A Pilot Study of the DREAMS Program: A Community Collaborative Intervention for the Psychosocial Development of Middle School Students

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to pilot the DREAMS (Desire, Readiness, Empowerment, Action, and Mastery for Success) program, a community-collaborative, after-school intervention program designed specifically to address the holistic developmental needs of students at school. The author originally developed and implemented the program in Kerala, India, and later redesigned it for American school students. Combining the theories of Vygotsky and Erikson, the DREAMS model emphasizes the impact of the community on the development of children. This study evaluates the effects of a summer camp, the primary intervention of a three-year program, on the self-worth, self-esteem, and self-concept of 20 middle school students in Northeast Louisiana. After students attended the week-long program, the most significant improvements were observed in self-esteem and self-worth. Further longitudinal or comparative experimental research on the complete design would provide stronger evidence to draw more substantive conclusions.

Keywords: after school program, DREAMS intervention, psychosocial development, school-community partnership

The wise old saying "it takes a village to raise a child" holds more significance today than ever before. When we reflect on the past, we see that there was more community involvement in schools than today. Due to socio-economic changes, gradually and unknowingly, schools have become isolated and separated from the community, and they have become solely the responsibility of the government and concerned parents (Wildy & Clarke, 2009). Today we have lost the wholesome organic community culture in which we had networks of support for the development of children. This increasing disconnectedness and lack of social capital dangerously affects the disciplined growth and sustainable success of the younger generation today (Possamai et al., 2022). It is true that children learn and develop by working collaboratively rather than in isolation. They grow within the networks of families, schools, neighborhoods, communities, and societies. In general, they learn and grow with whom they regularly interact. This learning is significantly influenced by the interaction of adults, whether it is from school, family, or community (Salta et al., 2022). According to (Price, 2008), we invest most of our energy in accountability, testing, management, curriculum, teaching, and redesigning for the improvement of the school while somewhat ignoring the community's significant role in fostering students' development. According to Mayger and Provinzano (2022), we need to synthesize the *micro* (school) and *macro* (community) level collaboration for our schools' improvement.

Another important aspect here is Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which explains that every individual has potential for cognitive development and an individual can only reach a certain level of their potential by themselves. According to the theory, to further expand and reach their full potential, social interactions are highly necessary. The scope of skills achievable with the support of elders or collaborative peers surpasses what one can achieve independently (Fani & Ghaemi, 2011). The model presented in this article aims at providing and expanding the child's holistic development by connecting them with community leaders, who serve as the *more knowledgeable others* (MKO), helping to expand the learning that occurs within the ZPD.

In many schools, students do not receive enough instruction and opportunities that address their development in the areas of psycho-social, interpersonal, moral, emotional, and self-understanding. Astin and Astin (2010) remarked, "We have increasingly come to neglect the students' inner development—the sphere of values and beliefs, emotional maturity, spirituality, and self-understanding" (p.15).Furthermore, today's teenagers are all the more exposed to a socially toxic

environment, growing up in a social context of increasing violence, poverty, disruption of family relationships, depression, alienation, and crime that is poisonous to their holistic development (Greenbaum et al., 2023). Being disconnected from a moral and mainstream societal life, this new generation is dangerously excluded from the discipline and rewards of life success (Graham et al., 2022).

Today our school systems evaluate students with numbers. High-stake tests are the main form of assessing student achievement, school achievement, and even teacher performance. A U.S. study by Maekawa Kodama et al. (2002) conducted two decades earlier asserted that there is too much emphasis on the intellectual outcomes of students in our school system and it has negatively influenced their holistic development. Alternatively, when schools adopt a whole child approach, they see a wealth of improved outcomes for students, including improved attendance, engagement, physical and emotional health, and academic performance. The *whole child* is a person who is intellectually, physically, socially, verbally, and academically active and competent. Further, the whole child is an empathetic, kind, caring, fair, creative, curious, disciplined, self-directed, goal-oriented, and confident critical thinker. However, we need a supportive context to build each student's social, emotional, physical, ethical, civic, creative, and cognitive development (Estes, 2022).

The DREAMS program, which stands for desire, readiness, empowerment, action, and mastery for success, is a community-collaborative after-school intervention program that attempts to discover the unique characteristics of each student and to build holistically toward the whole child by reintroducing a wholesome organic community culture into our educational system with the help of senior volunteers/mentors from local community. The aim of DREAMS is to aid in the overall development of a student, and the idea of including the community, along with schools, is aligns with the theories of Vygotsky and Erikson (Mahn & John-Steiner, 2012). According to Anderson (2022), schools working in isolation cannot become a hub of change. The DREAMS program was designed and implemented to enable schools and communities to better collaborate and work together for the holistic development of our students and improving schools as the hub of change in the community.

The DREAMS Model

The five sequential stages of the DREAMS model; *desire*, *readiness*, *empowerment*, *action*, and *mastery for success*; aim towards the holistic success of the child. It has been designed for the holistic development and life success of the participant through community involvement at each of its stages. The initial stage of the model, *desire*, is based on our human instinctual drive—the tangible reason for most of our general actions. (e.g., A baby crawls for a colorful object that attracts or fascinates). Motivation begins with this prime impulse of desire (Stults-Kolehmainen et al., 2022). The second stage, *readiness*, is the internalization and the intrinsic motivational dynamics. Extrinsic motivation gives way to intrinsic motivation at this stage. According to Tu et al. (2022), there is a time when a person internalizes the external causes of motivation, and at this point, a person starts to think about the ways and means to move toward his or her goal. A key role in this step can be played by MKOs and scaffolding. MKOs can serve as guides offering motivation and encouragement. Scaffolding can also help in creating avenues for accountability and a mechanism for feedback for the pupils. (van de Pol et al., 2015)

Once goals are realistically set, a student needs to prepare and *empower* themselves to reach the goal, which is the third stage of the success ladder. This empowerment comes basically from three realms: a) personal b) social and moral and c) leadership and creativity. Once the participant feels he is empowered, the next rung on the ladder of success is action. A growing body of research shows that stable intentions are more likely to transform into actions (Bronk & Mitchell, 2022, Hill et al., 2023). Once the student acts persistently by increasing their effort, they can reach a level of excellence or mastery, which is the last step in the process toward success. Bruner (1966) stated that the tendency toward mastery, or to go beyond immediate adaptive necessity toward innovation, is one of the basic human drives. In achievement literature, it can be noted that success-oriented people experience more success, going above and beyond expectations. They demonstrate more self-worth, self-confidence, and higher motivation. They are also shown to consistently work harder toward their goals (Leis et al., 2022 , Hoshi, 2021) . The DREAMS success progression is cyclical. Once a student accomplishes a goal, a desire to reach higher goal is created, which is the beginning of the next cycle toward success (see Figure 1).

Fig 1

The DREAMS Model
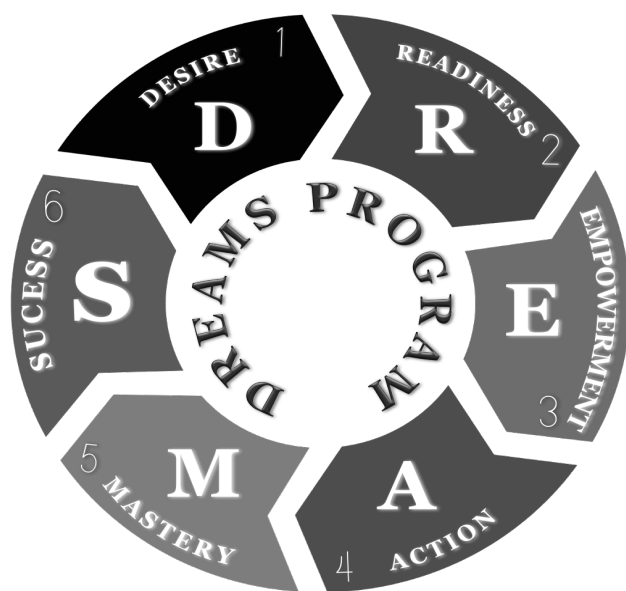
Implementation

Middle school students are not fully equipped to make life-long decisions, and poor life decisions can affect their future achievements (Chang et al., 2022). To address this issue, the DREAMS program is designed for middle school students, and according to the psychosocial stages of development this stage is characterized by industry versus inferiority (Chung, 2018). According to Erikson (1950), children at this age are learning new skills, gaining knowledge, completing tasks and seeking recognition and praise. In this stage of their lives, reinforcement from their teachers, elders, and peers goes a long way in developing their self-esteem. If a child experiences negative feedback, they might feel inferior and develop low confidence in their abilities, so this age is quite crucial and sets the stage for an individual's further development (Orenstein & Lewis, 2024). The DREAMS program aims to create a better sense of industry, which is connected to better self-confidence, self-concept, and esteem. (Issawi & Dauphin, 2020).

The program is implemented through the collaboration of other local community organizations and businesses. It is carried out through summer camps, one-day quarterly workshops, and once-a-month DREAMS club meetings at schools. The program lasts for three consecutive years and includes life skills training, mentoring, skits, community service, games, and music (Thomas L , 2017) However, this particular study focused exclusively on the summer camp, which is the key intervention of the DREAMS program.

Community Involvement

The DREAMS program relies completely on the local community human resources. Collaborating with parents, teachers, volunteers, and other organizations is the basic building block of this program. Local businesses and service organizations volunteer each day to cook and share food with the participants and share their personal life stories. According to Allen et al. (2022), the lack of social capital and social disconnectedness is growing in our society, and our youth often lack social cohesion and community spirit within their own neighborhoods. "They are disconnected from the normal, moral, mainstream life of society . . . and dangerously excluded from the discipline and rewards of working life," claim MacDonald and Marsh (2001).

According to recent research from Archambault et al. (2022), the concept of *pedagogy* is not just the method of teaching but also includes students' interactions with adults. This aspect of pedagogy is implemented in the DREAMS community

project through its adult mentors and volunteers. The role of adult mentors is a hallmark in the sociocultural theory of cognitive development. In the context of schools and other learning environments, community leaders and fellow peers can be considered as MKOs (Jarrett, 2022). Drawing from this theory, it can be opined that school curriculum should be focused on learning through an interaction and a collaborative effort between a student and an adult. Furthermore, teachers should also look at forming, improving, and bringing into play more MKOs into the learning environment to maximize the progress of the students (Rieber & Carton, 1988). However, these ideas are not commonly applied in the world of education today, implying a void that the DREAMS model aims to fill (Kaliannan & Chandran, 2010).

Participants in the program are divided into groups of five students and are assigned to one adult mentor and one college mentor. These mentors are some of the successful role models from the local community serving as MKOs. The mentors build a strong rapport with each of their students and try to build on each of their student's strengths, which is extremely important to help the students become receptive to learning and feedback. Aristotle noted that "All adults involved with children either help or thwart children's growth and development, whether we like it, intend it or not" (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005, p. 1). These community mentors' support and guidance are significant at each stage of the DREAMS program.

Significance of the Study

The current educational system is so highly automated that not every student will be able to receive the assistance, attention, and education they deserve. Thus, developing relationships, rapport and personal connections is something that this system lacks. According to Rowan et al., (2004), thousands of schools in the United States have adopted one of the more than 600 school reform models. Most of these models have great potential to impact the performance of schools and students; however, a significant amount of these programs are not contributing as expected. These programs would have been more effective if they were evaluated scientifically, comparing their impacts, strengths, and weaknesses in diverse contexts.

METHODS

This particular study was conducted at the University of Louisiana, Monroe, to identify the impact of the DREAMS program on its participants' sense of self-esteem, self-mastery, self-concept, and behavioral and interpersonal skills. This study focused only on the five-day summer camp, which is the major intervention of the entire three-year program. See Appendix 1 for a day's program schedule. The study was conducted following approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Louisiana, Monroe. All procedures were performed in accordance with the ethical standards outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants and their legal guardians prior to participation in the study. Additionally, measures were taken to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of all participants throughout the research process.

A mixed-method approach was employed to comprehensively evaluate the impact of the five-day summer camp, which served as the key intervention within the study's overarching design. This approach combined both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to provide a well-rounded assessment of the intervention's effects on the selected variables.

Quantitatively, the study focused on assessing specific variables, namely *self-esteem*, *self-mastery*, and *self-concept*. These aspects were evaluated using established three scales: the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 2006), Pearlin's Self-mastery Scale (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978), and Harter's Self-Concept Scale (Harter, 2012). These scales were administered to the participants at two key points: at the outset of the five-day summer camp and at its conclusion. This quantitative data collection allowed for a systematic and numerical measurement of the changes in the selected variables over the course of the intervention.

Qualitatively, the research delved into personal and interpersonal behavioral changes, recognizing the potential for a more nuanced understanding through open-ended exploration.

This was achieved by employing qualitative methods, including participant observations and interviews. The researchers observed not only the four chosen participants—two African American boys, one African American girl, and one Caucasian girl (Table 1)—but they also conducted interviews with their parents and teachers. The four chosen participants were selected purposefully to ensure diversity in the sample, representing different racial backgrounds and genders. This approach aimed to capture a range of perspectives and experiences related to the intervention program. Additionally, the participants were selected based on their active involvement in similar community initiatives and their availability to participate in the study. The students ranged in age from 13 to 15 years old and were in grades 8 to 10 at the time of the study. This comprehensive qualitative approach enabled the researchers to gain insights into the intricacies of personal and interpersonal behavioral changes brought about by the summer camp. Moreover, the qualitative data served to triangulate the quantitative findings. thereby strengthening the overall research design. This approach is aligned with the

understanding that qualitative data can effectively complement quantitative research designs, particularly in the context of intervention research, as highlighted by Aschbrenner et al. (2022).

Table 1

Observed Student Participants

Demographic	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Participant 4
Age	13	14	15	14
Grade Level	8	9	10	9
Gender	Female	Male	Female	Male
Race	African American	African American	African American	Caucasian

It's important to note that the selection of a random sample of twenty middle school students from Northeast Louisiana, with a focus on students from one of the districts, was a strategic choice. This approach allowed the researchers focus on targeted group of students, making it possible to assess the impact of the summer camp intervention in a more targeted manner. Additionally, the decision to closely observe and interview four selected students, who were identified as low-performing and with a history of disciplinary and family problems, provided a deeper understanding of how the intervention affected this particular subset of students.

In sum, the study employed a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative measurements with qualitative observations and interviews to comprehensively evaluate the impact of the five-day summer camp on self-esteem, self-mastery, self-competence, and personal and interpersonal behavioral changes among the selected middle school students. This methodological richness allowed for a more robust assessment of the intervention's effectiveness and its implications.

RESULTS

Quantitative Analysis

All students were measured before and after the program with a pre-test and post-test via a survey containing duplicate measures and scales. Questionnaires were distributed and completed before the camp began and then again on the last day (fifth day) of the program. The post-test was completed on the fifth day, with 17 of the original student participants. Self-esteem was assessed using the 10-item Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale. Sense of self-competence was assessed using the 7-item Pearlin's Self-mastery Scale. The 36-item (six for each subscale) Harter's Self-concept Scale was used to gather data on the overall self-report of participants' competence in the domains of academics, sports, intelligence, social ability, and overall self-concept.

The data collected with the psychometric scales described above was primarily analyzed using paired sample t-tests. See Table 2 for the results of the pre- and post-intervention data collected from each of the participants.

Table 2

Results of Paired Sample t-Test: Pre- and Post-Program Assessment of Self-Esteem, Self-Concept, and Self-Mastery among Participants (Middle School Students) (T2-T1)

Variable	Mean	SD	N	Std. Error	t	Sig.(2-tailed)
Relation	-.214	1.578	16	.422	-.508	.620
Self-esteem	1.929	2.495	16	.667	2.892	.013
Self-Concept academics	1.214	2.455	16	.656	1.851	.087
Self-Concept Social	.786	3.446	16	.921	.853	.409
Self-Concept Sports	1.857	5.216	16	1.394	1.332	.206
Self-Mastery	1.929	3.025	16	.808	2.386	.033

Results showed significant gains, from pre- to post-program assessments, in self-worth and self-esteem from all outcomes examined: relationship quality with parents, self-competence, academics, sports, intelligence, and self-worth. Specifically, self-esteem ($t = 2.892$; $n = 16$; $p = .013$) and self-worth ($t = 2.386$; $n = 16$; $p = .033$) showed statistically significant increases across the two points in time. There is evidence for divergent validity as two independent scales showed similar gains.

Research also shows how mentoring can serve as a powerful tool and linked with a variety of positive relationships and behavioral, attitude, health-related, motivational, and career outcomes (Eby et al., 2008). Numerous studies have pointed out the benefits of mentoring and the support that is provided by mentoring acts as a catalyst in helping the students (Fletcher et al., 2008; Herrera, 1999; Masehela & Mabika, 2017). Mentorimaseng also posits positive outcomes for self-esteem (Marino et al., 2020), which was also evident the results of this study. These results demonstrate the advantage of using this model in supporting students to develop and achieve to their full potential.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data were collected by observing four selected participants and interviewing parents and teachers. The reports indicated a positive impact of the program on the behavior of the participants, which is supported by the results of the quantitative data analysis. While positive changes were noted in all 20 teenagers, changes observed for these four students were more apparent. Unlike most of the other participants, these students initially appeared to be uninterested and had difficulty interacting with other participants, trainers, and team leaders. All of them agreed that they came to the program under parental or teacher pressure.

Observations of Participant 1

Towards the end of the first day, Participant 1 began talking and responding positively to the activities. On the following day, she participated in a group song, which showed her increasing interest. On the third day, major progress was seen when she opened up to her mentor and shared her feelings: "I find it difficult to control my temper, and I am always angry with my mother."

Later, the girl's mother shared that the lines of communication were opened after the summer program and that her daughter told her that she loved her. Both mother and daughter became emotional as they spoke of the changes. The mother had tearful eyes and told the mentor that her daughter came to her room one night, hugged her, and said she was sorry. The girl shared, "I hate her, but now I understand that she loves me, and I love her."

Observations of Participant 2

Participant 2 had a strained relationship with his mother and felt that his mother "did not love him." Much time was spent helping him to deal with this issue and teaching him ways to open the lines of communication. During one of the activities on the third day, researchers overheard him talking to himself, saying, "I am smart." Participant 2 struggled with feelings of inadequacy and a strained relationship with his mother. Through the program, efforts were made to address these issues and build his confidence, resulting in positive self-affirmation and leadership development. This participant was a team leader, and he eventually developed a team-building activity solution for the team.

Observations of Participant 3

Participant 3 appeared to be shy and tired; therefore, the team attempted to socialize more with her and to prompt her to speak about herself. She eventually began talking about her dog, and from that day on, she was the first one to arrive each morning, waiting for all of them to open the classroom. One day she brought a picture of her dog to show everyone. On the fourth day, she brought the researcher a set of guitar strings.

The researcher discovered that she lives with her grandparents and had difficulty forming meaningful relationships with peers. She was also having much difficulty in math, thereby decreasing her self-esteem. She wanted to become a veterinarian, and realized she must do well in math to achieve that goal.

Observations of Participant 4

Participant 4 was experiencing anger issues and had very little motivation. He said that he only attended the program because his mother "made him." He spoke about his strengths and goals in life on the second day. In his post-program interview, he

said, "I am happy that I had the opportunity to attend the program, and I am looking forward to attending the following year."

From the students' interviews, the researcher identified that they all enjoyed the program. All four students were from broken families. The family problems and low confidence were apparent when they shared informally about themselves. On the last day, there was a special session for the parents and guardians. During the session, the parents and guardians of these four students were interviewed. The data showed a positive response from each of them. One of the assistant principals was also interviewed after the program, and she shared that she received a lot of positive feedback from the students' parents.

Of these four students, the researcher could not identify any type of explicit behavioral changes in the behavior of Participant 4. However, the other three participants showed noticeable growth in their personal and interpersonal behavior based on the qualitative data collected from different sources.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study offer new for educators who desire holistic development of students in the public school system. The findings also have some implications on complementary education programs, which can be established and supported through community collaboration and for the development of the *whole child*. Programs like DREAMS can help our school system to provide more effective and quality training opportunities when students get involved with these initiatives of the community.

According to multiple research studies (Lecusay et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2022), schools that develop collaboration with community and community organizations create better opportunities for their students' successful education and development. Programs like DREAMS provide opportunities for successful persons from diverse areas of the community to get involved with the education system by volunteering their time, talents, and expertise. Community collaborative programs like DREAMS can create opportunities for connecting different schools and school systems from different parishes, counties, or even the homes of home-schooled children.

This study attests to previous research results regarding these types of intervention programs' significance in students' performance, equipping them with qualities required of today's business world such as honesty, integrity, interpersonal skills, motivation, initiative, and work ethic (Mahajan et al., 2022; Mainga et al., 2022; Srimulyani & Hermanto, 2022). The study is an important first step in analyzing this program, delineating whether this program can positively impact children's self-esteem, self-concept, and self-mastery. The findings of this study offer a new perspective on holistic student development within the public school system.

Limitations

In this study, the DREAMS program showed a remarkable ability to empower low-performing students in their personal and social life from the statistical results and other qualitative reports. However, there were several limitations in this study. The sample of the study was a convenience sample. Also, all participants, except a few of the participants, were from stable family backgrounds. Further, when conducting multiple *t*-tests with a small sample size, as done here, the findings may be unstable and the sample size may not be statistically powerful enough to make a strong conclusion. Additionally, this study evaluated only the impact of a small portion of the entire design. Future research may use a longitudinal design to study the entire three-year program to identify more reliable and substantial results.

CONCLUSION

This pilot study of the DREAMS program sheds light on the transformative power of collaboration and partnership, echoing the timeless wisdom of the Buddha: "Thousands of candles can be lit from a single candle, and the life of the single candle will not be shortened. Happiness never decreases by being shared". Through collaborative efforts involving students, schools, teachers, communities, organizations, and volunteers, collective success emerges in this program, benefiting all stakeholders. This study underscores the pivotal role of mentors in students' lives, highlighting their profound impact on student outcomes.

Looking forward, further research focusing on the long-term effects of mentoring can provide deeper insights into how mentorship shapes students' lives and fosters the development of responsible citizenship. Such research is essential for understanding the holistic impact of mentorship and for informing effective strategies to support student growth and well-being.

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