

A Validation of Lucid Dreaming in School Age Children

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I'd like to begin by sharing a dream that I had fairly frequently when I was a child, between the ages of 6 and 12.

I was lucid. I would fly sometimes during the night and see the ocean glistening below me, and sometimes during the day where I would see my reflection. But the place that I went was always the same, a place called Bali. I often wondered what that could mean.

I don't remember consciously recognizing where Bali was as a place in the world, but that is where I would go, and that's where I would land.

Two and a half years ago, I began my dissertation, wondering what on earth I was going to study, and really wanting to do something that reflected who I was. Dreams, lucid and non, have always been close to me. I came to this study as a clinician working some ten years with children, young children, preschool to school age. I had originally intended on studying lucid dreaming as a treatment approach, particularly with children with nightmares, and children who had been molested. However, when it came time to gather a committee it became quickly apparent that there were no studies validating that lucid dreams even exist in children. So I made a leap from applied clinical work to this foreign, but very exciting and challenging area of psychophysiological study. I had hardly even stepped into a sleep laboratory before I did this study. . . .

I want to emphasize that the purpose of my study was to validate lucid dreams in school age children, not to study how to teach the skill or how to increase the skill in children who already have the skill, or even how to use it. . . . I chose to work with ten-, eleven-, and twelve-year-olds, based on Foulkes' work. [Children of this age] are more able to define dreams as internally originating [and] show an increase in . . . seeing, talking, feeling, moving and manipulating things in their dreams. Furthermore, the rate of dream accessibility with respect to dream recall reaches a near-adult rate.

Method

There were three major parts to my study. The first way that I approached this problem was conducting a survey. [Second, I conducted a lucid dream training program, and collected dream diaries. Third, I conducted four sleep studies in a lab. The

survey] was comprised of two multiple choice questions along with the opportunity to share content about lucid dreams. I asked the children how often they recalled their regular, nonlucid dreams and their lucid dreams. The rate of recall could have been never, once a year, once a month, once a week, once a night, or not sure. I personally introduced the questionnaire to the children and defined lucid dreams to them as dreams where we know that we're dreaming while we're dreaming, and I would give them an example. I conducted the survey with 40 boys and 60 girls; there were 30 ten-year-olds, 45 eleven-year-olds, and 25 twelve-year-olds. . . .

[The lucid dream training program included] 12 girls and one brave boy. Of these, there were six ten-year-olds, five eleven-year-olds, and two twelve-year-olds. I ruled out children who had any kind of diagnosed emotional problem, any kind of cognitive deficit or learning disability and children who were on any kind of medications. I conducted the sessions weekly for six weeks; each session lasted an hour. I did everything and anything that I thought might help increase the skill of lucid dreaming in order to validate it. There was an opening and sharing time each week. We talked about pleasant dreams or things that I hoped would elicit their trust in both me and each other, [to] increase group cohesion and enhance the effectiveness of the group. There was also an educational component to the group. We talked about how different cultures utilize lucid dreams and the history of awareness of lucid dreams. There was also a dream review or re-creating exercise, where I utilized expressive arts to help the children become more comfortable with their dream content; helped increase their dream recall, and helped them feel comfortable with having lucid dreams.

[In] this kind of exercise we would talk about a dream that they may have had and how they would change it, similar to Patricia Garfield's redreaming exercise. We . . . [also] used all sorts of expressive arts. We used dramatic arts, clay, paintings, watercolors among others. I also had a relaxation portion of the training program where I took the children through a relaxation experience. I began with helping them feel comfortable with remembering their dream, being in their dreams, and finally toward the last three weeks of the training program developing lucid dreaming. At the end of each session we talked about tasks that I had asked them to do. . . . Each child was given seven dream logs to complete [and] return to me at the end of each week. The dream log material included: content questions about the main character, how active they were in the dream, what their affect was during the dream, [and] whether or not they were lucid in their dream. If they were lucid, they were asked to include that specific content.

During the first two weeks I gave them a little bracelet to wear around to remind themselves that they were to do reality testing [five to ten times a day]. Reality testing [involves] saying, "Am I dreaming?" and then imagining what it would be like if

you were dreaming. I instructed them on how to use the MILD [Mnemonic Induction of Lucid Dreaming] technique as well as redreaming. We also worked on some other ways [they could induce] lucidity like talking to themselves before they went to sleep. The third [type of validation was through] four non-consecutive sleep studies with three girls and one boy. There were two ten-year-olds and two eleven-year-olds. The first sleep study was conducted prior to the training program. The second one was two weeks into the group then four weeks into the group, and lastly after the group was completed. During every sleep study I instructed the children how to make the prescribed left-right-left-right eye movements at thirty second intervals. We would then awaken them one minute after they stopped signaling, or in the morning. During the second sleep study we also woke the children after each REM stage. During the third sleep study I made lucidity goggles . . . available to the children. Two of the children chose to wear them during some portion of the night, [but] we didn't get a full night with the lucidity goggles. I considered it a positive validation of lucid dreams when we observed the eye movements during REM as a confirm in a verbal self-report by the child. In addition to these portions of the study, we addressed the content of lucid dreams versus nonlucid dreams with the dream log material. I also administered, pre- and post, the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Rating Scale [to] the children to look at whether the lucid dream training program might have a beneficial effect on their self-concept.

Results

[About] 63% of the sample . . . reported recalling lucid dreams at least once during their lives. Of these 54% reported them . . . once a month or more. Ten-year-olds reported the highest regular recall of lucid dreams, with 63% reporting monthly. It is also interesting to note that 8% of the girls versus 17% of the boys reported never recalling lucid dreams, and 68% of the girls versus 56% of the boys reported that they had regular or monthly lucid dreams.

Recall of lucid dreams appears to go down, at least in this sample, as children age. 63% of the ten-year-olds reported monthly lucid dreams, 58% of the eleven-year-olds, and 36% of the twelve-year-olds. However, we need to remember that a lot of these children weren't also reporting content. We have content material with the lucid dreams from the dream logs, but with the questionnaire we don't have content on all of those dreams.

With the lucid dream training program, I wanted to mention that four of the children began the training reporting fairly frequent—once a month or greater—recall of lucid dreams. Two reported never having them, two reported once a year, two reported once a month, one reported once a week, one reported once [a] night, and five reported that

they weren't sure. Twelve of the 13 children reported at least one lucid dream in the dream logs.

During the first sleep study we had four eye movement signal observations and two reports. Two were confirmed. That was an exciting night. During the second study we had one observed and one reported [lucid dream], one being confirmed. During the third sleep study we had two observed and two reported, two being con-firmed. During the fourth sleep study we had two observed and two reported, one being confirmed. In terms of the number of lucid dreams per subject in the laboratory, Subject Nos. 1 [and 2] had no lucid dreams, . . . Subject No. 3 had five lucid dreams, and Subject No. 4 had one. I might add that this third subject came in [every] night, sure about what she wanted to dream, dreamed it and it was lucid. . . . Two other children who didn't have dreams in the lab did report lucid dreams in dream logs.

Specific Lucid Dreams

I want to read . . . examples of the lucid dreams . . . the children had. The first one is,

I saw a giant Mickey Mouse that was pink and orange and yellow. At first I was scared, and then I realized that it couldn't be true and I must be dreaming. I thought it was funny then and I got to be as big as it was.

Here is an example from the little girl who had five lucid dreams in the lab:

I told myself to dream that I was in a ballet, and that I had point shoes, and that's what I did. I had a lucid dream because I knew that I really couldn't dance on point shoes.

Another one dreamed,

It was snowing. I realized that couldn't be. Then I knew I was dreaming and I made it so that I was on a beach with palm trees next to an ocean.

As I recall, she wanted to go to both places for her holiday. [Here is another:]

My friends and I were in a house and some cowboys or something were trying to get some earrings, which S. and I were wearing, off of us. The way I found out that it was a dream was that I don't have my ears pierced, and that it was an old house yet the soccer field at my house was there. My school was there. Then we went to the Del Mar Fair and I made it so that we got on all the rides for free, and got earrings free too.

This is a girl who dreamt that she was under the water, realized that she was breathing, and realized that she was lucid.

In conclusion, I think [this study confirms] that lucid dreams do exist among children. However, there are so many more areas to be explored, such as the development of the concept and understanding of dreams among children, especially among young children; looking at cross-cultural differences in awareness and understanding of dreams; and the relationship between creativity and children's lucid dreaming. I will end with my dream. Yesterday Jill Gregory came by and we . . . began to play with this dream. We turned the letters around and Bali is "I Lab."

Question: What is the earliest age you have heard . . . for a child's lucid dreaming?

Armstrong-Hickey: Well, Stephen has had lucid dreams early in his life. I would say . . . with children in my clinical practice, the youngest age is six.

Question: I had lucid dreams around five, and I have a daughter that is nine years old. She had her first reported lucid dream at eight, and then another one at nine. Were the children in your study excited about it?

Armstrong-Hickey: Oh, they were thrilled. It was wonderful. It was a real exhilarating experience for me. I come from working clinically with children, so I see a slanted view of children, and this was a great experience.