

Utilizing Community-Based Research to Increase Optimistic Thinking Skills in Students: A Reflection

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Social and emotional skills are essential for children in order to build positive social characteristics that help lead to success later in life. Without the development of these skills at an early age, children are at risk for negative consequences. Properly developed social and emotional skills are correlated with positive academic outcomes, while poor social and emotional skills put children at risk for behavioral problems, drug problems, and risky sexual behaviors (Denham and Brown 2010). To examine how social and emotional learning influences children, psychology majors in an advanced capstone class implemented a socio-emotional learning program called *The Dream Playbook* in local YMCA afterschool programs. Our goal for this research project was to determine if *The Dream Playbook* had a positive effect on social and emotional learning, particularly the skill of optimistic thinking.

We were fortunate enough to participate in *The Dream Playbook* project over two semesters. Our teams worked with the YMCA afterschool programs at two Cincinnati public schools: the Academy of Multilingual Immersion Studies (AMIS) and the School for the Creative and Performing Arts (SCPA). We were trained to facilitate *The Dream Playbook* program by its authors, Scott Stoll and Dr. Sara Williams. Collaborating with the YMCA afterschool programs at AMIS and SCPA, each student in our class became a mentor to a small group of young children.

As a community-based research capstone course, one of the learning objectives for our class was to understand the role of the scientific method in solving real-world community problems. To meet this learning objective, we designed a research project that would allow us to use research methods to analyze *The Dream Playbook's* effectiveness. We collected data throughout the year to monitor the social and emotional growth of each child. During the 8-week session, the YMCA students completed a pre-survey about their optimism and the future. After each meeting, students and facilitators were asked to complete a data sheet reflecting on how they felt regarding the activities done that day; all questions were designed to examine both the perspective of the observer and the participant. The data was compiled and analyzed after each of the 8-week programs was completed.

We faced many obstacles in our research and were challenged to meet another of the course's learning objectives: to identify the interaction between real-world communities and academic partners and understand how each contributes to research. When working in the real-world with children, there were several challenges to data collection. Initially, the team was worried about data accuracy because of difficulties faced with the weekly data forms given to the children; some children had trouble understanding the concept of a ratings system. Many of the participants chose "5" for all their responses because they felt like it was the correct response instead of answering truthfully; some students felt that they would disappoint their mentors if they gave a less-than-perfect rating of the session's activities. In order to get the most accurate response, we reminded the children that a rating of "1" meant that they did not like the activities at all, and that a rating of "5" meant that it was their favorite activity in the book. Giving students

a small amount of direction when completing the forms was effective and provided our class with more accurate data.

Another learning outcome for our class was to interact with community members in ways that show respect for social, environmental, and contextual factors affecting individuals. Although we worked hard to interact with elementary school children, the schools, and the staff of the YMCA afterschool program, we faced challenges throughout the process. Many of the challenges faced at SCPA were environmental; the location and noise level were not ideal for students or facilitators. At times, it was difficult to keep the children focused because of noise and interruptions from other students. Despite the obstacles we faced, mentors found ways to overcome challenges. Knowing that we had to make the best out of the time that we had with our students each week, we remained positive and modeled optimistic thinking skills for the students. We worked in small areas, sometimes in a larger group setting, and took turns facilitating if it became necessary. We also attempted to isolate ourselves as much as possible from other after-school programs in order to help our children concentrate better. Thanks to making creative solutions, sessions ran smoothly. At AMIS, many of the challenges faced were age-related; many older students felt that *The Dream Playbook* was for younger students and were uninterested in engaging in the activities. However, mentors created various strategies to help the older students relate to the book and engage with them. Facilitators working at AMIS overcame the challenges and managed to make the best out of every situation, even if each session needed to be altered to fit the audience.

Each mentor faced a personal challenge in this project, but by stepping out of our comfort zones and remaining optimistic, we were able to provide a meaningful experience to children and even created one for ourselves. Many members of our research group had no prior experience with young children and did not know what to expect in our first few sessions; some had negative views and low expectations in the beginning. After spending several weeks with our students and getting to know them, each facilitator's attitude towards the project became more positive. Most mentors established a relationship with a specific child or with their entire group, which helped us learn more about our community.

We often struggled to handle issues with group dynamics; for example, some facilitators had difficulty handling extroverts and introverts within the same group. More extroverted children would sometimes be a little overbearing to the introverted children; some children answered all of the questions, talked over other students, and would not allow other children in the group opportunities to speak. It took time to learn how to bring out more conversation with the introverted children and make them feel comfortable speaking and answering questions while not making the extrovert feel discouraged. Some groups developed creative solutions to overcome these problems, like using a talking stick or talking stuffed animal. Facilitators would toss the stuffed animal to a group member and whoever had it in his/her hand was the designated speaker at that time; this strategy worked for many groups. Other groups brought in candy to use as a reward for answering questions; while this encouraged children to engage more, most were more focused on receiving candy than on learning. Other challenges to facilitators were situations in which children simply did not want to participate in the program; in these circumstances, mentors had to be vigilant and open minded with students to find a common ground to work on. Ultimately, these challenges made most of us feel guilty because we felt as though we were failing our students. We found that talking to each other, taking advice from other mentors, and applying it to our own groups allowed us to better serve our students. By the end of the eight weeks, we had been through enough trial-and-error to find methods that worked

for each individual mentor and group.

In our project, we partnered not only with YMCA afterschool programs at local elementary schools, but also with the authors of *The Dream Playbook*. *The Dream Playbook* was initially created for middle school children, but many of our participants were in second through fourth grade. We noticed very early that most of the material in the book was not age appropriate for all of our audience; many students at AMIS felt that they were too old for the activities in the book, while the youngest students had trouble with abstract concepts and difficult vocabulary. Additionally, some activities were more advanced than our students could handle. For example, one activity included matching words to places on a map; the facilitators thought the activity would be fun because there was not a right or wrong answer, but in reality the children wanted to know if they were right and where the real locations were. Some facilitators could not answer those questions because we did not know either; when we didn't know, the facilitators felt they lost credibility with the participants. In another example, there was a word search activity that we thought would be fun until most of the children brought it to our attention that they did not know most of the words; again, some of the words were difficult for mentors to explain to young children. A final example is a page in *The Dream Playbook* that required children to put two feet on their book and understand a magic carpet metaphor. Author Scott Stoll facilitated this activity but the message he wanted to get out was misunderstood; unfortunately, most of the students did not understand and later felt as though that activity was pointless.

Despite the challenges, we saw the potential of *The Dream Playbook* to inspire elementary school students. We described goals or their future career as being a dream. We believed that this would help better interpret the material in the book and help them understand the main goal of *The Dream Playbook*. Most students found it difficult to differentiate between a "sleeping dream" and a goal-oriented dream at the beginning of the session. After mentors explained it thoroughly, students eventually gained an understanding of what dreams are and why it is important to think optimistically about their future. At the beginning of the program, there were many students that did not have a life goal, but through this book and the after-school program, we were able to help them establish that goal. Through *The Dream Playbook*, we also helped them build confidence in themselves and in their goals. Most were now talking to everyone about their dreams, whether it was family or friends. They learned how family and friends play a crucial part in their success. They even established a plan on how they were going to achieve their goal. *The Dream Playbook* is a great workbook for children and our experiences led us to truly believe that it made a positive impact on the children we worked with.

One final aspect of *The Dream Playbook* program we decided that the children would enjoy was visiting our college campus to see where their dreams could lead them. A tour of the University of Cincinnati was planned to help bring the children's dreams from *The Dream Playbook* and apply them to their future in college. The tour was aimed to show them what a college could offer and help them live their dream while seeking a full-time education. Students from both SCPA and AMIS were expected to participate; unfortunately, transportation needs could not be met for AMIS. Planning consisted of figuring out what to show the children without filling them with too much educational based information; we wanted to create a fun and meaningful trip for our students. Facilitators planned for students to see the College of Design, Art, Architecture, and Planning (DAAP) and the College Conservatory of Music (CCM), which aligned with several of the children's dreams. We hoped that our students would be able to imagine what they could be doing in their own futures by seeing college students reaching

similar goals. The tour ran smoothly and the children had a wonderful time visiting our campus; many children reported that they would like to attend the University of Cincinnati one day!

Despite the trials and tribulations we faced throughout our research, we deeply value the experience we received from it. We passionately feel that our community-based research impacted our community partner and the children who participated. The relationships created by this research empowered the children to think more deeply about their dreams and aspirations, which helped them learn that it is a good thing to have positive thoughts about their future.

Through this project, we learned that research in real-world settings has many challenges. Community-based research is not done in a controlled environment (such as a laboratory), and thus can be unpredictable. We learned to be flexible and to work with the challenges we faced; while aspects of our research were not always ideal, we were able to overcome the difficulties to learn more about how children learn and improve their social and emotional skills.

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References

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