Curriculum Implementation Plan: Wise Generals SEL Certification

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This curriculum implementation plan seeks to delineate a process to incorporate an after-school program open to all students at University Academy Charter High School (UACHS). UACHS is a lottery-based, small, public charter school situated in Jersey City, New Jersey. Established approximately 16 years ago, UACHS serves an urban population accepted through application and random drawing. For the 2017-18 academic year, the school population was 436 students. The enrollment of special populations was 17% with disabilities and 80% economically disadvantaged. With the need to address social emotional learning (SEL) because of state mandates and because of the high rate of students with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE), a process for additional focus on SEL should be established through engaging means. The after school program is self-paced and leads to in-house "certification." Once certified, students have the option to become peer leaders with added leadership and mentoring roles. The school's mascot is "The General," therefore the program will be named Wise Generals and the peer leadership participants are the General Leaders.

Overview

The Wise Generals program takes place after school on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday afternoons immediately after dismissal during the school year with a trained faculty advisor facilitating the program. Five - seven students take part in the Wise virtual reality (VR), self-paced, SEL curriculum. Once the student, whose progress is monitored by the faculty advisor(s), successfully completes the program, that child will receive Wise Generals certification and will attend a concluding ceremony with installment into the peer leadership program if desired.

Wise implements an "Inside-Out methodology" (Curiious, n.d.) with virtual and safe experiences that build internal practical skills that can then be extended towards others. While the informal learning takes place through the VR interactions, students also self-reflect verbally and in writing to apply and extend their skills. Of course, peer leadership is the unmitigated application of these soft leadership skills.

Students are selected for the program through teacher or counselor referral or self-selection and are expected to attend the program through completion. ACE and at-risk students are encouraged to participate as they may receive the most benefit from the program. A counselor or administrator will be available during and immediately following the VR sessions in order to ensure counseling is available if emotional issues arise.

Rationale of its Importance

Several skills are required for success in both work and life; these skills might be categorized as either hard skills or soft skills. While hard skills indicate occupation-specific abilities, soft skills relate to interpersonal aspects of occupations (Doyle, 2018). Globally as well as in the US, more employers seek candidates with "soft skills" (Kyllonen, 2013). Additionally, the soft skills are essential for children to succeed in school as well as in life because of the link to behaviors with "long-term implications" (Zins et al., 2007). As awareness of the desirability of soft skills increase, it is apparent that (SEL) is an essential aspect of 21st century skills. The nature of schools, with students present for most of the day and with the educational responsibility of preparing students for life and work, SEL should be addressed in all schools. Fun and games are not only highly motivating to children, but essential to development (Hromek & Roffey, 2009). VR is appealing and engages students experientially in an SEL process, which is highly beneficial. According to Zins et al., "the best SEL approaches encourage application of

SEL competencies to real-life situations, and combining SEL and service learning is an excellent way to utilize innovative instructional methodologies to engage students in the learning process" (2007). A program which incorporates engaging interactive learning, while fortifying students for continued leadership and service, combines successful attributes that will enhance teaching and learning as it strengthens the school community. Students learn SEL skills while interacting with a safe VR environment then discuss in writing and orally self-understanding, human growth and development, empathy, resilience, and self-regulation.

Students who participate in programs that couple SEL and service learning tend to experience fewer school suspensions, pregnancies and failed classes than those in control groups (Zins et al., 2007). By recognizing feelings, learning positive coping mechanisms, and reinforcing self-awareness and self-regulation, students are able to reinforce positive behaviors and regulate how they interact with others (Curiious, n.d.). The ability to recognize, control, and change is important for leadership and achievement. These soft skills are markers of professional success (Hromek & Roffey, 2009).

Systems-based Proposal for Implementation

The implementation takes place over the course of one year from training, to pilot, to full roll-out. Beginning during the second cycle of year one (Y1), the training and piloting will span three grading cycles and ends in evaluation for continued adoption into year two (Y2). Throughout the initial implementation process, interested stakeholders will be interviewed and the program assessed and modified as needed.

During Y1, once the VR headsets and the Wise program have been acquired, the school social workers and counselors will undergo training that includes completion of the curriculum. Any concerns will be raised, addressed, and documented for reference and future use. For

example, if a specific module needs additional support, the facilitator will be prepared to give the students support. Once the emotional support staff have completed the training, the administrators and faculty – particularly those who wish to facilitate – will complete the training. Once the faculty and administration have completed the curriculum, they will meet to discuss the roll-out into Y2.

The third cycle of Y1, teachers and support staff will consider students' behavior and coping skills to determine eligible candidates for the Wise Generals program. An initial set of five student volunteers will pilot the program and attend meetings with other stakeholders to give feedback. Finally, students will have input in promotional materials for the program.

Towards the end of the first cycle of Y2, the initial fifteen candidates will be selected through referral and application. Once students have completed the program and awarded their certification, they will join the previous program graduates (the Y1 pilot-leaders) in a ceremony where they receive their certifications and entry into the peer leadership program: General Leaders.

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Evaluation

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Throughout the training and piloting of the Wise Generals program, stakeholders will participate in feedback meetings. Concerns will be systematically recorded, coded, and analyzed. Modifications will be documented and implemented as needed. The initial student pilot will be a focus group led by one consistent facilitator. Questions will not only include the program's engagement and procedures, but the efficacy of the program and the skills learned (or still unlearned). During Y2, student attendance, engagement, participation, academic achievement, and positive behaviors will be noted. Students who disengage from the program will be asked for feedback on the program.

Vignettes of Successful Implementation

Chris, a ninth grader, is quick to anger. The transition to high school has been a challenge and though Chris was looking forward to making new friends and having fun, classes seem interminable and friends are "fake". During a freshmen teacher team meeting, two teachers discuss Chris's lack of control. A third teacher relays how that student spoke about feeling anxious in the shower before school and not wanting to come into school. Chris has gone to see a counselor once or twice, but prefers to go only after a blow-up. The teachers decide to recommend the student for the Wise Generals program. One of the teachers speaks to Chris about it and asks if one of the General Leaders can approach Chris. "Sure," mumbles Chris. "Whatever."

One week later, Chris is in the program. One of six other students sporting VR goggles, laughing with amazement at their immersion into this fantastic world, learning how to notice racing thoughts and watch them as they pass by like trains speeding by on a track.

Two weeks into the program, the teacher notices Pat speaking in stage whispers about Chris's sneakers. She braces for an eruption. Chris merely stretches out those legs and admires the sneakers Pat has been disparaging. The teacher is amazed. And Chris remains calm. Next year, Chris – now a General Leader – is invited into the classroom to talk to the next group of freshmen about anger management.

Reflection

We learn through playing. And while formal education is the greater part of time spent on learning during childhood, informal education through fun and games is essential. Salen et al. show that meaningful play can happen through interactive games or through solitary play (2004). An interactive VR game that guides a student through adventures and learning is engaging. And

though the content is SEL, the interactivity with a virtual guide along with written reflections and conversations with adult guides in real life is itself an application of the SEL skills learned.

An effective paradigm for the creation and implementation of a program such as Wise Generals is ADDIE (Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, Evaluation). I have attempted to incorporate the ADDIE model of instructional design through this paper. Such a model is imperative to enabling a detailed implementation and ensuring the curriculum is evaluated for efficacy. Of course, part of the evaluation is to have a solid data base.

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