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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Project DREAM: Iterative development of an afterschool program with an emphasis on youth–adult relationships

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Abstract

The current manuscript describes the iterative development of an afterschool intervention aimed at fostering supportive relationships between adolescents and adults from their everyday lives. Project DREAM (Developing Resourcefulness, Engagement, Acceptance, and Mentoring) is a novel afterschool preventive intervention aimed at promoting youths' improved academic outcomes via gains in social and emotional development and their connectedness with nonparental adults. The purpose of the iterative development process was to improve the intervention to make it maximally usable and acceptable to the intended users and participants. The iterative development process was informed by data collected from advisory boards, focus groups, interviews, and observations of program sessions. In the current article, we describe the methods implemented as part of this process and fully describe the resulting intervention revisions completed across the 2-year period. We also summarize lessons learned.

KEYWORDS

afterschool program, iterative development, middle school, youth–adult relationships

Highlights

- A novel intervention aimed to promote personal growth and connections with adults is presented.
- This intervention was iteratively developed over 2 years to improve it.
- The intervention was revised with input from community partners to make it more usable and acceptable.
- Intervention revisions and lessons learned from iterative development are shared.

INTRODUCTION

Research indicates that supportive relationships with nonparental adults may play a key role in fostering social and emotional well-being, as well as academic success among adolescents (Billingsley et al., 2022; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Hurd et al., 2012; Kraft et al., 2023; Sánchez et al., 2008). Adolescents interact with a multitude of nonparental adults in their homes, schools, neighborhoods, and broader communities and yet studies consistently find that as many as one-third of adolescents lack supportive ties to nonparental adults (Billingsley

et al., 2021; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Hurd & Sellers, 2013; Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010). Programmatic efforts to address this void of supportive inter-generational relationships typically rely on approaches that pair youth with adult volunteers who youth have never met and who frequently do not share many of youths' identities (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity) or lived experiences (e.g., socioeconomic position; Sánchez et al., 2021). Although this formal mentoring approach is beneficial for some youth, research suggests that these relationships terminate prematurely (within a year) approximately half of the time and that premature

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termination may be harmful to youth (Albright et al., 2017; Bernstein et al., 2009; Grossman et al., 2012; Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016). This is of particular relevance for mentoring programs targeting adolescents as opposed to younger children given findings that formal mentoring relationships with adolescents are at greater risk of premature termination in comparison to mentoring relationships formed with younger children (Darling, 2005). An alternative programmatic strategy to formal mentoring (i.e., pairing youth with unfamiliar adults through a formal program) may be explicit efforts to support the formation of stronger relational bonds between adolescents and familiar adults from their everyday lives (e.g., extended family members, teachers, neighbors; Albright et al., 2017; Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016). Specifically, efforts to bring youth and familiar adults together in a programmatic structure may yield the formation of supportive intergenerational relationships that have the potential to develop more rapidly and be less susceptible to premature termination. Project DREAM (Developing Resourcefulness, Engagement, Acceptance, and Mentoring) was developed to explore this possibility.

Project DREAM is a novel afterschool preventive intervention aimed at promoting youths' improved academic outcomes via gains in social and emotional development and connectedness with nonparental adults. Project DREAM aims to help develop adolescents' abilities to identify and form relationships with positive nonparental adults and to help adolescents consider the ways that nonparental adults may be of help to them. The program is designed to incorporate adult-adolescent activities that foster collaboration on shared goals and facilitate opportunities for youth and nonparental adults to engage in dialog about issues of importance to adolescents (e.g., who adolescents are and who they want to be). Through this intervention, adolescents learn how to seek out and secure various types of support (e.g., emotional, instrumental) from positive adults in their communities. Importantly, adolescents also have opportunities to practice seeking out support and obtaining advice from the adults who attend the program with them. Simultaneously, through their participation in the program and interactions with adolescents, adults learn about the critical role they can play in the lives of adolescents in their communities. The program aims to both strengthen adolescents' relationship with one specific adult from their pre-existing network who attends the program with them, as well as to foster more positive intergenerational relationships with multiple adults in their lives who can be helpful to them in various ways.

Theoretical framework

Project DREAM is informed by the positive youth development (PYD) perspective. PYD emphasizes opportunities to build upon pre-existing strengths

inherent to all youth and underscores the role of supportive contexts for optimal development (Benson, 2003; Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008). Resting on a developmental systems theory that stresses the inherent plasticity of human development, the PYD perspective hones in on the potential for systematic change throughout development as a result of mutually influential relationships between the developing person and their ecology (Lerner et al., 2015). The PYD perspective also advances several core competencies that facilitate academic success (Lerner et al., 2015). Core competencies specific to early adolescents include self-confidence; skills in setting and achieving personal and academic goals; an orientation toward the future; interpersonal and communication skills; responsible decision-making; and an ability to recognize family, school, and community resources and supports (Catalano et al., 2004; Devaney et al., 2006; Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008).

Studies have linked competence in the abovementioned socioemotional domains to a variety of meaningful educational outcomes. For instance, early adolescents who are more confident in themselves and regard themselves more positively demonstrate more positive academic outcomes over time (Hirsch & DuBois, 1991). In addition, adolescents who are able to effectively set appropriate goals tend to achieve greater academic success in comparison to their peers who lack effective goal-setting skills (Zimmerman et al., 1992). Research findings also underscore the importance of envisioning one's future self (Oyserman et al., 2006) and possessing role models (Hurd et al., 2009, 2016) in promoting improved academic outcomes. This research also has highlighted the added benefits to youth of having a personal relationship with their role models, as well as obtaining support from adults in creating plausible strategies for successfully achieving their academic aspirations and navigating challenges along the way. The benefits of relational skills such as clear communication and active listening for academic success also have been established (Devaney et al., 2006). In particular, research findings suggest that students' abilities to interact positively with critical adults in their lives may be paramount to their ability to thrive academically. Moreover, adolescents' abilities to form positive relationships with other important adults have also been linked to improved academic and psychosocial outcomes (Hurd et al., 2013; Lerner et al., 2005, 2015; Rhodes, 2004). Notably, adolescents are more likely to form positive relationships with supportive adults when they possess the opportunities, the necessary communication skills, and the belief that adults can be helpful and useful to them.

Findings from previous research suggest that PYD programs are most successful when they target the promotion of multiple positive behaviors and increase healthy bonding with adults (Catalano et al., 2004; Lerner et al., 2015). As Larson (2006) contends, efforts to

encourage the development of core PYD competencies must rely heavily on the support of adults. Yet Larson notes that this support must be provided in a way that reinforces youths' ownership of developmental activities while simultaneously challenging youth and providing them with direction. Eight features of program contexts have been identified that help promote PYD including physical and psychological safety; appropriate structure; supportive relationships; opportunities for belonging; positive social norms; support for efficacy and mattering; opportunity for skill building; and integration of family, school, and community efforts (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). The combination of these features is theorized to be the link between youth participation and outcomes (Mahoney et al., 2005). Project DREAM was designed with these eight features in mind.

The project DREAM intervention

Adolescents in 6th through 8th grades are eligible for participation in Project DREAM if they lack supportive relationships with adults other than their parents/guardians (i.e., if they report there are no adults other than their parents/guardians who they can go to for help, support, or guidance). Thus, they complete a screener questionnaire about supportive relationships before being selected for participation. After eligible adolescents express interest in participation (and parental consent and adolescent assent are obtained), the program asks students to identify a positive nonparental adult from their family, school, or community (e.g., grandparents, teachers, neighbors, friends' parents) who could participate in all program sessions with them. Once identified and approved by adolescents' parents/guardians, these adults are contacted by program facilitators and recruited to participate in the intervention with the youth. Project DREAM is a manualized intervention designed to be implemented by two school staff facilitators after school. Sessions are 2 hours in length and are held once a week for 8 weeks. Selected nonparental adults attend all sessions with their youth partner.

Facilitators are recruited and then screened before selection. They then undergo 4 hours of training (broken up across two sessions) focused on (1) developmental issues facing early adolescents, (2) theories of social-emotional learning and PYD, (3) facilitation styles that encourage and support adolescent engagement and participation, and (4) best practices in mentoring relationships. Other topics covered during the training include ways to promote engagement and student participation; utilizing discipline and rewards; and dealing with common dilemmas that arise when working with youth. The training also includes in-depth review of curriculum instructions and scripts to be used when implementing the curriculum. This training is supplemented by weekly 1-hour preparation sessions held before each week's session. The trainings are led by the

research team. In the initial training, facilitators also prepare to lead the adult participant orientation that all nonparental adult participants are required to attend before their participation in the program. All trainings are manualized.

The overarching goal of the Project DREAM intervention is to foster supportive relationships, with a focus on helping youth optimize their abilities to avail themselves of adult support while simultaneously training adults to provide appropriately responsive support. The program aims to help develop adolescents' abilities to identify and form relationships with positive nonparental adults and to help adolescents consider the ways that nonparental adults may be of help to them. The program is designed to incorporate adult-adolescent activities that foster collaboration on shared goals and facilitate opportunities for youth and nonparental adults to engage in dialog about issues of importance to adolescents (e.g., who adolescents are and who they want to be). Program sessions also focus on issues specific to adult-adolescent relationships including a discussion of challenges to successful adult-adolescent communication.

This intervention is designed to help adolescents learn how to seek out and secure various types of support (e.g., emotional, instrumental) from positive adults in their communities and includes opportunities for adolescents to practice doing this during sessions. These positive interactions are expected to generalize to other relationships with adults, thus helping adolescents to have both a stronger and more supportive relationship with one key adult from their pre-existing social network and also more confidence to communicate effectively with adults and seek out additional supportive intergenerational relationships as needed. This is a key advantage of having adults participate in the intervention with adolescents, as adults can help to reinforce the learning that occurs during the intervention and support the maintenance of this learning over time (Millenky et al., 2014). Thus, active adult participation in the intervention may be able to extend the influence of the intervention; bolster program success; and diminish the erosion of gains. Simultaneously, through their participation in the program and interactions with adolescents, adults learn about the critical role they can play in the lives of adolescents, as well as receiving training in how to effectively support youth while also nurturing their autonomy.

Project DREAM provides structure as well as opportunities for skill building and support for efficacy and mattering through helping youth build their relational skills while simultaneously privileging the opinions of the adolescents through discussions and role playing. Opportunities for belonging and positive social norms are both inherent in the group format and focus of the curriculum. Additionally, Project DREAM incorporates one of the most important, but often least implemented, aspects of PYD contexts, the integration of family, school, and community. Project DREAM brings community-based adults into the school setting

where they will both become more acclimated and familiar with adolescents' school environment and have direct interaction with school staff facilitators. Thus, in addition to facilitating important connections between adolescents and adults in their schools and communities, Project DREAM also helps to bridge connections between schools and communities. Not only has this been identified as one of the eight features of positive developmental contexts, but better integrating adolescents' school and community contexts has also been shown to support adolescents' academic success and to increase opportunities for community adults to be involved with adolescents' school experiences (Payton et al., 2008). Thus, Project DREAM adheres to promising and best practices in PYD.

Curriculum components

Project DREAM includes a highly engaging and interactive curriculum intended to facilitate optimal participation and learning (Durlak et al., 2010). Project DREAM also promotes adolescent–adult interactions

that are task-oriented and collaborative (Karcher & Nakkula, 2010). Each session has a particular focus and adolescents are provided abundant opportunities to practice targeted skills (e.g., role plays). The curriculum is sequenced according to content to ensure that sessions build upon each other. For example, a session that focuses on identifying personal strengths precedes a session on goal-setting because that sequence allows youth to take account of their strengths when they are setting goals. Likewise, a session on identifying role models follows the session on goal-setting because it is important for youth to be able to first, determine short- and long-term goals and then, think more about examples of adults who have accomplished similar goals (with a particular focus on challenges faced along the way and the ways those role models received help from adults to achieve their goals). Finally, learning goals for each session are explicitly communicated to adolescents in advance, during, and at the close of each session. Below we provide a brief overview (i.e., topic, purpose, and descriptions of sample activities) of each of the finalized eight sessions of Project DREAM (also, see Figure 1).

Session 1: Introduction	Session 2: Personal Strengths and Identity	Session 3: Goal Setting	Session 4: Role Models and Thinking About Future	Session 5: Communicating with Adults	Session 6: Adults Helping Teens	Session 7: Making Good Decisions	Session 8: Closing
Session Purpose: -Meet program participants and facilitators -Learn about the program and set expectations	Session Purpose: -Reflect on personal strengths and important aspects of identity -Consider how adults can support identity development	Session Purpose: -Learn how to set and achieve goals -Learn how to navigate challenges with support from adults	Session Purpose: -Discuss the qualities of a good role model and the importance of multiple role models	Session Purpose: -Learn when help from adults may be useful -Learn effective strategies for communicating with adults	Session Purpose: -Consider the ways adults can be helpful to adolescents	Session Purpose: -Learn strategies for good decision-making -Learn how adults can help adolescents make difficult decisions	Session Purpose: -Reflect on what was learned in the program -Prepare to share what was learned in the program with others
Sample Session Activities: -Icebreakers -Share facts to find commonalities -Establish "Code of Conduct" -Get familiarized with community resources	Sample Session Activities: -Create identity collages -Participate in games that involve sharing identities and personal strengths	Sample Session Activities: -Participate in games that practice effective goal setting and dealing with challenges -Create a project that displays mini goals and big goals	Sample Session Activities: -Build a "perfect role model" art project -Complete activity to illustrate how multiple role models can help adolescents achieve their future goals	Sample Session Activities: -Role play conversations between adolescents and adults with a focus on learning how to better navigate them	Sample Session Activities: -Watch movie clips that show adults helping adolescents -Participate in partner activities that involve communication and teamwork between adolescents and adults	Sample Session Activities: -Participate in decision-making games to practice effective decision-making strategies	Sample Session Activities: -Create project that reflects what adolescents and adults learned from the program (project is shared at the closing ceremony one week later)

FIGURE 1 Overview of Project DREAM (Developing Resourcefulness, Engagement, Acceptance, and Mentoring) Curriculum.

The first session of Project DREAM, *Introduction*, introduces adolescent and adult participants and facilitators to each other and sets program expectations for the remainder of the intervention. Adolescent and adult participants play a series of “ice breaker” games, designed to guide self-disclosure in a fun and nonthreatening way. They also engage in several interactive activities aimed to orient them to the program and set their expectations for the subsequent seven program sessions. Adolescent and adult participants also work together to craft a “code of conduct” for the subsequent sessions. The reward system for active participation in sessions is also explained to adolescent participants (i.e., adolescent participants receive tickets for positive participation that they can trade in for small prizes during the fourth and eighth program sessions). The session ends with a game intended to familiarize participants with supportive community resources that can be accessed and utilized outside of session time.

The second session, *Personal Strengths and Identity*, encourages adolescents to reflect on their personal strengths and social identities, as well as how adults can help strengthen their desired personal characteristics. The session starts with another “ice breaker” activity to help participants get more familiar and comfortable with each other. Then, there is a didactic component aimed at helping adolescent participants identify their best characteristics and qualities. With the help of adults, adolescents then choose positive characteristics that best describe them and create a collage of words and images that best reflect their personal strengths and identities. Participants also play a small-group game to facilitate thinking about current strengths and the ways adults can help shape adolescents' current and future identity.

The third session, *Goal Setting*, helps adolescents develop or advance their skills in setting and achieving goals. This session also encourages adolescents to share their goals with caring adults so that these adults can help them set mini-goals, deal with challenges along the way, and help keep adolescents accountable. The session includes a didactic component on effective goal-setting. Adolescent and adult participants then begin thinking about goals by playing a game where they must come up with mini-goals for a set of big goals and identify solutions to potential challenges they may face when trying to achieve a goal. This game is then tied into a broader discussion of adolescents' future goals and how adults can help them achieve these goals. This discussion culminates in the creation of an art project depicting adolescents' big goals and the mini-goals they need to accomplish to ultimately achieve their big goal.

The fourth session, *Role Models and Thinking about the Future*, encourages adolescents to think about their current adult role models and the characteristics that make an adult a good role model. In addition, ways in which positive adult role models can help adolescents achieve their future goals are discussed. The session

begins with a very brief “ice breaker” activity to further solidify group familiarity and cohesion among participants. Next, adolescent and adult participants team up to construct a “perfect role model” using art supplies. Participants present their art project to the larger group and then are asked to discuss whether it is reasonable to expect one person to possess all their valued qualities and how to deal with a role model who possesses both positive (i.e., worthy of emulation) and negative characteristics. The session ends with an activity designed to help adolescents see the utility of multiple role models and to integrate the discussion of goal-setting and role models such that adolescents better understand how role models can help them reach their goals. Adolescent participants are given the opportunity to trade in participation tickets that they have collected across the previous sessions for small prizes before they leave. They also are told they can save their tickets and wait to redeem them at the final program session.

The fifth session, *Communicating with Adults*, helps adolescents identify situations wherein getting advice from nonparental adults may be particularly beneficial. In addition, this session focuses on helping youth develop strategies for talking to adults about personal issues and navigating challenges to effective inter-generational communication. Participants begin the session by hearing a series of difficult scenarios that middle school students might encounter and voting on the way they would handle each one (e.g., handle it themselves, ask a parent, ask a nonparental adult, ask a friend). This is followed by a discussion about when and how nonparental adults could be useful in each scenario. This discussion also focuses on challenges adolescents may face when asking an adult for help. Next, adolescent and adult participants role play skits that include unsuccessful communication between an adult and an adolescent (adolescents role play the adult role and adults role play the adolescent role). The group then discusses each situation and comes up with solutions to potential challenges so that they feel better prepared to seek out support from nonparental adults in the future and deal with communication challenges that may arise.

The sixth session, *Adults Helping Teens*, discusses how adults can help adolescents make positive changes in their lives. Participants view a series of clips from a popular, age-appropriate movie that illustrate positive relationships between nonparental adults and adolescents. In particular, these clips highlight how adults can support youth as they work to accomplish their goals and other ways in which adults can be helpful to teens (e.g., emotional support). Film clips are then followed by discussions to emphasize the themes of the clips. Building off this discussion, participants play an interactive game designed to help them identify the important adults in their lives across various contexts (e.g., home, school, neighborhood) and the ways in which these adults could

help adolescents accomplish their goals. The session closes with a partner activity where adolescent and adult participants must rely on and communicate with each other to recreate a small structure. This activity underscores the importance of receiving help from knowledgeable and experienced others when trying to accomplish a goal.

The seventh session, *Making Good Decisions*, encourages adolescents to think more about how adults can help them make the best decisions. Adolescents and adults team up to play a variety of engaging and interactive decision-making games. These games all drive home elements conveyed through a short didactic component about decision making, including listing all possible decisions for a specific situation; making lists of pros and cons for each possible decision; evaluating all options; and consulting with trusted others (preferably those who may have more experience and knowledge about the issue) before making a final decision. The last half-hour of the session is dedicated preparation time for adolescents' final projects. Participants are provided instructions for the final project (along with a plethora of example final projects) and provided time to review what they have learned from their participation in Project DREAM (review sheets are provided). They are told that they will use the last program session to create their final project with active help from their adult partner.

The eighth and final session, *Closing*, gives adolescents and adults an outlet to share what they learned with others. Adolescent and adult participants work on designing a final creative project that reflects what they learned from their participation in the program. Adolescent and adult participants are told they have the opportunity to share this project at a closing ceremony the following week to family, friends, school staff, and other invited guests. Those who want to share are encouraged to practice what they may want to say during the session time with their adult partner. Facilitators also go around to pairs to discuss how the adolescent–adult pair plans to remain in contact after the program ends. This final session ends with adolescent participants redeeming their participation tickets for prizes.

The closing ceremony provides participants the opportunity to teach others what they learned through their participation in Project DREAM. By teaching others, participants may further solidify some of the content they learned in the program. This also provides an opportunity for parents and other family members to have a fuller understanding of what the intervention entailed. Program facilitators supplement participants' presentations by providing more details about the program activities (including a slideshow of pictures taken throughout program sessions). All youth and adult participants are then presented with certificates and publicly acknowledged and celebrated for the specific contributions they made to the program.

Current study

The current article outlines the process of iteratively developing the Project DREAM intervention. The first author received grant funding to iteratively develop the intervention over a 2-year period before subjecting the intervention to a formal evaluation in the third year. Thus, the purpose of the iterative development process was to improve the intervention to make it maximally usable and acceptable to the intended users and participants. The iterative development process was informed by data collected from advisory boards, focus groups, interviews, and observations of program sessions. Across all methods, the purpose of data collection was to identify aspects of the intervention that worked well; aspects of the intervention that were not working well; and to identify changes that could be implemented to improve the intervention. All of this was done with an eye toward making the intervention maximally usable (e.g., manageable to implement) by school staff and acceptable (e.g., likable, enjoyable) to participants. Ultimately, the revisions made throughout the iterative development process were for the purpose of yielding the best possible version of the intervention that subsequently would be subjected to rigorous evaluation. In the current article, we describe the methods implemented as part of this process and fully describe the resulting intervention revisions completed across the 2-year period. We also summarize what we learned through this process as that may be helpful to other interventionists who are interested in undertaking iterative development before rigorous evaluation of a novel intervention.

METHOD

Iterative development was informed by feedback on the intervention's usability and acceptability from key stakeholders. Our collaborative approach to iterative development and evaluation was informed by research suggesting that effective youth programming incorporates parent, teacher, and community involvement in program planning, implementation, and evaluation (Bond & Hauf, 2004; Hawkins et al., 2004; Weare & Nind, 2011). Although the initial program content was developed primarily by a research team (including several members who had previously worked as teachers), this iterative development process ensured that community stakeholder perspectives were incorporated into the final intervention. Iterative development was conducted in collaboration with the school staff, students, and parents of three public middle schools in a suburban community in the Southeast. School A only enrolled seventh and eighth grades, whereas Schools B and C enrolled sixth through eighth grades. All schools were close in size (total school enrollment ranged from 477 to 579 students) and had similar gender distributions

(approximately 50% female students). At School A, 53% of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. This percentage was lower at Schools B (40%) and C (35%). Schools varied regarding their racial/ethnic composition: School A (49% Black/African American; 40% White; 7% Hispanic/Latino); School B (22% Black/African American; 38% White; 25% Hispanic/Latino; 5% Asian); and School C (7% Black/African American; 62% White; 12% Hispanic/Latino; 12% Asian).

In year 1 (2015–2016 school year), Project DREAM was implemented at School A with a cohort of nine students (diverse across gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic status) who were accompanied by nine nonparental adults who were selected by the youth. In year 2 (2016–2017 school year), the program was implemented at Schools B and C, each with a cohort of 10 diverse students accompanied by 10 nonparental adults who were selected by the youth. School staff facilitators were compensated at a rate of \$25 an hour for all trainings, preparation sessions, and program sessions. Each youth and adult participant was compensated \$20 for each program session they attended. Before any data collection, this study received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the first authors' university (IRB protocol #2305). All participants provided informed consent before participation. Youth participants provided assent and their parents/guardians provided consent.

Iterative development of the intervention was informed by input collected from a youth advisory board; a school staff advisory board; focus groups with youth, nonparental adults, and youths' parents; interviews with school staff facilitators; and observations of sessions conducted by the research team. Six advisory board meetings were conducted separately with each group across the 2 years of intervention implementation. Focus groups were conducted at the end of each round of intervention implementation and separately by group: youth participants, nonparental adult participants, and youth participants' parents. At the end of each round of intervention implementation, one-on-one interviews were conducted with each school staff facilitator. Observations were conducted by two research team members during every program session across the 2 years. More details about each approach are provided below.

Advisory boards

The collaborative process began with a series of meetings with two advisory boards. One advisory board was comprised entirely of students. This youth advisory board included 10 students (diverse across race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status) attending the three partner middle schools. These students were nominated by their teachers for the youth advisory board (note:

teachers were asked to nominate students who they believed would be eligible for program participation based on not having supportive relationships with nonparental adults). A second advisory board was comprised of nine staff from the three partner middle schools. Each advisory board met a total of six times for 2 hours each meeting across the 2-year iterative development period. The youth and school staff advisory boards were convened separately but following a similar schedule. Specifically, these meetings convened twice before the intervention was implemented; twice after the first round of program implementation; and twice after the second round of implementation. The first two meetings served to introduce and orient them to the intervention structure and content. Subsequent meetings focused on reviewing data collected during implementation and collecting advisory board members' input on proposed changes. In some meetings, members engaged in practice session activities. Advisory board members were asked to weigh in on specific components and to suggest ways to improve upon them with a focus on the usability and acceptability of the intervention. Advisory board members were financially compensated for their time with adults receiving \$40 per hour and youth receiving \$20 per hour (youth received less so as to not coerce their participation). Meals also were provided at advisory board meetings as they occurred during mealtimes.

Focus groups

Focus groups were conducted separately with youth and with nonparental adult participants at the conclusion of each program. Focus group meetings lasted 1 hour on average. Youth were compensated \$30, and adults were compensated \$50 for participation in focus groups. Focus group protocols included explicit questions to elicit feedback on the program curriculum and structure. Participants were asked about their likes, dislikes, and suggestions for how to improve the program. Focus groups with youth participants' parents were also conducted to collect parents' perspectives on the program. Focus group meetings were recorded and then transcribed.

Individual interviews

One-on-one interviews were conducted with each school staff facilitator to learn about their experiences facilitating the intervention and to collect their suggestions for how to improve the program. School staff facilitators were compensated \$100 for their participation in the interview. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed.

Observations

Observations of the intervention were conducted primarily to assess implementation fidelity and participant engagement. Observations included both targeted ethnographic field notes (Emerson et al., 1995) and structured observations (Deutsch, 2008). Research assistants used iPads to take detailed notes during observations. Notes included a running record of the activity in the room as it occurred and verbatim dialogue from participants and facilitators. Structured observations attended to fidelity to the curriculum, including whether activities were completed and how much time it took to complete each activity. Observations also captured aspects of the program that were challenging to implement and participants' engagement.

Data analyses

We content coded the data for etic and emic themes (Marshall & Rossman, 2010) using an inductive and deductive process with a specific focus on content pertaining to the usability (e.g., what made the intervention challenging to implement; what could be done to facilitate improved implementation of the intervention), acceptability (e.g., what did participants like or dislike), fidelity to the curriculum, and level of engagement of the intervention. We generated a codebook and then applied the codes to our data. Consensual qualitative methods were used; accordingly, any changes to the coding structure were agreed upon through discussion and coding disagreements were resolved through discussion to reach consensus (Hill et al., 2005). Themes were compared across data sources and data types to facilitate triangulation for validation of themes and to explore potential discrepancies and outliers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles & Huberman, 1994). We weighed data from all sources equally and prioritized suggestions for revisions that were achievable. Findings were discussed at length in weekly research team meetings before being presented to youth and school staff advisory boards for their input. We explained the proposed revisions to the advisory boards and presented multiple options. We asked them to discuss the pros and cons of suggested revisions. After taking into account the input from the advisory boards, revisions were made to the intervention. Revisions were made to the intervention following the first round of intervention (before the second round of intervention). Final revisions were made to the intervention after the second round of intervention (with the intent of subjecting the final revised intervention to a rigorous evaluation the following year). We followed an identical process for soliciting input from the advisory boards after each round of intervention. All revisions made throughout the 2-year iterative development process are described below.

RESULTS

Across the 2-year iterative development period, we made a number of significant revisions to the intervention, all of which were informed by the methods described above. Revisions to the intervention fell into the following five categories: revisions to the curriculum to improve acceptability; revisions to increase usability of the intervention by facilitators; revisions to the intervention to enhance positive participation and engagement; revisions to further bolster intergenerational bonds; and revisions to support parents' acceptability of the intervention. We outline each of these below.

Revisions to the curriculum to improve acceptability

To begin, several adjustments were made specifically to the curriculum across the 2 years. Using our observational data, as well as data from interviews and focus groups with participants and intervention facilitators, we identified activities that were not well received and discussed whether they could be modified to improve them or whether we needed to replace them entirely. In all cases, we preserved the intention of the activity throughout the modification process and if we replaced the activity, we devised other approaches to meet similar objectives.

Given that all games incorporated into the intervention had an educational objective, we struggled at times to find the right balance between fostering engagement and learning. In some cases, in our effort to realize the educational objective of the session, we had designed games that were overly complex, and we had to simplify them. In other cases, we had added a competitive element to make games more fun and engaging, but we ended up having to reduce the competitive elements when the competition distracted from the learning objectives. In addition, we designed some games that did not resonate with participants and subsequently had to be replaced. For example, a goal-setting activity that we created relied heavily on participants having an understanding of travel by train or airplane (e.g., steps to take to prepare for a trip), but many participants struggled with this activity because they had never traveled by either mode of transportation and some had never even traveled outside of their city limits. In this case, we replaced the activity entirely with a goal-setting activity that could be applied to any personal goal participants held. In this way, we also made the activity more personally relevant to participants. In addition, we originally included a scavenger hunt activity that was intended to help familiarize youth participants with youth-serving organizations and resources in their community. However, because this activity relied on participants traveling to various locations in between program sessions, very few

participants reported being able to follow through with the scavenger hunt activities. Accordingly, we replaced this activity with a drawing-based, word-guessing game to familiarize youth with relevant community resources and organizations. This activity took place during a program session and did not require participants to do anything outside of session time. Moreover, the competition element was retained which helped to make the activity engaging and fun, while also meeting the objective of familiarizing youth participants with community resources.

Although we replaced activities entirely in a few cases, it was more common that our data indicated the need for adjustments and minor revisions to curriculum activities. In particular, several sessions incorporated scripted scenarios that were either presented to participants or provided to participants for them to perform. Our data indicated that some of the scenarios we created did not resonate well with participants either because they were not perceived as being developmentally relevant or because they were seen as unrealistic by participants. We also received feedback that we needed to incorporate more scenarios that pertained to dilemmas that youth faced in the context of social media and online bullying and aggression. Guided by input from school staff facilitators and youth and adult advisory board members, we revised all scenarios to enhance their credibility and relevance to our youth sample.

We also made revisions to activities that included creative and artistic components. We learned that youth participants varied significantly in their attitudes toward creative projects. While some youth preferred to have a great deal of autonomy and flexibility in how they approached a creative project, others preferred more scaffolding and structure. Youth also varied in their confidence in their artistic abilities and self-expression. Thus, we made modifications to the instructions and materials available for all creative projects to both continue to encourage youth to be fully creative and independent in their project design but also to provide additional instructions, examples, and premade materials (e.g., cut-outs, stickers, stencils) that were available for youth who preferred to have programmatic guardrails guiding them when implementing these activities. Relatedly, we learned that participants needed more time to plan and make their final projects. Their final projects were intended to represent participants' cumulative learning across the previous seven sessions. Youth participants were also encouraged to present their final projects at the closing ceremony. Given the magnitude of the task, participants indicated that they needed more support and time than had been allotted to plan, design, and construct their final projects. Consequently, we modified the curriculum to include time for planning and designing the final project in session seven. We created worksheets that youth and adults could complete together to further scaffold the process. We also

provided many examples, suggestions, and additional materials for final projects. Participants retained the entire allotted time in session eight to make their final project with assistance from adults but were better prepared to use this time effectively once we added more planning time to session seven.

Revisions to increase usability of the intervention by facilitators

A broader issue that was identified early on regarding the curriculum was that school staff facilitators found it to be too difficult to implement. The problem was threefold in that many of the initial versions of sessions activities were too complex; the curriculum was overly scripted and included several lengthy didactic and instructional components; and school staff facilitators struggled to complete the 1 h of preparation before each session. We made several revisions to address this collection of issues. Specifically, we revised the curriculum to simplify activities that were overly complex. We also substantially shortened the scripts included for didactic lessons and instructions for activities. We made the scripted content as succinct as possible. Yet given that our curriculum includes many important instructional components, we retained scripts throughout as we felt these were needed to ensure implementation fidelity.

Given the important instructional elements of the curriculum and the challenges school staff faced in prioritizing and finding time for preparation before each session, we changed our delivery model. Rather than relying on two school staff facilitators, we paired one school staff facilitator with one facilitator from our research team. We determined that the research team member was needed to supply greater expertise in the curriculum content. Further, the research team facilitator was able to better scaffold aspects of preparation and session implementation in a more successful manner. Research team facilitators scheduled the 1-h preparation sessions with their school staff cofacilitator at least 1 day before each weekly session. In these preparation meetings, the research team facilitator worked with the school staff facilitator to divide up the delivery of session content and to practice the activities that the school staff facilitator was responsible for delivering. We also made modifications to the initial 4-h training that school staff facilitators received such that more opportunities to practice delivering session content were included even in the initial orientation and training sessions. In addition, the two facilitators divided up responsibility for supporting the participant dyads such that each facilitator was assigned to half of the dyads. Accordingly, as dyads needed additional instruction or support with various session activities, the facilitators had a plan for how to allocate their assistance, which made the session activities more manageable for them.

We also learned that our curriculum was too tightly and rigidly scheduled. This created stress for facilitators who felt the need to adhere to allocated time limits and was experienced negatively by participants who were frustrated when activities were abruptly curtailed, or they had to transition to a new activity without having fully completed the previous one. Youth and adult participants also communicated a desire for more unstructured time to informally connect with each other during the sessions. Accordingly, we revised the time structure for each session. We built in time at the beginning of each session for brief informal check-ins among the dyads. We suggested they use the time to reflect on “highs and lows” (i.e., positive and negative experiences) from their week. We also adjusted time allocations for various activities and in some cases, removed nonessential activities from sessions to allow more time for primary activities. We also revised our facilitator training to include recommended strategies for how to balance engagement and curriculum fidelity. For example, facilitators were instructed to be more flexible with time if participants were highly engaged in an activity or when a little more time was needed for a game or activity to be fully completed. Thus, building in more flexibility and “down-time” into the curriculum was intended to improve facilitators' and participants' experiences in the program without detracting from facilitators' fidelity to the curriculum.

Revisions to the intervention to enhance positive participation and engagement

Although we designed our intervention to be maximally engaging, we learned that we needed to incorporate additional strategies to facilitate positive participation and engagement. As is common in afterschool programs, some youth participants struggled to maintain high levels of engagement across program sessions. In addition, some youth displayed disruptive behaviors at times. To promote positive participation and engagement, we devised a positive reinforcement system that consisted of Project DREAM tickets that students could earn for participation and good behavior. Facilitators were instructed how to administer tickets throughout session activities and discussions, and encouraged to also administer tickets to youth participants just for good behavior or acts of kindness they observed them completing throughout the program sessions. In sessions four and eight, youth participants had the opportunity to redeem their tickets for prizes. Other changes we made to the intervention included adding more training for facilitators and adult participants on behavior management, positive reinforcement, and redirection. Thus, all adults attending program sessions were better equipped to keep youth engaged and on task. One additional change we made was to bring the code of conduct (that

was created by participants in session one) to all future sessions and post it in the front of the classroom to be referenced as needed. This also served to remind participants of the behavioral expectations that they had established for themselves.

Revisions to further bolster intergenerational bonds

In addition to these revisions, we added some components to the intervention to further bolster the intergenerational bonds across the participant dyads. Unsurprisingly, we observed variability in the strength of the bonds between the youth and adult participant dyads. While the majority seemed to connect easily and enjoy their time together, we observed some dyads where the connection was less strong, or the relationship appeared more strained. We also learned from youth participants that they desired to learn more about the adults. Although they enjoyed that the program centered on them, the youth participants expressed a desire for more mutual sharing and opportunities to further “get to know” the adult who was attending the program with them.

Thus, we made several additions to the intervention. To start, we provided more training to adults in advance of program participation about boundaries and appropriate personal sharing with adolescents. We acknowledged that the nature of the relationships between dyads varied in the program, and this would also help dictate how to establish appropriate boundaries around the relationships. For example, expectations for interactions between an adolescent grandchild and grandparent would be different for those between a student and teacher. We helped adults think through what boundaries would be appropriate for them regarding personal sharing and interactions outside of program sessions. We also provided instruction and examples of personal content that would be appropriate to share with adolescents. We encouraged adult participants to create opportunities to connect with adolescents in between program sessions and discussed with them what modes of communication may be preferable (e.g., many adult family members were comfortable with phone calls and text messages, whereas school staff preferred to have exchanges outside of session over email or in person if in the same school building as youth). Though our initial curriculum only included ice breaker (i.e., “getting to know you”) activities in the first session, our revised curriculum included ice breaker activities across several sessions. We also created more opportunities for adult sharing in program activities (e.g., both adolescents and adults shared about the important adults who have helped them throughout their lives). These activities helped adolescents and adults to learn more about each other's interests, experiences, likes, and dislikes. They



also learned more about their similarities and differences. This was intended to facilitate deeper connection and forge a stronger bond across the dyads.

Revisions to support parents' acceptability of the intervention

A final revision that we made to the intervention was the addition of parent newsletters to summarize each session. This revision was based on data from parent focus groups. We learned that while the overwhelming majority of parents felt their children were benefiting from participation in Project DREAM, many parents reported that they did not know much about what the program entailed. Several parents described feeling “out of the loop” and wishing that there was a way for them to be more involved with the program. A few parents noted that while they were relieved to have another adult being more involved in their child's life, they also held a desire to benefit from the content being provided to their child and the other adults attending the program. Parents who reported having a more strained relationship with their adolescent indicated that they believed the content provided in Project DREAM may also be of use to them and help them strengthen their relationship with their child. In response, we created parent newsletters for every session and sent physical copies home with participants after each session. We also e-mailed the newsletters to parents and offered more opportunities for them to be in touch with program staff if they desired additional information. Although Project DREAM was not designed as a parenting intervention, we agreed with the sentiment that much of the program content could also be of benefit to parents of adolescents. We also wanted them to feel more connected to the program and knowledgeable about the activities their child was engaging in with their nominated adult.

DISCUSSION

This article describes the iterative development of Project DREAM, an afterschool preventive intervention that aims to promote improved academic outcomes via gains in social and emotional development and adolescents' connectedness with nonparental adults. Similar to formal mentoring interventions, this theoretically driven intervention aimed to foster a stronger bond between adolescents and adults. However, this intervention differs from most mentoring interventions in that the focus was on helping youth lacking in supportive adult relationships to build a stronger bond with an adult they selected from their pre-existing social network. Moreover, Project DREAM aims to bolster adolescents' interests and abilities to form positive relationships with adults more generally, with specific attention to the ways that a

network of positive and supportive adults can be helpful to them as they navigate adolescence. This intervention is particularly timely given the increased risk of school disconnect, academic disengagement, and poorer school outcomes during the middle school years (Eccles et al., 1993). Moreover, this intervention fits well with the timing within which relationships with nonparental adults become increasingly relevant and useful to youth (Allen & Land, 1999; Marcia, 1980; Zimmerman et al., 2005). This intervention also responds to growing calls for alternative approaches to traditional mentoring interventions that may hold promise for fostering stronger and longer-lasting bonds between youth and nonparental adults from their everyday lives (Albright et al., 2017; Cavell et al., 2021; Schwartz & Rhodes, 2016; Spencer et al., 2016; Weiler et al., 2020). Through several rounds of implementation, we confirmed that the Project DREAM intervention is viable. Although eligible youth did not have supportive relationships with nonparental adults in their everyday lives at the outset of the intervention, they were able to generate a list of positive adults who they wanted to invite to attend the program with them. These adults were acceptable to their parents, and we were able to recruit these adults to reliably and consistently attend the program with youth. The program was implemented in school buildings during the afterschool hours. School staff were able and willing to serve as program facilitators. Youths' parents were supportive of the intervention. Furthermore, through engagement in an iterative development process, we made the intervention maximally usable, acceptable, and engaging.

Lessons learned through iterative development

We were fortunate to have secured funding for the iterative development of this intervention, which allowed us to properly compensate all community partners for their meaningful contributions to ongoing program revisions. Without funding, it would have been difficult to collaborate and secure so many opportunities for the collection of substantive input and feedback on the intervention. In addition, compensating participants for attending program sessions facilitated a consistently high participation rate. All of this allowed us to properly implement and appropriately revise the intervention to yield the strongest possible version of it. This fits with other research demonstrating the added value of iterative intervention development (McCabe et al., 2022; Ybarra et al., 2016) and speaks to the importance of funding opportunities designed to support iterative development of interventions (Kwasnicka et al., 2021) and community–university collaborations (Buys & Bursnall, 2007). Without the ability to properly compensate our partners, we would not have been able to make as many requests of them. In particular, we were aware

that our school staff collaborators were overworked and exhausted, and that even with appropriate compensation, it often felt as though we were asking too much of them. Expecting overburdened school staff to add this to their overflowing list of obligations without proper compensation does not seem realistic (especially in the context of additional challenges such as those posed by the Covid-19 pandemic; Chang et al., 2022). The intervention is low cost with regard to the required supplies and materials (less than \$500 total), but it is important that schools or other youth-serving organizations do not neglect the staff costs associated with implementation, which are not trivial.

The funding we received was critical, not just because it allowed us to meaningfully engage community partners, but also because it afforded us adequate time for multiple rounds of implementation and feedback across different schools. Too often, researchers feel pressure to rapidly develop and immediately evaluate novel interventions. Funding models typically emphasize well-powered evaluations with random assignment but frequently do not afford sufficient time for iterative development (Melnik & Morrison-Beedy, 2012). Without the opportunity to give our intervention a trial run, we would have been learning about the limitations and needed revisions while simultaneously evaluating the success of the intervention on youth outcomes (Kwasnicka et al., 2021). The funding we received allowed us to strengthen the intervention before subjecting it to a rigorous evaluation.

A particular aspect of this intervention that we struggled with was finding the right balance between education and engagement. We required multiple attempts to uncover how we could best create educational activities that were not overly complex and would resonate with participants, but also engaging enough without distracting from the learning objectives. We found we were able to strike this balance particularly well when we modified games that were already familiar to youth and made them instructional. By capitalizing on participants' prior familiarity with popular games, we simplified our curriculum (through minimizing the need for excessive instruction) and enhanced participants' ability to fully engage in session activities. This age group was particularly keen on competition. Accordingly, adding a competitive element often facilitated engagement. Yet we still had to find the right balance such that the competitive element was not a distraction from learning.

We also needed several trials to establish the best utilization of the adult participants in session activities. While we consider the inclusion of youth-selected adults in the program to be one of its greatest strengths, the iterative development process was necessary for determining the best possible way to utilize and engage the adults in each session. We strove to prioritize adolescents' autonomy development while also facilitating a stronger

connection to adults. We also learned that youth desired more mutuality and reciprocity in personal sharing with adults (a finding that also has recently emerged in the literature; Deutsch et al., 2020; Rivens et al., 2022). This required more instruction to adults on how to effectively engage with youth, with instructional material about youth autonomy and appropriate boundaries included in their orientation session. This also included adjustments to the curriculum to prompt more personal sharing from adults.

Future directions

Now that Project DREAM has been successfully honed and refined, our next step is to conduct a rigorous evaluation of the intervention with an adequate sample size, a comparison group, and random assignment to condition. The expectation is that participation in Project DREAM will facilitate better academic outcomes (e.g., attendance, grades) via increases in adolescents' connectedness with adults and social and emotional development. Data will be collected pre- and postprogram participation, as well as at 6-months postintervention. This will allow for the assessment of mediation effects that may unfold over time and allow us to determine if any immediate gains persist over time. Although the effectiveness of Project DREAM still needs to be established, we are confident that this process of iterative development over a 2-year period has yielded the most promising version of our intervention.

A remaining issue that will require attention going forward will be scalability of the intervention. If our evaluation yields promising findings, we will strive to disseminate these findings widely and work to make the intervention materials accessible to schools. Yet we will need to work with schools to identify affordable and sustainable approaches to implementation. Although we made a number of revisions to the intervention to reduce the burden on school staff facilitators, proper implementation of the intervention still requires some weekly preparation time and coordination with youth and adult participants. Implementing the intervention in its truest form will likely require that schools hire at least one part-time staff person who could provide more intensive support to the implementation of the program. Alternatives that could be explored include offering the intervention within the context of university-community partnerships or partnering with afterschool organizations (e.g., Boys and Girls Clubs of America) so that universities or organizations could provide needed supports. All possibilities are worth exploring as adolescents continue to face growing levels of loneliness and disconnection that have worsened as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (Farrell et al., 2023; Twenge et al., 2021). If the Project DREAM intervention proves effective in fostering greater social connection, it will be



worth it to explore all possible avenues for widespread implementation.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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