Empathizing with Others: Assessment of a Program for Improving Academic and Personal Growth

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**Description**
At this point in cultural-historical time the educational community is stressed and national dialogue on bullying is widespread. Included in this dialogue is the need to attend to youths’ social-emotional (SEL; aka, non-cognitive) learning skills. Research shows that enhanced SEL boosts prosocial behavior and academic achievement. Whereas teachers know this, they find themselves torn: How can they do it all?

Some schools cope by treating academic and personal-growth separately: teachers teach academics and counselors handle personal growth. In our district, the elementary school-counselor runs the “Positive Behavioral Intervention Support” Program; a token economy system. Whereas token economies can modify behavior to an extent, there is little evidence for generalization across contexts. The prospect of earning points for good behavior in the cafeteria can lead to self-control in the cafeteria, but what about the classroom?

Our program stems from a different clinical tradition: Selman & Yeates’s (1989) “Interpersonal Negotiation Strategies” and emphasizes internal growth within learning contexts. Activities are teacher-directed; content centers on emotion understanding, self-regulation, social perspective taking, and pro-social problem solving. Participation should enable skill growth to generalize.

The program has three parts; this presentation represents an initial assessment of the classroom activities. One classroom (3rd/4th-split, 21 students) completed activities 3 times; another classroom (3rd-grade, 38 students), participated 6 times. In the latter classroom, the teacher completed a semi-structured evaluation form as well. Results indicate that the activities were usable, challenging, and fun. Importantly, as youth-participation increased, so too did their ability to take the perspective of their peers.

**Keywords**
social-emotional learning, bully prevention, perspective taking, character development, non-cognitive learning skills

**Disciplines**
Developmental Psychology | Psychology | School Psychology

**Comments**
NOTE: This presentation represents a work-in-progress. I (Dr. Kleinknecht) am simultaneously building and evaluating this curricular supplement. If you would like to participate in the effectiveness evaluation, or just pilot some activities, please contact me.

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Empathizing with Others: Assessment of a Program for Improving Academic & Personal Growth
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Background
A growing consensus among educators in the US is that attention must be given to the school-aged youths’ social-emotional skill (SES) development. Research shows that youths who are better able to empathize with others, take others’ perspectives, and effectively self-regulate are better students and citizens. To this end, we are working on a curricular package that aims to promote advancement in school-aged youths’ SES. The package has three parts, but an initial evaluation of just one part is presented here: a series of in-class activities that challenge youths’ SES in a variety of ways. We expect that by engaging youths in this way over the course of the school year, their SES will advance to increasingly more mature levels.

Our work is inspired by a variety of programs and models, spanning from the “Tools of the Mind” curriculum (e.g., Diamond, 2012) to Yeates and Selman’s (1989) Interpersonal Negotiation Strategies model. From the former, comes the recognition that when youth are challenged in “playful yet purposeful” ways to work just beyond their initial self-regulation, their self-regulation matures. From the latter, we understand that with regular, deliberate, scaffolded social-reflection comes gradual maturation in contextual SES as well.

Interpersonal Negotiation Strategies Model

Level Zero: Impulsive/Egocentric
Youth are impulsive and reactive, not thoughtful nor reflective. Youths find perspective taking difficult and assume others think as they do.

Level One: Unilateral or Subjective
Youth aware that others’ perspectives differ, but don’t take them into account when problem solving. Youths’ inability to think flexibly can open the door for power differences and bullying.

Level Two: Reciprocal
Youth can take others’ point of view and attempt to do so when problem solving.

Level Three: Collaborative or 3rd party
Youth can coordinate multiple perspectives, including from a third party; can utilize shared and self-reflection to compromise, show reasonable and socially aware problem solving

Method

Participants
Participants came from two classrooms: a 3rd grade classroom at a local public elementary school (n = 32) and a 3rd-4th grade split classroom at a local public charter school (n = 23).

Materials & Procedure

For the first phase of assessment, our aims were to evaluate the usability of the activities and whether repeated activity engagement appears to promote SES as we predict. Participating teachers selected activities from a broad array:

- The participating PS teacher selected 3 activities and her students engaged with them 6 times, over the span of a semester. Before each activity, this teacher completed a brief report on her students’ SES problem solving abilities.
- The participating CS teacher selected 2 activities and her students worked with them 3 times in the span of a semester.

Activity 1: Get Well Soon Cards
Students worked with a pre-made card template, where each student in class filled out a card for a sick classmate. The activity challenged youth to compare their perspectives to their classmate’s, and to practice empathic reasoning.

Activity 2: Finders Keepers
This activity presents students with a hypothetical situation. The teacher guides them through the process and youth discuss, illustrate, and write responses to the scenario, creating a story complete with discovery, conflict, and resolution. In version 1, students are Amazon Explorers, in version 2, they are outer-space Explorers. Students must hold their excitement to take the perspective of “the locals” to solve the problem. The activity ends with a prompt to relate the scenarios to their own experiences and rethink how they might have handled it in a more empathic manner.

Activity 3: Good/Bad Feelings
This activity challenges youth to think about reasonable and socially acceptable ways of managing their emotions in social situations. By discussing, drawing, and writing, youth think about situations where emotional control will help them become better problem solvers.

Results

Figure 1: “Get Well Soon” Cards: Frequency of responses illustrating different levels of reasoning, over trials. Across trials, the number of students reasoning at higher levels increased.

Figure 2: “Finders Keepers,” v1. Frequency of responses illustrating different levels of reasoning in two different classrooms. Majority of students showed less mature reasoning.

Figure 3 “Finders Keepers,” v2. Frequency of responses illustrating different levels of reasoning in two different classrooms. Majority of students showed less mature reasoning.

Figure 4: “Good and Bad Feelings” Frequency of responses illustrating different levels of reasoning in two different classrooms. Overall, reasoning levels were slightly more mature than the PK activity, but whereas students could easily identify emotions, they found it hard to think about how to reasonably transform bad feelings to good ones.

Teacher Evaluations

The teacher evaluations yielded valuable information. The participating PS teacher completed a variety of evaluation forms throughout the semester; once before each activity type and again a few weeks after each activity type. Overall, she reported that her students really enjoyed the activities - even the hardest ones (“I enjoyed the activities - even the hardest ones”). As well, she reported that since engaging in the activities, her students were increasingly more likely to think about each other’s perspectives during disputes. Here is a snapshot of her reporting:

Pre-Evaluations
Activity 1: Get Well Soon Cards
- Students take the perspective of others when helping a classmate feel better but some don’t.
- Students do not take the other person’s side into account when problem solving.

Activity 2: Finders Keepers
- Some students take the perspective of others when helping a classmate feel better but some don’t.
- Some students take the other person’s side into account when problem solving but only slightly more than before the card activity.

Post-Evaluations
After 3 trials of the “Get Well Soon Cards” and 2 trials of the “Finders-Keepers” activities:

- Students are thinking about their peer rather than their own wants first.
- Students regularly take the perspective of others and compare it to their own when problem solving.
- Students recognize that it is hard to take another person’s perspective when you don’t know them well.
- Some students do still have a hard time letting go of their personal feelings and looking at situations from others’ perspectives.
- Students need more practice but are taking the perspective of others more than before.

Discussion

Signs suggest that our curriculum has promise. All activities were usable: the teachers found their instructions helpful and easy to follow and the children enjoyed the activities. Importantly, our data suggest that the students’ skills did indeed grow as a result of their repeated participation. The activities varied in difficulty with the “Get Well Soon” cards providing students with moderate challenge, and the “Finders-Keepers” activities providing them with extreme challenge. We see this as a good balance and one that, when the students asked for more, it was the most difficult activity they asked for. Instead, as educators we know that students grow when challenged, if the work is too easy, it doesn’t promote their skills.

With this evaluation outcome, we are confident that if children were to work through these and other similar activities over the course of a school year, growth in the following skills would be apparent and the school climate would improve as a result:

1. Appropriate emotional scripting and self regulation
2. Interpersonal, empathic perspective taking
3. Interpersonal social perspective
4. Interpersonal conflict resolution

Thus we will continue with our curricular development and effectiveness assessments. Additional activity prototypes still need to be tested. For example, next we plan to pilot a series of role-play activities, where students dyads start with a prompt and create a short skit about it, then they act it out, twice, once playing “each side.” We believe that acting out in this way will serve as the practice necessary to really boost youths’ skills in the challenging “art & discussion” hypothetical activities (Finders-Keepers, Good and Bad Feelings).

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