

Teacher Fidelity of Implementation of Social Skills Instruction for Students with Emotional Disturbances in the Self-Contained Setting

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Social skills instruction and the fidelity of teacher implementation is critical to the continued growth of socially acceptable behaviors amongst students with emotional disturbances (ED). Extensive research has indicated a need for the implementation of evidence-based practices centered on fostering increased awareness and use of specific strategies to overcome oppositional and defiant behaviors (Hutchins, Burke, Hatton, & Bowman-Perrott, 2017). Due to the nature of the educational placements for these students, specific strategies that can be implemented in the self-contained, or most restrictive setting, are critical to immediate and lifelong success (Maggin, Wehby, Partin, Robertson, & Oliver, 2011)

Needs of ED Students

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) students with emotional disturbances (ED) exhibit at least one of the following characteristics: “learning problems that cannot be explained by health, intellectual or sensory factors; behavioral challenges that prevent the creation and maintenance of satisfactory relationships with peers and teachers; and/or depressed and unhappy mood” (Cullinan, 2004, p. 156). In order to be classified as a student with ED, the above stated conditions must also negatively impact the child’s education (Kaya, Blake, Chan, 2015).

Students with ED exhibit “cyclical patterns of functional impairment across a range of variables that impact academic, social/communicative and vocational outcomes” (Kaya, Blake, Chan, 2015, p. 120). These characteristics dictate a need for explicit teaching of social skills aimed at improving student success in both the educational, vocational, and real-world setting. Not only do students with ED require intense instruction in areas where these

deficits are seen, students require the opportunity to generalize these foreign skills in different environments, and with different groups of people (Lane, Wehby, & Barton-Artwood, 2005; Wenz-Gross & Upshur, 2012).

Characteristics of ED Learners

Students with ED experience higher dropout rates (Bowman-Perrett, 2009), lower enrollment rates in post-secondary education, and increased risk for incarceration (Karpur, Clark, Caproni, & Sterner, 2005). According to the U.S. Department of Education, “44.1% of students with EBD spend more than 80% of their day in the general education classroom” (Haydon et al., 2017, p. 154). Aggressive behaviors, portraying as both verbal and physical altercations with peers and authority figures can result in the inability to form positive relationships with peers, teacher, and authority figures (Cumming et al., 2010; Haydon et al., 2017). These behaviors result in the student typically achieving at a level spanning from one to two grade levels below their peers in the elementary grades, to upwards of three grade levels below once in high school (Kaya, Blake, Chan, 2015). Target behaviors for students with ED include, “noncompliance, temper tantrums, and property destruction...negative verbal interactions and class disruptions” (Hutchins et al., 2017). In addition to performing below grade level, students with ED have increased difficulty reading (Cumming et al, 2010).

Due to the frequency and magnitude of behaviors, students with ED are most commonly placed in a self-contained setting, allowing for increased academic and behavioral support (Maggin, Wehby, Partin, Robertson, & Oliver, 2011). These classrooms typically have a lower student to teacher ratio, with at least one additional

para-professional support, and increased space to reduce potential peer conflicts (Maggin, Wehby, Partin, Robertson, & Oliver, 2011). Despite greater staffing support, behaviors still interfere with the teacher's ability to provide quality lessons (Haydon et al., 2017). The lack of targeted feedback and fewer opportunities for practice creates an atmosphere where students have the potential to fall further behind their same age peers (Maggin et al., 2011). Locke and Fuchs (1995) reported "36% of students with ED graduate from high school compared with 54% of students with other disabilities and 71% of non-disabled students" (Kaya, Blake, Chan, 2015, p. 121).

Social Skills Instruction

Over the past decade, much of the social skills research has been focused on students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) or intellectual disabilities (ID). Research on students' overall social emotional health has alluded to the need for improved programming to meet the needs of the whole child (Kaya, Blake, Chan, 2015; Wenz-Gross & Upshur, 2012). Lacking in the research are repeated studies on the effects of specific, evidenced-based practices proven to positively impact the use and transfer of socially acceptable skills for students with emotional disabilities. Additional concerns on the overall deficient body of research centered on teacher fidelity of social skills instruction reveals the need for future research efforts. Students with ED do not receive, nor have the skills necessary to be successful in the inclusive education setting, or the real-world (Cumming, 2010). Research has indicated that when students with ED receive purposeful social skills training, a "positive effect is seen in employment maintenance, personal relationships, and encounters with law enforcement" (Cumming, Higgins, Pierce, Miller, Boone, & Tandy, 2008, p. 20). More specifically, Gresham and colleagues (2002) reported that social skills interventions conducted with students with EBD yielded a 64% improvement" (Lane, Wehby, & Barton-Artwood, 2005, p.7).

Evidence-Based Social Skill Instruction

Students with ED require explicit instruction, as well as opportunities for practice and in some instances, teach the skills necessary to be accepted by their peers, authority figures and community members (Cumming, 2010; Gratz, 1999). The following strategies have been determined to be effective for this specific population of students: integrating technology, individualized curriculum sequence model, peer mediated intervention, and social narratives.

Integrated technology. Video self-monitoring is one means of incorporating technology into the social skills instruction of students with ED. Under this strategy, students are recorded exhibiting the stated behavior. This exemplar model is then edited for distractions ensuring the final product is succinct and targeted specifically at addressing the needed skill (Cumming, 2010). This strategy is most effective when designed to help the student transfer adaptive behaviors from one setting to another (Dorwick, 1999). Alternatively, video modeling, or the practice of recording other individuals exhibiting exemplar skills, can also have a positive impact on the student's ability to understand differing perspectives and appropriate social language (Cumming, 2010).

Student generated multimedia presentations can also help with the development and transfer of desired skills through increased "motivation, retention, and generalization" (Cumming, 2010, p. 244). This strategy allows students to work in a small group to design a presentation which they will record in the format of a movie. This movie is then presented to other students, allowing opportunities for the class to practice and debrief (Cumming, 2010). Using portable devices, such as iPads, laptops, or cell phones to record and store these movies can be beneficial due to the ease of access and frequency of use (Haydon et al., 2017).

Individualized curriculum sequence model (ICS). The ICS model is another evidenced-based practice that allows for a greater transfer of newly acquired skills given the design for multiple

opportunities for learners to respond to natural cues and consequences (Smith & Giles, 2003). The necessary skill being taught is purposefully embedded throughout natural settings using different materials, resources and reinforcers (Smith & Giles, 2003). Throughout these settings, behavior checks are scheduled to observe the student successfully exhibiting the learned skill. A record of the exhibited behavior is kept via a schedule or matrix in which all teachers who interact with the student are trained on completing. These check-ins are particularly critical in helping the student become more aware of their actions, as well as beneficial in reinforcing the desired behavior (Smith & Giles, 2003). Although the ICS model was created to meet the needs of students with intellectual disabilities, it has “been applied to a broad range of students with a variety of disabilities” (Smith & Giles, 2003, p. 32).

Peer Mediated Intervention (PMI). This evidence-based practice focuses on the student’s ability to successfully adapt the role of instructor to help influence their peers’ ability to learn and implement new social strategies (Blake, Wang, Cartledge, Gardner, 2000; Harjusola-Webb, Hubbel, & Bedesem, 2012). Under this strategy students learn a specific skill selected by the teacher to target an area of need and then teach this skill to identified students. Incorporating a role-model into the instruction of skills that are sometimes difficult for students with emotional disabilities to comprehend, helps to improve the “quality and quantity of social behaviors in natural settings” (Harjusola-Webb, Hubbel, & Bedesem, 2012, p. 30). Similarities in social status and age also allow for inherent relationships and zones of influence spanning outside of the typical student- teacher relationship (Kaya, Blake, Chan, 2012),

Peer proximity, peer prompting and reinforcement, and peer initiation are the three components of PMI (Harjusola-Webb, Hubbel, & Bedesem, 2012; Kaya, Blake, Chan, 2012). Peer proximity, allows opportunities for the targeted student to learn through observation of the peer role model. From there the role model engages the student via verbal prompting, allowing for an

opportunity to practice the skill in the student’s natural environment (Harjusola-Webb, Hubbel, & Bedesem, 2012). Reinforcing of the appropriate behavior is done by the role model student, and further initiation for engagement in activities that reinforce the skill helps to improve the student’s ability to transfer the stated strategy or skill.

A study conducted by Sutherland and Snyder (2007) investigated the effectiveness of PMI in a middle school self-contained setting. Students were trained as role models, then purposefully grouped to address specific social skills. The results indicated a decrease in disruptive behaviors as well as an increase in active response and reading skills (Kaya, Blake, Chan, 2012). It is noted, however, that older students may not be as likely to respond favorably due to complicated peer--teacher relationships, close peer proximity, and social structures inherent in the high school setting (Kaya, Blake, Chan, 2010).

Social Narratives. Using stories to address appropriate social skill instruction is one research supported strategy that can be implemented with relative ease on behalf of the classroom teacher (Harjusola-Webb, Hubbel, & Bedesem, 2012). Social narratives are designed to be specific to the student’s individual needs and should read similar to a story, following a logical sequence of events. These narratives must be precise, and focus on the operational definition of the problem behavior (Leaf et al., 2016). Once the problem is operationalized, it is beneficial to explicitly include step-by-step directions on what is required to successfully demonstrate this behavior (Harjusola-Webb, Parke Hubbell, & Bedesem, 2012; Leaf et al., 2016). Incorporating visuals, including photographs of the child can also help to personalize and reinforce the necessary skill (Harjusola-Webb, Hubbel, & Bedesem, 2012). This simple approach can also be easily transferred to the parent for further reinforcement at home

Teacher Fidelity of Implementation

Upon reviewing the literature, a common theme emerged: teachers were not implementing social skills instruction with fidelity (McCall,

2009). Although a growing body of research outlines specific evidence-based practices claiming to have success for students with ED, one detrimental aspect contributing to the lack of success of these students is the disconnect between research and practice. Kaya, Blake, and Chan's (2012) study on the effect of PMI on the development and use of appropriate behavioral responses indicated that although the instructional strategies were rooted in "developmental psychology and supported by research, they are infrequently implemented" (p. 122).

Questionable Research Base. In addition to the lack of teacher implementation of evidence-based social skills instruction, the research itself is inconclusive. A meta-analysis of the literature surrounding social skill interventions for students with, or at risk of emotional behavioral disorders indicated "more than half of studies identified failed to meet minimum design standards with or without reservations" (Hutchins et al., 2017, p. 22). With an already limited pool of research supporting social skills instruction specifically for students with ED, passive research design does not allow for results that are reliable and valid. Additional weaknesses found within these methods caused concern for the "fidelity of implementation and experimental control" (Hutchins et al., 2017, p.22). There has been a growing need for the current research base for social skills instruction for students with disabilities to be evaluated to assess the quality of the research when aligned to current standards (Hutchins et al., 2017).

Inhibiting Factors. When addressed with teachers, an overall lack of support, knowledge and motivation contribute to inconsistency in implementation of evidence-based practices focusing on social skills instruction (Cumming, 2010). However, research suggests that "even with adequate organizational support and training, the quality and quantity of curriculum implementation varies widely across classrooms, particularly for school-based interventions" (Wenz-Gross & Upshur, 2012, p. 428). To gain both support and motivation, the recommended strategy needs to be adapted from the research to fit the needs of the

local stakeholders. This coupled with the focus on instilling a sense of enthusiasm can help improve teacher fidelity (McCall, 2009).

Conclusion

The literature provides a variety of strategies focused on systemic introduction, feedback, and repeated practice of targeted behavioral modification strategies. Although these evidence-based practices have been successful in theory, further research on the fidelity of implementation of such strategies is required to fully understand the ever-present need for students with emotional disturbances and their ability to overcome daily social-emotional challenges. Targeted administrator observation and professional development opportunities could potentially mitigate misconceptions, lagging motivation, and the ultimate fidelity of implementation of such strategies.

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