How implementing social programs with first grade students to improve their existing emotional and behavioral issues affects a new teacher's outlook on her classroom and students

Rachel Trussler
Rowan University
HOW IMPLEMENTING SOCIAL PROGRAMS WITH FIRST GRADE STUDENTS TO IMPROVE THEIR EXISTING EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL ISSUES AFFECTS A NEW TEACHER'S OUTLOOK ON HER CLASSROOM AND STUDENTS

by
Rachel Trussler

An Action Research Thesis

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Approved by
Advisor

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ABSTRACT
Rachel M. Trussler
HOW IMPLEMENTING SOCIAL PROGRAMS WITH FIRST GRADE STUDENTS TO IMPROVE THEIR EXISTING EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL ISSUES AFFECTS A NEW TEACHER’S OUTLOOK ON HER CLASSROOM AND STUDENTS
2008
Dr. Yvonne E. González Rodríguez
Master of Science in Teaching

What effects does a “one on one” developmental program done with first grade students that are struggling with behavioral and emotional issues have on me as a teacher and inform and influence my teaching? This action research study took place in a southern New Jersey school from January 24 until May 9, 2008. Students were observed both in and out of the classroom. A better understanding of the classroom community and interactions of the students were gleamed from this process. Two students were selected based on their unique emotional situations, which influenced their ability to behave appropriately according to teacher expectations. These students were chosen to participate in an individualized social management program. Data collection consisted of two phases, an intervention program and a document review. Data included observations, informal interviews, and artifacts. School documents such as school records and report cards were utilized to determine past behaviors as well as academic success. Findings indicate that students responded positively to direct individualized social strategies and enhanced their learning. In conclusion, a better understanding of my students’ social and personal needs was achieved as I was able to better interact with and teach the whole child.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to start by thanking my husband, Michael, whose constant love and support has been paramount in the completion of this action research project. I would also like to thank my family who has helped me in numerous ways throughout this process. I give special thanks to my advisor, Dr. Yvonne E. González Rodríguez, who guided me through this action research project, every step of the way. In addition, I would like to offer my thanks to my cooperating teacher, Peggy Rowles, and the school guidance counselor, Jane Radar, who offered me their opinions, feedback, and support throughout the entire action research process.
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Chapter 1
Introduction

*Story Behind the Research*

My classroom had a great number of students that had potentially difficult social lives. Of my eighteen students, twelve of them dealt with situations that are not typical for the average first grader in Burlington County. Although their situations varied, some of the issues were as follows: (1) two of my students had undiagnosed classifiable disabilities; (2) three were adopted by parents that were not of the same ethnicity and/or races as the child; (3) one had a mother that was dying of leukemia; and (4) two had incarcerated parents. In addition, (5) one had parents that did not speak English and spent a majority of their time outside the home; (6) one had a younger sibling with autism; and (7) two had divorced parents that had a hostile relationship with one another. These home lives had affected the ability of my students to adjust appropriately to the classroom environment. From the perspective of family relationships, research shows that warm, supportive family relationships give children a sense of confidence and security when they go out and explore other relationships and experiences (Ainsworth, 1983; Bowlby, 1982). A lack of this secure relationship can be extremely detrimental to young children. Children’s early experience within their family structure is a consistently strong predictor of later academic achievement and cognitive functioning (Downer & Pianta, 2006). Many of my students displayed inappropriate behaviors throughout the day that may reflect their frustrations at home.
I believed that in order to help these students succeed at school it was necessary to help them socially. Only half of a student’s elementary education is acquiring academic skills. The other half of the students’ school experience is learning how to interact with the peers as well as adults. At this early stage of development, the students are also learning how to behave in a classroom setting. At the age of six, the average age of a first grader, children are just beginning to understand the difference between the concepts of intentional and accidental, become interested in rules, and form a strong desire to perform well and complete tasks correctly (Arpin, 2008). In order for students to succeed at school, they must master both the academic and the social skills (Goldstein, 1999). I believed that without additional help, the students that were experiencing difficulty in their day-to-day lives would not be successful. These students needed to be given additional support outside of the traditional classroom so that their social skills can blossom.

During the process of completing the action research, I believed that helping my students “one on one” will help me to better understand my students needs as well as see each child in my class as a unique individual whose behaviors and motivations are based on their backgrounds and home lives.

*Personal Importance*

This research project is of particular importance for me. My younger brother was born with Asperger’s Syndrome. This disability has altered his capacity to form relationships with those around him. As such, I believed that he has suffered tremendously at the hands of both peers and teachers. Although my brother is extremely gifted academically, his struggle with social skills made it profoundly difficult for him to
succeed in the standard classroom setting. I believe that the same is true for all students, whether they have a classifiable syndrome or not.

In addition to watching my brother’s dilemma, I have been employed at an early childhood center for over five years. I have witnessed many children grow through the early developmental stages and change with time. Many of these students follow patterns of growth and social interaction that are based heavily on their early experiences. Those that falter early on creating strong relationships with their peers and teachers have a much more difficult time being successful in academic and other areas as well. In addition, their overall happiness is greatly affected. My personal and professional experiences have informed my teaching and had a great deal of influence of the actions that I took.

Problem

As I observed my students over the first few weeks, I noticed that two students in particular were having an extremely difficult time living up to the classroom and teacher expectations. One little boy, who will be referred to throughout the study as Philip*, did not display any of the appropriate behaviors that one would expect from a first grader. He called out constantly, did not remain in his seat, rarely completed assignments, and often started conflicts with the other students. In addition, it appears as though Philip seeks out and requires additional attention from teachers and other adult authority figures.

The second student, who will be referred to as Kit throughout this study, also displayed behaviors that were inappropriate in a first grade classroom. Kit was extremely quiet and timid. She spoke softly, sometimes inaudibly. She was shy around the other students, often not engaging in group conversations. Kit kept her head down at all times. More alarming about Kit’s behavior was her over attachment to adults. Kit immediately
found comfort with complete strangers and sought physical contact such as hugs, sitting in their lap, or resting her head against them.

According to Richard Lavoie (2005), “a child’s social life is immeasurably important to his happiness, health, and development (p.xxv).” As such, many professionals agree that social skill instruction and remediation should be offered for students that are not sufficiently adjusting on their own. My students were not appropriately coping with their social situations. They required additional assistance so that they may have a healthy social life. In helping these students, I believed that I would also develop as a teacher.

**Critical Question**

What effects does a “one on one” developmental program done with first grade students that are struggling with behavioral and emotional issues have on me as a teacher? In what ways does working on an individual basis with students with behavioral issues inform and influence my teaching?

**Integrated Action**

In my action research project, I met with each of the two students twice a week in order to build communication strategies. Each student met with me individually for thirty minutes to an hour after school. During this time, we did a variety of activities such as role-playing, constructive conversation, informal interviews, and games that helped build their social skills and trust. This time also served to help build a comfort level between myself and the students, which I believe helped them to open up and ultimately improve their behavior. These activities expectantly created a sense of belonging for the students
both in and outside the classroom. For each task I did extensive journaling, anecdotal notations, and field notes.

The following table shows a timetable of events as they occurred.

Table 1.1
Timeline of Research Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposed Date of Action</th>
<th>Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Week of March 3</td>
<td>Began observations of students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week of March 10</td>
<td>Reviewed artifacts and school documents in order to set the baseline for my student’s behaviors. Conducted student informal interviews. Conducted informal interview with guidance counselor and cooperating teacher. Self assessed attitudes towards students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week of March 17</td>
<td>Began meeting with students after school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weeks of March 31</td>
<td>Instituted one strategy per week. Each student was introduced to a different strategy based upon his or her individual needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 7</td>
<td>Weekly observations continued throughout this process. Collaboration with cooperating teacher and guidance counselor took place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week of May 5</td>
<td>Conducted final informal interviews for student feedback.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 shows a timeline of events as they occurred during the research process. This table shows dates that I met with the students as well as times that additional research was instituted and data was collected.

Context

School and Community. My action research project was conducted in a first grade classroom at Victor Brass Elementary School. Victor Brass Elementary is located in a suburban community in Burlington County, New Jersey. The total enrollment in the school was just shy of 500 students. Although the community population was not extremely transient with only five percent mobility, the school population nonetheless changed several times a year. The school accommodated grades kindergarten through fifth. The school employed twenty-two full time general education classroom teachers, five full time special education teachers, three teacher assistants and six classroom aides. In addition, the school employed five full time special area teachers that included art, gym, computers, library, and music plus a nurse, guidance counselor, reading specialist, two Reading Recovery teachers, a speech therapist, and a part time occupational therapist. Special programs at Victor Brass included after school clubs such as chorus, instrumental, theater, sports, art, literature, stock market, student council, yearbook, technology, peer mediation, science, and homework. Other special programs offered at this school were ‘Art Goes to School,’ DARE, and Jump Rope for Heart (McMullen 2006). (see Appendix A for a description of these programs)
Victor Brass's student population was far from diverse in terms of race and ethnicity. Of the roughly five hundred students, just over two percent were African American, six tenths percent were Indian, and three percent were Asian. Over ninety-four percent of the student body was White. This breakdown was consistent throughout the district. Socio-economic status, on the other hand, differed greatly. Although the median household income was $64,526, individual households ranged from upper middle class incomes and lower upper class to below poverty incomes, with 5.5% of the population below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau 2007). Ten percent of students at Victor Brass Elementary had 504’s or I.E.P.’s. Ninety seven percent of students spoke English as their primary language (NJ School Report Card, 2006).

Victor Brass Elementary School is one of five elementary schools in the district. Students that require ELL services or extreme accommodations were transferred to one of the other district elementary schools for those services. Therefore, teachers expected to have students that only had manageable disabilities and/or behavioral issues. Typically, this resulted in a majority of students being on grade level and able to meet the curriculum expectations. Unfortunately, this format also led to a slow delivery of services when students required it. The resources were not readily available in the building. In addition, there was no system in place to deal with students whose disabilities caused them to behave inappropriately and/or in physically aggressive manners, such as hitting and pushing both peers and teachers, threatening others with sharp objects, and knocking over and/or throwing objects. These students often behaved in violent fashions, causing disruptions in the classrooms yet there were no systematic school wide programs in place that dealt with these behaviors.
In the first grade, the average class size at Victor Brass was 16 students per one teacher. My action research project was conducted in a first grade classroom that contains eighteen students. Of those students thirteen were White, one was African American, two were Chinese, and two were Korean. Only one child spoke a language other than English at home. Of the above students, three of the four Asian students were adopted and lived with White families. According to an analysis of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Asian adolescents adopted by White parents had the highest levels of psychosomatic symptoms (Burrow 2001).

Many of the students in my class had difficult family lives as described above. This particular classroom had been intentionally weighted with students that required additional attention. This imbalance was due to my cooperating teacher’s reputation and caring attitude. Her teaching style was extremely nurturing and well suited for students that called for a loving disposition. According to Pedersen, Faucher, and Eaton (1978) the long term impact on student learning can be exemplified by one first grade teacher. “The children she taught, despite their challenging life circumstances, achieved at higher levels than other students throughout their years in school. As adults, all recalled how much this teacher cared. They emphasized that her confidence in their abilities helped them believe in themselves and become productive citizens” (Lumpkin 158).

Most of the students in my class live with both parents and at least one sibling. Of the five children that do not live with both their mother and their father, two have divorced parents, two belong to parents that were never married but live together when they are not incarcerated, and one has parents that are still together but spend a majority of their time outside the home. Most of my students come from middle class income
homes. Two come from upper middle class families. One of my students is currently being evicted from their home and will be moving shortly to a new neighborhood within the district (Personal Communication 1.24.08)

Table 1.2

Student Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Names”</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Hobbies</th>
<th>Interesting Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chloe</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>mom, dad, sister(25), brother(3)</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>coloring</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ark</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>mom, dad, brother, 2 sisters</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>hockey, football</td>
<td>possible Aspergers, not yet diagnosed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrick</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>mom, dad, brother, sister (both older)</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>football</td>
<td>possible ADHD, not yet diagnosed, difficulty with written language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>mom, dad, brother</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>drawing</td>
<td>mother is dying of leukemia, 20% chance of survival, he is unaware the condition is terminal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rick</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>mom, dad, sister</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>soccer</td>
<td>adopted by White family, sees dad, step-mom, and baby half sister but does not live with them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>mom, dad</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>adopted by White family, parents expect perfection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emanual</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>mom, sister (8)</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>football, hockey</td>
<td>has difficulties following the rules but becomes easily upset by disciplinary actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>mom, dad, sister, brother</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>baseball</td>
<td>adopted by White family in the midst of what is an ongoing turbulent, hateful relationship, emotional trauma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liz</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Korean</td>
<td>mom, dad</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>soccer</td>
<td>adopted by White family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kit</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>mom, sister/dad, stepmom, stepsister</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>religion</td>
<td>adopted by White family in the midst of what is an ongoing turbulent, hateful relationship, emotional trauma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allana</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>mom, dad, sister</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>webkinz</td>
<td>cries easily</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelly</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>mom, dad, brother</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>soccer</td>
<td>Parents own store, live in store, afraid of robbery, only her and brother speak English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vivian</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>grandmother, brother (11)</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rianna</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>mom, dad, brother</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>soccer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The above table shows the age, sex, and race of each student in my classroom. In addition, this chart shows which family members each student lives with, the primary language spoken at home, their favorite hobby, and any additional important information.

Participants. The participants in this study, Philip and Kit, were chosen based on their unique situations. Philip seemed to struggle the most of all my students. As a new student he had not acclimated himself to the classroom environment. I felt as though he needed the “one on one” support the most. Kit, on the other hand, seemed to struggle in a completely different way than Philip. I felt that it would be prudent to choose two students that were reacting differently as to better gauge the effect that my time with them had on their behaviors and attitudes, as well as, to determine how this intervention would advance my development as a teacher. I expected to gain valuable information both for the students and for me as a beginning teacher.

Philip lived at home with his mother and younger sister. His father was recently incarcerated for a sentence of 5-10 years. As of the end of the study, he had not been permitted to visit him in jail. He had been told that he needed to be the ‘man of the house.’ In addition Philip had attended three different schools for kindergarten and first grade. He arrived in the district in January of 2008. Although I did not have access to all documents, the limited records that were made available to me indicated that his previous

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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kara</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>mom, dad, sister</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>family has a large amount of money and uses it liberally to meet her “needs”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eileen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>mom, dad, sister (9)</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>mom in and out of jail, she is in and out of foster care with brother who has fetal alcohol syndrome</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beth</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>mom in jail, brother, dad in rehab</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>father only recently went to prison, grandparents active in upbringing, social trauma</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philip</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>mom, sister, dad in jail</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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school was located in a low income area with a high crime rate. He was used to an environment in which he needed to be defensive and on alert as shown by his response to the other children as well as his aggressive behavior and extensive knowledge of the legal system. He seemed unable to comprehend that he was no longer in that type of environment. To further complicate Philip’s situation, he was the only African American student in the class.

Kit was a Chinese student that was currently in the middle of an extremely turbulent relationship between her adoptive and divorced parents. Kit was abandoned when she was only a few days old, left outside to die. She was found and brought to foster care in China. She was put in a crib until she was two years old. This made some development difficult for Kit, and some evidence of this remained. When she was two years old her family adopted Kit and brought her to the USA. Unfortunately, the couple was having difficulties and divorced a year after the adoption. The parents were still in conflict and battled constantly. I was informed of this situation by the school guidance counselor and witnessed this behavior first hand at parent teacher conferences. Kit split her time spending seven days with one parent and then nine days with the next. During the time that Kit was with her father she was not permitted to call her mother or have any contact with her. The father referred to Kit as his adopted or Chinese daughter. Kit’s father had recently moved in with his girlfriend and her children. Kit had a tendency to be inappropriate with adults, and showed difficulties with behavior. For example, she was often reclusive and did not participate in group activities even when addressed directly by the teacher or her peers. I believe that her home situation may also have interfered with appropriate reading and social development.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

**Background Knowledge**

The consensus between researchers and teachers is that children’s adjustment to their early school transitions relates to their future academic and social success (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988; Bloom, 1964; Ladd, 1990; Ladd & Price, 1987). This adjustment includes strides in social skills as well as academic. Many researchers agree that social skill instruction should be offered to those students that need additional assistance. Pelco and Reed-Victor (2007) agree that social skills should be included as a part of the curriculum, but needs to be provided to all students, not just those who are struggling.

Lavoie strongly believes that “social skills are the ultimate determining factor in the child’s future success, happiness, and acceptance (p. xxx).” While academic skills are useful, they are not critical to every situation that one will encounter. The same is not true for social skills. The ability to read social cues and interact effectively with others is something that is needed numerous times a day in a variety of scenarios (Lavoie, 2005).

Development of these social skills can be delayed by emotional trauma that has occurred in a child’s life. This emotional disturbance often emerges as behavioral outbursts that further affect the student’s relationships with the other students (Henkenlaible-Gotto & Roggow, 2007). This quickly becomes a downward spiral for students. Often, these inabilities to perform on a social level lead to an increase in
aggression and additional behavioral problems. Both stem from deep frustration and an inability to resolve conflicts in a calm manner through methods such as negotiation (Lavoie, 2005).

Learning these skills take on even more importance early on in students' educational years. Children's early school experiences are a matter of national concern as evidence consistently points to the significance of early achievement in predicting future educational accomplishments (Chen, Lee, & Stevenson, 1996). During the first-grade year, children face many challenges. They must negotiate a new environment, handle increasing academic demands, and form new relationships with their teachers and classmates. Three areas of school adjustment have received particular attention: children's peer and teacher relationships, and their academic performance (Donelan-McCall & Dunn, 1997). We know that children who lack social acceptance by their peers are at risk for a variety of negative consequences in later life, spanning such diverse realms as behavioral, psychological, and academic adjustment (Parker & Asher, 1987; Kupersmidt, Coie, & Dodge, 1990). Supportive relationships with teachers link to more favorable classroom adjustment (Pedersen, Faucher, & Eaton, 1978), and outcomes that are more positive for high-risk children (Boyer, 1983; Werner & Smith, 1982). For example, previous research showed that early teachers' preference significantly predicted subsequent peer rejection (Taylor, 1989).

Methods and Goals

This social instruction that is so highly recommended should ideally begin in kindergarten and then continue on spanning the grades. The classroom teacher best conveys the social skill lessons, as they have a more consistent relationship with the
students and greater opportunity to reinforce the modifications (Pelco & Reed-Victor, 2007). When teachers meet with students they are most effective when the session is one on one. By meeting with the student alone, the teacher can better address their needs and truly customize the lesson (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004). These one on one sessions were the most effective when they took place during the student’s free time, such as lunch, recess, or after school. In this way, the student did not miss any instructional time (Steen & Kaffenberger, 2007). Furthermore, by meeting with students one on one, a relationship formed that allowed the student to feel comfortable and special. Students that feel as though they are truly cared about are more likely to cooperate and are more willing to work (Baker, 2003).

Some of the skills that students should be taught included: (1) the appropriate way to speak in a classroom setting; (2) how to wait patiently; (3) the correct way to transport oneself around the room; (4) the proper way to request help; (5) the completion of assignments; (6) the suitable steps one can take to clarify unanswered questions; (7) how to work independently; and (8) how to monitor one’s own work (Pelco & Reed-Victor, 2007; Steen & Kaffenberger, 2007).

In addition to addressing the students’ inabilities to properly handle social situations, direct anger management issues should also be a focus. Students that struggle not only behaviorally but act aggressively as well, could be taught how to deal appropriately with events that tend to provoke anger, in ways in which they can communicate their feelings, and use strategies to relieve anger (Steen & Kaffenberger, 2007).
Strategies

When attempting to help a child to develop social skills there are certain principles of behavior management that should be considered. To start, behavior that results in extra attention or reinforcement, whether be it positive or negative, is likely to be repeated. On the same token, only positive feedback will result in a change of behavior. Although negative feedback will stop behavior, it is typically temporary and does not change the motivations or rationale that caused the behavior to exist, thus, failing to make a meaningful long-term change in the behavior (Lavoie, 2005). When Lane (2004) questioned teachers as to what factors they deemed important for their students to master, they responded that the students should “follow directions, attend to instructions, control temper with peers, control temper with adults, get along with people who are different, respond appropriately when hit, and use free time in an acceptable way (p. 106).” Although these behavioral issues are often just manifestations of the deeper emotional concerns, helping students to control these behaviors will in turn improve their emotional stability and in turn classroom success.

Goldstein (1999) suggests breaking down the more complicated tasks into individual skills that the student can master, citing 50 in all. It is important to assess the student’s starting ability so that the social skill program can begin at the correct benchmark. Some students may need to begin with simple social tasks while others are ready to conquer more complicated methods such as planning skills and coping with stress. Goldstein also suggests using precise exercises that focus solely on one single task. In this way, the student can concentrate all of their energy on the direct skill being introduced.
There are four key steps to changing a child’s behavior. The first step is to provide the child with a reason or why the new rule has been put into place. This helps the child understand that the rule is not simply something that the adult figure wants, but that it serves a greater purpose. The second step to directly state the rule that the child is expected to follow. The third step is a reminder that helps the child to remember the behavior that they are supposed to avoid. This typically works best as a hint or memory trigger that will allow the child to rethink before they proceed past a point of no return. The fourth and final step is to reinforce. This step involves recognizing success and praising the child for a job well done. It is important, however, that one not confuse reinforcement with incentive. In most scenarios, incentives are offered before the correct behavior has been delivered. Reinforcements on the other hand act as after the fact rewards that let the child see that you recognize their success (Lavoie, 2005).

Although there are many options available to those attempting to correct social impairments, Lavoie suggests that most are fairly ineffective. He believes that social skill videos, role-playing, and social skill groups are not constructive methods to improve behavior. Lavoie suggests that these tactics do not represent a true environment for children and are, thus, deemed useless to their ability to apply what they have learned. In order for children to succeed, they must be given the opportunity to practice what they have been taught in real life situations (2005).

Teacher Advantages

Helping students to adjust to these difficult situations in turn assists the teacher. From teachers’ perspectives, believing in students and actively engaging them in their learning lead naturally to thinking about and reflecting on teaching (Escalante &
Dirmann, 1990). This process includes continually reexamining how and why they teach as they do and what they can do to facilitate even greater student learning (Bain, 2004).

In addition, highly effective teachers show a tendency to reflect a strong trust in their students, believing that students want to learn, and more importantly, that they can learn (Bain, 2004). This trust also helps soothe behavioral disruptions. A calm classroom is important not just for student learning but for teacher success as well. Research shows that classroom organization and behavior management capabilities significantly influence the persistence of new teachers in teaching careers (Ingerstoll & Smith, 2003). Teachers who have problems with behavior management and classroom discipline are frequently ineffective in the classroom, and they often report high levels of stress and symptoms of burnout (Berliner, 1986; Browers & Tomic, 2000; Espin & Yell, 1994). Disruptive classroom behavior is a significant reason why teachers leave the profession (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003).

Working with students to improve teacher knowledge of their skills and abilities is one way to become a more effective teacher. According to Bain (2004):

They [highly effective teachers] all had to learn how to foster learning and they must constantly remind themselves of what can go wrong, always reaching for new ways to understand what it means to learn and how best to foster that achievement....I suspect that part of the success they do enjoy stems, in part, from the willingness to confront their own weaknesses and failures. (p. 19)
Part of the process of becoming an effective teacher involves constantly monitoring and reworking strategies and procedures to ensure that students are being served to the best of their abilities. Oliver and Reschly (2007) state that:

Highly effective teachers are able to implement strategies appropriately to manage the behavior of individual students...understand that no single strategy will be effective for every student at all times and in all contexts. Effective classroom management requires teachers to be adept at employing multiple strategies and to be skilled at recognizing when current strategies are ineffective and modifications necessary. (p.8)

It is important for teachers to institute new strategies and constantly reevaluate their effectiveness. In order to successfully implement management that works teachers must have a full body of knowledge about their students’ individual needs and motivations. This requires time and effort to get to know students on a more individualized basis than is generally accomplishable in the typical classroom setting.

Conclusion

Students require appropriate social skills education in order to be successful both in and out of the classroom. For students that are struggling, the typical school day is not an efficient amount of time to pick up the social skill set. Students with pre-existing emotional and behavioral problems require additional assistance and individualized attention so that their needs can be adequately addressed. Furthermore, research shows that these meetings should take place after school or during a student’s free time. This
process, in turn, benefits the teacher for the insights gained from the time spent with the students creates an enriched learning environment where both teacher and students excel.
Chapter 3
Research Methods

Overview of Action Research Process

Action research began on January 24, 2008. I started by completing informal interviews with all of the students in order to learn more about each child. The purpose of this process was to help me determine which students would benefit the most from participating in the action research project. From January until the end of February of 2008, I observed the students both in and out of the classroom. These observations were aimed at better understanding the classroom community and interactions of the students. In addition, these observations allowed me to set a baseline of average behavior amongst the first grade students in that classroom. By March 3, I had chosen the two students that would participate in the study. I sent consent forms home to all students, however, in order to ensure that permission had been established with all students in the classroom.

Beginning the week of March 3, 2008 I began focusing my observations solely on the actions and interactions of Kit and Philip. This allowed me to see clearly what behaviors they were exhibiting towards the academic work, their peers, and adults. At this time I also began looking at school documents, such as school records and report cards, to determine past behaviors as well as academic success. In addition, I spoke to both the guidance counselor and my cooperating teacher in order to attain their opinions of the students’ behaviors and attitudes. I also completed an informal self-assessment on
my attitudes towards the children. This allowed me to track changes in my feelings
towards the students as the study progressed.

The week of March 17, 2008 I began my afternoon sessions with the students.
During these sessions I completed a pre-selected activity to address individual needs that
the students had socially. These activities ranged from simple conversations about events
that offered feedback as well as a chance for the students to open up, to formatted social
intervention strategies. These strategies allowed students through a five step process to
address problems and work through the situation to find alternate solutions than the
behaviors they chose previously. These sessions continued until the week of May 5,
2008.

As the sessions took place, I continued the observations of my students in the
form of field notes, journaling, shadowing, and anecdotal records. These observations
allowed me to see changes that were occurring in the students’ behaviors in the classroom
towards their peers and adults. I also continued to collaborate with both the guidance
counselor and my cooperating teacher through this process in order to gain additional
professional insights and guarantee that my observations were on track and had not been
swayed by biases. During the week of May 5, 2008 I conducted my final informal student
interviews in order to attain their opinions and attitudes. In addition, I completed my final
informal self-assessment at this time to gauge my final thoughts and attitudes towards the
students.

At the end of the action research project, I compiled the all of the data collected
from observations, interviews, and artifacts into an organized notebook organized
chronologically and by child. Once I completed the notebook, I coded for common themes (see Appendices C-G) as per the process described by Gibbs and Taylor (2005):

Coding is the process of combing the data for themes, ideas and categories and then marking similar passages of text with a code label so that they can easily be retrieved at a later stage for further comparison and analysis. Coding the data makes it easier to search the data, to make comparisons and to identify any patterns that require further investigation. Codes can be based on themes, topics, ideas, concepts, terms, phrases, or keywords found in the data. All passages and chunks that are coded the same way — that is given the same label — have been judged (by the researcher) to be about the same topic, theme, concept etc. The codes are given meaningful names that gives an indication of the idea or concept that underpins the theme or category. The list of codes thus will help to identify the issues contained in the data set. (p.1)

I then used the coded themes to determine how my students changed since the beginning of the process. The journal notes also reflected my opinions and attitudes. I tracked the changes that occurred over time. In addition, I made notes as to how these changes affected both my behavior towards my students as well as my teaching strategies. I compared my information with that of my cooperating teacher and the school guidance counselor.
Data Collected

Data collection for this inquiry can be best described in two phases. The first phase took place in January and February of 2008. A majority of the data collected during this time included background information on both the school and classroom students. This data allowed me to choose which participants would benefit the most from the study as well as refine the questions I would be researching. Data collected in the first phase included informal interviews with the students, principal, guidance counselor, and cooperating teacher as well as observation of the students during regularly scheduled class time.

The second phase of data collection ran from March until May of 2008. During this time data was collected on the individual participants as the research was carried out. Data collection took place over six weeks. It was gathered after school in one-hour intervals, twice a week, and on an individual basis with each student. Instrumentation included observations, interviews, and artifacts. A majority of the data collected came from structured and unstructured observations. I composed field notes, anecdotal records, and journal. I also collected data by shadowing the students, which provided another set of observations and notes. I conducted informal interviews with both students and other professionals. For artifacts, I collected school documents (student files and report cards). Periodically, I completed a self-assessment and inventory on my attitudes and feelings towards both the students and their progress. The field notes were then compiled and interspersed with anecdotal records, journal, shadowing, and other interview documentation and artifacts. Thus creating three data bases, one for each participant and one for myself in order to document teacher thinking and development.
Analysis

Analysis occurred concurrently as I collected the data. I reviewed each session after its completion to see if my actions were resulting in the desired outcome, or whether the program needed tweaking. As significant patterns emerged I analyzed these patterns and changes were made in the program to address specific issues. An analysis of the observations and school documentation served as my baseline for determining where the students began with their classroom behavior as well as their social ability and emotional stability. I used this data to determine the starting point for strategies and goals. As the process continued, I coded and analyzed my current observations and interviews to benchmark my students’ progress. As I analyzed the participants’ behaviors, attitudinal indicators, and progress, I adjusted the program to fit their needs.

In order to analyze the final data I first compiled all of the data collected and organized it into a research notebook in chronological order. My field notes were then reorganized according to the notes on each participant and what I identified as more effective to emotional and behavioral growth. I read the anecdotal records, journal, interviews, and artifacts and coded these documents and classified them by participant and effectiveness.

In order to analyze the data I began by coding for common terms. The data were transcribed, coded, and categorized using content analysis (Gibbs & Taylor, 2005). As these key terms emerged I regrouped the data in order to find themes that ran throughout the data. Themes that emerged through the analysis of the data included changes in social interaction, behavior, and attitude. I also noted a common theme that emerged about trust and the power of believing in someone.
Trustworthiness

Validity of the Research. When completing an integrated action, one establishes trustworthiness in four primary ways. The first is by ascertaining a triangulation of data through multiple data sets. The second is through “thick” description. The third method to establish trustworthiness is grounding conclusions in preexisting literature concerning the method implemented, and finally, through the inclusion of multiple voices (Phillips & Carr, 2006). In order to assure the validity of my research I met four criteria. The first and primary method of triangulation was in data collection. I gathered three types of data, observations, interviews, and artifacts. By using different methods of data collection the possibility of error or accidental bias is reduced. The second method, creating “thick” description was accomplished by using several methods of observations and taking extremely detailed notes. I collected data through observation as field notes, anecdotal records, shadowing, and journaling. This created a thorough data set that limited the amount of pertinent information possibly overlooked.

To further establish trustworthiness I completed an in depth literature review to ensure that both my actions and conclusions were firmly based within the preexisting literature on this particular topic. By consulting published literature I reduce the chances that my results are accidental. This step ensures that my methods were grounded and reliable. The fourth and final action I took to institute validity in the research was consulting multiple voices. By using multiple perspectives, that included my own as well as my cooperating teacher, the guidance counselor, and that of the students, I limited the chance of bias influencing my research. In addition, I can be sure that the conclusions I came to were solidly grounded in multiple viewpoints.
Potential for Bias. Throughout this process, I kept in mind my biases as to limit their influence on my data collection and analysis. There still exist however, several areas in which there is a potential for bias to effect the research. The most important bias to consider is my personal background. I am still a new teacher and thus extremely eager to have a large effect on my students. As such it is possible that I put additional meaning on small happenings, in hope that they were signals of success. Although this is unlikely as I took a large amount of care and precaution in the validity of my research, the potential for bias exists. As a part of being a new teacher I have had little exposure to a variety of environments. All of my experience has been in middle class environments, where families are primarily stable.

Another area where there exists a potential for bias is my preconceived expectations of the results of the research process as well as my expectations of how the students would respond and behave, both before and after the administration of the “one on one” sessions.

Additional biases that may have affected the study come from the environment in which the students were taught. Each of the students chosen were a part of a small group of non-White students at the school. Kit is Chinese and Philip is African American. Although under other circumstances their race may have had no effect on the way they were perceived by both their peers and by other adults in the school, this particular environment was over ninety percent White. As such the potential for bias amongst both the staff and students exist. It is possible that the expectations for these two students were set at a different standard and as a result they may have been treated differently. Although
I do not have any conscious biases in this matter, one cannot overlook the fact that unconscious biases may exist.

Limitations of the Study. The main limitation of this study was the implementation of the strategies and the “one on one” interactions with the students were conducted over a six week period. Had I conducted this study over a longer period of time, the data collected would have been more thorough and I would have had more opportunity to possibly have a greater impact on the participants’ behavior. It is difficult to track progress and make large strides in only six weeks.

Another limitation of the study is that the research project took place during my student teaching. This was my first full time position in a classroom where lesson plans and daily instruction were entirely my responsibility. While completing the action research I was also responsible for several other projects both in and outside the classroom. Both my inexperience as a classroom teacher and split priorities limited my ability to develop the action research to its fullest potential.

My preconceived notions of each of the students further limited this study. As described in findings, I made quick assumptions about each student briefly after meeting them. These assumptions targeted mainly what I believed to be the motivations behind the students’ behaviors. I later discovered that these assumptions were quite mistaken. As such, the study was limited by these assumptions.
Chapter 4

Findings

Philip

From the very first day that Philip* joined the classroom, it was clear that he had been exposed to things that other students in our classroom had not. During a discussion about why stealing is wrong, Philip raised his hand and volunteered the information that, “stealing is bad because if you do then people will come and put an ankle bracelet on you.” This was not the type of information that a majority of our first graders had access to or would express. The neighborhood he had come from did not just provide Philip with unique stories. It also left him feeling vulnerable and constantly on the defense. The other children in the classroom liked to touch. They liked to hug and high five. Philip on the other hand felt that any physical contact, even an accidental brush, was a sign of aggression and would respond as such. Philip got angry when students invaded his personal space, a circumference that was much larger than that held by a majority of the other students. I observed that the other students in the class were quick to notice the differences in Philip to which they were unaccustomed. Philip in turn noticed that they did not treat him the same as their other peers. On one occasion a little girl, Eileen* approached me and told me that Philip was not participating correctly. Philip responded saying, “she only told on me because she doesn’t like me.” Philip was becoming very aware of the attitudes that surrounded him.

* Names have been changed to protect privacy
The other students were not only responding to Philip’s aggression. They were also concerned with his behaviors during class time. Philip rarely stayed in his seat, wandering around the classroom to grab whatever item had caught his attention. He would also leave his seat to begin conversations with the other students. In addition to leaving his seat, Philip would call out constantly. He would not only yell out the answers he would make comments that were rarely relevant to the situation. This behavior made it extremely difficult to get through lessons and agitated Philip’s classmates. Philip had difficulties following the rules as well. He would often not be on task or following the directions as they were given.

Philip’s behavioral problems did not only occur in the classroom. These behaviors continued on the playground and on school trips. One afternoon in March Philip was marched inside during lunch recess by the aide. I was told that he had twisted another little boy’s arm. Philip claimed that the other little boy had instigated the assault by taking something away from Philip. Philip responded by grabbing the little boy’s arm. In a separate incident, Philip pulled the arm of a different child. He claimed that they were just playing.

In April, the class went on a field trip to the aquarium. Philip was placed with the lead classroom teacher. According to her, Philip spent the day running away and disobeying her rules. At one point in the day, Philip taunted a group of students standing on a bridge way overhead, urging them to jump. In the parking lot, Philip ran though the parking lot, ignoring the orders of the chaperones to stay together. It was surprising that even during a fun event Philip could not seem to control himself.
Originally, I believed that Philip’s behaviors were a result of a lack of discipline at home. However, once Philip’s mother was contacted, it became very clear that this was not the case. Philip’s mother was truly shocked by the discovery that her son was misbehaving. She assured the school staff that her son had been taught better than that and knew the appropriate way to handle himself. This fact showed itself when Philip interacted with adults. When speaking with a grown up “one on one” Philip was polite and reserved.

At our first meeting Philip acted unsure. Given his interactions with authority figures in the past, it was not surprising that he assumed he was in trouble. I did my best to assure Philip and let him know that his meeting with me was because I wanted to spend more time with him. He seemed relieved that he was not going to be reprimanded; however, he was not completely convinced. I started by asking Philip if he would like to do his homework with me. That evening he had two assignments, a math worksheet and sentences on family traditions. We decided together that the sentences needed to be completed at home, but that we could complete the math assignment together. As Philip and I worked together he seemed grateful for the additional help. After we had completed his assignment, I asked Philip how he felt about the other students in the class. He said, “I like them.” I asked him if he thought that they got along, and he shrugged his shoulders. Most of the conversations that I had with Philip went similarly. It was difficult to retrieve information from him. I believe that this was in part due to his young age. I also believe that Philip wanted to please and was unsure what to say.

Even after the sessions began, Philip still needed addition guidance. After analyzing my notes and Philip’s interactions, I decided to help Philip with his in class
behavior problems such as calling out and leaving his seat and inappropriate times I 
instituted a behavioral modification program using Popsicle sticks. A fellow graduate 
student suggested the technique. I attached an envelope to the side of Philip’s desk that 
held five Popsicle sticks. I told Philip that each time he failed to act appropriately, I 
would remove a stick from his envelope. If Philip managed to keep two of the Popsicle 
sticks by the end of the day then he received a sticker. When Philip collected five stickers 
he received a prize of his choosing. This program was also instituted for another little girl 
in the class that had similar difficulties with calling out. Although the program seemed to 
reduce some level of Philip’s calling out it did not have the ultimate desired effect. The 
Popsicle sticks worked extremely well for the other little girl in the class.

In an effort to figure out why the sticks were not working for Philip I addressed 
the issue in one of our afternoon sessions. I began by asking Philip what he thought we 
could do to improve his behavior and if he believed that the Popsicle stick method was 
working well for him. He said that he thought they were helping him a lot. I asked him 
how it made him feel when I had to talk to him about his behavior. His response was 
rather surprising to me. He said, “it makes me feel good [when I talk to him about his 
behavior] because it means that I will get better.” I asked how he felt when I had to take 
away one of his Popsicle sticks. He said that it made him feel sad because his behavior 
was not good.

As a result of our conversation I decided that perhaps Philip would respond better 
to the program if he felt as though he was more a part of the entire process. In order to 
achieve this goal I decided that Philip should create his own stick set. In one of our 
sessions I gave Philip the envelope and told him he could decorate it any way that he
wanted. He colored it green and drew a picture of me on the cover. He informed me that he colored it green because that is my favorite color. I then gave Philip the sticks and told him that he could decorate those any way that he wanted. Philip smiled throughout the process and seemed to enjoy having such a big part of creating his set. I then asked Philip what he would like his prize to be should he reach his goal of five stickers. Philip told me that he wanted to have lunch with me. I believe that Philip's behavior improved dramatically after this session.

Unlike Kit, the sessions with Philip did not follow a specific pattern. Although we always started with his homework, we varied the activities we did together greatly. I felt that in order for Philip to truly grow and change it was important that he form a strong respect for me. In addition, I thought that it would greatly benefit him if he felt comfortable enough around me that he could feel free to voice concerns and open up about the issues that were troubling him. Furthermore, I felt Philip needed an opportunity to simply be a kid. With his situation at home, Philip needed to act mature and responsible and 'be the man' at the tender age of six. This is an extremely high demand for such a young child.

On days that we met where Philip had a particularly rough day or a specific incident with another child, then we would spend a large portion of that session addressing the issue. I used Lavoie's five-step program to adjust socially unacceptable behavior as described in Its So Much Work to Be Your Friend. Using this program we would address the problem and possible solutions that would have been better than the one that he chose. Philip seemed to respond to this program. He appreciated the fact that
the program dealt with better choices and the mere process meant that I thought he was capable of better choices.

*Kit*

Kit’s inappropriate attitudes towards adults were blaringly obvious from my first day in the classroom. During circle time Kit sat beside me and rested her head in my lap. We hadn’t even been properly introduced and already she felt as though she could initiate physical contact. Her speech was soft and difficult to hear. She looked down and appeared nervous.

Over the next several weeks, I noticed that Kit rarely raised her hand to answer questions. Her reading, although never strong, had regressed. When I arrived, Kit was reading books that were a level 14, as determined by its difficulty and use of strategies required to decode. By the end of February, Kit’s reading had dropped to a level eight. Not only had her skills dropped, but her behavior had also changed dramatically. Instead of being quiet, shy, and reserved, Kit began to rebel. She had difficulties following directions, she called out, she was often loud, she talked to the students around her at inappropriate times, and became much more comfortable with her classmates.

Noticing the change, both my cooperating teacher and I began questioning the new behavior. The guidance counselor informed us that Kit’s father had recently moved in with his girlfriend and her daughter. Even with the change in behavior however, Kit’s tendency to latch onto adults remained consistent. Whenever in her proximity Kit would hug you, or lean against you, try to sit in your lap, or rest her head on your legs. She insisted on physical contact whenever possible.
Before I began meeting with Kit individually, my cooperating teacher and I created a chart to help set routine in Kit’s home life. The chart incorporated a checklist for both Kit and her parents. The items on the chart included removing her green folder, for homework, from her book bag, completing her homework, reading three books, packing a snack, and placing her green folder back in her book bag, among other items. Kit was to check off each item as she completed it. Afterwards her parents were to initial each box to ensure they had checked each item. Unfortunately, despite initials that indicated otherwise, many of the tasks remained undone when Kit was at both her mother and father’s home.

At the end of March, I began meeting with Kit “one on one” for one hour twice a week. At our first meeting, Kit seemed unsure. She reverted back to her previous behavior and became quiet. I asked Kit if she would mind doing her homework with me. Together we went through Kit’s math homework and word work. When we were finished I asked Kit to read to me. She did not appear pleased at the request however, she did comply. Kit chose a book that she had been reading at home. Although she had access to this book for quite some time, she struggled through the text.

In response to Kit’s drop in reading she was added to the Reading Recovery Program. She was taken out of the room once a day for half an hour to forty five minutes by the reading specialist. It was at this time that her behavior really became aggressive. She began rolling her eyes at requests and at times being outright defiant to requests that were made of her. Although Kit claimed that there was nothing new, we believed that the behavior was a response to what was going on at home. Kit’s mother had decided to file for full custody. Although it was unlikely that she would receive such a sentence, she was
nonetheless pursuing that avenue. The added tension between her mother and father was extremely noticeable.

I decided that since Kit seemed to be lacking structure the best thing for her would be a solid routine each time we met. In order to further instill a sense of format I met with Kit every Monday and Wednesday that school was in session from March 31 to May 5. Kit remained in the classroom until all of the other children had filed out. Kit stayed in the after school program on those days so there was no need to make special arrangements for our sessions.

Every session followed the same basic timeline. First, Kit and I would complete any homework that she had assigned for the evening that did not require parental input. Kit was fairly competent at math so my help was more gratuitous than necessary. Kit seemed to appreciate the help however. At one meeting, Kit informed me that usually she had to do her homework by herself. Kit struggled more with the writing and reading assignments. Kit’s reading abilities slowly faded. They seemed to grow worse over time. She began guessing at words that she did not recognize instead of using strategies to decode them.

When we had finished Kit’s homework, we would take five to ten minutes to discuss how she was feeling. Unfortunately, this time was less productive than I originally hoped since at the young age of six she had difficulty expressing any real concerns that she may have had. She responded with brief uninformative answers to questions. For example, at one session I asked Kit, “how does it make you feel when you rest your head on Mrs. Trussler’s knee?” Kit responded, “I don’t know.” I tried using probing questions such as, “does it make you feel good?” She responded, “I guess.”
Although I tried several leading questions to get her to clarify, I was unable to gain any valuable insights.

After our question and answer session, I allowed Kit to pick our next and final activity. She could pick a book to read, a computer game to play, drawing a picture, or anything else that we could do together in the classroom. I believe that this is the part of our sessions that Kit enjoyed the most.

Due to Kit’s habit of getting too close to adults, I decided that it was extremely important that I maintain very professional distances with Kit throughout this process. Although I believe that there is nothing wrong with giving a child the occasional hug, it was important that Kit realized we could have a close relationship and have fun together without having physical contact. That is not to say that if Kit tried to hug me I avoided her embrace, but rather did my best to maneuver situations so that touch was not an option.

After a few of our sessions, I did notice a slight change in Kit’s in class behavior. She did not always sit next to me in the circle. Rather she chose locations that were next to her friends. She seemed more comfortable being without the physical contact. Unfortunately, this was only true for me. On any occasion where my cooperating teacher joined our circle, Kit would sit right by her side resting her head on her knee. Although it seemed as though Kit disliked our sessions, I believe it instilled in her the idea that I cared about her well being. As such, in the beginning of the study Kit was insecure. As we continued to meet she felt as though I really cared and no longer needed to be near me or in constant contact to prove this. She was secure as my student.
In the middle of April Kit began to change dramatically. Instead of being shy and reserved, she became loud and talkative. She talked to her friends during lessons and did not complete assignments. In addition, she began rolling her eyes any time I suggested an activity in which she had no interest. For example, every day when the reading recovery specialist would arrive to retrieve Kit she rolled her eyes and looked annoyed that she had to attend. In response to the new behaviors, the guidance counselor began meeting with Kit on a regular basis. Although Kit was reluctant to open up, it appeared as though her aggressions were a result of the changes going on at home.

Me

When I first entered the classroom in January, I had no idea what type of students each of the children sitting in front of me would turn out to be. After about a week, however I had made some general assumptions. I half-heartedly labeled Philip the troublemaker. Due to his ability to be incredibly sweet and charming to adults, I did not believe that he was a ‘bad seed.’ I did however believe that he enjoyed making trouble and that he was going to be extremely difficult to tame. I attributed most of his behavioral outcries to his old environment. I assumed that his behaviors were a result his upbringing in a negative community where violence was often the answer to problems. These opinions changed dramatically as I got to know Philip.

Philip struggled incredibly when he first arrived in my classroom. He did not relate well to the other students and he did not seem to understand that the rules of the classroom were solid and unchanging. Philip’s saving grace is the fact that he is adorable and he knows how to play it up. He has a little baby face and can look extremely innocent and unknowing when it so suits him. Even in the beginning when I believed that Philip
was a trouble maker, I liked him. It was hard not to. When he spoke to adults he was friendly and well mannered. Unfortunately, as his poor behaviors continued it became more and more difficult to hold on to those positive feelings.

As I met with Philip I got to know more and more about his likes and interests. On one occasion, he informed me that he loved writing but never got enough time in class to finish. He also said that he really liked sharing his work with other people. After that I began asking the students to read their writing pieces aloud to the other students if they were so inclined. Usually a majority of the class would volunteer to do so. It turned out that most of my students loved showing off their writing. They were extremely proud of what they had written and were happy to have others hear their work.

I got frustrated sometimes when speaking to Philip. He seems to relate well to adults, he liked to please them. Yet he did not seem to have the wherewithal to do what was required for good behavior. Sometimes I wondered if he knew exactly what he was doing and was acting purely for the attention it got him, whether it was good or bad. I began to think that maybe if Philip received an increase in positive attention then he would not seek so much negative attention.

The same went for the answers to the questions that I asked him about his behavior and the other students. I could not tell if he was being purposefully dishonest with me about certain things in order to try to please me with correct answers or if he really believed the answers he was giving me despite their seeming inconsistencies with his behavior.

Philip seemed to enjoy the time that we spent together. On days that we were not scheduled to meet he would ask if he could stay. If I did not already have other
arrangements then I would allow him to stay for extra sessions. Times that we met outside the prearranged schedule were much looser. He chose any activity that he wanted. Usually we went down to the computer lab to play games together. This was his favorite thing to do with me except for hang man. I also enjoyed these occasions for I got the opportunity to truly see Philip as a little boy instead of a student. There were no goals to be accomplished or tasks to be assigned. We were simply able to have fun and enjoy each other’s company.

On the first of May, Philip asked to stay after school with me. I agreed and toward the end of his stay we began to play a game of hangman. I went first and the puzzle that Philip needed to solve was MRS. TRUSSLER IS SUPER COOL. Once Philip had solved the puzzle he turned to me and said, “You are super cool, Mrs. Trussler.” Then Philip got a turn to write a puzzle that I needed to solve. Much to my joy and surprise Philip’s puzzle read I LIKE TO BE WITH MRS. TRUSSLER. After I had solved the puzzle, Philip asked if I could be his second grade teacher, too. I told him that I would love to except that it was not up to me to decide. He then asked if I had to go. I told him that I did because I was in college to learn how to be a better teacher to which he responded, “but you’re already a better teacher.” It became very clear to me on that day that regardless of anything else the time that Philip and I had spent together obviously meant a great deal to him, and I meant a great deal to him.

The longer that I met with Philip the more I noticed improvements in his behavior. He remained in his seat more reliably and called out much less often. He began interacting more positively with the other children. The changes that occurred in his behavior became shockingly obvious on my last day of school when he reverted back to
his old ways. I believe that his regression in behavior was due to negative feelings about my leaving. Philip asked, as usual, if he could stay after school with me. I told him that we could but only for a little while. We decided to play one last game of hang man. Philip gave the puzzle that I was to solve. His puzzle read I AM GOING TO MISS YOU MRS. TRUSSLER.

Kit’s story was explained to me early in my clinical practice. My cooperating teacher and the guidance counselor told me about everything that she had gone through and was still going through. I immediately felt sorry for Kit. I felt as though she was a product of her environment, that all of her behaviors and reactions were a direct effect of the problems that she had been through and the conflict between her parents. I knew that Kit’s over attachment was not only wrong but also potentially dangerous; however, I felt a need to protect Kit and look out for her. Once again, my opinions were extremely altered as Kit and I got to know one another.

Originally I believed that Kit’s quiet nature was due to a sadness that she felt. The more time I spent with Kit however, I began to see that her low-key attitude was a type of quiet defiance. In our afternoon sessions, Kit seemed to appreciate the help with her math homework, but this did not improve her attitude. When there was a question that Kit did not know the answer to, she looked down at her feet and mumbled. When pushed to really consider the possible answers and work through the problem Kit seemed annoyed. She had the same reaction to reading. If we reviewed a book that she was not very comfortable with Kit skipped over words and hoped I would not notice. If I made Kit go back and reread the section she bit her lip or sighed. After giving her clues or strategies to help her decode a difficult word she would simply say “I don’t know” and refuse to put
effort into the work. At first, I was unsure whether this reluctance was due to a fear of failing or simply a lack of interest in the material.

As stated, Kit’s behavior changed from quiet and timid to rude and outspoken about midway through the action research project. I believe that the behaviors she began to exhibit such as calling out, talking to neighbors at inappropriate times, rolling her eyes, were simply different ways to express the same frustrations and emotions that she had been feeling all along. When her quiet nature failed to get the response I believe that she wanted, she took a different approach.

As time went on, I no longer felt sorry for Kit. Although I did believe that her home situation was the cause of a majority of her frustrations, which in turn fueled her behaviors, I felt that her actions were much more intentional than I had originally believed. I do not feel as though I got as far or made as deep a connection with Kit as I did with Philip and as a result, did not feel as though I had as big an impact on her. When I met with Kit she often seemed uninterested in being with me. At times, it seemed as though my presence aggravated her. Kit’s behaviors changed dramatically during the time that we met together. However, there were several outside factors influencing Kit’s attitude. She began meeting with the Reading Recovery teacher, an event that I believe fueled a great deal of hostility within her. She began acting rudely and defiant towards the Reading Recovery specialist and at times that behavior showed in the classroom as well.

Themes

Analyzing the above information, many new themes became apparent. For example, it became very clear that Philip wanted someone to believe in him. He wanted
someone not to tell him that he was a bad kid. He wanted someone to believe that he was capable of better behaviors. He needed someone to let him know that they thought he was capable of great things. Everyone else had already written him off. On one occasion when Philip was staying after school with me the Principal accused him of being where he was not supposed to be. His reputation spread quickly and made it difficult for him to be anything but a misbehaving child.

Philip liked being able to please adults. This was shown on several occasions. When we were creating his talking sticks package, he chose my favorite color for the cover. In addition during one of our conversations he mentioned that he liked talking about his behavior because it meant the behaviors would improve. Due to Philip’s early difficulties adjusting to the rules of the school and classroom, a majority of the staff began to expect the worst from him at all times. Even the principal assumed that Philip was always in the wrong. This was a great detriment to Philip. If everyone believes that a students will fail it becomes twice as hard for them to succeed. Simply by meeting with Philip and showing him that I had a vested interest in his success, his confidence grew and he began to believe that he was capable of behaving appropriately.

Instead of disciplining Philip for his shortcomings, I worked with Philip to find new ways for him to express himself. We worked with solutions, not problems. All of our interactions were positive and focused on making the next day a better one than the day before. Even when we were focusing on one of Philip’s shortcomings, it was in a positive light, concentrating on ways that we could change the behavior so that it would not keep emerging. By creating this positive environment, our afternoon sessions became something that Philip looked forward to and wanted to do. He wanted to hear what I had
to say, what advice I had to give, and he wanted to grow and change and become a better individual, both for my sake and his own.

I changed the way in which I interacted with both students. In the beginning, I gave Kit a lot of freedoms that she did not necessarily deserve. I felt badly for her and responded as such. I let her rest her head on my knee. I let her act in any way she chose since I did not see her behaviors as disruptive. However, as time went on I did not feel the same compassion for Kit. I felt as though her actions were deliberate and manipulative and as such, called her out on behaviors, a change that she in turn did not appreciate. The more responsible I held Kit for her actions, the angrier it seemed that Kit became. She was trying to find a new way to express her feelings that would be more effective than her past attempts. Unfortunately, this came out in an aggressive fashion.

I changed the way in which I interacted with Philip as well. The more time we spent together the more humanized he became. Although we all strive to see our student’s as individuals, it quite often happens that we end up seeing them as a collective whole that represents our class. The individuality often gets lost in the shuffle. With each after school session, Philip became more a child and less a student. Once I viewed Philip in this matter, it become much easier professionally to be more willing to go above and beyond. I wanted to do everything in my power to make him successful. Kit, on the other hand, who fought me at every turn, did not endear me to her in the same fashion. As such, I was less motivated to do whatever it took to help her through her problems.

Conclusions

As a result of this action research project I have achieved a better understanding of my students’ social and personal needs. Meeting with the students individually after
school, allowed me the opportunity to see them as children that have needs and wants that extended beyond my classroom and academic requirements. I got to interact with and teach the whole child. The time I spent monitoring my students allowed me to help them with personal dilemmas and problems. Through this understanding, I was better able to instruct them in the classroom, not only on their behavior but academically as well. My research revealed that understanding the whole child, their behaviors, and their deeper motivations, can truly enhance their learning, and an educator’s ability to teach.

In addition, a student’s behavior can both enhance or interfere with their learning. A child that is acting in a way that does not cause disruption may have a tendency to be ignored. This absence of attention does not happen deliberately, however one has a tendency to assume that a child without complaint is comprehending all the material and does not require assistance. This is not always the case. I found quiet and meek students also need close monitoring and assistance. Some students simply suffer in silence. On the same token, a child that is acting out does not necessarily mean to be disruptive. They may simply not know another way to communicate. Youngsters often lack the skills to appropriate behave and/or solve their problems. It is imperative as teachers that we take it upon ourselves to know each child, the whole child, and to avoid assumptions about motivations. We must always know, and never guess.

Having this deep understanding of my students helped me to not only assist the students that I met with, but better assist all of the students in my classroom. It made me more conscious of my teaching, as well as each interaction I had with my students and how it may effect each of them as an individual.
As a result of this project, I have also learned that personal feelings towards a student has a great affect on the way that we not only interact with that child, but the way we treat them, and teach them. After analyzing the data, I realized that after Philip let me know that he wanted to please me, I changed my reactions to his behaviors, trying to increase the amount of positive reinforcement that I gave him. Although Philip’s behaviors changed for the better, I believe that the change was more highly influenced by the relationship and bond that we had formed than the actual social programming. This idea was confirmed by his behavior on my last day in the classroom. Upset at the fact that I was leaving, Philip reverted back to his previous behaviors. When I informed him that his behavior needed to improve if we were going to meet as planned, he began behaving more appropriately. My research shows that the attitudes teachers project towards their students, especially when they are at a young age, can be more rewarding or damaging than anything else that goes on in the classroom.

This is incredibly important for all teachers to keep in mind since sometimes it is the children who are the least endearing who need help the most. Their behaviors may suggest that they are uninterested in the material or unwelcoming to our assistance. Often times however, students are just unsure how to express themselves. In the case of Kit, I observed that her behaviors became aggressive. At first, I found these behaviors inappropriate for the classroom and distracting to other students. I did not appreciate her aggressive attitudes or her disrespectful actions. After further reflection, I realized that her extroversion might actually be a positive change for her. The new behaviors may be empowering for her, giving her a new voice that she did not have before. She definitely needed new skills that would allow her to express herself in more appropriate ways,
however, this more extroverted personality would serve her better as she grew and
developed. As teachers, we must be careful of the assumptions we make about our
students so that these assumptions do not negatively affect the way that we teach them.
Chapter 5
Implications and New Directions

Implications

This study suggests a great deal about the power of the connection between the teacher and his/her students. In my future classroom, I will use this information to inform my interactions with all the students that I encounter. In the beginning of the year, I will set aside a significant amount of time to informally interview each of my students to learn about their home lives, interests, hobbies, preferences, and any other information that they would like to share. I plan to repeat these interviews at least twice a semester. I plan to schedule these “one on one” interviews in the beginning and at the end of the semester. This will allow me to rethink and reestablish goals for the next semester. Students who may need more individualized attention, during the semester, will be accommodated accordingly. The more that I know about each one of my students as individuals the more successful I will be as their teacher. This in turn will increase how successful each of my students will be academically, emotionally, and socially.

New Directions

This action research study has set additional goals for my future teaching. The findings have motivated me to further my knowledge about the whole child and treat my students as the individuals they are. Furthermore, I believe these findings can motivate other teachers, especially beginning teachers, to examine their biases and interact with the whole child. Hopefully as teachers inform themselves about their students’ real lives, both in and out of the classroom, the teachers will better connect and interact with each of
their students. The teachers can become better teachers and the students can develop their potential more fully.

This action research has helped me grow a great deal professionally. Although new teachers are taught in the college classroom about differentiated instruction and the importance of catering to individual needs, one cannot fully comprehend this importance until they are immersed in a classroom of their own. In addition, the college lessons do not go far enough into how much detail one needs to truly accommodate their students. This process has helped me learn not just how to get to know my students, but how to implement that knowledge into lesson plans and daily activities. Furthermore, this process helped to remind me that in the classroom, the students are not the only ones who should always be learning. As a teacher, I must always grow, change and use new information to advance myself for the sake of my students.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES
ART GOES TO SCHOOL – A volunteer art appreciation program that visits local schools in order to share both art history and art appreciation with students several times a year. Its goal is to enrich students through exposure to art and to motive them to become interested in art through all its forms and periods.

DRUG ABUSE RESISTANCE EDUCATION (DARE) – A police officer-led series of classroom lessons that teaches children from kindergarten through 12th grade how to resist peer pressure and live productive drug and violence-free lives.

JUMP ROPE FOR THE HEART – A national educational fund-raising program, sponsored by the American Heart Association and the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD). This program engages elementary students in a physical activity (jumping rope) while raising funds to support lifesaving heart and stroke research. This program teaches physical fitness and promotes the value of community service to students and their families.
APPENDIX B

Letter of Consent

February 4, 2008

Dear Parent/Guardian:

As you know, I am a graduate student at Rowan University. I am currently working towards my Master of Science in Teaching. This semester as I work with your child I will be conducting a research project as part of my master’s thesis. My project concentrates on the positive affects a mentoring program can have on student’s success in a traditional public school setting. I am requesting permission for your child to participate in this research. The goal of the study is to determine how effective mentoring programs can be for students that are still in the early stages of their elementary school careers.

Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate in this study will have absolutely no effect on your child’s standing in his/her class. If you have any questions or concerns please contact me at 856-____ or you may email me at __________. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Rachel Trussler

Ms. Rosemary McMullen

Mrs. Peggy Rowles

Please indicate whether or not you wish to have your child participate in this study by checking the appropriate statement below and returning the letter to your child’s teacher by Feb. 7, 2008.

[ ] I grant permission for my child __________ to participate in the study.

[ ] I do not grant permission for my child __________ to participate in this study.

Parent/Guardian signature (date)
APPENDIX C

Example of Field Notes

Entry
Philip and I met to discuss his behavior and what we could do to improve it. I asked him if he thought the Popsicle sticks were working, he said yes. I asked him how it made him feel when I had to talk to him about his behavior. He said good because it meant it would get better. I asked how he would feel when I have to take his sticks he said sad. We made a new stick collection and set a prize to achieve. He colored it green and told me he did it because green is my favorite color. He drew a picture of me on the cover. When he was finished he told me that he loves to write. He said that he never gets time to finish though. I asked him if he would like an opportunity to work on his writing in our sessions. He said that he would and took out his journal to finish the work he had been writing earlier in the day. When he completed the piece, he read it to me. It was about the types of chores he could do around the house to help out his mother.

Codes

positive reinforcement

attempt to please

attempt to please
APPENDIX D

Example of Anecdotal Records

Entry
Philip stayed with me after school to do his homework.

We completed his math and then did some reading.

Afterwards he asked if we could play some hang man.

We each took turns. I began, and on my turn I wrote,

Mrs. Trussler is super cool. Once he had solved the

puzzle he turned to me and said, “You are super cool,

Mrs. Trussler.” I had to smile at his sweet comment,

since I had merely meant it as a joke. It was then

Philip’s turn. I solved the puzzle he had written, I like

to be with Mrs. Trussler. I was so touched by his sweet

gesture. After the game, we sat down at the desk and

Philip asked me if I could be his teacher again next year

in second grade. I told him that although that is

something I would love, it is not up to me who teaches

which child. He then asked me if I could stay in the

class longer. I told him that I had to go to school which

was why I could not stay with the class. He asked what

I had to go to school for. I told, “To become a better

teacher.” He said, “But you’re already a better teacher.”
APPENDIX E

Example of Journal

*Entry*
Philip seems to relate well to adults. He likes to please but doesn’t seem to have the where withal to do what is required. I wonder if he does know just what he is doing and just likes the attention whether it is good or bad.

Perhaps if he receives more positive attention he would not act out as much. Meeting with him after school makes it easier for me to remember that he is a sweet boy and that the bad behavior is correctable. Sometimes its’ easy to forget how sweet he is and become frustrated. I can not tell if he is being purposefully dishonest with his answers and trying to please me or if he really believes what he says.

He says it doesn’t bother him when the other students tell on him but when it happens he appears frustrated and hurt. Once he even said they tell on him because they do not like him. It seems inconsistent.

*Codes*

attempt to please
positive reinforcement
attempt to please
exclusion
APPENDIX F

Example of Shadowing

Entry
9:00 A.M. During guided reading Kit struggled with the book that she used to be able to read. Mrs. R asked her to she was reading the book at home to which she responded that they have no books at home to read. While Mrs. R was speaking she averted her eyes and played with her hands twisting her fingers and picking her nails.
10:00 A.M. Kit is getting easily distracted. She is wandering from her seat. She has already done this several times today. At the moment, she is talking with another student about a seemingly endless variety of topics. She has now moved back to her desk and is coloring her mobile but is still talking to her neighbor. I have reminded her that the mobile is a quiet activity yet she continues to chatter.

Codes
- trouble with reading
- avoiding conflict
- fiddling
- inappropriate behaviors
APPENDIX G

Example of Informal Interview

Entry
I asked Philip, “Do you like the other students in class?” Philip responded, “I like them alright.”
I asked him, “Who do you like the best?”
He responded, “I like Emanual, Kit, and Josh. We play together outside.” I asked him, “What kinds of things do you do together?” Philip responded, “During recess we play soccer, baseball, and basketball.”
I asked him, “Do you all play those games together? Do other people play, too?”
Philip replied, “No, mostly just Emanual and I play during recess. Sometimes boys from the other class play, too.”
I asked, “So what about Kit and Josh, do they play with you outside?”
Philip responded, “No, only sometimes.”
I asked him, “So if they don’t play with you why are Kit and Josh you favorites? What do you like to do with them?”

Codes

attempt to please?