
Character Education: Lessons for Teaching Social and Emotional Competence

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The purpose of this study was to investigate whether a social skills program, *Connecting with Other: Lessons for Teaching Social and Emotional Competence*, would enable students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms to develop skills to facilitate socialization with peers with and without disabilities. Students' growth was measured only in terms of teacher perceptions, because of the absence of preprogram assessments of the targeted students' social skills. The results of the study indicate reasonable assurance that the students did grow in the skill areas and were able to interact positively with their peers.

KEY WORDS: *character development; proactive behavior management; social skills*

School social workers' role includes providing support to teachers and parents in various areas. Increasingly, school social workers are presenting workshops to teachers on the prevention of social problems students display in schools (Allen-Meares, Washington, & Welsh, 1996). Teaching social and emotional skills is character education. Character education rests on the principle that teaching for character is important for a society that values democracy. A democratic society is not only based on social equality—its citizens are also expected to behave responsibly, respect other people's diversities, accept what is fair and just, and show concern for the common good by helping others. Character education includes the affective and the cognitive qualities of a person. Because emotions play an essential role in making final decisions between good and bad choices, children need to be guided as they mature in their social and emotional development. Healthy social maturation of children depends upon their learning and internalizing standards of acceptable conduct as well as transferring and applying these standards in directing their behavior in various situations (Berk, 2007).

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 strongly emphasizes scientifically based practices (Wilde, 2007). The U.S. Department of Education requires that all instruction, cognitive as well as physical and affective, be guided by theory and strictly evaluated so that it actually

does what it is intended to do (Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy, 2002). The measurement of effectiveness is critical to the validity of a character education program. Such programs should be validated and replicated by researchers in the field (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2008). Various character education programs have been studied for their usefulness, and research has supported significant correlations between character education instruction and a decline in discipline problems as well as improvements in academic performance (Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) has fostered research to show a connection between Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs and academic success (CASEL, 2003, 2008). CASEL's mission is to identify and document how SEL programming coordinates with and adds value to other approaches that address children's successful development. The *Connecting with Others: Lessons for Teaching Social and Emotional Competence* series is included in CASEL's *Safe and Sound* list of SEL programs (CASEL, 2003, 2008).

INCLUSION AND FRIENDSHIPS

Students with mild to severe cognitive, physical, and behavioral disabilities have been included in general education classes for many years, but research indicates that their friendships with nondisabled peers still need improvement (Saenz,

The lessons in the Connecting with Others program are based on three theoretical frameworks: transactional analysis, positive assertion training, and cognitive behavior modification.

2003). One of the reasons is that both groups of students frequently lack social skills and need more opportunities for quality social inclusion. Many children with and without disabilities have never learned appropriate behaviors for social settings situations in which they are required to interact and cope with others. Taylor and colleagues (2002) suggested that teachers should manipulate the environment and directly teach social skills for promoting friendships between children with disabilities and their nondisabled peers. How should classroom teachers respond to the inclusion concept? They should be open and honest about disabilities, make disability a comfortable concept, and create social opportunities for friendships to develop between all students. Collaboration between special and general educators is crucial in achieving these goals (Calloway, 1999). *Connecting with Others: Lessons for Teaching Social and Emotional Competence* is based on a friendship model developed by Evans and Richardson (1989) to encourage teachers to increase positive interactions in an inclusive classroom.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Connecting with Others: Lessons for Teaching Social and Emotional Competence Volume I (grades K–2) (Richardson, 1996a) and Volume II (grades 3–5) (Richardson, 1996b) were originally developed with a Louisiana state grant to support teachers in their instruction of prosocial skills and to facilitate inclusion of students with disabilities in regular classroom settings. The curriculum includes 30 lessons divided into six skill areas: Concept of Self and Others, Socialization, Problem Solving/Conflict Resolution, Communication, Sharing, and Caring/Empathy. Each lesson follows a specific lesson cycle, and goals, objectives, and materials are included

for every activity. The program was developed with practical utility as a primary goal. The teacher directly teaches the skill and involves the students through guided questions while providing prompts and feedback. The teaching is followed by a brief assessment to check for understanding. The students engage in teacher-guided and independent activities following the instruction. The guided activity involves the students working in heterogeneous cooperative groups. The independent practice activity allows the teacher to observe the students' learning styles and individual abilities. A summary section synthesizes the information and concludes with optional enrichment activities.

The instructional steps for each lesson are based on the findings of educational research on direct instruction and cooperative learning. Prater and colleagues (1998) compared three procedures for teaching social skills to students with behavior and learning problems. The group who received teacher-directed instruction improved significantly in listening, problem-solving, and negotiating skills during role-play situations. Rutherford and colleagues (1998) implemented a cooperative group structure and direct instruction in promoting social communication among female adolescents. The results indicated systematic increases in appropriate communication skills.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The lessons in the *Connecting with Others* program are based on three theoretical frameworks: transactional analysis (TA) (Freed, 1991), positive assertion training (PAT) (Alberti & Emmons, 2001), and cognitive behavior modification (CBM) (Meichenbaum, 1977). A "Getting Started" section describes each theoretical concept in a concrete, practical, and comprehensible manner to give students a context for subsequent skills lessons. The program features a cartoon character, K. T. Cockatiel, who appears periodically to explain concepts and provide examples.

The ego states of TA are referred to as five attitudes: the Impulsive Me and the Enthusiastic Me (the Child), the Bossy Me and the Caring Me (the Parent), and the Thinking Me (the

Adult). The students are taught self-awareness and awareness of others by examining attitudes and behaviors in various situations and by making an effort to be sensitive to the feelings of others in interactions.

PAT focuses on cognitive, affective, and behavioral procedures to increase self-advocacy and interpersonal communication. Empathetic assertion as well as direct assertion are taught and exemplified in numerous situations (for example: direct assertion: "No I don't need your help, I can do it myself"; indirect assertion: "Thank you for wanting to help, but I can do it myself"). In addition, time, place, and situation are examined in relation to assertive behaviors (For example: it is not wise to be assertive in certain dangerous situations or when reprimanded by an angry adult in authority; refraining from an assertive response until calm and reason are restored does not indicate passivity).

Teachers can apply principles of cognitive restructuring through CBM procedures. Students are guided to analyze the logic of their thinking and are taught to change inappropriate behaviors by examining their emotions and the consequences of their behaviors. Their next step is to plan and evaluate alternative behaviors. Students are introduced to the "thinking steps" "Stop," "Think," "Plan," and "Check" to monitor their behaviors. Students use relaxation techniques, guided imagery, and self-chosen strategies to put their inappropriate behaviors on hold. During the second step, the teacher guides students in thinking of all the consequences of their behavior. They learn to plan and to implement their plans. The last step, Check, involves self-evaluation and self-reinforcement.

TEACHING AND LEARNING STRATEGIES

Several strategies are consistently used throughout the program to teach the intended skills. Specifically, these strategies include storytelling, bibliotherapy, relaxation, modeling, coaching, behavior rehearsal, role playing, verbal mediation, creative expression (for example, art, music, poetry, and puppetry), creative visualization, cooperative learning, and transfer learning. Because generalization and transfer of skills are learned best when parents are involved,

the program includes newsletters to inform parents or other caretakers of what is currently being taught and to elicit their cooperation in reinforcing the skills at home. The newsletters include specific homework for the parents and the child. Bibliotherapy and storytelling are powerful strategies to teach children social skills. The program includes lists of correlations of children's literature to every skill area. In addition, teachers can add to the lists according to books available in their school libraries. Children tend to tune out adults who are constantly telling them to behave. Role playing and behavior rehearsals are two strategies that can change behavior and attitudes without sermonizing. Teachers must model the skills they wish their students to acquire and use a variety of modeling strategies, such as puppetry, to engage the students in developing ethical characters.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether a social skills program, *Connecting with Other: Lessons for Teaching Social and Emotional Competence*, would enable students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms to develop skills that would facilitate socialization with peers with and without disabilities. The research question addressed the students' acquisition of social skills as a result of the training. Did the targeted students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms show growth in various skills categories as a result of social skills instruction? The identified skills categories were the following: Concept of Self and Others, Socialization, Problem Solving/Conflict Resolution, Communication, Sharing, and Empathy/Caring. It was predicted that growth in these skills would promote acceptance of students with disabilities by their nondisabled peers.

METHOD

Participants

The 25 participating students were selected from five schools districts. Seventeen students were identified as having learning disabilities, and eight students were classified as having behavior disorders. The students with learning disabilities in grades 3 and 4 received most of their instruc-

tion in a general education classroom; however, they also received a period of reading instruction in the resource room. The students with behavior disorders received all of their instruction in a general education classroom. Of the 25 students, 80 percent were African American, 17 percent were white, and 3 percent were Asian. The students ranged in age from 9 to 13 years old. The teachers reported that both groups of students demonstrated antisocial behaviors, including inability to make friends, noncompliance, impulsivity, inability to grasp future consequences of behavior, inability to delay gratification, and inability to self-regulate emotions. The program was implemented using activities from Volume I (grades K–2) and Volume II (grades 3–5) of *Connecting with Others: Lessons for Teaching Social and Emotional Competence*.

Twenty-one educators implemented the program. Eighteen were general education teachers, two were speech therapists, and one was a counselor. The counselor and the speech therapists worked with the general educators in a team-teaching environment to implement the program. Two of the teachers were not assigned inclusive classrooms and implemented the program in other classrooms containing students with disabilities. The 19 female and two male teachers were employed in public schools in five parishes in Louisiana. The average teaching experience of the 18 general educators was seven years, with 16 being the highest number and four being the lowest number of teaching years. All had earned university credit hours in an introductory course to special education in their teacher training program and had received continuing education credits through their district training program.

Research

The Social Skills and Attitude Scale (SSAS) was developed to assess the social skills included in the program. This instrument uses a five-point Likert scale to measure the level to which a student reflects or demonstrates the skill or trait identified in a statement. There are 50 items on the instrument, and the number of items per skill category varies from four in the Sharing category to 13 in the Problem Solving/Conflict

Resolution category. The perceived growth of each student in the six areas was assessed by a participating teacher, a teacher who interacted with the student (control), and the special education teacher. The reliabilities of the six scales ranged from .84 for Sharing to .56 for Problem Solving/Conflict Resolution. The overall reliability estimate was .75. The analyses were made in terms of scale scores and reported as mean differences between teacher category and pretest and posttest. The three assessing teachers were selected on the basis of their familiarity with the students and their parents. The data analysis compared changes from pretest to posttest by the students as perceived by the three teachers, to determine whether the *Connecting with Others: Lessons for Teaching Social and Emotional Competence* program had an impact on the social skills of the targeted students and whether the students were able to generalize the learned social skills across teachers.

Procedure

Prior to implementing the program, the 21 educators attended 35 hours (seven sessions) of training in social skills instruction and implementation. The workshop was offered by the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and led by a professor of special education. The focus of the training was on developing activities based on the framework of the *Connecting with Others* program. The teachers worked in collaborative groups and identified areas for a social-emotional curriculum. They originally designated eight areas; however, following much discussion, they agreed on the following six skill areas: Concept of Self and Others, Socialization, Conflict Resolution/Problem Solving, Communication, Sharing, and Love/Caring. They created activities for each skill area under the guidance of the professor.

Upon returning to their schools, the teachers targeted students in their classrooms identified as having a disability who were receiving instruction in inclusive general education classrooms and in special education resource rooms. The targeted 25 students had displayed antisocial behaviors documented by referrals to the school office. The SSAS was administered for each student in

the study by graduate students at the university. The teachers were instructed to teach selected social skills lessons class-wide three times per week for 40 minutes for 16 weeks. In addition, they addressed social behaviors throughout each day according to the demands of the situation. Five students with disabilities were targeted in schools A, D, and E. Six students were selected in school B, and four students were selected in school C. The schools were all Title I schools, which meant that 40 percent of the students received reduced-fee or free lunches. With one exception, the school districts were rural. To assess the effects of the lessons, a checklist was used to document the behaviors of the targeted students.

Data Analysis

The hypothesis was that participation in the social skills program would improve the targeted social skills of the 25 students with learning and behavior problems who were instructed in a general education classroom. The obtained raw scores were subjected to a 3 (Teacher) \times 2 (Time) factorial analysis with repeats on the Time factor. Any significant interactions were probed using simple main effects (SME) analysis. Any SME profiles that were declared to have significance were explored using least significant difference testing.

The means and standard deviations of the students ($N = 25$) for the six scales at pre- and posttest are presented in Table 1. The differences and similarities of the means were examined using analyses of variance (ANOVAs).

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations for Each Scale Pretest and Posttest

Scale	Pretest		Posttest	
	M	SD	M	SD
Concept of Self and Others	19.67	2.36	31.09	2.68
Socialization	18.71	1.53	28.27	2.13
Problem Solving/Conflict Resolution	33.23	2.86	46.16	4.72
Communication	23.93	1.65	32.21	2.62
Sharing	10.33	1.41	11.67	1.67
Caring/Empathy	23.21	1.99	30.19	2.88

The summary ANOVAs for the scales are presented in Table 2. An examination of the table indicates that except for the Socialization scale, the ratings of the three groups of teachers did vary significantly, and differences across Time were significant in terms of all the scales. The effect sizes associated with the analyses are presented as partial η^2 in Table 2. Except for the Teacher \times Time interaction for Sharing, the effect sizes would be judged to be moderate to large.

Across the five scales in which the Teacher \times Time interaction was probed, the participating teacher tended to give ratings that were similar to those of either one or both of the other two teachers. Where significantly different ratings were detected, they were between the special education and control teachers.

The student changes across Time were significant for all three raters, with the mean at postprogram always being greater than that obtained at preprogram. The effect sizes for all the SMEs were judged to be very large. This would indicate a substantial practical significance even for the relatively small sample size used in this study.

DISCUSSION

Importance of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether a social skills program, *Connecting with Other: Lessons for Teaching Social and Emotional Competence*, would enable students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms to develop skills to facilitate socialization with peers with and without disabilities. It was necessary to measure student growth only in terms of the data provided by the SSAS. The results of the study indicate reasonable assurance that the students did grow in the skill areas or, at the very least, that all three groups of teachers were cognizant of growth in these areas. The outcomes of the study indicate growth of the students' social skills resulting from instruction from the *Connecting with Others: Lessons for Teaching Social and Emotional Competencies* program. The findings of this study are consistent with those of numerous studies that address the importance of teaching social skills to students with disabilities. Schlitz

Table 2: Summary Analyses of Variance for Each Scale

Source	df	F	p	Partial η^2
Concept of Self and Others				
Teacher (R)	2	7.006	.002**	.226
Time (T)	1	2456.351	.001**	.990
R x T	2	32.719	.001**	.577
Socialization				
R	2	2.144	.128	.082
T	1	1205.367	.001**	.980
R x T	2	9.144	.001**	.276
Problem Solving/ Conflict Resolution				
R	2	53.873	.001**	.692
T	1	1471.114	.001**	.984
R x T	2	28.458	.001**	.542
Communication				
R	2	17.665	.001**	.424
T	1	769.103	.001**	.970
R x T	2	22.72	.001**	.486
Sharing				
R	2	4.515	.016*	.158
T	1	85.714	.001**	.781
R x T	2	.264	.612	.011
Caring/Empathy				
R	2	5.756	.006**	.193
T	1	647.023	.001**	.964
R x T	2	30.378	.001**	.559

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

and Schlitz (2001) found that direct teaching of social skills resulted in significant improvement in the behaviors of students with moderate cognitive delays. A study with students on the autism spectrum by Epp (2008) indicated that the results of social skills instruction showed improvement in assertion scores and decreased internalizing behaviors, hyperactivity scores, and problem behavior scores.

Implications of the Study

School administrators are concerned with a positive and safe school environment. Peer rejection has been linked to school violence. Given the demonstrated relationship between social skills and school safety, schools are increasingly

seeking ways to help students develop positive social skills, both in school and in the community (National Association of School Psychologists, 2002). Through proactive social instruction, children can acquire a sense of self-efficacy, a feeling of being in control of their own emotional and interpersonal experiences (Saarni, 1999). This fosters a positive self-image, which can overcome a learned helplessness attitude that students with disabilities frequently develop. Emotionally well-regulated children are generally more positive and pro-social and are able to form and contribute to friendships with their peers with and without disabilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS

School social workers are important links between the school, home, and community. Children with disabilities frequently have difficulties in retaining and transferring knowledge across settings and trainers. School social workers can mend this disconnect by informing parents of skills that are taught in school and need to be practiced at home. The *Connecting with Others: Lessons for Teaching Social and Emotional Competence* program includes a section for parents, with home activities to help transfer what has been taught in school. School social workers are in a perfect position to review those activities and model them for parents to imitate. Lack of social skills interferes with students' ability to benefit maximally from their education, and in many cases these skills are not modeled in the home. Social workers can keep parents or caregivers informed and help them with implementation of positive proactive strategies to change the inappropriate behaviors of the children.

Teachers in public schools are under pressure to teach their state's standards and to prepare their students to pass their state's high-stakes tests. Teaching social skills consumes time and is not a priority in most cases. In addition, numerous teachers do not feel qualified to teach in this area. School social workers can be a tremendous asset by assisting teachers in creating social skills groups of student, teaching critical social skills, and delivering proactive behavioral interventions.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. It was not considered ethical to administer friendship assessment instruments or sociograms to the students because of the attention that would necessarily be focused on the students with disabilities. Office discipline referrals were considered in some of the cases but were not applicable to all student participants. Therefore, this evaluation considered only the perceptions of the various teachers in assessing student growth. A factor analytical approach was not used in this study because of the ratio of students to items. Also, a control group was not used in the study. Further research is needed consisting of a larger sample and a control group to measure social skills growth resulting from the *Connecting with Others* program.

Social skills training for students with disabilities has its weak aspects. Gresham and colleagues (2001) recommended that the training with this population be frequent and intense and linked to the individual student's social deficit. Appropriate social behaviors will persist if they are somehow immediately reinforced. A weakness is the failure of social skills acquisition to display sufficient generalization and long-lasting effects. Still another problem is the assessment of social skills training. The validity and reliability of rating scales frequently contribute to the effects of the intervention. These measures may only detect short-term effects of social competence. **CS**

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