

How can I improve my ability to effectively teach social skills so that students can apply the skills to enhance their life relationships in a meaningful way?

Wendy Lauwerier

Biography



Teaching for Wendy Lauwerier is a third career. The majority of her eight years of teaching has been in special education. She has her specialist in special education and currently teaches a self-contained behaviour classroom at Delhi Public School.

Abstract

This is an account of a Special Education Teacher striving to improve the social skills of her students. They are in a Self-Contained Behaviour class and had a need for an improved ability for relating to other students. Recorded classroom observations and the comments of professional colleagues have provided evidence for this study.

Background

The term “Action Research” has been part of GEDSB landscape for the last several years. I have even worked with other teachers who have “conducted” Action Research. One day I received a call from the Coordinator of Special Education, Peggy Blair, inviting me to be part of an Action Research project. I was enticed for two reasons. First, I would receive a complete social skills program (complete with training) for my special education classroom. And, second, I had been contemplating putting more emphasis on social skills training as part of the alternative programming. I knew I wanted to improve how I taught social skills to the students, but I didn’t know how to begin.

Even today, I find it difficult to articulate clearly and concisely what Action Research is because it is something so fundamentally different from any type of Professional Development(PD) I have ever taken part in. It is the simply-complex notion that you decide what area of your practice you want to improve, think about how that improvement will better your practice, develop and implement a plan for improvement and, then through your own method of data collection, make and evaluate the change(s). What makes this approach so different is that you are the driving force, and you decide what needs improvement not someone else. Traditionally, professional development involves someone standing in front of a captive audience telling them how they will improve their practice. While the “magic bullet” of the year may be in and of itself a reasonable and good approach to improving board-wide practice, the reason these programs do not necessarily reflect the success rate hoped for, is that these umbrella decisions often do not blend with individual teacher values and beliefs.

Research supports the hypotheses that all stakeholders must believe in and be committed to change in order for it to be truly successful ... “in action research, everyone takes responsibility for their own practice and for asking their own questions ... you are showing your intent to learn more about a particular issue [of interest and importance to you] within a particular situation.” (McNiff19,20) Although reasonably clear about why I wanted to become involved (to support my students to improve their ability to get along with others), I was still very unsure about how to actually do this.

I teach a self-contained special education classroom called Primary Behaviour. The class is currently composed of primary-aged students with serious behavioural issues. The students may also demonstrate significant safety issues, developmental delays and have other psychiatric disorders and diagnoses such as (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Oppositional Defiance Disorder (ODD). Most of the students take a variety of medications to assist them with attention, concentration and mood stabilization. They are all in need of long-term special education support and share the common need of having an inability to build and maintain interpersonal relationships (poor social skills).

The Question

How can I improve my ability to effectively teach social skills so that students can apply the skills to enhance their life relationships in a meaningful way?

The Process

My first few months were fraught with many false starts and much trial and error. In retrospect, I realize my ambitions were unrealistic and my focus much too broad.

I really thought I could teach one new [social] skill each week and reinforce it until the next lesson. WRONG! The behaviours have been so frequent and so severe since I took this project on, I most often do it informally ... without the chart paper and all the brainstorming and the role-playing. We are teaching social skills so much and in so many different contexts it would be impossible to track (Journal Entry, January 9, 2004).

Another factor was, like all teachers, I was feeling the pressure to get through as much of the ministry-directed curriculum as I could and yet I knew my students needed alternative programming - particularly social skills training. How could I possibly do both? Could I find a balance between curriculum and alternative programming? Heather Robinson expressed the same frustration while discussing her Grade 7 classroom at an October 2003 Action Research Meeting,

I won't be able to get through the curriculum because of the students' lack of basic social skills and poor learning skills. Their ability to learn is negatively affected and they need to be taught how to get along with each other first (Journal Entry, October 2003).

As life often does, a solution to my dilemma was presented to me through an unexpected source—a PD workshop. The course I had originally signed up for had been posted incorrectly and the instructor suggested that I find a different workshop to attend that day. As I wandered through the halls, I spotted a sign reading “Positive Discipline”. The workshop was presented by Janice Boose. Janice is an excellent presenter, who has a background in special education. She used an engaging and interactive format to help outline and discuss classroom management strategies and techniques based on a book called “Positive Discipline”. The book was written by a five member team: June Nelsen, Linda Escobar, Kate Ortolano, Roslyn Duffy and Deborah Owen-Sohocki. This team had traveled the world listening to teacher concerns about the everyday problems and discipline issues which interfere with their

ability to deliver a curriculum-rich program. The book outlines 17 fundamental tools of positive discipline ... one of them being “Class Meetings”.

The authors of this book “believe that the development of social interest in all people would solve most of the problems in the world ... and that [teachers] must understand the importance of developing students’ social interest. Social interest is as important as academic subjects (if not more important).” They go on to explain that time set aside for class meetings can be used to “teach students decision-making skills, problem-solving skills and social interest.” (Nelsen, et al, 34,35)

It still took a couple of weeks, and with the help and support of Alison Ebdon and Dorothy Barker (two educational assistants in my classroom), I finally decided on what I believed was the most appropriate forum from which to conduct my Action Research - a combination of six specific social skills taught and reinforced during morning snack time.

Commencing in January of 2004, our classroom began a daily tradition called Class Meeting. Class Meetings have turned out to be an effective and fun way of covering a myriad of topics and social skills.

Here is a description of how it works.

- time frame from 9:30 - 9:45 am
- all students have an assigned job (chairs, set table, serviettes, etc. - it is important to take the time to ‘train’ the student ‘how’ to do their job)
- all students and staff sit around the round table to enjoy their morning snack and juice (snacks must be healthy - no junk food allowed)
- as the children gather around the table, they are asked if they would like a drink of juice and/or a snack on the days the snack program is running (this is a great time to practice “yes please or no thank you”)
- we begin by toasting/greeting each other individually saying our good mornings and making eye contact with everyone (smiles can’t help but pop up too)
- no one begins eating until all are seated and we have completed our “good morning toast”
- we usually have an agenda, although some days there are no issues to discuss. The Class Meeting is the place we make class decisions regarding everything from how to celebrate upcoming birthdays to dealing with behavioural issues. We have group discussions and problem solve issues pertaining to everyday real-life problems the students are encountering that include fighting over toys or who will be first in line.
- the Student of the Week completes the calendar during this time, and can, if s/he wishes, bring something interesting and educational (not toys) for the Magic Bag. The student secretly puts an object in the bag and the other students can only ask questions to try to figure out what is in the bag.
- when we are finished our discussion and our food and drink, it is the job of the students to recycle, clean the table and put away the extra chairs.

As you can see, each day we cover curriculum-related topics such as: math (measurement - calendar routine); problem-solving; oral communication skills, as well as aspects from our alternative programming regarding behaviour management and social skills training. In addition to items on the agenda, our class meeting is a time of fellowship, social connection and building of group consensus. Rarely behavioural issues or tantrums erupted during this time to spoil this important part of our day. In May of 2004, I tape recorded what the students had to say about the Class Meetings, “I like the food and the juice and saying good morning to everybody. I don’t like it when people have problems. I like to talk about it and solve it.”

“The stuff I like about the class meetings are the food and the drinks. I like everyone to be happy every day. The thing I don’t like is not getting to eat until everyone is sitting down.”

“I like the class meetings because you get to talk to everybody and you get to talk about things, you get to have drinks and eat with everybody. The thing I hate is that you have to wait to eat ... but I like it mostly because you get to talk about problems. It’s really fun.”

“I like the way you get to say good morning to everybody ... it makes you feel like a family.”

“I think our class meetings are good because we get to know each other better than if we didn’t have a class meeting. We get to have our snacks and juice. We get to say good morning to everybody. We get to do the calendar and have the Magic Bag.”

“I like the meeting and the food and when we say good morning and talk about everyone. What I hate about it is that we have to wait until everyone is done their food.”

“I like all the stuff at the class meeting. I like talking about everything and saying good morning.”

“I like when people look at each other and they get to sit beside their best friends. Everybody is nice to you and makes eye contact at you.”

Specifically we work on six different social skills, although many “teachable social skills” moments present themselves on an almost daily basis. I use the ‘stoplight’ analogy to teach social skills: STOP (red) rather than immediately reacting - take a moment to pause and THINK (yellow) first about what you will say, and if you feel what you want to say is appropriate for that conversation at that time, wait for a pause in the conversation and in a polite voice talk or DO (green). Here is an example of a child working their way through entering in a conversation.

STOP before blurting out, ask myself do I WANT to join in? Yes or No

THINK if No, keep quiet, if Yes ask myself do I have something to say about the same topic ?

DO wait for the others to stop talking, look at them and use a polite voice to say WHAT is important

The Feedback

I visited Wendy's classroom in March to see how Skillstreaming was progressing. I was lucky enough to be included in a "class meeting" with five of her students. I was really impressed at how quickly the kids completed their assigned jobs in order to get the meeting underway. Once the table was set, Alex invited me to join the group at the table.

Wendy had picked specific social skills related to table manners that a person would need in a public setting that she reinforced several times throughout the class meeting. During the meeting the kids raised their hands at appropriate times, and with encouragement, waited until they were called upon before they spoke. I also noticed that the students were making some eye contact with the person to whom they were speaking, another of Wendy's social goals focus (Thompson, 2004).

I think it is an excellent way for the student to learn table manner/rules for conversing/problem solving, etc. They were able to put into practice the skills they were taught - unfortunately, they didn't seem able to apply these skills in the "outside world", for example at recess or on the bus, etc. Class Meetings have been a great way to encourage entire class discussions regarding specific problems or ideas in a non-threatening way. I hope [the meetings] continue, as it was also a great way to build positive relationships with each student. I also think every primary grade should try to do a similar thing (Barker, 2004).

I feel the class meetings have been very beneficial for all of the students. I have seen great accomplishments from each individual student (re: improved manners, more patience and more cooperation with each other). Our class meetings have been a huge success, very rewarding and I feel this is a very pertinent to our students' needs and should be continued on an ongoing basis (Ebdon, 2004).

The social skills training in Wendy's classroom offered students many opportunities for learning. Participants set the table, checked that everyone present had all necessary materials, practised taking turns and taking part in conversation. In addition, students enjoyed a healthy snack. The skills learned and practised in this safe environment will be applied in other settings. This is an example of education for real life experiences, invaluable training for all members of a caring and healthy society (Dowds, 2004).

The Conclusion

In the behaviour classroom, the notion of using a "stoplight" or the green, yellow and red colour-coding system is a familiar one. We have a posted behaviour modification chart where the children's behaviour is tracked and recorded as green (good), yellow (several reminders) and red (non-compliant) throughout the day. This chart is an intricate part of the alternative programming currently in place. For the most part, prompting with non-verbal cues (colours) helps to assist the students make better choices regarding their behaviour. And, as a follow-up to that, we have begun to refer to the "stoplight" to cue them to work through the 3-part problem-solving model in an effort to help them decide for themselves whether or not what they want to say at that particular moment is relevant to the conversation. Impulsive outbursts continue to be problematic among all the students in the behaviour classroom.

My greatest concern throughout the project has been ... will the students use the social skills taught independently and without prompting on their own and in a setting different from the classroom at the Class Meeting? Alida Hunt is an Occasional Teacher who frequently covers for me during my absences,

I have found that around the table at snack time that the students are usually courteous and wait for their turn to talk. I think this is partly due to the fact that there are 3 adults at the table giving them their undivided attention and quickly “stepping on” anyone that speaks out of turn ... at these times [class meeting] the children do seem to be more polite. At other times, they revert back to their rude, aggressive and push ways. Hopefully though, even if they learn one good social skill and use it only a few times, that is better than not at all (Hunt, 2004).

My overall conclusion is that the students have not yet begun to independently and consistently apply the STOP, THINK, DO model to help themselves interact in a socially acceptable manner. This is particularly true when the students are in a more unstructured environment like the playground, lining up or in the gym. Perhaps my expectations are premature, given that we have only been working with the model of Class Meeting for about five months.

Another possible reason the social skills training has not shown the success rate I had hoped for is that more continuity and consistency is needed between school and home. I’m not ready to give up yet. I feel that the specific teaching of social skills and the daily opportunity for fellowship are a vital part of my classroom. I plan to include this model during the next school year. The difference will be, however, that I will begin the program in September and include a description of the class meeting and the model of how the social skills will be taught as part of the parent orientation/information meeting. I may also have parents and guardians complete the rubric (see Appendix A) in the fall and ask them to work on the same skills outlined. I may also follow up with sending another rubric home the following spring to see if social skills improve. I believe a strong home and school connection is absolutely vital for the students to make even slight changes in their behavioural functioning.

Next Steps

I will continue to do all I can to encourage, support and instruct my students to STOP and THINK about what their choices are in any given situation (this also means considering the reward or consequence of their action(s), and then DOing what they have decided). Teaching them alternative strategies, how to problem-solve and make better choices for themselves is my greatest challenge.

Barbara Coloroso says it best, “It’s never too late to begin to help a child change the dynamics of their behaviour ... he [is] capable of being respectful, kind, and compassionate ... he can learn more prosocial ways to act ... helping your child develop these skills will go a long way toward helping your child take on a new, more constructive role ... a change in both your child’s thinking and behaviour” (p.) I will continue to use Class Meetings as one vital

component to teach social skills and provide a workable model for problem-solving with the hope that one day the students will use these skills independently.

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Appendix A

SKILLSTREAMING

Social Skills Rubric - "Class Meeting"

Name : _____

Month : _____

Skill Description of Skill Level of Achievement

#1 Listening look at person talking, sit quietly, think about what is being said, say yes or nod your head, ask a question about topic to find out more 1 2 3 4

#3 Saying Thank You using a variety of good manners (thank you, no thank you, yes please, excuse me), look at person talking, think about your response, use a friendly voice 1 2 3 4

#5 Following Instructions listen carefully to the instructions, ask questions about anything you don't understand, repeat instructions to person or yourself, follow the instructions, 1 2 3 4

#7 Contributing to Discussions decide if you have something you want to say, ask yourself "Is this related to the discussion?", decide what you want to say, raise your hand, wait until you are called on, say what you planned to say
1 2 3 4

#15 Beginning a Conversation choose the person with whom you want to talk, decide what you want to say, choose a good time and start talking in a friendly way 1 2 3 4

#16 Ending a Conversation decide if you need to end the conversation, decide what you want to say, wait until the other person stops talking and say it in a friendly way
1 2 3 4

Comments: