

# How can I help the students in my classroom to develop appropriate social responses and reactions in a variety of situations?

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## Biography

Alan attended Teacher's College at Queen's University in Kingston. He began his teaching career in a Behavioural Adjustment class in Napanee. After joining the former Norfolk Board he has had a variety of teaching assignments, including a Developmental Centre at Bloomsburg Public School, a Developmental Class at Elgin Avenue Public School and a wide variety of assignments at Doverwood Public School, including all grades in the Junior Division. He is currently teaching a self-contained mixed exceptionalities class at Doverwood Public School.

Alan lives near Port Dover and has four children, the second of whom is enrolled in the Concurrent Education Program at Brock University.

This is his second Action Research project.

## Abstract

This article describes a teacher's focus on the social skills of the students in his classroom. With consistent, repeated expectations, students were able to become more independent workers and apply appropriate means for asking for assistance. Journal entries of classroom observations and comments by colleagues provide the evidence that student learning did improve.

## Background

During the 2002/2003 school year I began to focus on the social skills of the students in my classroom. Many of the difficulties and behaviour problems which arose during the course of virtually every day were the result of poor social skills and poor choices around social behaviours. Many of the students in my self-contained class have social skills as an Instructional Need in their Individual Education Plan (I. E. P), but I was beginning to feel that a more proactive approach was required. "Social benefits are unlikely to occur unless planned and systematic instruction in social skills also takes place" (McGinnis and Goldstein, p. 11.). "It is important that schools.... establish proactive interventions to teach alternative behaviours, discipline programs need to be instructional in nature" (McGinnis and Goldstein, p. 13.).

I had participated in an action research project during the 2002-2003 school year and began to consider working on social skills for a project in the current school year. This led me to begin considering the question, "How can I help my students develop more effective social skills, especially considering their language and developmental disabilities?" This, in turn, led to the question, "What steps can I take to promote appropriate social responses and reactions in a variety of situations?" At times the question became more, "Are social skills even teachable in my situation?" ( that was only on bad days!).

During the 2002-2003 action research project, I was introduced to the book "Skill Streaming in the Elementary School Child, New Strategies and Perspectives for Teaching Prosocial Skills" by Ellen McGinnis and Arnold P.

Goldstein. I decided to base my project, and social skill instruction on this book, which provided a list of sixty social skills and a breakdown of the steps required to teach these skills. In September 2003, I received an e-mail from Peggy Blair, the Grand Erie District School Board's (GEDSB) Special Education Co-ordinator inviting people to join a group of people using this book as a basis for an Action Research project. Perfect!

## The question

Finally, I began to coalesce my questions into one. It slowly evolved into "How can I help the students in my classroom develop appropriate social responses and reactions in a variety of situations?"

## Getting the project going

In September I began to assess the behaviour and social skills of many of my students, in order to identify the social skills which they most needed. I completed the teacher checklist, included as an appendix in the McGinnis and Goldstein text. I included input from the classroom Educational Assistant(EA) for completing these forms. After finishing the checklists, I selected the skills which appeared to be the weakest in a number of students. These included listening, asking for help, ignoring distractions, completing assignments, and beginning a conversation.

I originally had visions of teaching more skills, but after beginning listening skills, I quickly began to realize that I had been overly optimistic. For a time I began to despair and wonder if we would even be able to develop improved listening skills. I found that I was not the only one to feel this way. Wendy Lauwerier, Special Education Teacher, and fellow action researcher, commented in her journal,

*I booked a block of time each Day 5 to teach a new skill. My plan was to reinforce the steps and do some role plays to ingrain the specific skill and by the next week they would be ready to learn a new social skill. By the end of the third or fourth week, I knew this approach was not going to work.*

We began, as a class, by listing the behaviours necessary to demonstrate good listening skills. I realized quickly that all of the listening behaviours could be present yet a student still might not really be listening. Then I reinforced these skills in a wide variety of situations. This became a daily procedure, first thing in the morning and after lunch. We role-played good listening skills, but by far the most progress was made when I began looking around the room and saying, "G. is really listening well" (Journal entry, October 15, 2003). This kind of comment would suddenly make everyone else sit up and begin demonstrating listening behaviours. "When a teacher sees a child behaving appropriately and states approval of that behaviour publicly, children engaging in unacceptable behaviour are likely to stop that behaviour and engage in the one that received teacher approval" (McGinnis and Goldstein p, 171.). "Expect the best from your students, you may well get it." (McGinnis and Goldstein, p. 30.)

Several of the students who were not praised, would begin to ask, "What about me, Mr. McMillan?" I would ignore them and go on with the activity. These students would frequently also begin to display better listening skills for the remainder of the time period. "G. attempts to claim that he was displaying good listening skills, when in fact he would be playing in his desk, or drilling a hole in the top of his desk, "What about me, Mr. McMillan, I was listening!" (October 20, 2003, journal entry).

By November 5, I was noticing in my journal that several students were making and maintaining eye contact, especially during oral reading and class discussion times. As well, they had reduced the amount of time spent

playing with pencils, erasers and other items in or on their desks. “D. is no longer playing with erasers, pencil sharpeners, pencils, in his desk. His answers to questions are based on group discussions and his answers are based on what has been going on around him” (Journal, Nov. 5, 2003).

As time went by I began to see a need to withdraw the verbal prompts for listening. I began to print the names of all the students on a chart. During class discussions, reading periods and group work, I observed the students. When a student displayed good listening skills and asked or answered a question in a manner which demonstrated that they had been listening, I gave them a tally mark on the chart. At the end of a designated time period I would count the tallies and any student who had received five or more would receive a small prize (a pencil, eraser, sticker). Eventually I increased the reward time to ten, and then fifteen tallies. On April 10, 2004 I began to notice that this system was having an unexpected outcome.

*Students are beginning to show that they are listening, not only to me but to the other members of our class. They are beginning to realize when someone else's question, comment or answer is off topic, and reject these, rather than simply making the same response themselves a few minutes later (Journal entry, April 10, 2004).*

Since some students were beginning to show improved listening skills, I decided that it was time to introduce a second skill, also aimed at improving classroom skills. The second largest issue in my class was students interrupting each other. It occurred to me that the students interrupted because they did not know how to ask for help, how to ask a question, or even what to do when they thought they had their routine and self-directed work finished. When I was working one on one, or in a small group with two or three students, often a student who had been working independently would come up to the group and immediately interrupt with “Mr. McMillan...”.

Perhaps A. would be the best example of this. In September and October, when she wanted attention she would simply walk up to me and begin talking. It would not matter if I, or another student, was speaking at the time. On September 29, 2003, I wrote in my journal

*...A. interrupts continually. She does not know how to enter into a conversation, other than simply “sailing in” and beginning to talk. As well, she continually attempts to control the other students around her and tell them what they should be doing (Journal entry, September 29, 2003).*

I began to help the students identify the behaviours that went along with good questioning skills, as well as how to ask for help. This was very frustrating for me because, although the students could list the appropriate behaviour skills, they found practising them very difficult, probably because this was the way they were used to behaving. Interrupting had been reinforced because it got them attention. I found that the most effective way to deal with this was to lean forward so that I could make eye contact with the original group and begin to review the steps of asking a question. This would send the interrupting student scurrying back to his or her desk to put up a hand. I found that this process had to be repeated many times until finally, on March 4,

*A. got out of her seat, walked across the room toward me, stopped, turned back to her desk and put up her hand, with no verbal prompting. I made sure that I dropped what I was doing and responded to her. Maybe I'm the one being conditioned (Journal entry, March 4, 2004).*

As well, students began to remind each other to use the skills for asking a question, or asking for help. At times, they even began to let me know that I had broken the rules, stating, “Mr. McMillan, he should go back to his seat, sit down, put his hand up and wait for you to ask him...” (Jen, Dec. 13, 2003) This comment was proof to me that at least one person had internalized the steps and could generalize them to other people in the class.

At the same time, I began to stress the need for students to “have a go” at something they didn’t understand before automatically saying “I don’t know how to do this,” and coming to me, or the Educational Assistant for help. On January 17 I wrote in my journal, A. is beginning to make some attempts to “have a go” by herself, especially with writing and math assignments. Unfortunately, she only experiences success about 50% of the time, but at least she is getting the idea of trying on her own first!” (Journal entry, January 17, 2004).

The next skill that I had identified as “extremely weak” was being able to ignore distractions.

Several students displayed highly distracted behaviours, watching other students, fidgeting in their desks, playing with items, and generally noticing anything that went on in the classroom rather than doing what they had been assigned. I introduced the skill of “Ignoring Distractions” on December 3, 2003. In my journal I commented that “the students were very good at ignoring me in a role play situation, but a note from a supply teacher on December 5 included the statement, “G. was highly disruptive, and D. was very distracted and highly verbal.” (Sharon Wright, December 5, 2003). This confirmed to me the need to continue working on this skill. After several role play sessions, based on ignoring distractions I began to notice that students were starting to remind each other about this skill, “... Students are beginning to remind each other to pay attention. Of course, this also indicates that the one doing the reminding is distracted themselves, but they then go back to their own work.” (Journal entry, December 13, 2003).

## Reflections for the future

During November of 2003 our group had the opportunity to meet with Jack Whitehead in Brantford. During a discussion period, I talked with Brian Matiljan, a fellow teacher with the GEDSB, about my action research project. He pointed out that this was a very large and complex project which could conceivably take years to bring to fruition. Fortunately, in a Self contained Special Education classroom, I typically have the same students for more than one year at a time. I also became aware of the assessment factor of the process, “How will I know that the students have generalized the knowledge taught? How will I know that the children use the skills taught in situations outside of the four walls of my classroom?” (Journal entry, November 29, 2003)

Perhaps one of the most rewarding moments of teaching social skills, occurred on June 9, 2004, when I sneezed while teaching a small group. From all over the room, I heard murmured voices saying, “Bless you”. Earlier in the year many students would have laughed at the sound of a sneeze, someone saying “Bless you”, or commented about how gross that was. While this wasn’t a skill which I had focussed on, I had taught it on the side and rewarded students whenever I saw it. I was very impressed by the new behaviour demonstrated, and became even more convinced that the effort to help my students develop improved social skills, while slow, would continue to show results with time and patience. The Educational Assistant in the class told everyone what a great response they had made and how impressed she was at their politeness. The group glowed with pride!

Despite the limited progress I saw in many skill areas, and the few skills we actually covered, I have come to realize that improving social skills is a slow process, and I plan to continue using the Skill Streaming strategies during the 2004-2005 school year.

**Bibliography**

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