

Social Skills as Part of Class Instruction

Module 18

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Like all classrooms, Mr. Johnson's class of 24 fifth-graders has had its share of behavior management challenges. Since Mr. Johnson has started incorporating social skills instruction into his regular class instruction, however, things have gotten better. Mr. Johnson's lesson plans include a step they never did before. When he sits down to plan, he first examines his notes and curricular goals for embedded assumptions regarding student social skills, noting that a crystal-growing activity planned for next week requires the ability to collaborate in small groups, to follow directions, and to share materials with classmates. He decides to focus his attention on sharing materials. Next, he identifies students who will need intensive supports in order to share materials within a group, and makes a note to alert Ms. Haver, the paraprofessional who works with Andrew, so that she can arrange to be near him during that part of the lesson. In his lesson plan, Mr. Johnson also allocates five minutes near the start of the period to a discussion and brief role-play on sharing materials. That week, when Mr. Johnson initiates the science activity, he will spend the allocated five minutes pre-teaching and reviewing the behaviors expected while sharing materials. During the lesson itself he will move around the room, praising, prompting or intervening as necessary, and keeping quick count of the number of times certain students react poorly to sharing. At the end of class, when the class discusses the results of the experiment, he will include a brief discussion on how the material-sharing went.

Social Skills Instruction

The purpose of social skills instruction is to increase positive social or interpersonal behaviors related to participating in the classroom, and as such, improve learning outcomes (Kavale, Mathur, & Mostert, 2004). The development of social-emotional competence is a normal aspect of childhood and adolescence – and like any aspect of childhood, students vary in the pace and extent to which they have mastered a particular set of social skills (Berry & O'Connor, 2010; Bryan, 1991; Gresham, Elliot, & Kettler, 2010; Korinek & Polloway, 1993;

Samancı, 2010). By embedding social skills instruction in the regular classroom, we enable students who might otherwise be unable to access the curriculum due to social skill deficits to thrive and succeed in inclusive settings. Unlike interventions conducted outside of class (e.g., groups led by a guidance counselor), social skills instruction provided within the classroom setting helps to include all students within the regular classroom and to target support to the precise situation where the need is greatest – within the general education classroom (Fenty, Miller, & Lampy, 2008; Schoenfeld, Rutherford, Gable & Rock, 2008).

Research that Supports Social Skills Instruction

The link between social skills and academic skill development has been supported across a variety of subjects and student ages. For example, using a latent growth curve predictive model, Konold, Jamison, Stanton-Chapman, and Rimm-Kaufman (2010) found that teacher evaluations of children's social skills at the preschool level were predictive of later school achievement, a finding that has been mirrored in research literature (e.g., Gutman, Sameroff, & Cole, 2003; Konold & Pianta, 2005). At the elementary school level, a longitudinal study conducted by Maleki and Elliott (2002) found social skills were positively predictive, and problem behaviors negatively predictive, of concurrent academic achievement in third and fourth grade students, as well as acting as a significant predictor of future academic performance. In middle school, Wentzel (1993) found correlations between prosocial classroom behavior and standardized test scores, even when family structure, IQ, ethnicity, days absent, and other factors had been taken into account, while students at the high school level who exhibit behavioral difficulties are at especially high risk for poor employment and life outcomes as adults (Zigmond, 2006). These and other studies suggest that time spent fostering positive social skills is not wasted, but feeds directly into academic achievement.

Social skills instruction has been successfully incorporated into regular class instruction in a variety of curricular areas, including core subjects such as mathematics and reading (Jones, Jones, & Vernette, 2009; Marchant & Womack, 2010; Miller, Fenty, Scott, & Park, 2011; Walker & Hunt, 2011; Womack, Marchant, & Borders, 2011), as well as music and physical education (Eldar & Ayvazo, 2009; Gooding, 2009). Social skills instruction taught in this way can also be an effective remedy to criticisms regarding the generalizability and overall benefits of social skills instruction that is provided outside the classroom (Kavale et al., 2004; Maag, 2006; Quinn, Kavale, Mathur, Rutherford, & Forness, 1999).

When to Consider Social Skills Instruction

Appropriate for all ages. All learning has social factors that are necessary for success, regardless of student age. Therefore, bringing these prerequisites into active teaching within the context of each class's activities is appropriate to all age groups.

Use as part of a multi-tiered approach. Like all skills instruction, social skills instruction is most effective when used in combination with a wide menu of more individualized interventions for students with the greatest need (Carr et al., 2002). As such, it is well suited to settings utilizing tiered approaches such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Response to Intervention (RTI).

Inclusive and self-contained settings. Pull-out models of social skills intervention can be disruptive, counter-productive, or contrary to the ethical position of full inclusiveness (e.g., Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007). As such utilizing regular class instruction for social skills acquisition is an especially good fit for inclusive settings.

Guidelines for Implementation of Social Skills Instruction

Effective social skills instruction within general education is incorporated into the ongoing cycle of lesson planning, implementation, and debriefing that is part of typical classroom instruction (Schoenfeld et al., 2008). Let us look at the steps that Mr. Johnson might take in implementing social skills instruction in his general education classroom.

1. *Be aware of your expectations.* Rather than focusing only on academic content, Mr. Johnson paid attention to implicit social skill requirements embedded in his lesson. Becoming aware of these requirements is a necessary step in planning for them.
2. *Plan ahead.* Rather than becoming overwhelmed by the variety of skills involved, Mr. Johnson chose a single skill on which to focus and planned ways to intentionally teach it during his lesson. In future lessons, he will shift his focus to other skills, as appropriate.
3. *Incorporate Tier II and Tier III supports.* There will always be students who have particular difficulties with a given skill and will benefit from additional supports. Rather than work in isolation, Mr. Johnson collaborated with others to meet the needs of those students.
4. *Actively model and teach the needed skills.* Behavior change cannot happen in isolation, but must be supported in the context of students' interactions with teacher and peers. During the lesson, Mr. Johnson moved about the room not only to support academic goals, but also to praise or intervene in student behavior related to the social skill.
5. *Summarize or debrief.* To close the circle of instruction, Mr. Johnson included discussion of the social aspects of the lesson in his class wrap-up.

Cautions Regarding Social Skills Instruction

Social skills expectations must be carefully chosen so to coordinate with the IEP or Section 504 accommodations already identified for particular students: for example, a student with traumatic brain injury may exhibit poor impulse control, aggression, or forgetfulness that are clinical in nature (Gauvin-Lepage & Lefebvre, 2010), while students with a variety of other syndromes may also exhibit patterns of social skill deficit that are symptoms of their disability (Kiley-Brabeck & Sobin, 2006; Kully-Martens, Denys, Treit, Tamana, & Rasmussen, 2012). In such instances, individualized interventions should be chosen in coordination with special education and administrative school personnel. Finally, students with severe emotional disabilities can exhibit a range of aggressive or intimidating behavior (Cullinan, Evans, Epstein, & Ryser, 2003; Cullinan & Sabourne, 2004). If a student's behavior affects the safety of others, it must be handled immediately, rather than left to the more gradual improvement that is typical of social skills instruction.

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