

School Intervention

*Edited by Paul Flaspohler
and Melissa Maras*

Greetings from the School Intervention Interest Group!

In this issue, we present a brief article from Nadia Ward, Lakeesha Woods, Cindy Crusto, Michael Strambler, and Lance Linke from The Consultation Center at Yale University. The authors describe the Maximizing Adolescent Academic eXcellence (MAAX) program, a social development program designed to foster academic aspirations in urban youth. The authors highlight the value to the program both to the urban youth participants and benefits to doctoral and masters level trainees who participate in program delivery. 🌐

Creating a safe space to learn: The significant role of graduate students in fostering educational engagement and aspirations among urban youth

Written by

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Studies show that when students have the opportunity to develop important social skills such as self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, relationship skills, and responsible decision making, educational engagement and academic performance is increased (Zins, Payton, Weissberg, & O'Brien, 2007). Research in social-emotional learning further suggests that creating more caring and safe classroom environments enhances student development of social and emotional skills.

In these supportive environments, students feel more comfortable approaching and interacting with teachers, participating in classroom activities and discussions, and making meaningful connections to their peers where these skills are reinforced continuously (Payton et al. 2008; Ward, 2006). In addition, Murdock, Hale, and Weber (2001) found that students who characterize their classroom environment as caring and report that teachers and students are respectful of one another, demonstrate increased class participation and are more likely to complete homework.

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Despite the aforementioned value of social development programs in improving educational outcomes for youth, quality implementation of social development programs in schools is often hampered by pressure placed on teachers to improve student performance on standardized assessments (Ravitch, 2000). Graduate students, however, present an underutilized yet valuable resource in the implementation of school-based preventive interventions. With ongoing support and supervision, graduate students can be an effective means of creating meaningful relationships with youth and establishing safe and responsive classroom environments that facilitate learning.

In this paper, we present a program

description and initial evaluation findings of a school-based intervention delivered by graduate students within a supportive classroom environment that is designed to enhance social competencies, increase educational engagement and heighten the educational aspirations of urban middle school youth.

Program Description

The MAAX (Maximizing Adolescent Academic eXcellence) program is a culturally relevant, classroom-tested social development program designed to promote competence in academic, social, and emotional domains for urban youth while fostering educational aspirations. The curriculum consists of eight core modules that highlight college awareness and preparation within the context of a developmental assets model: 1) Managing the Middle School Transition; 2) Keys to Academic Success; 3) Exploring College; 4) Who am I?; 5) How Values Shape My Life; 6) Getting Along with Others; 7) Strengthening Community Connections; and 8) Managing the High School Transition. The MAAX program is delivered as an in-school and after school program for 7th and 8th grade students. Students participating in the program receive 45-50 minutes of workshop sessions weekly for 24 weeks.

One distinguishing feature of the MAAX program is its emphasis on building important skill sets in cognitive, social and emotional domains within the context of developing students' orientation toward postsecondary options and the future. The underlying theme of the program is the exploration of various college options. Students learn to develop, apply, and practice important social skills to novel situations in a way that anchors them toward the goal of successful high school completion and matriculation into the postsecondary option of their choice. Another unique characteristic of MAAX is its cultural relevance as the program curriculum explicitly addresses socio-cultural factors found to positively impact academic achievement especially among African-American and Latino students

(Bowman & Howard, 1985; Constantine & Blackmon, 2002; Gordon, Iwamoto, Ward, Potts & Boyd, 2009; Miller & MacIntosh, 1999; Phinney & Chavira, 1992). Through attending to issues of racial and cultural identity and how they relate to learning and academics, the sessions demystify the concept of higher

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education and challenge misconceptions low income and ethnic minority students may hold about their potential to achieve.

An innovation of this program is the use of masters and doctoral level graduate students to serve as facilitators to deliver the curriculum to urban middle school students. An underlying assumption of our approach is that graduate students serve as important role models to students as they convey key curriculum content on the development of social skills. Graduate students hired reflect the racial and ethnic composition of students served by the district. In our experience, graduate students serve as role models who, by virtue of their own educational pursuits, demonstrate by example that not only is college a viable option, but earning a graduate level degree also lies within the realm of possibility for urban students. Facilitators also inspire and motivate middle school students by sharing their decision-making process in determining

college and career choices, obstacles they overcame, and future career aspirations. Graduate students also discuss the myths and realities of college life—both academic and social—and the significance of their high school experience in preparing for their transition into college.

Training of Graduate Student Facilitators Through established university collaborations we recruit and train graduate students at the masters and doctoral levels in areas of clinical, community, school, and counseling psychology; social work; law and social justice; and divinity studies. Facilitators participate in two full-day training sessions followed by two-hour weekly supervision sessions that run from October to May. Periodic classroom observations are conducted using fidelity assessment scales developed for the MAAX; specific indicators of interest are facilitator adherence to the curriculum and facilitator competence in delivering curriculum content (Ward, Woods, Tebes, Crusto, & Greif-Green, 2010). Facilitators' classroom sessions are videotaped and then presented during supervision where facilitators discuss strengths and weaknesses of their sessions and strategies to address challenges to delivering the curriculum. These assessments are part of an ongoing quality improvement that enables facilitators to make adjustments in their implementation of the curriculum and to refine curriculum content.

Initial Findings

To evaluate MAAX, we used a pre-post design to examine program effectiveness with respect to academic engagement and aspirations among a 7th and 8th grade sample of urban ethnic minority students. Two preliminary studies examined the impact of the MAAX on student outcomes. The first study assessed student retention of curriculum content knowledge. Curriculum modules were divided into two domains: school modules and social skills modules. Students were pretested on curriculum assessment

items prior to the start of the program and completed a posttest at the end of the program. Pre-post analyses revealed significant mean differences on both school ($t[91] = 6.18, p < .001$) and social skills modules ($t[76] = 3.42, p = .001$) at posttest. The second study utilized a pretest-post test comparison group design. We hypothesized that greater exposure to MAAX will be associated with greater academic engagement and aspirations to attend college. Preliminary results indicated significant pre-post differences for students who had nine or more hours of the intervention. These students demonstrated increased reading for pleasure ($t[202] = 2.90, p = .01$) and homework completion ($t[202] = 2.41, p = .02$) at posttest. Findings also revealed a trend toward increased educational aspirations ($t[202] = 1.94, p = .06$). In summary, results indicated that the amount of participation in the MAAX program was significantly associated with increases in: a) number of hours students spent doing homework; b) students' aspirations to graduate from a two-year college; and c) the number of hours students spent reading for pleasure

Qualitative Findings. Focus groups data provide additional indication that the program had a positive impact on middle school students. Twelve focus groups were conducted with 220 students representing 6 middle schools. A semi-structured interview protocol was developed to obtain information about student perceptions of the MAAX program. Randomly selected MAAX classrooms participated in focus group interviews. Classes consisted of approximately 18 to 24 students. The research team worked in pairs to conduct the focus groups; one team member was the primary interviewer while a second team member assisted in the interview process by audio taping, taking notes, and asking follow-up questions. The focus group protocol queried students as to their experience in the program. A constant comparative method was used to analyze the qualitative data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Once the data were collected and transcribed,

members of the research team individually reviewed transcripts of all of the interviews and wrote notes, phrases, or key concepts that appeared. This process helped to identify underlying and emergent themes and categories.

Once this process was completed, the team met to develop consensus for individually coded categories. For the purposes of this paper, themes that emerged

from the data are reported in areas of: educational engagement and aspirations and effectiveness of program facilitators.

With respect to how the MAAX Program affected their engagement in the schooling process and their academic performance, students reported that the program helped them grow in areas of: 1) academic skills development; 2) changes in attitudes and behavior; 3) development of an orientation toward the future; and 4) learning about college.

In terms of the development of important academic skills and changes in students' attitude and behavior, students reported increased motivation, improved study habits, regular completion of homework, increased time spent reading and writing, increased ability to engage in class discussions and increased focus (i.e., paying attention). For example, a female student stated that the program helped give her the confidence to be more engaged in class. She shared, "This program has helped me do better in my classes...I raise my hand more to answer questions...I am not afraid to read out loud in class."

The program has also served to develop students' future orientation, to envision their lives beyond high school. In exploring college and careers, students reported they now understand the benefit of a college education and the direct relationship between years of education and annual income. A female student reported, "[The MAAX] helped me think about what I want to do in the

future. It put my focus on the future." Students further indicated that they realized the connection between their school performance in middle- and high school and the impact their academic

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performance has on their educational trajectory and career choices. A student expressed the following sentiment, "[The MAAX] made me realize how important my grades are for my future, what kind of college I apply to, and my job."

Students were most favorable in their evaluation of facilitators who led MAAX sessions. Students related to the facilitators with ease; they often referred to their facilitators as "cool," "easy to talk to," "kind" and "helpful." Student comments further indicated that the program created a safe space where students felt supported. "They made me feel like I could talk to them about anything." As a male student noted, "[Our facilitators] made sure that others didn't make fun of us." Program facilitators also provided a consistent message of support and encouragement to students in the realization of their academic, personal, and college/career goals. One student shared, "They wanted us to achieve our goals." Other students commented on how the program helped them feel more engaged in school. As one female student reported, "This program kept me from dropping out of school." Another female student shared, "Our facilitators are always here for us...they come before our session to help us with our work and stay after if we need them."

Conclusion

This study examined the impact of the MAAX program, a school-based social development program designed to increase students' educational engagement and aspirations for low-income and

urban ethnic minority students. Both quantitative and qualitative findings indicate that the MAAX program has shown early evidence of promoting social competencies and increasing educational

engagement and aspirations among urban youth. Initial evaluative findings suggest that the MAAX program appears to have a positive impact on developing students'

social competencies, educational engagement, and educational aspirations. Graduate students serve a critical function in their ability to establish rapport and create a safe space within the classroom. Middle school students can fully engage in interactive sessions with facilitators as they learn about college and important skills that teach them how to engage in creative problem solving, exercising responsible decision-making, establishing personal and academic goals and learning to communicate effectively with peers and adults. In their authentic sharing about their own educational trajectories, graduate students bring a lively and youthful perspective that captures the attention of middle school students. Graduate student facilitators debunk misconceptions adolescents have about college and orient them toward envisioning a future that includes college as a viable option.

Study limitations. It is important that future assessments of MAAX rely on other academic outcome measures such as student performance on state standardized assessments. Despite the limitations, these results are a positive indicator that MAAX indeed has the desired impact of expanding the knowledge of post-secondary educational options available to youth in urban schools. Further, most of these analyses are based on data gathered when The MAAX was in its infancy. Future studies will address the impact of the MAAX in increasing academic achievement outcomes for urban middle school students.

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Student Issues

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and Lindsey Zimmerman*

The Oxford House model: A pathway to empowerment for women

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The construct of empowerment has been utilized in many different contexts with various populations. Given the large conceptual and theoretical basis for empowerment, we were interested in identifying factors that contributed to empowerment for women who were in recovery from substance use. Women who abuse drugs and/or alcohol often have unique barriers to maintaining their recovery, such as the need for gender responsive services, a lack of childcare and housing, and limited educational and employment histories and opportunities. A subset of women who have engaged in substance use have also had involvement in the criminal justice system. These women often have similar needs to those of women who engage in substance abuse; however, they may face additional challenges due to the stigmatization and discrimination they experience for being ex-offenders in society.

Although various models of aftercare have been proposed to address the needs of women in recovery and women ex-offenders, we believed the Oxford House model, a self-run, democratic, sober living environment, provided a unique set of factors that empowered women through their recovery and reentry into the community. For example, the Oxford House model promotes the principles of personal responsibility and autonomy, as each house is independently supported by house members. Previous research demonstrated that variables such as abstinence, length of stay, social support, and increased self-efficacy

