

A Culturally-Targeted HIV/AIDS Graphic Novel for Teen Well-Being

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Abstract:

*Approximately 35.3 million people worldwide were living with HIV in 2012 (U.N. AIDS Global Report, 2013). Of this population, an estimated 2.1 million young people (ages 10–19) were living with HIV in low-and middle-income countries (Jewkes, 2010). In spite of the high population of young people with HIV/AIDS worldwide, studies have shown that many young people are not concerned about becoming infected with HIV/AIDS (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2000). In order to reduce this troubling trend, education and prevention efforts are needed to raise young adults' awareness of HIV/AIDS issues. To address this need, the researchers and an illustrator, working in collaboration with students in the South Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice School District (SCDJJSD), developed an age-appropriate, culturally diverse graphic novel on HIV/AIDS. Once the novel, *AIDS in the End Zone* (Albright & Gavigan, 2014) was completed, graphic novel book club interventions were held with young adults in South Carolina and North Carolina to measure knowledge gains and impact from reading the graphic novel. The purpose of this project is to examine the role that graphic novels can play as a resource for increasing HIV/AIDS awareness among young adults. This paper will present the findings from the study, the first of its kind to provide scientifically-based research that examines whether or not graphic novels can be an effective HIV/AIDS prevention tool for young adults.*

Keywords: HIV/AIDS, graphic novels, young adults, prevention, libraries

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Introduction

Although progress has been made in HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment in recent years, it is still a serious health issue in the United States and around the world. There were 2.1 million new cases of HIV reported worldwide in 2013. It is estimated that 1.5 million people died AIDS-related deaths in 2013, and approximately 39 million people with AIDS have died since the epidemic began (Center for Disease Control (CDC), 2015). In the United States, new HIV infections have remained steady since the mid-1990s, with an average of 50,000 cases reported per year. Out of these new HIV infections in the United States, 26% were among youth, ages 13-24. The state of South Carolina has a high prevalence of HIV/AIDS. The state is currently ranked 8th in the nation for AIDS cases, with the capital city of Columbia ranked 10th in the nation for major metropolitan areas (South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control, 2013).

In an effort to lower the number of HIV/AIDS cases in South Carolina and beyond, effective HIV/AIDS prevention campaigns need to be implemented for today's youth. Studies have shown that successful HIV/AIDS prevention campaigns take into account the use of appropriate messages targeted to the specific population in an authentic, accessible format (Albright, Kawooya, & Hoff, 2006). Further, young adults are more inclined to read and retain information if it is in an engaging format such as graphic novels that is popular with their generation (Gavigan, 2012). There is increasing evidence that the use of graphic novels in the educational setting can enhance literacy skills, and the artistic format can facilitate learning for students with varying learning styles and abilities (Botzakis, 2009; Carter, 2007; Gavigan, 2012; Krashen, 2004; Monnin, 2008).

An increasing number of schools are integrating the graphic novel format into their classrooms and libraries. In addition, the guidelines and standards of national and international library associations are promoting the use of graphic novels in educational settings. As stated in the standards of the American Association of School Librarians (AASL), "Multiple literacies, including digital, visual, textual, and technological, have now joined information literacy as crucial skills for this century" (AASL, 2007, p. 3). Further, the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) includes the following statement in its new guidelines:

The school library should provide an aesthetic and stimulating environment containing a **variety of print and digital materials** and offer opportunities for a wide range of activities from quiet reading to group discussions and **creative work**. (IFLA, 2014, Standard 5.2 Program and Activities)

For the purposes of this project, the creation of a graphic novel offered a unique opportunity to develop a new approach to HIV/AIDS prevention for teens. The goal of the project was for students to create a graphic novel that would help young adults acquire the knowledge and resources they need to make informed decisions regarding HIV/AIDS, including how to reduce or eliminate risk factors, how to talk with adults and/or partners, where to get tested for HIV, and more.

Background and Phase One

In Phase One of the study, the graphic novel was created in a high school English Language Arts class in a South Carolina juvenile justice facility. The young men who created the graphic novel attended high school in a contained facility. Over the period of eight weeks in summer 2012, the authors (two librarian educators), a graphic illustrator, and the students' teachers worked with incarcerated males, ages 15–18, to develop an age-appropriate and culturally-diverse graphic novel about HIV/AIDS. With editorial guidance provided by the researchers and the students' teachers, the young men wrote a story in their vernacular about high school students dealing with HIV/AIDS.

The students created a storyline that occurs in a high school in South Carolina. The characters include Marcus, the new boy at school who displaces Brad as the star quarterback, and Brad's former girlfriend, Maria, who has HIV. Brad is furious that Marcus has stolen his limelight and wants to get rid of Marcus to get his old life back. Brad threatens to tell the whole school that Maria is HIV positive, unless Maria has sex with Marcus to infect him with the virus. Indeed, Maria does infect Marcus, which is eventually revealed in a dramatic scene in the school cafeteria. The resulting chaos resolves itself in the end, and Marcus and Maria go on to lead a normal life. The graphic novel, *AIDS in the End Zone* (Albright & Gavigan, 2014) was originally printed by the University of South Carolina Printing Services, until it was published by Young Palmetto Books in 2014.

After the graphic novel was completed, the researchers conducted focus groups with the young men who created *AIDS in the End Zone* (AIEZ). The students were asked to share their views about the graphic novel and what they learned from the process of creating it. Two themes that emerged from the interviews are described below.

Development of Literacy Skills

As they spent time creating the graphic novel, the students were aware that they were developing a variety of literacy skills, including information literacy skills. For example, they researched HIV/AIDS in their science classes before they began working on the graphic novel. In the words of one student, "We learned how the disease can be transmitted." During their social studies classes, they researched the geography of the disease, its origin in Africa, and how widespread it was in South Carolina. In addition, the students were aware that their writing skills were improving while they were developing the story line and plot. As one student stated, "(It) helped us brush up on writing skills because it was a different genre -- different way to express yourself -- not full sentences." Another student said, "It helped writing skills -- helped with the flow of the story."

Collaboration / Consensus Building:

Throughout the project, the students worked with their classmates to make important decisions regarding the creation of the graphic novel. They had to come to consensus about elements such as plot, character development, dialogue, and setting. The young men were proud that they were able to work together so well. As one student stated, "We overcame difficulties and came to consensus." Another student commented, "You are learning a lot of different things including social and communication skills." The collaboration skills that the students used throughout the project built on a consensus building class that had previously been taught by their assistant principal.

Phase Two and Phase Three

Once the graphic novel was completed, and the students were interviewed in Phase One of the study, the researchers began Phase Two and Phase Three. Phase Two was conducted in summer 2013, and Phase Three was conducted in summer and fall 2014. The research questions guiding these phases of the study were:

1. How does reading a graphic novel about HIV/ AIDS affect young adults' understanding of HIV/AIDS issues?
2. What are the ways in which young adults respond to a graphic novel about HIV/AIDS?

Findings

During Phase Two and Phase Three, the researchers conducted book club interventions using *AIDS in the End Zone* (Albright & Gavigan, 2014) with young adults in South Carolina and North Carolina. Surveys containing twenty questions were administered before and after the participants read the graphic novel. Pre- and post-surveys were used to measure the knowledge gains and impact from reading the graphic novel. While confidentiality was observed, each participant was asked to put the last four digits of their mobile phone on the top of each of the two tests, so that the results could be compared. The identity of participants could not be determined by the last four digits of their mobile phones. In addition, interviews conducted with the participants provided insight into the nature of the graphic novel's impact, as well as clues regarding which elements of the material were particularly effective in influencing knowledge and attitudes. Several of the participants commented that the graphic novel was "informational" and "creative."

Data was collected from 142 young adults in South Carolina and North Carolina. The South Carolina participants (136 participants) were patrons in public libraries. The six North Carolina participants were at-risk males who were involved in a program conducted through the Children's Home Society of North Carolina. Of the total number of participants, 55% were female and 45% were male, with a mean age of 16.46 years, ranging from 14–20 years (Figure 1).

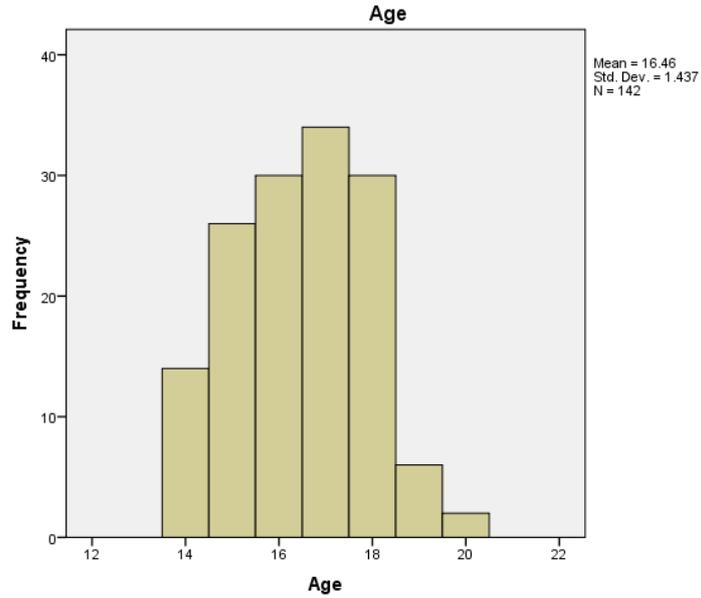


Figure 1. Age of Study Participants

There was a range of races in the sample, many of whom self-identified as mixed race. Figure 2 shows the breakdown of races, including those who listed themselves as being of more than one race. Choices for race selection included:

- a) American Indian or Alaska Native
- b) Hispanic
- c) Black or African-American
- d) White
- e) Asian

Racial composition of the study participants consisted of 65% African-American, 20% white, and 15% of mixed race.

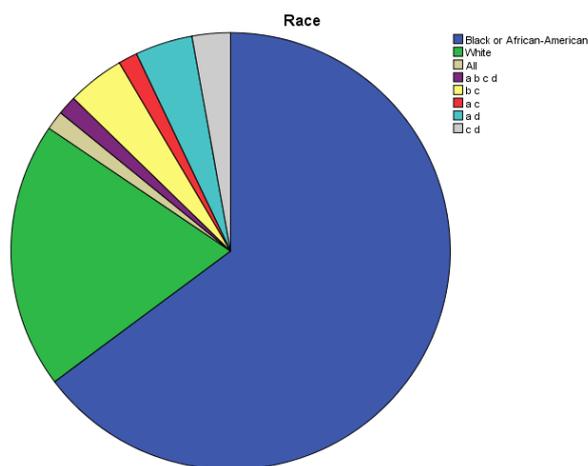
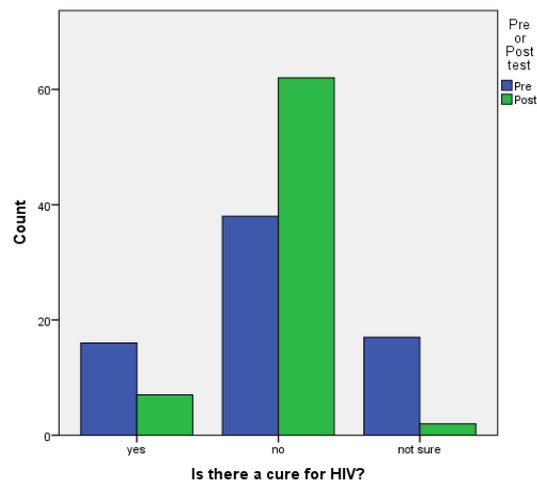


Figure 2. Race of Participants

Impact Evaluation

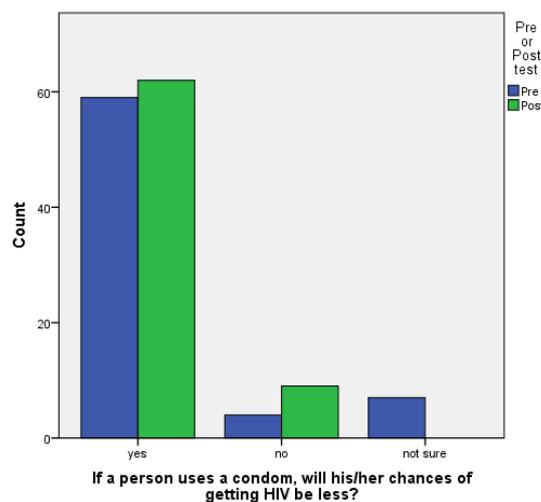
Impact evaluation was measured by analysis of results from the pre- and post-test surveys and the focus groups. Findings from the study revealed knowledge gains and changes in attitudes among the participants. There were a number of results that demonstrated significant changes in knowledge between the pre- and post-test surveys. In particular, five questions resulted in significant changes in answers from before and after reading *Aids in the End Zone (AIEZ)*. For example, when asked if there is a cure for HIV, the number of correct responses (i.e. No) increased by 44%, while the number of those who weren't sure before reading *AIEZ* changed their minds to the correct answer after reading the graphic novel (Figure 3).



$$\chi^2 = .029$$

Figure 3. Question: Is there a cure for HIV?

Another question that showed significant changes in knowledge gains was “If a person uses a condom, will his/her chances of getting HIV be less?” (Figure 4).

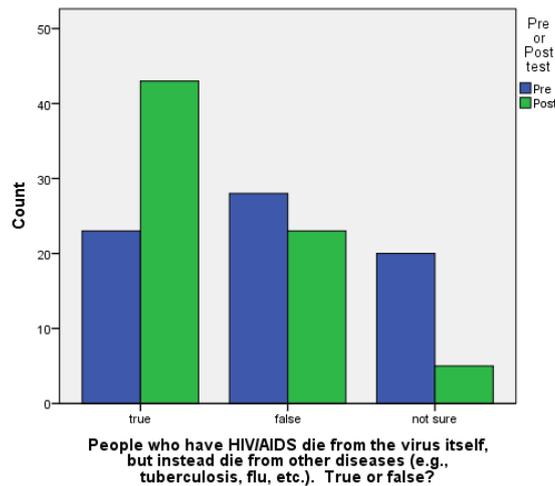


$$\chi^2 = .01$$

Figure 4. Question: If a person uses a condom, will his/her chances of getting HIV be less?

The number of those who correctly responded increased by 5%, but more important was the complete resolution of those who answered “not sure” before they read the graphic novel. After reading *AIEZ*, no one responded “not sure.”

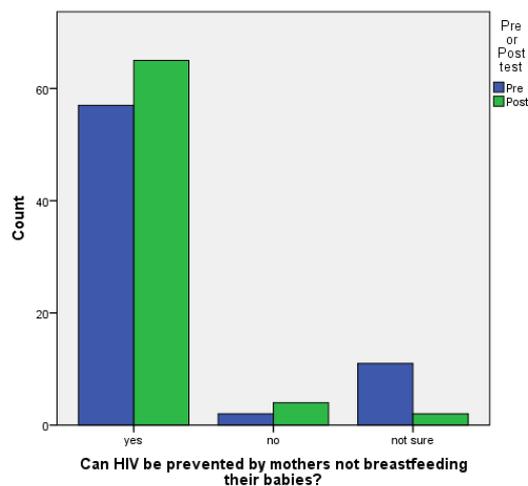
Participants were also asked, “People who have HIV/AIDS die from the virus itself, but instead die from other diseases (e.g., tuberculosis, flu, etc.). True or false?” (Figure 5). The number of correct responses (i.e., “True”) increased by 54%, while the number of incorrect responses (i.e., “False”) decreased by 18%, and the number of “Not Sure” responses dropped by 75% after reading *AIEZ*.



$$x^2 = .00$$

Figure 5. Question: People who have HIV/AIDS die from the virus itself, but instead die from other diseases (e.g., tuberculosis, flu, etc.). True or false?

Participants were also asked whether mothers can transmit HIV to their babies through breastfeeding: “Can HIV/AIDS be prevented by mothers not breastfeeding their babies?” (Figure 6). Significant changes from reading the graphic novel were seen in the 8% increase in correct responses (i.e., “Yes”) and the decreased number (82%) of responses of “Not Sure.”



$$x^2 = .03$$

Figure 6. Question: Can HIV/AIDS be prevented by mothers not breastfeeding their babies?

Conclusion

This study was the first of its kind to provide scientifically-based research that examines whether or not graphic novels can be an effective HIV/AIDS prevention tool for young adults. The findings from this study provide insight into the effectiveness of allowing students to create graphic novels as an educational tool for their peers, specifically in the field of HIV/AIDS prevention. Further, the process of creating the graphic novel and the study's methodology could easily be replicated across the health sciences curriculum, as well as for health-related social issues such as addiction, adolescent pregnancy, etc. Future plans for the project include replication of the program in school and public libraries and classrooms in other areas of the United States. Finally, the researchers are meeting with potential partners in Cape Town in August 2015, to explore options to replicate the project with a teen book club in South Africa. Additional funding is being sought to replicate the project in the United States and in Africa.

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