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THE EFFECTIVENESS OF A SOCIAL SKILLS PROGRAM

by
Sharon D. Hetzell

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Arts Degree in the Graduate Division of
Rowan College of New Jersey.
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Approved by _____
Professor

Date Approved May 6, 1996

ABSTRACT

Sharon D. Hetzell

A Social Skills Program to Reduce Aggressive
Behavior in Special Education Students

1996
Dr. Stanley Urban
Learning Disabilities

This study was conducted to test the effectiveness of a social skills program to reduce aggressive behavior in special education students. The need for such intervention has been established, however, the empirical evidence to support educational programs which promote effective social skills is just beginning to emerge.

Instruction of social problem solving and role-play activities were used in this intervention. Alternatives to aggression were taught and roleplayed daily for a five week period. Two special education students from a resource room were the subjects of the study. Pre and post intervention assessment was conducted by students and teachers. Time-outs and office referrals were also charted.

The results were encouraging with improvement in the most severe aggressive behavior. Further long-term empirical research is warranted.

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I would like to thank my family who believed in me and supported me every step of the way in completing my degree. Thank you for all the sacrifices you made to help me.

I would also like to acknowledge Jesus Christ because He is before all things and in Him all things hold together.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

Recently there have been many opinions expressed, as well as research, on ways to help special education students improve their academic skills. In fact, most teacher training programs focus on curriculum and methods to improve reading, math and language skills. However, many special education students are perceived by their peers and teachers as socially unappealing. Some research suggests that special education students are unappealing not just because of their academic problems but because of their own social interactions (Vaughn, 1985). These difficulties often lead to negative social behavior and outcomes. It is clear from research that social difficulties early in life are predictors of a high rate of juvenile delinquency, psychiatric hospitalizations, and difficulties acquiring and keeping a job later in life (Sabornie and Beard, 1990).

The reason that many special education students experience difficulty acquiring positive social skills is

not clear. Bandura (1977) believes that social learning occurs through observing role models and imitating them. Others theorize that social problems are skill deficits, lack of motivation or intellectual ability to apply prosocial behavior (Gresham, 1984).

In the past it was assumed that placing special education students in the class with students who possessed positive social skills would somehow help the special education student to imitate these skills. Unfortunately, for various reasons this does not always happen.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of Skillstreaming in Early Childhood: Teaching Prosocial Skills to the Preschool and Kindergarten Child by McGinnis and Goldstein as a means for reducing aggressive social behavior for two students eligible for special education.

Definition of Terms

According to Blackbourne (1989) social skills are "defined as those skills that enhance and facilitate a student's ability to interact successfully with peers and adults."

Need for the Study

In order for special education students to more successful, instruction of social skills is a necessary part of the curriculum. A variety of instructional materials are available to assist the teaching of social skills. Among them are: DUSO-Revised: Developing Understanding of Self and Others by Dinkmeyer and Dinkmeyer, 1982; the ACCEPTS (A Curriculum for Children's Effective Peer and Teacher Skills) Social Skills Curriculum by Walker, McConnell, Holmes, Todis, Walker, and Golden, 1983; Skillstreaming, and series of social skills programs by McGinnis and Goldstein. However, there has been little research on the effectiveness of these programs. This study will implement and evaluate Skillstreaming in Early Childhood: Teaching Prosocial Skills to the Preschool and Kindergarten Child by Ellen McGinnis and Arnold P. Goldstein. It is a program which seeks to identify social skill deficits, teach prosocial skills through modeling, role playing, performance feedback and transfer of training. This program will hopefully provide a means of reducing aggressive social behavior in special education students.

Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Importance of Social Skills

For a child's present, as well as future, social skills development is an important part of their success. "The development of social skills has important implications for children's academic and vocational success as well as long-term mental health adjustment." (Pray, et.al., 1992) Interestingly research suggests that special education students are not rejected for academic reasons but because of poor social interactions. Moreover, teachers, as well as peers, have negative perceptions of special education students (Vaughn, 1985). Frank M. Gresham in his article on "Misguided Mainstreaming: The Case for Social Skills Training with Handicapped Children" (1982) states that "It has been shown time and again that handicapped children are poorly accepted by their nonhandicapped peers." In addition poor social skills appear to be a risk factor for social pathology including higher incidences of juvenile

delinquency and psychiatric hospitalizations (Sabornie and Beard, 1990).

In addition, the U.S. Department of Education estimates that between 50 to 80 percent of handicapped individuals are unemployed or underemployed. This is despite the fact that 75 to 85 percent of handicapped individuals are capable of competitive employment. The Department of Education attributes the lack of appropriate social skills as the most frequently stated cause of this event (U.S. Dept of Ed., 1987). This seems to be supported by the fact that job supervisors rate social competence higher than actual occupational skills (Sabornie and Beard, 1990).

Origins of Social Skill Deficits

There are many theories on the sources of social deficits in special education students. Among them are: poor role models, lack of motivation, and lack of intellectual ability.

Bandura (1977) believes that poor social skills are a result of imitating poor role models. He theorizes that there are three types of learning by modeling: observational learning, inhibitory or disinhibitory effects, and behavioral facilitation. Observational learning occurs when a child observes and imitates what others do. For

example, the use of slang expressions which circulate through schools represents this type of social learning. Inhibitory or disinhibitory effects strengthen or weaken a behavior. Observing poor behavior that is rewarded or good behavior that is punished results in poor behavior. Finally, behavioral facilitation refers to the performance of previously learned behaviors. For example, one student successfully deals with a problem and another classmate deals with the problem in the same way.

However, Bandura has admitted that children observe many models each day and do not necessarily engage in the activities themselves; and therefore further explanations for poor social skills seem to exist. McGinnis and Goldstein (1984) in their series of books on teaching social skills agree that following role models is only one means by which people learn social behaviors. For some a second source of social deficit seems to be the lack of motivation. In Skillstreaming the Elementary Child they conclude that many students need "prompting, coaching, material reward and especially such social reinforcement as praise and approval."

In addition to poor models and a lack of motivation a third source of deficit appears to be lack of intellectual ability. The same reasons that cause a special education student to have difficulty in acquiring academic skills may interfere with social learning as well. Such factors as an inability to attend to relevant information, lack of

consequential thinking, an inability to take the perspective of another, and failure to understand and take the role of the listener may result in negative behavior (Vaughn, 1985). Whatever the reason, it seems that special education students are not able to intuitively learn social skills.

Need for Instruction

Given the importance of social skills in both academic and vocational settings it is crucial that deficits in these skills receive instruction. In the past it was assumed that physically placing a special education student in a regular classroom would increase the acquisition of appropriate social skills (Gresham, 1982). This seems to be an acknowledgment of Bandura's social learning theory. Unfortunately, as stated before, modeling alone does not appear to increase positive social behaviors. Research indicates that placing special education students in the regular classroom often fails because these students lack the prerequisite social skills for peer acceptance. Gresham maintains that social skills training is one way to increase the social acceptance of special education students by their nonhandicapped peers (1982). Sabornie and Beard conclude that "any teacher seeking to be a comprehensive change agent cannot ignore the social side of exceptionalities." and that for those that need this intervention it should be as intense as academic remediation (1990).

Among researchers in the area of social skills there seems to be unanimous agreement that the majority of special education students should receive social skills instruction. However, despite the need for such instruction it has been estimated that it is "virtually nonexistent in schools." (Pray, et.al., 1992)

Available Curriculum

Since most researchers agree that the majority of special education students have social skill deficits and it is vital to present and future success the next question is: What curriculum should be taught?

Carter and Sugai (1989) suggest that social skills should be taught using the same strategies of instruction, practice and feedback that are presently used to teach academics. They suggest several practical criteria when considering a social skills program: (1) training of students should occur in small groups; (2) the curriculum should be able to be individualized; (3) the materials should be able to be used by teachers without a great deal of highly specialized training; (4) curriculum should be cost-effective; (5) the curriculum should have a means of assessing student needs and performance; (6) the curriculum should train for maintenance and generalization and (7) the curriculum should be field-tested.

A thorough search of available curriculums does not

reveal an ideal choice for a program that meets all proven instructional and practical guidelines for all age groups. Teachers must review the curriculums and guidelines to choose the one best suited for their students. There are, however, several programs which do meet many of the criteria mentioned earlier. They are: (1) Skillstreaming, a series of books grouped according to age by E. McGinnis and A.P.Goldstein, copyrights 1980, 1984, 1987, Champaign, IL: Research Press. (2) The Walker Social Skills Curriculum: The Accepts Program. by H.M.Walker, B. Todis, D. Holmes and G. Horton, 1988, Austin, TX PRO-ED. (3) Getting Along with Others: Teaching Social Effectiveness to Children. by J.F.Jackson, D.A. Jackson, and C. Monroe, Champaign,IL: Research Press. (4) Assertive Behavior: A Program for Teaching Social Skills to Children and Adolescents. by S.A. Waksman and C.L. Messmer, 1985, Portland, OR: Enrichment Press. (5) Social Skills Training Manual: Assessment, Program Design, and Mangement of Training. by J.Wilkinson and S. Canter, 1982, New York: John Wiley and Sons.

Effectiveness of Social Skills Instruction

While there is a great deal of documentation on the lack of social skill development and its significance for

special education students, there is very little research on the effectiveness of social skills training. Each publisher of social skills curriculums maintain that their program will enhance acquisition of such skills, however, not all are field tested.

There are no long term studies with large groups of students. However, there are numerous short term studies including one by McIntosh, Vaughn and Zaragoza (1991) who review 22 studies which reported on the effects of social skills training of 572 children. Most of the studies were on small groups of children and in no case did the intervention last longer than 25 weeks, with an average of 10 weeks. They found that there is "a lack of empirical evidence documenting increases in peer acceptance as result of social skills intervention." Unfortunately, there are no long term empirical research studies on the effectiveness of any social skills program.

Conclusions on the Review of the Literature

A review of the literature on the subject of social skills reveals that there are basically three reasons for social skill deficits. They are: poor role models, lack of motivation and lack of intellectual ability. In addition a lack of social skills is a risk factor for academic and vocational failure. Researchers agree that social skill

instruction is crucial and should be provided with the same level of intensity as academic intervention. Researchers also agree that social skills should be taught using the same strategies of instruction, practice and feedback used to teach academics. Using accepted educational practice, teachers should review programs and guidelines to choose the curriculum best suited for their student's needs.

However, while there is general agreement on the necessity of social skills instruction there is little empirical research to support the effectiveness of intervention. Hopefully, this paper will help provide some evidence to support social skills instruction for special education students.

Chapter 3

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

Subjects of the Study

Two students enrolled in a special education resource room whose Individualized Education Plans (I.E.P.) included social skills goals were chosen for intervention. This was a convenience grouping to evaluate the effectiveness of a social skills program for special education students.

Student number one was a second grade female student with a chronological age of 7 years, 8 months. Student number two was a second grade male with a chronological age of 8 years, 4 months.

Method of Selecting Curriculum

Using the criteria by Carter and Sugai (1989) for choosing a social skills curriculum several programs were reviewed for their suitability for use. The criteria were: (1) small group instruction, (2) individualization, (3) use without a great deal of training, (4) cost-effectiveness.

(5) field-tested, (6) ,means of assessing needs and performance, and (7) training for maintenance and generalization.

Skillstreaming in Early Childhood: Teaching Prosocial Skills to the Preschool and Kindergarten Child by Ellen McGinnis and Arnold Goldstein, 1990 was chosen because it met six of the seven criteria and was suitable for use with non-readers. Skillstreaming was designed to be used with small groups by teachers who have read the manual. This curriculum can be individualized by teaching only the students and skills necessary. All materials necessary to implement the program are easily assesible in a school setting for a minimal cost. The manual cost \$17.00 with a small cost for photocopying, behavior charts, rewards, and charts for instruction. The program provides for modeling and role-playing of different situations. It also incorporates homework to help provide maintenance and generalization.

The authors of Skillstreaming in Early Childhood do not mention in their materials any evidence of field testing the curriculum or the results of implementation. However, given the other positive attributes, especially its ease of use with non-readers, Skillstreaming was chosen.

Procedures

Two special education students whose I.E.P.'s included social skills goals were chosen for intervention.

Three criterion-referenced checklists were given to assess the social skill areas most in need of intervention. The first was a Teacher Checklist. This criterion-referenced checklist was given to the regular education teacher at the beginning of the baseline period. After completing the checklist the regular education teachers recorded for five weeks the number of times the subjects were given a time-out or referral to the office for aggressive behavior. behavior.

The second was a Parent Checklist. Parents of both the subjects were sent a checklist to be completed and returned. Neither of the parents returned the checklist and did not come in for scheduled parent-teacher conferences.

The third was a Child Skill Checklist. This Checklist was read to the subjects individually in four separate sessions at the beginning of the baseline period. It was designed to assess the children's perceptions of the skills they believed they wanted to or needed to learn.

After the checklists were completed and the I.E.P.'s reviewed a Skills Grouping Chart was used to group the subjects on the basis of shared skill deficits. The charts were examined and five shared skill deficits were chosen for instruction in a five week period.

Treatment

Two second grade special education students in a resource room were grouped for social skills instruction

using Skillstreaming in Early Childhood: Teaching Prosocial Skills to the Preschool and Kindergarten Child by Ellen McGinnis and Arnold Goldstein. This intervention followed a five week period of recording baseline information on time-outs and referrals to the counselor for inappropriate social behavior. The regular education teachers completed criterion-referenced checklists and the two subjects targeted for intervention completed checklists based on their perception of need or want to learn a social skill. A Skills Grouping Chart was then completed to identify areas of shared deficit. Five goals were chosen for instruction during a five week period. The goals all targeted Alternatives to Aggression. One goal per week was targeted for instruction, modeling, role-playing, feedback, and homework.

The instruction took place for approximately 15 minutes per day for the five week period. On the first day the skill was introduced. The need for the skill was explained and situations where the skill could be used were identified. Regular education teachers were made aware of the goals for the week through notes from the special education teacher. On the second day the skill was modeled by the special education teacher using role-playing and a picture chart of the steps. The teacher took the role of the main actor on this day. On the third day, the subjects took the role of the main actor in a role-playing situation, with feedback from the teacher. On the fourth day

role-playing was completed and homework was assigned and completed with the help of regular education teachers. On the fifth day students returned homework and discussed its value or any problems with the goal for the week.

As suggested by the authors of Skillstreaming a behavior modification program was implemented to enhance motivation. Each subject had a chart posted in the classroom and was given stickers for performing certain behaviors. For example, students were given a sticker for coming to group on time, looking at the teacher during instruction, participating in role-playing, and completing and returning homework. Five stickers in one day and the subjects were given a their choice of a candy from the teacher's treat box. One week of good behavior and they were allowed to play a game of their choice for the remainder of the 30 minute period on the fifth day. One month of stickers and they earned the chocolate bar of their choice. In addition, positive notes were sent to the regular education teachers, counselor, principal and parents on an intermittent schedule for good behavior and participation in the social skills group.

At the end of the five week intervention period regular education teachers were asked to complete another Teacher's Checklist to compare pre and post intervention behavior. In addition regular education teachers were asked to record for five weeks after intervention the number of time-outs and referrals to the counselor for inappropriate social behavior.

Parents were not asked to complete a second Parent's Skill Checklist since the first one was not returned.

Children were again asked to complete a Child's Skill Checklist to determine if their perceptions of their behavior had changed.

Five weeks after the social skills instruction pre and post intervention results were compared to see if the social skills instruction decreased aggressive behavior. This was done by comparing student checklists, teacher checklists, and the number of time-outs and referrals to the office before and after instruction for each of the students.

Chapter 4

RESULTS

In this study the effectiveness of a social skills program, Skillstreaming in Early Childhood: Teaching Prosocial Skills to the Preschool and Kindergarten Child by Ellen McGinnis and Arnold Goldstein, was tested. Two special education students whose Individualized Education Plans included social skills were chosen for intervention. The intervention consisted of daily fifteen minute sessions over a five week period. The lessons targeted "Alternatives to Aggression".

The differences between pre and post intervention as interpreted by students, teachers, and the number of time-outs and office referrals were charted and analyzed. The results are reported in terms of individual improvement. Specific skill differences by individual are presented in tables 1, 2, and 3.

On the tables a score of 1 represented a skill the student never performed, a score of 2 represented a skill the student sometimes performs, a 3 represented a skill the student often performs, a score of 4 represented a skill the

student usually performs, and a score of 5 represented a skill the student always performs.

Table 1
Student Self-Report

Student	1			2		
	pre	post	dif.	pre	post	dif.
Dealing w/ Teasing	1	2	+1	1	2	+1
Feeling Mad	1	2	+1	1	1	0
Deciding If Fair	2	2	0	3	3	0
Solving A Problem	1	2	+1	1	1	0
Consequences	1	2	+1	1	2	+1

dif.=difference

Table 2
Teacher Report

Student	1			2		
	pre	post	dif.	pre	post	dif.
Dealing w/ Teasing	2	2	0	1	1	0
Feeling Mad	2	3	+1	1	2	+1
Deciding If Fair	3	2	-1	3	3	0
Solving A Problem	2	2	0	1	1	0
Consequences	3	2	-1	1	3	+2

dif.=difference

Table 3
Number of Time-Outs/Referrals

<u>Student</u>	<u>1</u>			<u>2</u>		
	<u>pre</u>	<u>post</u>	<u>dif.</u>	<u>pre</u>	<u>post</u>	<u>dif.</u>
<u>Time-Outs</u>	2	2	0	3	3	0
<u>Referrals</u>	2	0	-2	7	3	-4

dif.=difference

Individual Results

Student number 1 perceived an overall increase in her ability to find alternatives to aggression. She perceived an increase in her ability to deal with teasing, deal with feeling mad, solve problems without aggression and to accept the consequences of aggression.. She saw no change in her ability to decide if something is fair.

Student number 1's teacher reported a decrease in her ability to find alternatives to aggression. Her teacher reported no change in her ability to deal with teasing or solve a problem. However she reported an increase in her ability to deal with feeling mad without aggression, but a decrease in her ability to decide if something is fair or to accept the consequences of aggression.

Overall student number 1 experienced a decrease in aggressive behavior as measured by the number of times she was referred to the office. She did not decrease the number

of time-outs she received for aggressive behavior but she did decrease office referrals from 2 in the pre-intervention period to 0 in the post-intervention period.

Student number 2 perceived an overall increase in his ability to find alternatives to aggression. He reported that he increased his ability to deal with teasing and to accept the consequences of his behavior. However, he reported no change in his ability to deal with feeling mad, decide if something is fair or his ability to solve a problem without aggression.

Student number 2's teacher reported an overall increase in his ability to find alternatives to aggression. She reported an increase in his ability to deal with feeling mad and to accept the consequences of aggression. She reported no change in his ability to deal with teasing, decide if something is fair or to solve a problem without aggression.

Overall student number 2 experienced an increase in his ability to find alternatives to aggression as measured by the number of times he was referred to the office. He went from 7 referrals in the pre-intervention period to 3 in the post-intervention period. Although he did reduce the number of office referrals, the number of time-outs in the classroom remained the same.

Summary of Results

According to the self-reports both students in the study reported improved skills in selecting alternatives to aggression. However, according to teacher reports the results were mixed. The teacher of student number 1 reported a decrease in two skill areas, an increase in one skill area, and no change in two social skills. The teacher of student number two reported an increase in two social skills and no change in three areas.

Overall there was a decrease in the most severe aggressive behavior of both students. While there was no change in the number of time-outs students received in the classroom for aggressive behavior, there was a decrease in the number of times students were sent to the office for severe aggressive behavior.

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

This study was developed to test the effectiveness of a social skills program for two special education students who exhibit aggressive behavior. The results indicate that the program was partially successful. Both students improved their perception of their ability to find alternatives to aggression.

Teacher reports were mixed. Student number one's teacher reported a decrease in two skill areas, an increase in one area, and no change in three skill areas. Student number two's teacher reported an increase in two skill areas and no change in three areas.

Most encouraging was the decrease for both students in the most severe aggressive behavior as measured by the number of times they were referred to the office. Students did not reduce the number of times they received time-out in the classroom. However the results of this study seem to indicate that special education students can decrease aggressive behavior through instruction in a social skills program.

Curriculum Evaluation

Skillstreaming in Early Childhood: Teaching Prosocial Skills to the Preschool and Kindergarten Child by McGinnis and Goldstein provided a systematic approach to social skills training. The curriculum was easy to use and cost effective. It provided a means for assessing student need and performance and provided a way to promote maintenance and generalization. In addition it was easy to individualize and use with small groups. Once students became accustomed to the programs, they enjoyed role-playing and participating in the program. The special education teacher noticed improved student awareness of behavior.

Limitations

Despite the encouraging results it is difficult to draw broad conclusions due to the limited sample size, lack of a control group and length of the study. Further research should include a larger number of students and a control group. In addition a longer length of intervention would be helpful in teaching the necessary social skills. Following the control group and those who received intervention for a long period of time would help validate the effectiveness of social skills training.

Conclusions

The results of this social skills program were partially successful despite the limitations mentioned earlier. Research places a high value on social skills as a predictor of future success and therefore worthy of teaching to students who lack these skills. Research also supports intensive remediation for students in need. For these reasons further social skills instruction and research in this area is warranted.

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