Explicit teaching of social skills

Does it lead to behaviour change?

JEAN HAROLD and LOUISE KEOWN

KEY POINTS

- Children need social skills to interact successfully in the classroom.
- The school in this article implemented a programme of explicitly teaching specific social skills to Year 2 students through describing, practising and reinforcing those behaviours.
- To communicate the skills, the programme used role modelling, role play and posters that described what the skills looked like in practice.
- The programme greatly improved the social skills scores of the intervention class compared to the control class.
- As a result, the teacher of the intervention class had more time for academic work because the class as a whole functioned better.

There are many children who have interpersonal difficulties at school that affect their enjoyment of and achievement in learning. *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) recognises the critical role that schools have to play in supporting the development of students' competency in relating to others. This article discusses a junior primary class intervention programme that targets children's self-control and assertion behaviours.

Oliver is a six-year-old boy in a Year 2 class. He appears to have no friends, withdraws from group situations and often laughs at other children's contributions in class. No one in the class wants to include him in their activities. There are many other children like Oliver who have interpersonal difficulties at school. Should teachers be concerned? What can teachers do? According to Hattie (2009, p. 107) "the most powerful effects of the school relate to features within schools such as the climate of the classroom, peer influences and the lack of disruptive students in the classroom".

There is ample evidence that children's behaviour influences the nature and quality of relationships they have with their peers and teachers at school (Ladd, Buhs, & Troop, 2002). In turn, a growing body of research links children's peer relationships to how well they adjust to school, including children's classroom participation and achievement (Ladd, Birch, & Buhs, 1999). Factors such as peer rejection and poor attachment to school may also negatively impact on a child's wellbeing and increase the likelihood of psychological difficulties developing (Australian Network for Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health, 2007). *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) recognises the critical role that schools have to play in supporting the development of students' competency in relating to others, a stance that is consistent with the World Health Organisation's position that schools have a key responsibility in providing environments that support children's social and emotional wellbeing (Australian Network for Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health, 2007).

A wide range of self-regulation skills and communicative, interpersonal, academic-related behaviours have been identified as important components of children's social competence at school (Elksnin & Elksnin, 1995; Gresham & Elliott, 1990; Ladd et al., 2002; Renwick, 1997). The focus of this article is on some specific social skills that children need to successfully meet the interpersonal demands of classroom learning, such as responsiveness to group goals and the ability to engage in prosocial and co-operative interactions with peers (Wentzel & Looney, 2007). In particular, the importance of children's self-control and assertion behaviours and a classroom intervention that targets these behaviours will be discussed.

The New Zealand Curriculum competency statement *relating to others* gives recognition to self-control and assertion skills. This competency includes "the ability to listen actively, recognise different points of view, negotiate, and share ideas" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 12). Self-control includes skills in negotiating, dealing with fights and arguments, telling someone to stop annoying you politely and respecting other people's opinion (Gresham & Elliott, 1990). These self-control skills are vital for children to successfully engage in group work, which is often a part of classroom learning. For the class to work harmoniously, it is essential to consider others. Furthermore, the quality of the instructional exchanges between the teacher and the child are influenced positively or negatively by a child's social conduct (Wentzel, 1993).

Likewise, children need to use assertion in a classroom to enable the interactions and sharing of ideas that are key to successful learning. When children discuss and share their ideas, opportunities for higher levels of thinking (for example, critical, creative and evaluative thinking) are opened up. Assertion includes initiating such behaviours as making requests for help, permission or a privilege; introducing oneself; and responding to the actions of others (Gresham & Elliott, 1990). In order to be socially successful, children need to be able to carry out these behaviours politely and respectfully rather than in a demanding or aggressive manner. On the other hand, passive or shy children often are unable to make their needs and wants known (Elksnin & Elksnin, 1995). In a learning situation, children need to be able to interact and

share ideas with a range of people (Ministry of Education, 2007). Often it requires the ability to make their own well-informed choices known to others.

Research evidence suggests that children's self-control and prosocial behaviours are associated with academic success (Elksnin & Elksnin, 1995; Wentzel, 1993). Further support for this link is provided by intervention programmes like Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (Greenberg, Kusché, & Riggs, 2004), and the Responsive Classroom Approach (Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu, 2007), that teach strategies for assertion and self-control. These programmes have been associated with improvements in children's social emotional functioning as well as improvements in children's cognitive skills. Furthermore, the message from the literature is that caring relationships increase children's desire to learn (Hawkins, Smith, & Catalano, 2004). Children learn more easily when they are in a safe, caring atmosphere and are enjoying their work. They are more likely to be motivated, with their full attention on the task (Hawkins et al., 2004).

A social skills intervention

The early years are an important time for acquiring social competencies that relate to positive social relationships and adjustment to school (Ladd et al., 2002). Research suggests several advantages to intervening with social-skills learning at a young age. Younger children adapt more easily to changes in behaviour and are more willing to participate in social interventions. At this stage, children are less likely to be a member of a peer group that supports maladjusted behaviour and therefore discourages behaviour change (Forehand & Long, 1991, as cited in Ladd et al., 2002).

From a developmental perspective, young children may respond better to a more direct, behavioural approach (in other words, training children in specific motor responses using modelling and reinforcement techniques) than a cognitive approach (in other words, teaching children social problem-solving skills, social perspective taking and self-control) (Beelmann, Pfingsten, & Losel, 1994). Given the age of the children, this research focused on a behavioural social-skills training intervention targeting specific social impairments.

Method

The study this article is based on investigated whether the teaching of self-control and assertion skills, with practical opportunities across the curriculum, increased these behaviours in Year 2 children. The study was carried out over a school academic year of four terms. Information about the children's social skills was collected in the first and fourth terms. During the second and third terms, the intervention programme was implemented for a total of 14 weeks. The intervention was based on improving social skills that have been described as being influential for children's academic achievement (Malecki & Elliott, 2002; Wentzel, 1993). Each lesson was structured around instructions, discussion, modelling, role playing/behavioural rehearsal, feedback and reinforcement, as recommended in the literature (Spence, 2003).

The participants in this study were 43 Year 2 students and their respective teachers from two classes in a suburban school in Auckland. One Year 2 class was the intervention class, with 22 students, while a second class with 21 students formed the comparison group. There was no significant difference in the age and gender compositions of the two classes. The students had an average age of almost six years. Both classes had more boys than girls and the same number of girls. The overall ethnic mix of students in each class was similar, with approximately 54 percent of the class identifying as New Zealand European. Other ethnic groups were represented in the classes, but no particular group in significant quantities. There were four Māori students, three Asian students and three students of other ethnicity in the intervention class, while there was one Māori student, one Pasifika student, six Asian students and two of other ethnicity in the control class.

Social-skills assessments were administered before and after the social-skills intervention using the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS; Gresham & Elliott, 1990). The SSRS was selected as it is a widely used international measure of social skills, which has age and gender norms that enable comparisons to be made with children's scores. The SSRS, which measures co-operation, assertion, responsibility, empathy and self-control, was used to assess teachers' perceptions of the students' social skills, problem behaviours and academic competence. Following the intervention, the teacher answered a questionnaire about perceived benefits of the social-skills programme on the children's classroom interactions, learning-related behaviours and their academic progress (based on her observations and the student's academic results).

The intervention programme

The programme was designed around six skills in the self-control area and five skills in the assertion area. Both classes had similar scores for these skills. These 11 skills were chosen because the intervention class teacher had selected a high percentage of students on the SSRS who never or only sometimes demonstrated these

behaviours in the classroom. The teacher had indicated this behaviour was critical or important in the classroom. Some of these skills were broken down into sections for teaching—for example, "compromises in conflict situations by changing own ideas to reach agreement" was taught as two skills: "negotiating" and "suggesting and persuading" (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1 THE LESSONS USED TO TEACH THE SELECTED SELF-CONTROL AND ASSERTION SKILLS

Self-control	Assertion
Negotiating	Saying no
Dealing with fights and arguments	Approaching and joining in
Suggesting and persuading	Including others
Telling someone to stop annoying you	Playing fairly
Ignoring someone who is giving you a hard time	Being a good winner
Making decisions in a group	Being a good loser
Respecting other people's opinion	Standing up for yourself

The programme by McGrath and Francey (1991) called Friendly Kids, Friendly Classrooms formed the basis of the intervention programme. The programme identifies 21 social skills that are important for successful classroom and playground interactions. These social skills closely matched the 11 skills identified from the students' SSRS score profiles. The programme was designed for primary school children and developed in Australia. The method of presenting each skill, as described below, followed McGrath and Francey's (1991) method fairly closely.

Step 1: Icebreaker: This was a brief period to allow the children to tune in again to social skills, usually by recapping the previous week's skill, giving them an opportunity to use that skill and playing a game.

Step 2: Introduction: This was a time to focus on the new skill for the week.

Step 3: Why learn this skill? Students need to know the benefits of using each skill. Step 3 focused on explaining this, and students' input was encouraged to ensure the relevancy for them in their context. The importance of maintaining positive relationships while feeling good about themselves was stressed at this time.

Step 4: How do you do it? In Step 4, a poster outlining the "Dos" of the skill was introduced. McGrath and Francey (1991) supplied posters in their programme, which were adapted to suit the younger students' language. The "Don'ts", which were a feature of the original posters, were avoided to keep the message simple and positive. Instead, these were addressed verbally during Step 3. The posters were left displayed in the classroom for the teacher's and students' reference during the week of practice. Each poster had a memory jogger below the skill title to motivate and remind the students why they were learning this skill. The students were also introduced to "What does the skill look, sound and feel like?" For example, during the lesson about "playing fairly", children were asked, "What would you see if people were playing fairly?" Their responses, such as "people smiling", were recorded on the chart. It was decided to describe the skill in this manner based on the work of Pardy-Comber (2002), who found that this helped to make the skill explicit for young students.

FIGURE 2 EXAMPLE OF A POSTER OUTLINING A SOCIAL SKILL

PLAYING FAIRLY

Fair players get to play more games

Do …

Wait for your turn

Say nice things when someone plays well

Get started and pay attention

Have your turn as quick as you can

Be patient while others have their turn

Play by the rules

Step 5: Having a go: In the first part of this step, role play was used to model the skill. Sometimes older students were trained to model both the negative and positive behaviours of the skill. This was an effective way to demonstrate both of these aspects. The initial modelling was followed up by as many students as possible taking part. Students were then asked, "What did they do well?" and "What could they have done to make it even better?" The "Dos" on the poster were used as an evaluation reference. Next, students practised the skill by playing board games or games suggested in Friendly Kids, Friendly Classrooms or through outside physical activities.

Step 6: Review: The last five minutes were used to recap the new skill. "What were you doing today?" Students were referred to the "What does it look like?" poster. At the end of some lessons the students coloured

in a smiley face to indicate whether they had achieved three statements about the skill, for example: "Today did I … listen to other people … speak in a calm voice … say why I agreed or why I disagreed?"

FIGURE 3 EXAMPLE OF A "WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?" POSTER

We asked the intervention class teacher to be conscious of opportunities to practise the skill during the week. They used a class reward system to reward the implementation of the skill. The teacher put a marble in a jar when she noticed a student using the social skills. When the jar was full, the class earned a reward (for example, board games, dressing up, soccer). The students helped decide on the rewards.

Results and discussion

At the end of the intervention, there was a significant improvement in self-control behaviours of children in the intervention class, with 59 percent of the class very often demonstrating self-control on the targeted skills, compared to 18 percent prior to the intervention. Very little change was detected in the scores of the control class children, with only 2 percent more of these children very often demonstrating self-control on the same targeted behaviours.

Responses from the teacher questionnaire also showed that academic time increased. She attributed this change to less time spent on social issues; the children having better work-related skills, such as being better at organising themselves for learning; and increased communication because the children were expressing themselves more effectively in class. The teacher indicated that the self-control social skills made a difference to the harmony of the class. Interestingly, she also noticed an increase in co-operation between the children in terms of tolerance and respect for each other.

Although she was not able to establish a direct link between the children's acquisition of social skills and their academic achievement, the teacher stated that, compared with the previous two years, it was the highest academic achievement the children at that level had accomplished.

These findings are consistent with Elias and Clabby (1992), who implemented a social-decision-making and social-problem-solving programme (SDM/SPS) that involved teaching self-control behaviours, such as gaining control and access to clear thinking, alongside academic instruction. The children involved in the SDM/SPS programme demonstrated greater sensitivity towards others, better understood the consequences of their behaviour and increased their ability to size up interpersonal situations for appropriate actions. The SDM/SPS programme was linked to gains in language arts for fifth-grade children and in social studies for fourth-grade children.

Our study would have been strengthened by the addition of observations of child interactions in the classroom. For example, direct behaviour observations have been used in similar situations to enrich the social-skills data and corroborate information obtained from rating scales (Lane et al., 2003; Welsh, Parke, Widaman, & O'Neil, 2001). The use of classroom and playground observations may have helped to identify more specific changes in social behaviours missed by rating scales.

It was not possible to make meaningful comparisons of findings by ethnic group given the small numbers of children in each group. Further research with larger samples of children from Māori and other ethnic groups would help to identify whether the findings described in this study can be applied to these other groups of children.

Implications for teachers

This research highlights key findings for the explicit teaching of social skills to young children in the classroom. A class-wide intervention gives all children the opportunity to acquire and practise social skills. Research has shown that targeting specific social behaviours (in other words, self-control and assertion) benefits children socially and, ultimately, academically, at school. Young children's social behaviour can be shaped to promote positive interactions. They can learn how to play fairly and practise self-control, such as telling someone to stop annoying them in an appropriate manner.

The lessons focused on a new social skill each week over 14 weeks. It is possible that greater success would have been evident in the data if the number of skills

were reduced and more time was spent on revising and maintaining current skills rather than moving on to learn the next skill each week. Further time and opportunities to consolidate, reinforce and generalise the skills may have promoted the children's learning (Ministry of Education, 2007).

The literature suggests that including the steps of role playing, visual prompts (for example, posters), practice and reinforcement will contribute to the success of a social intervention programme (Harrist & Bradley, 2003; Pardy-Comber, 2002; Spence, 2003). Role play helps young children in particular to clearly see the actions and words they need to employ. The poster that described the skill by what it looked, sounded and felt like made the skill explicit (Pardy-Comber, 2002). The poster gave the children confidence to try out new social skills, because they knew the behaviours that were expected. By leaving them up in the classroom, the teacher, and, more importantly, the children, could refer to them as reminders in context and for practice. Practice helped to embed the social skill in the classroom context and reinforcements helped to transfer the skills to other situations—for example, the playground.

Conclusion

Children at school learn in a social context. Social skills play an important role in the child's adjustment to and success at school. This research has indicated that explicit teaching of specific social skills, assertion and self-control, through a class intervention programme, can change children's social behaviour. The New Zealand Ministry of Education (2007) and the World Health Organisation (2004, as cited in Australian Network for Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health, 2007) state the importance of children being able to relate to others in order to live, learn, work and contribute as active members of their communities. The evidence from research supports this view. As John Hattie has stated: "the importance of social skills and social competence programs most likely relates to the subsequent enhanced opportunities that accrue from peer co-learning, working together in classes and minimizing disruption ... it should not be assumed that all students have these skills or that they could not benefit from systematic social skills interventions ..." (2009, p. 160).

Further reading

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JEAN HAROLD is Deputy Principal and Head of Junior Department at Tirimoana Primary School, Te Atatu South, Auckland.

Email: mrsharold@tirimoana.school.nz

LOUISE KEOWN is a senior lecturer in the School of Teaching, Learning and Development, Faculty of Education, The University of Auckland.

Email: l.keown@auckland.ac.nz

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