	Lennard High School	7 - K. W. Class Period 2	RA to Intervention	"Student Success" Class and curriculum for students with low grade
		8 - K. W. Class Period 1	RA to Comparison	"Student Success" Class and curriculum for students with low grades
		9 - K. W. Class period 3	RA to Intervention	"Student Success" Class and curriculum for students with low grades
		10 - K. W. Class period 4	RA to Comparison	"Student Success" Class and curriculum for students with low grades
		11 - L. B. Class period 5	RA Intervention	"Student Success" Class and curriculum for students with low grades
		12 - L. B. Class period 7	RA Comparison	"Student Success" Class and curriculum for students with low grades
		13 - L. B. Class period 6	RA Intervention	"Student Success" Class and curriculum for students with low grades
		14 - L. B. Class period 8	RA Comparison	"Student Success" Class and curriculum for students with low grades
5	Simmons	15.- B. B. Class period 5	RA to Intervention	Career Center–2 nd opportunity to graduate at an accelerated pace. Class and Curriculum in Intensive Reading/English.
		16 - A. L. Class period 7	RA to Comparison	Career Center–2 nd opportunity to graduate at an accelerated pace. Class and Curriculum in Intensive Reading/English.
		17 - B. W. Class period 6	RA to Intervention	Career Center–2 nd opportunity to graduate at an accelerated pace. Class and Curriculum in Intensive Reading/English.
		18 - A. L. Class period 8	RA to Comparison	Career Center–2 nd opportunity to graduate at an accelerated pace. Class and Curriculum in Intensive Reading/English.

Methodology

This qualitative study examines school personnel's experiences with and perceptions of the SPARK Curricula. Specifically, this study explores school personnel's observations and insights associated with the delivery and impact of the SPARK Curricula. As such, this qualitative study further documents the efficacy of the SPARK Curricula.

Research Design

This research employs a phenomenological qualitative inquiry design. The objective of this design is to understand study participants' lived experiences. Customary to a phenomenological study, this research utilizes in-depth interviews to gather detailed descriptions of participants' experiences through their oral self-reports. Through in-depth interviews, participants' experiential beliefs can be revealed. Accordingly, the evaluator immerses in the participants' descriptions gleaming understanding of those experiences through evaluation, synthesis, and interpretation of their narrative data. Through thoughtful examination, the evaluator documents a description of the narrative data, analyzes the description for themes, and interprets the essential meaning of participants' lived experiences.

Participant Recruitment and Selection

For this qualitative study, a listing of email addresses for school personnel familiar with the SPARK Curricula was obtained from The SPARK Initiative staff. These identified school personnel were sent an email asking them to voluntarily participate in a confidential telephone interview regarding the SPARK Curricula. Recruitment correspondence (Appendix A) provided an explanation of the research and the voluntary, informed, and consent participation process. Interested respondents were informed of the research purpose and offered the opportunity to voluntarily consent to participate in this study. All participants voluntarily consented to research involvement.

Research Sample

The sample for this study consisted of 10 school personnel familiar with the SPARK Curricula based on their role as teacher, literacy specialist, social worker, or advisor in the educational settings where the SPARK Curricula was delivered. Employing a purposeful sampling strategy and targeted inclusion criteria, study participants were selected among those school personnel who were physically present and had observed SPARK Curricula delivery on numerous occasions. Based on this study's participant criteria, all 10 selected school personnel met these sample guidelines.

The 10 school personnel who met study sample criteria were voluntarily recruited, selected, and consented for this research study. These research participants represented five schools where the SPARK Curricula is delivered. This sample was comprised of 10 females (100%) who reported three to 12 years at their school and one to 5 years observing SPARK Curricula delivery.

Instrumentation

This qualitative research study utilized in-depth interview questions that explored research participants lived experiences with the SPARK Curricula. The interview guide (Appendix B) was comprised of questions focused on participants perception of the SPARK Curricula, its delivery, and its effectiveness. These questions, presented to elicit detailed narrative responses, were asked during in-depth telephone interviews with study participants. These interview questions, which were designed to prompt participants' experiences and perspectives, served as a foundation from which the evaluator, as the interviewer, elicited participants' detailed elaborations. This approach, which employs self-report of participants' experiences and perceptions, was specifically devised for this research study.

Data Collection

The evaluator voluntarily recruited study participants from existing SPARK Curricula school delivery sites as identified by The SPARK Initiative staff as meeting the research inclusive criteria. The evaluator emailed potential study participants with the research purpose, seeking their interest and recruiting their voluntary consent to participate in an in-depth telephone interview. Recruitment correspondence explained the aim of the research, voluntary and informed participant content, and voluntary confidential participation in telephone interviews. Potential research participants were able to contact the evaluator via email, seek research and participation clarification, and enroll in the study. The evaluator reviewed the research purpose, voluntary participation process, participant role, study benefits and risks, and voluntary informed consent with all potential and interested student participants.

In-depth telephone interviews were scheduled with recruited and consented study participants at their convenience. The in-depth interviews afforded participants the opportunity to confidentially share their experiences in response to each question. Recruited and consented participants were asked open-ended questions that prompted narrative responses associated with their experience with and perception of the SPARK Curricula. Study participants were able to refuse to answer any questions and/or withdraw from the research at any time without adverse consequences.

Ten study participants, who met sample criteria, were voluntarily recruited, selected, and consented for this research. All participants participated in in-depth interviews answering all questions and sharing their experiences. There were not any participants who wished to not answer a question and/or withdraw from the study.

All in-depth interviews were conducted via telephone conversation with all research participants. Interviews were conducted over a three month period, and each interview followed the same format of introduction, overview of research purpose and study methodology, review and confirmation of voluntary informed consent, questioning in accordance with and as sequenced in the interview guide, and response elicitation.

With study participants' voluntary consent, research data was collected verbatim as reported by the respondents. Interviewed participants transcripts were de-identified to protect

privacy and maintain respondent confidentiality. An aggregated report of all collected narrative data was generated from all completed interviews and interview questions. Collected data was documented and organized by questions, respondents, and responses.

Data Analysis

Collected and transcribed narrative interview responses were aggregated by question. Study participants' verbatim responses were initially analyzed and categorized by question to identify themes. In addition, categorized themes were carefully analyzed across questions.

Collected data was analyzed through thematic analysis, which is a reliable qualitative approach to analytically examine narrative and provide a detailed account of data. Participant response data was reviewed, interpreted, and classified by significant statements and/or quotes and combined into themes as well as the essence of respondents' experiences and perceptions. The evaluator adhered to a consistent thematic data analysis process and scheme of interpreting collected response narrative.

Consistent descriptive and interpretive analysis was used to identify common themes within entire interviews as well as across all interviews. Through the data collection and analysis process, the evaluator maintained a conscious unbiased perspective of not imposing preconceived experiences or themes. This study was conducted with adherence to qualitative research procedures, specifically aligned with a phenomenological approach.

Findings

Extensive analysis of the qualitative data collected during the in-depth interviews with study participants revealed school personnel's experience with and perception of the SPARK Curricula. From the study interviews, the following themes emerged regarding the SPARK Curricula from the perspective of school personnel:

- Students participating in the SPARK Curricula are at-risk youth
- SPARK Curricula content is relevant to students' lives
- Facilitators are consistent and effective in their delivery of the SPARK Curricula
- Youth engage in SPARK Curricula activities
- Students benefit from SPARK Curricula participation

Students Participating in SPARK Curricula are At-risk Youth

Study participants described youth as "shy" to "aggressive." Participants indicated that for many youth this is their "last chance for education." These students have had increased absences and truancy from school, fallen behind in their academic studies, low grade point averages, emotional and/or developmental conditions, and lack of success in traditional schools. Participating youth include those with child welfare, juvenile delinquency, criminal, and court involvement as well as pregnant teens, single teenage female parents, and students on free and reduced lunch. The following quotes represent research respondents' description of students participating in SPARK Curricula "They need lots of mentoring because they do not have good

role models and mentors.” “These youth have difficulties and challenging life circumstances.” “These students need extra support.”

SPARK Curricula Content is Relevant to Students’ Lives

Research participants conveyed that the SPARK Curricula topics are encountered by students in their lives. They stressed the value of curricula content focused on emotions, relationships, stress management, and decision making for youth. The following quotes reflect study respondents’ perception of the SPARK Curricula content: “It is realistic for teenagers.” “It is relatable to our students.” “The scenarios are practical and personal for the students.” “The program is geared for the age group.”

Facilitators Consistent and Effective in SPARK Curricula Delivery

Study participants stated SPARK Curricula facilitators are consistent in the delivery of the program content. Research respondents related that facilitators were skilled and effective in interacting and connecting with students. Consistent and interactive facilitation was reported across facilitators and from year to year of curricula delivery. The following quotes represent study participants’ observation of SPARK facilitators: “The facilitators are excellent presenters who are experienced in their work.” “The facilitators are in touch with the youth in a friendly, positive, open, and nonjudgmental way.” “The facilitators get youth engaged and talking, helping them apply topics to the real world.” “The facilitators are adaptable, able to reach the kids, and keep them involved.”

Youth Engage in SPARK Curricula Activities

Research participants indicated that youth engage in SPARK Curricula activities. Respondents described the curricula as a platform where students open up and talk about tough topics. Youth are reported as responding well to the content, getting involved in the lessons, enjoying the program, and providing positive feedback about their involvement. The following quotes reflect participants’ beliefs: “Students find the curriculum interesting, fun, and engaging.” “Youth come together during the process.” “Students listen, reflect and share experiences.” “Kids are excited to participate, they wear their SPARK t-shirts, and tell other students about it.” “Our students eagerly talk about it and look forward to it.” “Students enjoy the curriculum and want to attend.”

Students Benefit from SPARK Curricula Participation

Study participants discussed the SPARK Curricula as beneficial for participating students. Respondents stated the program is valuable for youth as it teaches how to deal with difficult, real, and relevant situations. The SPARK Curricula is identified as helping students think about their lives, process information, and resolve feelings. The following quotes represent participants’ perception: “The program helps students handle themselves and others, and it reduces risks.” “It helps youth feel accepted and be more open.” “It has improved the classroom culture and relationships between teachers and students.” “I have heard students say, ‘I used

to think this, now I think this’.” “It’s a great program.” “I would recommend SPARK for other students.”

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study yielded findings that demonstrate the SPARK Curricula is effective from the experience and perception of personnel in schools where the program is delivered. School personnel participating in this research reported the SPARK Curricula as being taught to at-risk youth who face numerous life challenges and struggle academically. Study respondents indicated curricula content is applicable to students’ circumstances and lives, and subsequently, youth actively engage in the SPARK program. Interviewed school personnel perceive SPARK facilitators as effective and consistent in their role, and the program as beneficial to participating students. The SPARK Curricula is described by research participants as developing youth’s capacity for self and relationship management.

Appendix A

Interviewee Recruitment Correspondence

Dear

The SPARK Initiative is currently evaluating the effectiveness of its SPARK curriculum. As such, the evaluation team would like to conduct stakeholder interviews with school teachers and personnel familiar with the SPARK curriculum and its delivery to youth by the SPARK Initiative.

You are receiving this correspondence based on your familiarity with the SPARK curriculum and its delivery in your school. You are invited to participate in a voluntary and confidential stakeholder interview regarding the SPARK curriculum. Stakeholder interviews are conducted via telephone conversation for approximately 20 minutes by Dr. Stephen Ferrante copied on this email correspondence. Interviews are scheduled at the convenience of the interviewee, including at a time during non-school hours.

If you consent to participate in a stakeholder interview, please reply directly to Dr. Ferrante through this email. Please know that your participation and perspective are valuable and appreciated.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Appendix B

Interview Guide

Confirm interviewee name and affiliation

Introduce research initiative and voluntary interview process

1. How long have you been with your current school?
2. Are you familiar with the SPARK Curriculum delivered by the SPARK Initiative to youth at your school?
3. How many school years and/or times have you and/or your school been involved with the SPARK Curriculum?
4. What are the reasons you/your school is partnering with the SPARK Initiative to deliver the SPARK Curriculum?
5. Have you ever been present when the SPARK Curriculum is being delivered?
6. In your own words, please describe the SPARK Curriculum?
7. Please describe the characteristics of the youth in your school/class?
8. How do the youth in your school/class respond to the SPARK Curriculum?
9. How has the SPARK Curriculum been beneficial to the youth in your school/class?
10. From your perspective, what is the effectiveness of the facilitators in delivering the SPARK Curriculum?
11. What is the consistency of the facilitators in delivering the SPARK Curriculum?
12. Any additional information you would like to provide about the SPARK Curriculum?