

The Wezmore Project: Feasibility and Next Steps

Anxiety among young people is at an all-time high. Families, communities, schools and medical institutions alike are striving to cope with this reality, yet many needs remain unmet. Creative and innovative approaches that tackle stubborn problems in new ways are needed. Importantly, interventions that *break the mold* by being delivered in non-traditional ways is critical; in spite of best efforts, stigma surrounding access to mental and emotional health care services remains a significant barrier to many individuals who would benefit from the experience.

CORE & Wezmore Partnership

The Center on Research and Evaluation (CORE) at the Simmons School of Education and Human Development at Southern Methodist University is helping to investigate the potential of one such innovation: The Wezmore Project. CORE serves as a research and evaluation partner to a number of in and out of school providers who are all seeking to support and improve the life chances and overall well-being of youth. CORE's interdisciplinary staff includes educators, psychologists, counselors and social workers who utilize social science to ask and answer important questions about *what really works* for kids?

The purpose of the Wezmore Project, developed by performer Eddie Coker, is to contribute to building the psychologically resilient child skilled in deploying critical strategies that support sustained, optimal function and performance, to include the management of challenge or adversity in any circumstance. As we know that the skills inherent in psychological fitness are, indeed, teachable, then deliberate attempts to deliver critical content via innovative mechanisms with broad accessibility - make sense. The Wezmore Project is an attempt to provide comprehensive exposure to content that buoys psychological health in a fun, non-threatening manner.

Currently, The Wezmore Project is anchored by stage shows, performed by Mr. Coker to a wide range of young audiences. Plans are in place to expand elements of the stage show into a multi-media platform, where young people can access online content, music, and other media all related to Wezmore's messaging about positive psychological and emotional health.

CORE and The Wezmore Project have partnered to explore the feasibility and potential impact of this kind of expansion. To date, CORE has undertaken a review of existing Wezmore materials, interviewed persons knowledgeable of the Project, and has conducted an extensive literature review.

What's changing and why?

One of CORE's initial tasks has been to explore plausible mechanisms of change, asking; what might The Wezmore Project change for kids, and how? Two primary theoretical avenues have emerged.

First, Wezmore may tap a number of underlying psychological processes, shoring up youth resilience and coping strategies by providing anchoring stories, songs and characters that a child can relate to, recognize themselves in, and remember when they need to draw upon a skill. These processes seem to fit conceptually within a broader cognitive behavioral conceptualization. Under this model of understanding human psychology, a stimulus or activating event triggers an appraisal or a thought, about the event. The thought itself is accompanied by an emotional response. Aspects of Wezmore's stage show (and planned aspects of its digital activities) directly address the thought-emotion relationship by providing young people with humorous and memorable explanations and strategies.

Second, The Wezmore Project aligns with the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) that posits social and emotional health as inextricably intertwined with academic achievement. SEL addresses skills like self-awareness and self-management and most programming currently tends to be delivered in quite traditional formats (curricula delivered to students in school or quasi-school settings like afterschool). Results are promising and a trend toward integrating SEL into "school as usual" is on the horizon. However, traditional school models and business-as-usual curricula do not serve all students, as evidenced by persistent achievement gaps. In this way, Wezmore could potentially offer an important alternate delivery of SEL content through non-traditional, independently accessed, and non-stigmatizing avenues.



Take-Aways

Through the initial literature review and information gathering process, CORE has landed on some key take-away points.

First, the current stage-show version of Wezmore and the digital delivery of the wezzers is a hybrid approach that contains elements of cognitive behavioral psychology, positive psychology, social and emotional learning and developmental assets for youth, each of which have been shown to contribute to a range of positive outcomes for youth over time.

Wezmore fits into a larger landscape of youth development work as a universal and risk reduction approach, not as a targeted treatment intervention for youth at high risk for emotional or mental health needs. This means that Wezmore has a critical role in providing supports to a wide range of students but should not be confused for, or used in place of, targeted mental health services for symptomatic youth.

From a theoretical perspective, Wezmore most likely works by activating underlying psychological fitness and resilience processes. This may include emotional regulation, cognitive reorientation, interpersonal skill, coping strategies, generalization of skills and building resilience, and in this way complements both 1) strong social and emotional learning initiatives and 2) mental health modalities.

If digital delivery is developed, then effective implementation will be exploratory and Wezmore is strongly encouraged to monitor the roll out as there is a lack of solid evidence about “what works” in digital delivery of this type of programming.

Project Feasibility

The mechanisms of change that The Wezmore Project may be activating are currently unknown, and fully theoretical; yet the potential for impacts from this type of approach, paired with the extensive need for creative interventions merits more exploration. CORE’s preliminary assessment is that the building blocks of a potentially highly impactful program are in place. It is CORE’s professional opinion that if Wezmore’s emerging digital activities are

implemented with sufficient dosage (ensuring that young people get more than nominal exposure) and in a way that targets explicit instruction of cognitive and emotional skills, Wezmore could quite plausibly impact positive youth outcomes.

Wezmore should specifically attend to:

- explicit skills instruction
- sufficient dosage

The Wezmore Project seems to have a feasibility both for design, implementation and eventual outcome evaluation that merits further support and exploration of impacts. As The Wezmore Project continues to provide stage shows, and continues to explore and develop additional mixed-media content, CORE and Wezmore continue to collaborate reciprocally on emerging information. In a consultative capacity, CORE reviews incoming information from Wezmore, compares it to know best practices, and makes iterative recommendations for programming. In the future, as The Wezmore Project more fully develops a set of activities that can be fully implemented and/or provided online at a fuller scale, CORE is committed to continuing to serve as an evaluation partner, eventually documenting a range of youth development outcomes as a potential result of exposure to Wezmore.

