

Social Interactions Action Research

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Purpose

One of the largest challenges the students in my Moderate/Severe Special Day Class face is making friends or interacting with their grade-level peers on any social level. I am passionate about giving my students tools for social interactions because my students are lacking in social skills and for many of my them, my paraprofessionals and I are supply the only social interactions they will have at school. Often times my highest functioning students miss out on friendships within my classroom because there isn't another student at their social level to interact with, but when this student goes into the general education (GE) environment their GE peers are so far beyond their social ability that they miss out on those friendships too. I would love for my students to have someone at their grade level who they interact with at some point during the day. It would be ideal if this friendship could operate on a spontaneous natural level and not be something that is facilitated by the teacher. I have recently implemented a variety of social skills instruction materials into our daily schedule. I am interested to see what type of social interactions develop within my classroom during structured activities and whether my students are able to generalize social skill interventions to the playground and engage in spontaneous play with a peer in an unstructured setting.

Summary of Literature

School districts are adopting a full inclusion service delivery model for students with disabilities. Educators, paraprofessionals and students have identified benefits and barriers to the full inclusion model (Gadberry, 2009; Carter, 2006; Obiakor, 2012). While educators agree upon inclusion as a positive model in terms of equity, a variety of risks or barriers are identified as well (Buell, 1999). Increased social opportunity is one of the foremost identified benefits to

inclusion for students with mild to severe disabilities (Carter, 2005; Broer, 2005; Gadberry, 2009; Carter, 2006; Jacobson, 2000). In a study that measured faculty perceptions on full inclusion, Carter asked whether students with a disability are truly accessing the curriculum if the greatest perceived function of full inclusion is strictly social (2006). As students age into secondary school, socialization is frowned upon in the classroom as the focus is predominantly academic (Carter, 2005). From elementary to secondary school, service providers and educators must work alongside all students in the general education setting to insure an inclusion model that gives social and academic benefit to the student.

Social Skills: A student must have a preliminary set of social skills as a prerequisite for academic skill learning (Sugai, 1996). Social understanding and self-regulation are key components of peer interactions in a student's early years that can determine whether a student is accepted or rejected (Hay, 2004). As a student continues in the inclusion setting, self advocacy and decision making skills are valuable social emotional tools that will grant a student in the inclusion setting independence from restrictive supports (Broer, 2005). Students must generalize social skills taught in a separate setting into the inclusion setting. Paraprofessionals can assist in social skills generalization by looking for desired social behavior in the classroom and outside settings and assisting the teacher to reinforce them (Fenty, 2008; Sugai, 1996). Once the student is familiar with the inclusive setting, teachers can embed social skills into academic instruction by identifying the social skills required for the activity and embedding them into the academic lesson (Fenty, 2008).

Paraprofessionals: For a student to receive the full benefit of participation in the general education classroom, the paraprofessional must assume the role of a social and academic

learning facilitator rather than a mothering figure, protector, or primary teacher (Carter, 2005; Broer, 2005). In a 2005 study, former high school students who used the support of a paraprofessional in the general education setting reported feeling a sense of disenfranchisement and estrangement from their peers due to the mother-like figure looking over their shoulder (Broer). Inclusion becomes exclusion when the paraprofessional assumes the role of primary teacher to a student. The student may feel that they do not have a connection to the classroom teacher, or that they are not worth their time (Broer, 2005).

Peer Mentors: Using peer mentors as a form of service delivery pulls students with disabilities directly into the classroom community. Students in the full inclusion setting yearn for the friendships they see the students around them have, and are given meaningful academic collaborative learning opportunities through the use of peer mentors (Carter, 2005; Broer, 2005).

Broer posits that shifting the helping role from the paraprofessional to a peer mentor creates shared learning experiences similar to the collaborative learning already taking place in the classroom (2005). A configuration of two peer mentors per one student with a disability yields increased access to curriculum and social interactions (Carter, 2005). When given proper training, peer mentors are not inconvenienced academically by working with a student with a disability. Rather, peer groups support one another academically and can alter roles between who provides support to the student while the other completes class work (Carter, 2005).

Implications for Educators: Collaboration between service providers, teachers, paraprofessionals, and students is necessary to ensure the success of any inclusion model. With social opportunity as the leading perceived benefit for students with a disability, schools must

create socially valid ways for students to participate and receive instruction in the general education setting, (Gadberry, 2009; Carter, 2006; Broer, 2005).

Research Question

What is the effect of structured social skills on spontaneous social interactions between peers?

Methods

Participants in the study included eleven students in a Moderate/Severe Special Day class. There were five boys and six girls. Participant grade levels included three students in kindergarten, three students in first grade, two students in second grade, and three students in third grade.

For the duration of this study, the teacher used a music program that included songs designed to teach various social skills. Social skills topics consisted of recognizing appropriate proximity to a speaking partner, learning how to greet someone (wave, shake hands, high five), learning how to ask and answer questions with a friend, and recognizing body language and facial expressions in others. Students were given the social skills instruction every day during class time in the Special Day Class setting over a period of four weeks. The classroom teacher paired the songs with classroom discussions, structured practice, and worksheets that review the skills taught in the songs.

To measure the effect of the social skills program, the classroom teacher gathered data in three settings: social interactions in the structured setting, unstructured social time on the playground, and personal reflection from students.

To measure social interactions in the structured setting, the teacher took notes on student interactions that stood out as newly developed social skills for the students. For an interaction to be considered new, it had to be a social behavior that the student had not previously exhibited in the classroom. The teacher collected anecdotal data detailing new occurrences of the following behaviors: showing awareness of others, helping others, the success of using a social skills song to redirect a behavior, and facial expression/body language awareness.

The classroom teacher observed the students during recess time as an example of an unstructured social setting and gathered data in the interest of examining the types of social interactions the students engaged in, and whether they were able to generalize some of the skills taught through the social skills music program to the playground environment. During morning recess, the students involved in the study participated in recess time with their appropriate grade levels. Recess data was gathered at three points throughout the study and detailed whether the student was having social interactions and whether they were successful or unsuccessful.

As an additional way to measure the effectiveness of the social skills instruction, the teacher interviewed students about their perceived success. Toward the end of the four week instruction period, students were asked four questions relating to the social skills program and how they would use these skills with a friend.

Data Analysis

Data was triangulated across structured and unstructured settings using anecdotal data from the classroom, tallied interactions on the playground, and personal responses from students about their experience.

Table 1 presents newly exhibited social behaviors in the classroom setting. All eleven students were observed throughout the study for newly displayed social skills. As a whole, six out of eleven students demonstrated one or more new social behaviors directly related to the social skills programming that took place in class. Three students displayed new social skills in all four areas examined. Five students showed no growth. In the area of increased awareness of others, four students showed growth. Four students displayed increased helping behaviors. Four students had success with changing a behavior after being reminded of the song. Five students showed an increased awareness for facial expressions and body language.

Table 1. Newly Exhibited Social Skills in the Structured Setting

Student (S)	Awareness of Others	Helping Others	Uses Song To Redirect Behavior	Facial Expression/ Body Language Awareness
S1				
S2		X	X	
S3	X	X	X	X
S4				
S5	X	X	X	X
S6	X	X	X	X
S7				
S8				
S9				X
S10	X			X
S11				

Table 2 shows interactions in the unstructured recess setting. Each of the eleven students was observed for two to three recess periods, resulting in a total of twenty-nine opportunities for interaction on the playground. Seven out of eleven students engaged in social interactions at

recess over a period of three observations. For an interaction to be considered successful, the student had to speak to or play with another student. The interaction had to be reciprocated by a peer, meaning the target student needed to either respond to a partner, or have a partner respond to them. An interaction was unsuccessful if it was not in some way reciprocated by a peer. For the occurrences of students engaging in a social interaction, fourteen out of seventeen interactions were considered successful. It should be noted that these interactions may not be solely on account of the social skills program as these students engaged in interactions on the playground before the intervention began.

Table 2. Social Skills Exhibited in the Unstructured Setting

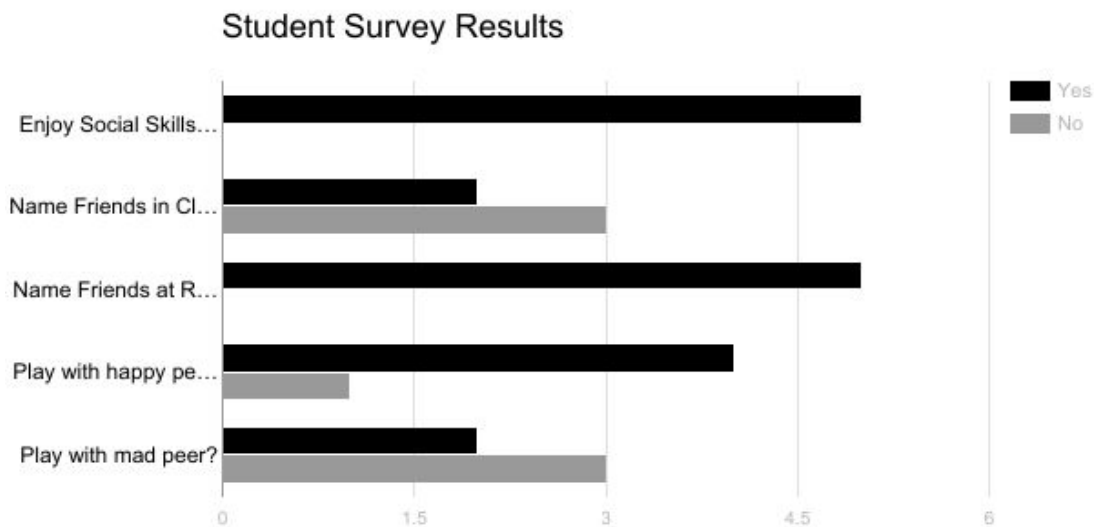
Student (S)	Did Student Interact With A Peer	Successful/ Unsuccessful
S1		
3/24/17	No	
4/6/17	No	
4/24/17	No	
S2		
3/24/17	Yes	Successful
4/6/17	Yes	Unsuccessful
4/24/17	No	
S3		
3/24/17	Yes	Successful
4/6/17	Yes	Successful
4/24/17	Yes	Successful
S4		
4/6/17	Yes	Unsuccessful
4/24/17	Yes	Successful
S5		
3/24/17	Yes	Successful
4/6/17	Yes	Successful
4/24/17	Yes	Successful

S6		
3/24/17	Yes	Successful
4/6/17	Yes	Successful
4/24/17	Yes	Successful
S7		
3/24/17	No	
4/6/17	No	
S8		
3/24/17	No	
4/24/17	No	
S9		
3/24/17	No	
4/6/17	No	
4/24/17	No	
S10		
3/24/17	Yes	Successful
4/6/17	No	
4/24/17	Yes	Successful
S11		
3/24/17	Yes	Successful
4/24/17	Yes	Unsuccessful

At the close of the study, five verbal students in the classroom were interviewed about their social experiences at school across structured and unstructured settings. Findings are displayed in Figure 1, below. When asked if they enjoyed the social skills music program, all five students answered yes. All five students reported that they have friends in the classroom, however only two students were able to name who these friends were. One student said that he couldn't remember any of his friends names, but named the teacher and all of the paraprofessionals instead. Students were asked if they could name any of the friends they play with at recess. All five students named children that they play with at recess, however only one

of these students had an answer that was accurate. The remaining four students named peers that they do not actually play with at recess. Students were asked whether they should go play with someone who looks happy and if they should go play with someone who looks mad to determine if they understood the types of peers to approach on the playground. Four students knew that they should play with someone who appears happy. Three students knew that they should not go play with someone who appears mad.

Figure 1.. Student Interviews



Conclusion

The use of the social skills music program in the classroom yielded increased social awareness and interaction across school settings for many of the students in the classroom. While there were two students who did not experience growth, the remaining nine students experienced new success in the area of social interaction.

Though there was a wide margin of social growth, during student interviews, many of the students were unable to name their friends in the classroom, or were inaccurate when naming who they play with at recess. Knowing a friend's name is a fundamental element of social skills and necessary for building friendships. An implication for practice is to teach students the names of their peers through interactive activities in the classroom. After playing at recess, classroom staff can debrief with students about who they played with to assist in memorization of names of friends who may not be in their class. If learning names is taught in a similar format to the social skills program, (explicitly through song and discussion), the students will likely experience success.

While not every student with special needs has a desire to interact with peers, it is important that they learn awareness of those around them and how to appropriately acknowledge their peers. An area for future research could examine appropriate interactions throughout the school day rather than a heavy emphasis on friendship.

Reflection

The ability to connect with peers seems to be a skill that is taken for granted in the school environment. Kids mostly evolve socially on their own from the moment they begin attending school. This is not the way it has worked in my classroom. When I noticed that my students had no friends on the playground and were not even interacting with each other in my classroom, I knew that intervention was necessary. I have learned that explicit and direct instruction works for more than academics. My students have blossomed through the use of the musical social skills program. The songs and our time singing together in the afternoons is vibrant and fun so interacting with peers becomes a positive experience. As my students experience success in the

structured setting, they begin to display these interactions on the playground as well. I am encouraged that for every social deficit I see, I can ease the student into developing the skill through closely guided instruction and gently release them to the general population to try it out.

For my few students who did not show growth, I can infer that the interactions did not take place because these students do not show a need for interaction the way typically developing students do. These are students who are inherently introverted and require excessive prompting and support to become present for academic work. Asking these students to engage with others because it is what many people enjoy doing goes directly against their personality. It simply isn't who they are. In the future I am interested in exploring ways to increase appropriate interactions and attentive behaviors in these students, without applying the unnecessary weight of friendship expectations.

After seeing spontaneous interactions occur between my students in the classroom and outside with grade-level peers, I am a proponent of musical social skills instruction. Though there is certainly room for revision, what a positive, natural transition it has been over a short period of time.

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