

# “How can we use the Skillstreaming program to improve Student Learning Skills in our Classrooms?”

Giancarlo Crotta & Heather Robinson

In a time of drastic change it is the learner who inherits the future. The learned usually find themselves equipped to live in a world that no longer exists.

*Eric Hoffer*

## Biography



Giancarlo Crotta and Heather Robinson are enthusiastic, caring, intermediate teachers at West Lynn Public School in Simcoe, Ontario. Giancarlo received his Bachelor of Arts (Honours) from Nipissing University and his Graduate Bachelor of Education in Special Education from the University of Western Sydney. At the time of this Action Research project he taught full time in the intermediate division. He currently teaches Grade 8 focusing on English and Math and is a Special Education Teacher Consultant half-time. Previously he taught for three years in an intermediate self-contained behavioural class and a Grade 3/4 combined class. His goal has been to make a difference and help students recognize their strengths, and understand their challenges to enhance their ability to move forward and meet their goals.

Heather received her Bachelor of Applied Arts from Ryerson University (Journalism), Bachelor of Arts from University of Waterloo (General Arts) and Bachelor of Education from Queen's. Heather has experience in both the elementary and secondary panels in regular and special education classrooms. She currently teaches Intermediate English and The Arts half-time and is a Junior/Intermediate Resource Teacher half-time. At the time of this Action Research project she taught full-time in the intermediate division. Her passion is using the Arts to promote literacy and citizenship in the classroom. This is Heather's first Action Research project and Gian's second.



## Abstract

In 2002, an intermediate division was added to West Lynn Public School. The student population of the division is 75 students. Approximately 20% of the students are considered to be high risk. Learning skills as outlined on (Provincial Report Card) are lacking in many students. The authors examine their roles as teachers as they answer the question, “How can we use the Skillstreaming program to improve student learning skills in our classrooms?”

## Rationale

In September Gian and I realized that learning skills were a real area of concern in our classrooms. As early as the second week of school, homework was incomplete or not attempted, attitudes and conflicts were developing between students; problem-solving skills and initiative were just not there. In my Grade 7 classroom group work was

a nightmare. In Gian's Grade 8 classroom the work ethic was poor. It was very noisy, but groupwork was successful. The students are on a rotary system, so all three intermediate teachers spend time with each class. The Grade 7, Grade 7/8 and Grade 8 classes had very different compositions. The Grade 7 class had four students with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and one with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Three have informal Individual Education Plans (IEP's). By first term report cards eight of the 23 students were receiving R's (failing marks) in one or more subject areas. Most students did not know how to resolve conflicts appropriately. Ninety per cent of the students in the Grade 7/8 class had an excellent work ethic, and good to excellent learning skills in the classroom. There were two Identified students in September. One was Behaviour Learning Disabled and one was Learning Disabled (LD). One student is ADHD. Four had been attending the Enrichment program on a regular basis. The Grade 8 class started the year with 22 boys and four girls. One student had an informal IEP. In October a student transferred from another school with a behavioural/LD identification.

On September 10, 2003 Gian came across to my room, wide-eyed and in disbelief. He said, "Okay, so only two kids in your class did their homework. They had every excuse" (Journal Entry September 2003). An incident occurred the next day which provided further evidence that students had difficulty in social situations. After the first physical education class held outside, the class had "decided to have a giant pile-up on the field" (Journal Entry September 2003). Every student had jumped on each other. None had avoided trouble or taken a leadership role. By the second week of school, we knew that teaching learning/social skills were a must. At the end of September, it was clear to both of us that the Grade 8 class had a real problem with listening, attending and homework completion. Gian and I were very concerned about our students.

In October, we were asked to be a part of a Action Research project to pilot the social skills program, *Skillstreaming the Adolescent: A Guide for Teaching Prosocial Skills* a program by Ellen McGinnis and Arnold P. Goldstein. Other teachers in the Action Research group taught in the primary and junior self contained special education classes. This provided us with an opportunity to see the program across a spectrum of ages and abilities.

### Practice: Skillstreaming Training at the Elementary Level

Each of the students priority skill areas (e.g., classroom skills, friendship skills, etc.) became the classroom focus for a month at a time during the school year. Skill streaming training was provided in that goal area during that month.

The DVD enclosed in this book, will supplement the information outlined on the next few pages. The program begins with various class members who volunteer to lead the different monthly efforts and are at liberty to choose whatever means they prefer to teach the skills in the classroom. They might offer role playing demonstrations, lead art projects (e.g., featuring posters which display the skill), or bring in speakers to address the targeted area. Examples of monthly goal areas include honesty, "joining-in" skills, classroom skills (listening, question asking, getting clarification), and being a friend (what does it mean and what do you do?).

The program emphasizes self-monitoring and internal checking rather than placing adults in the role of monitoring students' behavior. Appropriate behaviors are broken down into small, teachable units and presented in sequence, so that students can progressively build upon what they have already learned.

Reinforcing students in the use of skills is an important part of the Skillstreaming program. Students give out rewards to students who are observed practising the skill of the month. Since each student may give out only three rewards each month, students must be judicious in their selection of students and situations which merit awarding the reward; and receiving a token is something students truly value. An all-school assembly at the end of every month provides an occasion for giving certificates to students who have demonstrated improvement in the skill of current interest. All students were targeted to receive an award to make them successful; however, five students were

not successful in receiving an award. Appendix 1 indicates this and more information which is discussed later in the paper.

Parents support the program in various ways, including giving their input about the program at school gatherings and reviewing the goal of the month with their children at home. The parent involvement component of the program is currently expanding, with parents taking on task assignments based on their skills and preferences as determined by a school-administered survey. For example, parents may get involved in such activities as computer data analysis, putting on a lecture series, and planning for a parent-sponsored night.

### Our Parental Involvement Data and Findings.

When the permission form to participate in our Action Research Project was sent home on November 6th, a Parent Skillstreaming Checklist was also sent home. In this checklist parents were asked to rate the child's use of 60 various skills based on observations in various situations. We observed that most parents put a great deal of thought into their responses. Often comments were written in. Most parents were very supportive of our action research. The most supportive parents indicated that they had already taught social skills at home and believed they were very important.

We found it interesting that the parent's evaluation and the student's self-evaluation sometimes conflicted and were inconsistent. Some parents stated that the student has the social skills, whereas the student acknowledged that he/she didn't.

One mother responded that her child "almost always" is able to ignore distractions. This was not evident in the classroom at the time. Her son had tremendous difficulty focusing. He was unable to stay on task in group discussions and would often play with items in his desk (November, 2003).

Another mother said her child almost always listened when he was spoken to. He responded that he seldom found it easy to listen to someone who is speaking to him. Out of 60 skills the mother responded that he almost always demonstrated 17 of the skills and often demonstrated 26 others. The student felt he almost always demonstrated twelve of the skills and often demonstrated only five others. The inconsistency is that the mother perceiving the son to have good social skills for 43 of the 60 on the checklist, while the son only perceived himself to have good social skills for seventeen. While his mother did not ever answer "almost never" in her son's use of social skills he gave himself 23 "almost never" responses. Where she responded that he often knew how to ask for a favour, he identified that he almost never knows. He didn't think he was willing to share with others; she said that he was. He acknowledged that he almost never held his temper when he was upset. His perception of himself, based on classroom observations from November to June, was more accurate than that of the mother's. From September to June he was sent to the office nine times for physical aggression, disruptive, disrespectful or inappropriate behaviour, and defiance (See J.L. in Appendix 1). The student also served more than 20 detentions. Parental support was lacking by the end of the year. The student who was least successful in the skillstreaming program this year, was well aware that his social skills were weak. In his skillstreaming checklist he responded that he almost never performed 23 skills well (eg. goal setting, dealing with anger, non-violent conflict resolution, compromise, telling the truth, participation in class discussions) and seldom demonstrates another eighteen well. He felt he only did eight skills often, or almost always (listening, fixing mistakes, asking a favour, feelings, doing nice things for yourself, saying no in a friendly way). Throughout the year this student was sent to the office 48 times and served numerous detentions (see A.W. Appendix 1). Parental support was weak at the beginning of the year but grew better as the year progressed.

Another mother was irritated that she was asked to respond to certain questions on the checklist. When it came to following rules in class discussions she said "How would I know this? I am not in class with her." Several other

comments were made then scratched out. By question 40 (out of 60) she stopped filling in the questionnaire and wrote a note at the top of the page - "I am not a child psychiatrist and neither are you! I'm a good mother. Are you a good teacher? Circle 1 to 5." (B.B. Parent Skillstreaming Checklist, November 2004).

Since the majority of our parents were positive and we saw the need to teach skillstreaming in our classrooms we began the skillstreaming process.

### Planning Skillstreaming In Our Class

Ellen McGinnis and Arnold P. Goldstein acknowledge, there are three parts to effective training in any specific social skill. These three parts are Assessment, Skills Program Construction/Selection and Feedback/Evaluation. The following outlines how this was implemented in our classroom.

#### Assessment

This was a two-fold process.

- The first step was identifying the teens who were lacking in skills.
- The second step was more formal and involved identifying the areas of skill weaknesses the teen has, in order to target specific areas for the future skill program to concentrate on. For an example there is a 23 item pre and post Social Skills Group Assessment Questionnaire developed by Goldstein & Pollock (1988) for social skills training with ADD and ADHD children. It is a quick and easy to complete tool.

#### Skills Program Construction/Selection/Implementation

Simply teaching a specific social response appropriate in a specific situation is was not the true goal of our social skills training. We felt the child must also learn to be flexible and organised in applying the skill in the correctly judged situation. Our skills program included the following features; built-in examples of generalization of skills to the child environment, provision of internal, as well as external controls over the consequences of the child's actions, and followed the child over the school year.

We were focusing on helping the classes develop sensitivity and awareness for their problem area. Often the class' and the adults' definition of the problem vary greatly.

We noticed the teacher or parent must work with the child to help them change their perception, and accept a definition of the problem where the child recognizes they are responsible. Without this first step being correctly accomplished the next four steps were completely ineffective.

The next stage is generation of solutions to the child's problem. A comprehensive list of alternatives was drawn up by both the child and adult working in co-operation. This was accomplished by a written list on either paper or blackboard. However, we avoided lecturing the child and constructing all the solutions, as this will subtract from the child's motivation to learn the suggested solutions.

"Means-ends thinking", is the third stage. This involves taking the child step by step through the most applicable solution, selected from the list generated in stage two. This could be as simple as answering another person when asked a question, or starting a piece of work early enough to be completed on time. Once agreed upon, the solution is broken down by the child, with the help of the adult, into specific steps to be implemented. Often this process will evolve the use of stage four, "consequential thinking", focusing the child's attention on the consequences of their actions. In the example of the child completing their work on time, a listing by child and adult would be

made of exactly how much time should be allocated to each stage of the child's task, with the adult reminding the child whenever they reach one of these stages.

The final stage is an attempt to develop the child's "sense of causality". This is accomplished by linking this particular problem and event with other past events and potential future problems. Once a solution for the particular problem has been selected and implemented, the adult should encourage the child to apply the solution to other problems they may be having. The adult helps the child visualize the potential impact of this solution on the child's relationships with others in the future. For example, the child who never completes their work on time, when they complete their work on time will not be rebuked by either parents, teachers or other children for being lazy. If this child applied the same time allocation skill to all their future task management problems, they may suddenly find that they are receiving more positive praise and recognition than negative.

An example of this approach in practice, is Goldstein & Pollock (1988) Social Skills Training Program to improve social skills in children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. This incorporates their Group Skills Assessment Questionnaire for assessment and evaluation (at beginning and end), and is implemented once a week over six half-hour lessons. Each lesson was divided into four parts. During the first part, homework is reviewed and skills taught from the previous week are briefly demonstrated. During the second part each new skill is broken down into a step-by-step model for acquiring the skill. The third part involves role play and practice of the new skill and the fourth part is the allocation of homework based on the skill, for the next lesson.

### Feedback/Evaluation

The simplest way to judge success of the program upon completion is to repeat the assessment exercise conducted at the beginning of the training program, and compare the result for some significant improvement. If there is no obvious improvement, the program has not necessarily been unsuccessful. Skills learned may not be immediately used or generalized into the child's social environment. Some children may learn the required skills, but still require behavioural props (reinforcers) or additional intervention for them to become an established response over time.

### Use Of Combination Of Skills

(quotes taken from student journal entries 2003-2004)

### Listening to instructions

***Kayla:** I have used at least one of these skills in the past week. The time I used the listening skills was on Friday during History. The teacher asked what she said to the class and everyone was talking and she said that people that weren't listening were not going to know what to do. I knew what to do because I was listening and I knew perfectly because I was listening. There were almost no people listening in our class at the time.*

## Bringing Materials to Class

**Courtney:** *I have improved on bringing materials to class because at the beginning of the year I always was forgetting my materials so I had to come back into class to go and get what I forgot and need. But now I am better at bringing materials to class.*

## Ignoring Distractions

**Steven:** *When I was doing my homework I ignored my baby sister's crying by using the five steps. (Count to five, Say to yourself "I won't look I'll just keep on working.", Continue to work, Say to yourself "Good for me. I did it.") But if it goes on for a long time (2 minutes) then I use it. In order to ignore it something else has to be on your mind other than the crying.*

**Sydney:** *I tried to distract myself from the people in my class but it's hard to ignore distractions. I can't ignore people sometimes, because they might be funny, talking to me.*

**Cru:** *The class was talking and I tried to focus on my work then I stopped and said to myself I'm going to finish my work then I continued my work and finished my work.*

**Kurt:** *I have used Ignoring Distractions at home when I had to do my homework while my mom was vacuuming.*

**Ricky:** *I've been trying to ignore distractions by trying to ignore Alan speaking out in almost every class, because he always talks out.*

## Completing Assignments

Jon had not written much all year in his journal. This was one of his first he completed with some thought (Feb. 2004). It showed his sense of humour. The question was to write about someone you admire and to give reasons why.

**Jon:** *I admire Captain Underpants cause he fights for all that is pre-shrunk and cottony and he is faster than a speeding waistband, stronger than boxer shorts and is able to leap tall buildings without getting a wedgie.*

## Social Skills

### Dealing With Group Pressure

**Lauren:** *In the winter time a lot of people were throwing snowballs and they told me to throw one at this one kid, but I didn't. I told them that would be very mean and rude so I didn't.*

#### **Offering Help**

**Cru:** *Over the March Break the skill I used most of the time was Offering Help. I used this skill most with my little sisters. I did this because if they would be playing with their dolls they would need help buckling or unbuckling the seatbelts for their strollers. Sometimes they won't let me and freak out. I think offering help is important because if*

*you help them without their permission it could make someone feel bad and become depressed. Chris was having a problem with a math question so I asked if he wanted me to show him how to do it and I did.*

### **Avoiding Trouble**

**Rich:** *(March 22) I used listening and staying out of trouble by when everybody was yelling before recess and moving I didn't start yelling out, moving my chair or talking back. Instead I sat, listened to what was being said and in the end I wasn't in trouble. I learned a new skill. These skills are good to use because by listening you stay out of trouble and get to enjoy school. Listening also give you an education so you are ready for high school, then college, then maybe university.*

**Angela:** *Last week during March Break I was avoiding trouble by not hitting April's brother with pop bottles. But he kept on hitting me but after he got bored and stopped. But then we played with a bed sheet tripping people and tying them up. But once he slipped it around my feet and dragged me all around the kitchen through the hallway and down brick steps. He basically pushed my buttons so I somehow got up. April and her nephew were just laughing at me and watching him do that. So I got up, nipped him with a jacket and then we just went downstairs and played Gamecube. So I made one right decision and one bad one.*

**April:** *One of the skills that I have done in the last week was Avoiding Trouble. My nephew Dalton took Mitchell's car wheels. I think this is an important skillstreaming to learn because a lot of people in our class are almost always in trouble and a very few people hardly ever get in trouble. If we didn't learn that then most people would always be in trouble.*

**Braedyn:** *On Tuesday, February 23 I help Kayla Jenereaux pick up her markers when they dropped on the floor. From now on I bring all my materials to my classes. Yesterday I asked Mrs. Robinson for some help when I needed it. Today I listened to all my teachers I had.*

What has changed as a result of implementing the skillstreaming program within the students?

Disciplinary referrals to the principal's office have reduced dramatically. The year before the program began, 50 % of the Intermediate students were referred to the principal's office for disciplinary action (from Principal's discipline book). Gian reports spending far less class time dealing with disruptions, and he asserts that the program has enabled him and students to have a common baseline of understanding and "speak the same language" with regards to social skills (Journal Entry, May 2004). Students and parents like and support the program. However, it is difficult to establish a causal relationship between the program and student achievement, even though there has been an increase in learning time which has resulted from use of the program.

The class's prosocial skills training program has been modified to meet the needs of special needs, and staff and parents are pleased with the way the training has facilitated successful mainstreaming of these students. Special Education Teacher, Fran Butcher, observes, "One of the things I like about the program is that it can be used with almost any level of kid. I also like it that the program is not punishment oriented; it focuses on identifying positive elements in kids' behavior. And it makes the [at risk kids] kids feel more a part of the school" (Journal Entry, December 2003).

Tom Kleven Principal of West Lynn Public School, is very enthusiastic about the role of the prosocial skills training program in meeting students' affective needs. "We have to give kids tools for interacting with others successfully and opportunities to use those tools," he says. "A program like this and Lion's Quest does that and more"

(Journal Entry, June 2004). The principal has taken it a step further and put a focus on using Skillstreaming next year in every classroom to develop the “right school culture” ( Journal Entry, June 2004).

In summary, this Action Research project was a great learning experience for both of us, as well as our students. Throughout our research we came to a few conclusions. First of all we found that parents were a key element in the success of the program, from the initial consent and checklists to support with discipline throughout the year. Where social skills were seen as important to the parents, support of the school and teachers were high. Where social skills were lacking in children, parental support was most often at a low (from Journal entry, June, 2004). We also found that skillstreaming is a useful program for the majority of our students. Students acknowledged that the program helped them. Often we didn't know that they had used the skills until journal entries (above) were read. While we had hoped that our efforts would result in a classroom full of socially advanced students by the end of June, this didn't happen. Some of our students who most lacked social skills, showed little progress this year. Some made advances. The students who had good social skills at the beginning of the year, demonstrated consistency throughout the year. These were students who had already had a strong foundation in social skills, either learned from the home environment or at the beginning of the year. The greatest impact was seen with those students who were behaviourally and socially “middle of the road”. This was evidenced mostly through their self-observations. We didn't make a large impact with the social skills program, but we feel that even a small impact is a positive one. “The pebbles are for you, but ripples are for everyone else” (Lynn Abbey, Action Research conference, November 2003).

## References

Goldstein, A.P., Sprafkin, R.P., Gershaw, N.J. & Klein, P. (1980).

*Skillstreaming the adolescent: A structured learning approach to teaching prosocial skills.* Champlain, IL: Research Press



## Appendix 1

## Records of Visits to Principal's Office : Sept. 12, 2003 - June 14, 2004

Grade 7 Student	S	O	N	D	J	F	M	A	M	J	Total
S.Br.					B PA	B					3
A.G.							PA				1
J.K.					TH D NC B	B	DR OP TH B	D D DP DR DR	D DR	PA	17
J.L.		DP		TH		TH TH	DR TH DR PA	PA	I D NC DR		13
C.M.							B	TH NC			3
R.M.					TH B	DR	OP				4
M.Ph.	P A		PA		B	B				PA	5



J.J.			OP								1
L.L.					PA	D		DR	PA		7
						NC		DR			
								NC			
M.Pe.	T	DP	D	NC	TH	DR	DR	DR	D		17
			NC	TH	D		TH		B		
					PA				DR		
					I						
A.Wh.			Th	D		NC	DR	DR	I	NC	17
								I	DR	DR	
								D	B		
								DR	NC		
									NC		
									NC		
									PA		
<b>Total</b>											<b>48</b>
<b>Grade 8</b>											

Legend:

B: bullying

D: disrespectful

DR: disruptive in class

DP: destruction of property

I: indecent exposure

OP: obscene pictures

PA: physical aggression

NC: non-compliant

T: theft

TH: throwing