



Promoting Optimistic Thinking in YMCA Afterschool Students

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Introduction

Social-emotional learning (SEL) skills are crucial for children to learn at a young age to build positive character and be successful in their future lives. Socio-emotional factors can compete with student's academic attention causing students to not fully reach their educational potential (Elias, DeFini, Bergmann, 2010). Properly developed social and emotional skills have been shown to be related to positive academic outcomes, while poor socio-emotional skills has been associated with behavioral problems, drug problems, and more sexual partners (Denham & Brown, 2010; Hessler & Katz, 2010). Social and emotional learning skills include the ability to identify emotions, cope and empathize with these emotions, set goals and build the steps to reach said goals, develop interpersonal relationships and maintain them, and make decisions. (Payton et al., 2008). Many SEL programs have shown positive progress in increasing socio-emotional development in children, however, modifications to these programs need to be made in order to increase all aspects of socio-emotional learning and better prepare children for their futures.

SEL programs have been shown to have a positive influence on the way children feel about themselves. For example, one SEL program conducted with over 500 middle school students showed strong gains in categories representing student respect and friendship and belonging (Elias, DeFini, & Bergmann, 2010). Another study involving a program called the Healthy Kid Mentoring Program (a program consisted of relationship building, self-esteem enhancement, goal setting, and academic assistance) showed that 4th graders who received mentorship from the program had significantly higher scores at post-test than pretest on self-esteem, school connectedness, peer connectedness, and

family connectedness. (King, Vidourek, Davis, & McClellan, 2002). In a meta-analysis of after school programs across the US seeking to promote personal and social skills, child self-perception and school bonding were found to increase significantly in students participating in SEL programs (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, Schellinger, 2011).

Positive academic achievements have also come from effective SEL programs. According to teacher ratings, SEL programs demonstrate positive effects on academics including improved classroom behavior and more effective academic engagement, including increased self-control and on-task behavior. (Bierman, et al., 2010). Previous research suggests that SEL programming is associated with an average gain of 11 to 17 percentile points on achievement test scores. (Payton et al., 2008). In the meta-analysis done on after school SEL programs across the U.S seeking to promote personal and social skills, overall achievement test scores increased along with overall school grades (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, Schellinger, 2011).

In addition to increasing socio-emotional functioning and academic achievement, SEL programs have also been successful in reducing problem behaviors. In a study done in the U.S with the participants beginning intervention in first grade and ending when the children were in third, children in SEL intervention schools significantly lowered problem levels at Grade 3 from Grade 1 and had less of an increase in problems than children in the groups receiving no SEL intervention. (Bierman et al., 2010). Another study involved 40 kindergarten, first, and second grade classrooms using Dinosaur School, a comprehensive program that works to eliminate disruptive child behaviors and foster prosocial behaviors. Children in the intervention group of the Dinosaur School had

significantly more prosocial responses in response to conflict situations than control children had. (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004).

Many existing SEL programs are effective at improving academic achievements, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and behavioral problems, but very few focus specifically on optimistic thinking, a core component of socio-emotional learning (Naglieri, LeBuffe & Ross, 2013). Schools and afterschool programs have a demonstrated need to target optimistic thinking in their programs because this outcome is measured by the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA), a comprehensive system rating socio-emotional competencies and resilience (LeBuffe, Ross, Fleming & Naglieri, 2013). One curricula that emphasizes optimistic thinking and goal setting as SEL targets is the Dream Playbook, a workbook-based SEL curricula that provides children with the opportunity to explore and think about their future in a fun and interactive way. The Dream Playbook allows children to explore their options for the future in a way that positively creates the foundation of life goals by guiding the children to be open-minded and self-motivated. In this project, students from the University of Cincinnati facilitated the Dream Playbook with children in YMCA afterschool programs. We investigate the feasibility of the Dream Playbook as a SEL curriculum in the YMCA afterschool setting. Specifically, we hypothesize that the students participating in the Dream Playbook program will demonstrate increases in optimistic thinking after participating in the program.

Methods

To assess the feasibility of *The Dream Playbook* in improving children's optimistic thinking and socio-emotional learning, University of Cincinnati students facilitated *The Dream Playbook* with a sample of Cincinnati Public School students

participating in the YMCA Afterschool programs over the course of eight weeks. Our participants are de-identified to ensure confidentiality of their work.

Participants

A total of 55 YMCA Afterschool students participated in the Dream Playbook program. Ten of these students were enrolled at the Academy of Multilingual Immersion Studies (AMIS), and 45 students were enrolled at The School for Creative and Performing Arts (SCPA), both part of the Cincinnati Public School system. Participants ranged in ages and grades. Group 1 included ten students, ranging in age from third to seventh grade; Group 2 included twenty-eight students ranging from second to third grade; Group 3 included seventeen students ranging from fourth grade to sixth grade. For more detailed information about the distribution of the participants, see the table below.

Table 1. *Participants*

| <u>School</u> | <u>Total</u> | <u>Ethnicity</u> | | | <u>Gender</u> | | <u>Grade</u> |
|---------------|--------------|------------------|------------------|-------|---------------|--------|----------------------------------|
| | | White | African American | Other | Male | Female | |
| AMIS | 10 | 0 | 10 | 0 | 5 | 5 | 3 rd -7 th |
| SCPA | 28 | 3 | 19 | 6 | 13 | 15 | 2 nd -3 rd |
| SCPA | 17 | 3 | 12 | 2 | 0 | 17 | 4 th -6 th |
| Total | 55 | 6 | 41 | 8 | 18 | 37 | |

Measures

In order to determine the feasibility of *The Dream Playbook* for the YMCA after-school program, we created two de-identified surveys that were completed each week, one final student interview questionnaire, and an optimistic thinking ratings measure. Each of these measures are included in the appendix.

Youth Weekly Report. The youth weekly report was given to each of the participating students at the end of each session. The report included three quantitative questions rated on a 1-5 Likert scale and two qualitative questions referring to the value of the day's lesson.

Facilitator Weekly Report. The facilitator weekly report was given to the University of Cincinnati student facilitators at the end of each session. The report consisted of four quantitative questions rated on a 1-5 Likert scale and three qualitative questions that apply to feasibility and future recommendations.

Final Child Interview. The final child interview survey was created in order to determine an overall consensus of what the children thought about the program as a whole. This survey was completed and collected on week eight, the final day of the program. The facilitator acted as an interviewer and recorded the child's responses for each question. With a total of eight questions, the survey asked two quantitative questions rated on a 1-10 scale in regards to the progress of their dreaming ability, four close-ended "yes" or "no" questions, and two qualitative questions.

Optimistic Thinking Ratings Measure. In order to determine the potential progression of the students' optimistic thinking scores, rating measures were created and modeled after the DESSA forms used by the YMCA. The measure consisted of seven quantitative questions rated on a 0-4 linear scale ranging from "Never" to "Very frequently". Each UC student facilitator was asked to complete the measure for each student that they worked with. The facilitators completed the measure in regards to when they first met the child, and completed the measure again at the end of the program. To

determine change in each child's optimistic thinking, scores at baseline were subtracted from the score after the program was completed.

Procedure

The Dream Playbook experience was a partnership among University of Cincinnati college seniors participating in the Community Capstone, the authors of *The Dream Playbook*, and the YMCA afterschool program. The authors of *The Dream Playbook*, Dr. Sara Williams and Scott Stoll, served as trainers (for a total of 4 hours) introducing and teaching the UC students about *The Dream Playbook*. The YMCA program coordinated the children in the afterschool program who participated in the study and the UC college students served as the facilitators who implemented *The Dream Playbook* and worked through the book with the kids.

The program began the week of September 29th, 2014 and continued for an eight-week period. The program was implemented one hour per week at each school. During each session, students would try to complete 4-5 pages in their *Dream Playbook*. This book includes activities to help them discover their dreams, questions to determine if they already have a dream and how to obtain it, and many more interactive activities.

Facilitators led students through the activities in *The Dream Playbook*, focusing on providing a positive experience with dreaming rather than work completion or "correct" answers. Each week, students and facilitators each completed weekly surveys. Responses were collected from all groups and recorded into a shared spreadsheet for later analysis.

Results

Data from the Child Weekly Surveys, Facilitator Weekly Surveys, Optimistic Thinking Ratings, and the Child Interview Questionnaire were analyzed to determine the

feasibility of *The Dream Playbook* as an socio-emotional learning program at the YMCA afterschool program.

Facilitator Weekly Report

Each week the UC student facilitators completed a survey that asked how satisfied they felt with the session, how realistic the sessions goals were, how engaged the children were, and the overall fit of the program. These questions were answered on a 1-5 Likert scale. The average ratings of each variable across the eight-week period are presented in Table 1. We also discovered that these ratings differed between the three different groups of students; a one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare facilitator data between each group. It was found that Group 3 reported significantly higher satisfaction scores [$F(2, 132) = 5.6, p = .005$], realism scores [$F(2, 131) = 7.44, p = .001$], and overall fit scores [$F(2, 130) = 7.13, p = .001$] than Groups 1 and 2.

Table 2
Ratings of Facilitator Weekly Surveys Across Weeks

| <u>Survey Question</u> | <u>Mean Across Weeks</u> | <u>SD Across Weeks</u> |
|--|--------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. How satisfied were you with today’s lesson? | 3.74 | 0.88 |
| 2. How realistic were today’s goals? | 3.95 | 0.80 |
| 3. How engaged were the children? | 3.87 | 0.95 |
| 4. Overall, how well do today’s activities fit with the YMCA after-school program? | 3.73 | 0.85 |

Youth Weekly Report

The participating children completed the Child Weekly Survey after each session throughout the eight-week period. The most important information gathered came from the questions “How do you feel after completing today’s activities?” and “How do you feel about dreaming?” which were answered on a 1-5 Likert scale. The average ratings of

those two variables across the weeks were: feel-after ($M= 4.66, SD= .80$) and dreaming ($M= 4.77, SD=.76$). Using a t test to compare mean scores by gender, we found that females ($M=4.91, SD=.38$) rated dreaming significantly higher than males ($M=4.50, SD=1.11$) $t(123.86)=80.05, p=.000$. We also found that the ratings given across the weeks were negatively correlated with age in terms of the feel-after variable ($r=-.125$) so that older children tended to rate their feelings lower after the program than younger children.

Final Child Interview

During the last session of the eight-week period the UC student facilitators interviewed each child to determine their overall opinions about the program. Four close-ended “yes” or “no” questions were asked and the results of those interview questions are shown in Table 2. Overall, the overwhelming majority of youth looked forward to *The Dream Playbook* and would recommend it to a friend. Every student reported that they thought more about dreaming and enjoyed working with the UC facilitators. Rated on a 1-10 linear scale found in *The Dream Playbook*, the average improvement in dreaming by the after-school students about three and a half points ($M=3.45, SD=2.97$). Results from this survey showed that there was no significant difference in dreaming improvement in terms of gender ($t=12.709 = -0.945, p=.001$). None of the variables collected through the child interview were significantly correlated with grade level, suggesting children at all levels had a positive experience with *The Dream Playbook*.

Table 3
Child Interview Questions Results

| <u>Question Asked</u> | <u>% Children said “yes”</u> | <u>% Children said “no”</u> |
|---|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Did you look forward to The Dream Playbook sessions each week? | 89.5% | 10.5% |
| Would you recommend The Dream Playbook program to a classmate? | 94.7% | 5.3% |
| Do you think about your goals more since using The Dream Playbook? | 100% | 0% |
| Was it helpful to have the facilitators at each session to guide you? | 100% | 0% |

Optimistic Thinking Ratings Measure.

The UC student facilitators completed the Optimistic Thinking Rating Measure in order to determine the progress made for each individual student’s socio-emotional optimistic thinking skills. The measure was completed once at the beginning of the program and once at the end, the average scores and the average change in scores are provided in Table 3. Results proved that there was no significant difference in optimistic thinking scores by gender ($t(31.52) = .425, p = .391$). The progression of optimistic thinking scores was determined to be negatively correlated with grade level ($r = -.929$).

Table 4
Optimistic Thinking Scores

| | <u>Average Optimistic Thinking Score</u> |
|-----------------------------|--|
| First observation: Week 1 | 2.70 |
| Second observation: Week 8 | 3.80 |
| Progress made between weeks | 1.10 |

Discussion

Current findings suggest that *The Dream Playbook* is a feasible socio-emotional learning curricula to use in YMCA afterschool programs. All students reported thinking more about their goals since using *The Dream Playbook*, which indicates that the program is an effective strategy for increasing and strengthening optimistic thinking skills. The effectiveness of the program in promoting optimistic thinking is further supported by the improvement in dreaming scores, which showed that on average, students reported a 3.45-point improvement in dreaming on the 10-point linear scale. Additionally, since there was no correlation between students self-reported dreaming improvement score and grade level, the data supports *The Dream Playbook* as an effective tool for a wide range of ages. Data collected from the Child Interview Questionnaire did not reveal significant differences in optimistic thinking scores between genders, which suggests *The Dream Playbook* is useful to both boys and girls to teach this important socio-emotional skill. Furthermore, because all students reported finding the University of Cincinnati facilitators helpful during the sessions, the mentorship element of the program may have had a positive effect on overall feasibility and success of the program. Previous research has revealed a positive interaction between students and mentors involved in socio-emotional learning curricula (Kahne et al., 2001); the findings of our study indicating that students found their facilitators helpful is consistent with this idea.

Previous research has found that socio-emotional learning programs increase student achievement scores, decrease violence, and improve attendance (Flay & Allred, 2010). With 100% of students in our study reporting thinking about dreaming more, *The*

Dream Playbook may be an effective tool to increase student achievement through increasing dreaming and goal setting. Additionally, with 89.5% of children reporting looking forward to each session, *The Dream Playbook* may contribute to improved school attendance by providing many students with an exciting reason to go to school. Overall, the results of our study suggest that *The Dream Playbook* is an effective program for teaching socio-emotional skills, increasing optimistic thinking, and is enjoyed by students.

The negative correlation found between progression of optimistic thinking scores and grade level suggests that facilitators observed less change between initial and end-of-program optimistic thinking in students who were in higher grade levels. These results could have been effected by many factors, including enthusiasm and interest in the playbook. Based on these results and results suggesting that students enjoyed working with facilitators, it is possible that decreasing the facilitator-to-student ratio in groups will help older students make more progress in regards to optimistic thinking in future iterations of *The Dream Playbook* at the YMCA.

Our study had several strengths. Our data was collected from two different schools, which suggests that *The Dream Playbook* can be successful in a variety of environments. In addition, the students who participated in this study are ethnically and socioeconomically diverse; this demonstrates the relevance and usefulness of the playbook for a diverse group of children. Primarily, our study has targeted optimistic thinking skills; our program is unique because it goes beyond general socio-emotional learning and focuses on helping students think positively about their futures. The Cincinnati YMCA afterschool program measures optimistic thinking as part of their

evaluation of socio-emotional learning in their program and the Dream Playbook appears to be a good fit to help improve optimistic thinking in elementary school students.

While our study had many strengths, several limitations suggest avenues for future research. For example, attendance tended to be inconsistent. While implementing the program, several students missed several sessions and several groups welcomed new students after the initial starting date or lost group members. Another possible limitation was social desirability. It is possible that children responded to the feedback forms and interview questionnaire in a manner that they felt would please their facilitator, rather than how they truly felt; future research could capture data from observer ratings or blind report to further study the effect that *The Dream Playbook* has on socio-emotional learning and optimistic thinking skills.

To further study the feasibility of *The Dream Playbook*, future researchers could further investigate the negative correlation found between grade level and progression of optimistic thinking scores. To increase socio-emotional learning for all students, researchers can change elements of group dynamics to help older students make as much progress as younger children. More research regarding group size, amount of one-on-one availability with facilitators, and amount of enthusiasm for specific lessons could also help future researchers explain the gap in optimistic thinking progression between younger and older students.

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