BeyondBehavior

Social Skills Training: Teacher Practices and Perceptions

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Reading class had begun, and Billy, as expected, was sitting there, scowling at his book. Mrs. M. recognized the posture and prepared for the worst.

"This is stupid! I don't want to do this dumb stuff," Billy mumbled.

Mrs. M. replied, "Well, you have to. It's reading time, and this is your assignment."

Billy became more sullen and continued to disruptively refuse.

Mrs. M. couldn't get Billy to calm down, so she felt that her only alternative was to send him to the office (or to Mr. B., the special education teacher) again!

Speaking out without raising a hand, interrupting conversations, refusing to complete work or to follow directions, becoming aggressive toward peers or teachers with the slightest provocation, and generally having poor peer relations are only some of the myriad of problematic behaviors presented in classrooms at any given time. The historical choice of methods to deal with these problematic situations has often relied on reactive approaches that temporarily halt the behavior but that do not provide opportunities to correct or change these behaviors over the long term. Often the interventions tend to be punitive in nature. In response to this, the current focus of both research and practice has been on a variety of program initiatives that utilize more proactive measures to deal with problematic behaviors. Several of these initiatives focus on the development of schoolwide support systems that emphasize a more systematic approach to problematic behaviors (Horner & Sugai, 2000). Providing appropriate and systematic interventions potentially reduces the need to rely on more punitive, reactive measures. Although not a new initiative, one such intervention that has had moderate research support is the development of appropriate social skills for students with problematic behaviors, in particular those students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). Replacing maladaptive behaviors with more adaptive, acceptable behaviors presents possibilities to limit the overreliance on punitive methods. Additionally, students who develop more acceptable social skills, which can be sustained within a variety of environments, will have more opportunities for success in their lives.

Social skills are the skills that people utilize to proficiently perform a social task, such as interrupting properly, negotiating for a desired activity, or dealing with conflict (Lane, Gresham, & O'Shaughnessy, 2002). These and other social skills are vital for the success of students within any given classroom. The delivery of social skills training is a process that includes providing direct instruction of the social skills, having opportunities to see models of the skill, role-playing the skill, receiving corrective feedback, and having opportunities to practice the skill in a variety of settings (Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004). The delivery of social skills is not limited to a single classroom, such as a formal instructional setting, but can extend beyond this setting and be supported and enhanced through a more subtle, ongoing process.

Often there is a hopeful assumption that students will just "pick up" social skills or appropriate behavior within the context of the classroom. This assumption supports the notion that, through observation or experience, social skills will be learned, reinforced, and generalized. This subtle, nonexplicit process is often referred to as "incidental teaching" (Gresham, 1996). There is power in the use of incidental learning as a vehicle to support social skills development (Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001). This type of learning often can take best advantage of those teachable moments within the natural environment. The natural environment is where the targeted behavior is most likely to be expected and reinforced (Elksnin, 1996). However, this more subtle type of instruction may not be explicit enough for students who have demonstrated significant problems in the development of their social skills. Interfering behaviors exhibited by such students frequently sabotage the best efforts of any teacher, and many students may not gain the desired outcomes from incidental teaching. Problems with these teaching moments may also occur when such moments may not be apparent or compelling enough for the student to learn a new social skill or to use and incorporate a previously learned skill within their social skills repertoire.

For students with behavioral issues, primarily students with EBD, explicit instruction or support is most often essential. Many times, children with EBD demonstrate behaviors that interfere with their ability to engage in acceptable interactions with peers and teachers, making them probable candidates for specialized instruction in social skills (Zaragoza,

Vaughn, & McIntosh, 1991). In fact, social skills development may constitute a significant portion of their individualized education plan (IEP). To sustain the development of social skills training, a program must be developed to provide the necessary experiences that support the student's attainment of desirable skills (Bullis, Walker, & Sprague, 2001).

Interestingly, although many agree that problem behaviors require social-skills-related intervention, the literature is mixed on the outcomes of social skills training (Gresham et al., 2001). However, even with these mixed outcomes, a systematic approach for social skills training is still considered a primary focus in the programming of students with behavioral issues, particularly those students with EBD (Elksnin & Elksnin, 1998).

The Study

In many cases, special and general education teachers struggle with how to support the development of desirable social skills within the time and resource constraints of day-to-day instruction. Teachers struggle to find approaches that will really work and are feasible given their current conditions and constraints that may be present within the school context, such as teacher skills, resources, and time. Extending from the premise that social skills training does offer a proactive opportunity to remediate problematic behavior, we wished to examine questions regarding what is really happening in schools, such as how social skills training was being implemented and the opinions of teachers implementing social skills training. With this in mind, we set out to discover how teachers viewed social skills training, which instructional techniques teachers used for social skills training, how teachers monitored the training, how teachers provided for the generalization of the training, and what teachers considered to be beneficial staff development in the area of social skills training.

Having effective social skills is critical to being a successful student, adult, or employee.

One hundred and eighteen special education teachers were surveyed to evaluate their instruction of and their belief about social skills training. Surveys were sent to elementary, junior high, and high school teachers in a large, urban school district. Seventy-four were returned, yielding a 62.7% return rate. In the 74 returned surveys, 49 teachers (21 elementary and 28 secondary) identified themselves as being responsible for the instruction of social skills training. Although all surveyed teachers were certified to work with students with EBD according to the state certification standards, there seemed to be a division of teaching responsibilities such that only specific teachers were accountable for the instruction of social skills. If the school identified more than a single teacher, then one of them tended to be the primary person responsible for social skills training, perhaps due to a particular teacher's expertise in the area or comfort in dealing with behaviors at a more intensive level. In any case, the participating teachers volunteered some interesting insights into the daily experience of social skills training and how it translates into the general educational environment.

Teachers' Social Skills Practices

Belief About the Need for Social Skills Training

All responding teachers recognized that students with EBD struggle with day-to-day interactions, as well as dealing with future postsecondary challenges. This was a particular concern for some secondary teachers, who expressed, "Having effective social skills is critical to being a successful student, adult, or employee and to being in successful relationships. But it is hard to teach and harder still to internalize and generalize," and "Transition into the community is critical for the high-risk population." The vast majority of teachers (94%) believed that social skills training was an important and necessary component of the education of students with behavioral needs. Several teachers stated that "there are some students who either don't have social skills or have very poor skills from home. If they don't learn them here, then where will they?" and "Special education students are often ill equipped with the social skills necessary for daily life. They do not seem to know the difference between appropriate and inappropriate comments. These skills are necessary for job and social environments."

Instruction

With the need for instruction generally accepted as a necessity, in what manner did the teachers approach social skills training? Regardless of whether respondents were elementary or secondary teachers, and, although it created some difficulties, the majority of the 49 identified teachers found time within their schedules to teach social skills (see *Table 1*). Formal instruction took place approximately two to three times a week, with eight elementary teachers and sixteen secondary teachers providing this level of social skills instruction. Five elementary teachers and one secondary teacher focused on social skills one to two times per week,

whereas eight elementary teachers and eleven secondary teachers taught social skills one or fewer times per week.

To ascertain how they determined what to teach, teachers were asked to describe what guided their selection of social skills. Did they rely on their own judgment of what skills were needed, create their own materials, assess the students, or use published materials as their scope and sequence for skill development? For both elementary and secondary teachers, their selection was a mixture of instructional materials that they had purchased and those of their own creation, indicating no consistent pattern. Common materials identified by elementary teachers included *Helping Kids Handle Anger*, *ACCEPTS*, *Activities That Teach*, *I Can Problem Solve*, and *Skillstreaming for Elementary Children*. Secondary teachers tended to focus on life skills and transition as well as on general social skills training. Their selected materials included *Life Skills Activities for Secondary Students With Special Needs*, and *Social Skills Strategies*. Thus, it seems that teachers have an eclectic instructional approach to social skills training because no particular instructional program or focus was consistently used within this district.

Although the teachers recognized the importance of social skills instruction for future success, there appeared to be a reliance on a more reactive rather than proactive delivery of instruction. In response to a question that asked how they determined what social skills to teach, 20 elementary and 25 secondary teachers identified that they relied heavily on teacher judgment, on understanding student needs, and on student-centered decision making. For some, teaching skills that addressed the most problematic concern at the moment took priority. Some teachers based their choices on how the student was behaving in their classes. For these teachers, immediate behavioral issues informed the decisions about what to teach. What they taught was determined more from their own judgment than from an actual assessment of skills. Although most teachers had proactively scheduled some time each week to teach social skills, it appears that some lessons were still based on a reactive position.

Table 1 The Most Common Responses to the Generalization Technique

	Elementary	Secondary
Amount of formal instruction		
Two to three times per week	8 (38%)	16 (57%)
One to two times per week	5 (24%)	1 (4%)
Zero to one time per week	8 (38%)	11 (39%)
Type of progress monitoring		
➢ Daily progress notes	6 (29%)	12 (43%)
➢ Weekly tracking	5 (24%)	5 (18%)
Other	10 (47%)	11 (39%)
Generalization techniques (multiple selections)		
➢ Train and hope	13 (62%)	20 (71%)
➢ Contracting	14 (67%)	17 (61%)
➢ Self-monitoring	8 (38%)	11 (39%)
➢ Training of relevant staff	6 (29%)	7 (25%)
➢ Assigning homework	4 (19%)	5 (18%)
➢ Setting positive behavioral traps	0 (0%)	1 (4%)
Staff development (multiple selections)		
➢ Workshops/In-services	13 (62%)	19 (68%)
➢ Collaboration	16 (76%)	15 (54%)
➢ Conferences	7 (33%)	11 (39%)

Teachers felt that time, resources, and lack of follow-through outside of the instructional environment limited the instruction of social skills training. Many felt that time constraints prevented them from providing adequate social skills training or support. As one teacher summarized, "I wish I had more time to teach social skills." Only a small proportion (17% secondary and 9% elementary) of teachers relied on the incidental learning that occurred in general education classrooms to serve as their approach to social skills instruction.

Monitoring of Social Skills Development

Once instruction was described, we looked at the monitoring of improvement of behavior over time. The most common choice for monitoring a student's behavior was the use of either a daily or a weekly format that required teachers to report on student behavior. Six elementary teachers and twelve secondary teachers used a daily progress note to evaluate identified behaviors such as arrival time, preparedness, cooperation, following directions, and assignment completion. Five elementary and five secondary teachers used a weekly tracking format. Other frequently used methods included self-reporting, point cards, and teacher conferences. The behaviors that were monitored most closely were those that allowed a student to stay in the general education classroom (i.e., compliance, preparedness, and cooperation). Administrative referrals were used less frequently than other methods, and, fortunately, teachers indicated that they did not rely on information gathered in the teachers' lounge, where students' escapades are often rehashed for all ears to hear. Interestingly, both an elementary teacher and a secondary teacher reported that they did not track behaviors at all.

Generalization of Skills in General Education Classrooms

In regard to the issue of facilitating generalization in general education classrooms, one teacher exclaimed, "This is the hardest thing to do!" Teachers responding to our survey were able to select from a list of generalization approaches or techniques that are commonly used within a school ("train and hope," contracting, self-monitoring, training of "relevant" staff, assigning homework, and "setting positive behavioral traps") (see *Figure 1*). Of these, the most popular technique was train and hope, used by 13 elementary (62%) and 20 secondary (71%) teachers (see *Table 1*). The teachers indicated that the train-and-hope approach had an observational component. The effectiveness of the train-and-hope approach was dependent on general education teachers' ability to accurately observe the targeted behavior, provide opportunities for practice, and monitor and report success.

All teachers indicated that they used a variety of techniques to support the generalization of student behavior (see *Table 1*). Among respondents, 14 elementary (67%) and 17 secondary (61%) teachers used contracting, 8 elementary (38%) and 11 secondary (39%) teachers used self-monitoring, and 6 elementary (29%) and 7 secondary (25%) teachers used training of relevant staff. The two techniques that were selected least often were assigning homework and setting positive behavioral traps. Four elementary and five secondary teachers assigned homework, and only one secondary teacher set positive behavioral traps to reinforce social skills development. Low use of these strategies could be because they are more intrusive, require more knowledge, or demand more time than more popular strategies.

The necessity of relying on other teachers with the train-and-hope approach brings forward one of the main obstacles to generalization. When analyzing the data collected beyond the direct involvement of the social skills instructor, consideration needs to be given to the potential lack of resources, time, teacher knowledge, and teacher skills that may make the data from the other settings incomplete. Consequently, teachers need to find ways to address these very different learning situations (i.e., formal pull-out instruction and the natural environment) so that generalization has the best chance of occurring. One teacher stated, "...[social skills training] needs to be done continually throughout the day as situations arise with students. They generalize much better when the skills are informally discussed and relevant to their own lives." Another teacher discussed the attempt to use the natural environment as the instructional setting, and, although it was apparently felt to be a successful avenue for instruction, it was not continued. "But having them use [the social skills] in other settings is the hard part. In the past, I have taught the skills in the regular classroom, and that helped with generalization." Finally, a high school teacher recognized that, if the students cannot generalize what they have learned, success within the adult world will be difficult to attain. "No, it is very hard to get kids to transfer into real life. If we could overcome that, I think it could be beneficial."

The reported inability to assist in the generalization of skills was obviously a paramount issue for the teachers. Their responsibility for the development and guiding of the implementation of a student's program seemed to be daunting at times in that student successes can be rare. Although some teachers in the study reported that social skills training did not seem to work, their statements may be the result of feedback from other teachers who simply did not understand generalization techniques. In addition, the variety of utilized techniques seemed to be difficult to manage across time and settings. Promoting generalization still frustrates teachers. Lack of support or knowledge often makes programming

Figure 1 Description of Generalization Technique

Train and hope
- Teaching social skills with the "hope" that they will be used in other settings. Although not a legitimate strategy, this is an approach commonly used by the surveyed teachers. These teachers rely on the observation of others as a measure of performance.

Contracting
- Pre-organized written agreement in which criteria for performance, consequences, and evaluation are identified for the use of social skills.

Self-monitoring
- Students record and evaluate their own behaviors.

Training of relevant staff
- Training staff members in behavior techniques that support the emergence of social skills.

Assigning homework
- Organized activities to practice skills outside of school.

Setting positive behavioral traps
- Deliberately "setting the stage" for social skills that are likely to be reinforced in other environments so that other teachers can reinforce skills.

Figure 2 Key Questions

Behavioral Characteristics

Systematic planning needs to involve the match between the identified behavioral concern and the specialized instruction (Walker, Schwartz, Nippold, Irvin, & Noell, 1994).

So ask yourself . . .

- Does the IEP address specific behavioral needs or clearly identify the replacement behavior? If so, is structured instruction necessary, or is there a need for systematic rehearsal and support of a behavior?

Skill or Performance Deficit

Recognizing that a student may either lack a skill or lack the ability to proficiently perform a skill provides a focus to mediate a problematic behavior.

So ask yourself . . .

- Is the reliance on my own judgment enough to determine what skills are needed?
- Would the use of a formal assessment tool, such as the Social Skills Rating Scale (Gresham & Elliott, 1990) be helpful?
- If it is a skill deficit, when will I find time to teach the skill?
- If it is a performance deficit, how can I go about providing practice for, feedback to, and reinforcement to the student within all environments?

Curriculum

Teaching replacement behaviors allows a student's program to be proactive.

So ask yourself . . .

- Does the curriculum provide the preferred approach to social skills training such as the inclusion of modeling, role-playing, providing constructive feedback, and promoting generalization (Gresham, 1996; Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2004)?
- What lessons support the effective use of the replacement behavior?

Data Collection

Ask yourself . . .

- Does my data collection show student progress with IEP goals or the development of the replacement behavior?
- Can I measure success based on the IEP criteria?

Generalization

Ask yourself . . .

- Do the teachers know why I am requiring them to use a specific strategy?
- Do the teachers have the skill to implement the strategy correctly?
- How do they provide me with feedback beyond the daily or weekly progress report?

for student success untenable and, at times, results in the education of students with EBD being a less effective adventure for all concerned.

Preferred Staff Development

All of the teachers recognized their own lack of knowledge and skill and reported a desire to improve in these areas. Thirteen elementary and nineteen secondary teachers selected workshops or in-services as their preferred staff development choice. Collaboration was selected as a second choice by sixteen elementary and fifteen secondary teachers. Seven elementary teachers and eleven secondary teachers favored attending conferences as a choice. Staff development activities receiving moderate support were consultation, reading articles, and formal classes. Overall, it seemed that the teachers preferred to have a more interactive type of learning situation, enabling engagement with their colleagues or other persons familiar with their experiences.

Where Do We Go From Here?

There is no question that programming for students with problematic behaviors is difficult. Not only does social skills training support the development of adaptive skills within a school or home environment, but also long-term effects such as unacceptably high dropout rates (Sawka, 2002) may be mitigated by a more proactive use of systematic and sound social skills training. What can be done to assist teachers in making social skills training worthwhile for students and for themselves? We believe that answering the questions in *Figure 2* may assist teachers in creating programs that support the development of social skills and diminish the likelihood of students using more troublesome maladaptive behaviors. These questions reflect concerns noted by teachers as they responded to our survey. Although these questions won't automatically

provide more time or resources, they may assist in creating a plan that organizes and utilizes the available resources more efficiently.

Summary

For students with EBD, social skills training may offer a fundamental focus for what they need the most: more appropriate social behavior. Teachers recognize the importance of social skills development, but the best manner in which to include it within the school environment seems to be selected in accordance with an individual teacher's personal taste, particularly within the general education environment. Best-practices in teaching social skills continue to be needed in the schools so that teachers can offer students with behavioral issues the education they deserve.

The information gathered from this survey provides a basis for discussion that will potentially lead to more efficacious and thoughtful interventions for the development of social skills. There is a need to better analyze the connection between the behavioral concerns on the IEP and the actual programming of activities within the school. The teachers in the study were cognizant of the need for social skills training to guarantee success not only in school but also in future postsecondary environments. For the majority of teachers, direct instruction of some type of social skills training was attempted. However, this instruction was driven by immediate needs and there was not a common application of any similar curriculum. Teachers relied on their experience and preferences to select instructional materials. In order to monitor the use of social skills, teachers realistically depended on other teachers to inform them of student success. This practice provided teachers with daily information, but it also fed into the difficulty of generalization. Although not considered a legitimate technique, teachers overwhelmingly selected train and hope with its observational component as their primary generalization approach. Ultimately, this gave them less control over the integrity of the intervention that supported social skills development; however, it utilized the natural environment.

Finding the balance between the acquisition of social skills and the performance of skills within the natural environment proved to be at the heart of much of the problem with generalization for these teachers. They readily acknowledged that professional development—in particular, in-service training or workshops, collaboration, and conferences—could help in achieving this balance. Regardless of how difficult the situation proves to be, these teachers seem to be a dedicated group who recognize the importance of providing their students with as many avenues for success as possible.

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