Teacher Targeting and Developing of Student Social Skills within a Personal and Social Capabilities Curriculum

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Abstract

Social skills and social emotional learning (SEL) are fundamental to children's mental health, academic learning and motivation to cooperate and achieve. Social skills and SEL are also significant predictors of school achievement, problem behaviours and school attendance. In line curriculum, personal and social capability is now an integral component of the new Australian Curriculum. This paper outlines preliminary information on the comprehensive and longitudinal (4 year) implementation of a proactive SEL intervention by classroom teachers with all students in Preparatory to Year 3 in a low socio-economic status (SES) school setting in Australia. The social skills improvement system (SSiS) [1] has recently been applied in Australian schools [2]. This paper provides insights into the applicability of the SSiS in this challenging setting. The SSiS has been recognised as a most comprehensive system of assessing, targeting and then developing specific social skills to individual students and to whole classrooms [3]. This paper also outlines the use of the SSiS Screening tool for all students and the use of a Rating Scale for students with low Prosocial behaviours, so as to identify social skills for targeting, for the subsequent delivery of social skill training to the whole class, rather than intervention to individuals. The paper also raises the importance of training teachers as social skills classroom interventionists, particularly in early year classrooms. Preliminary data on student social skill development in the first year of the research program, along with teachers reflections provide evidence of the efficacy of the SSiS as a classroom intervention program in this setting. This intervention model of training classroom teachers to assess and then deliver social skills to their students with support from school psychologists is reviewed as a potential strategy to meet the expectations of the personal and social capability domain of the Australian Curriculum.

1. Social Skills and SEL

Social skills and social emotional learning (SEL) are not new, despite changes to nomenclature, definitions and understandings over the past century. Thorndike identified 'social intelligence' in the 1920's. Since then, many researchers and educators have explored and advanced this concept, These include Wechsler in the 1940's, Gardner's intrapersonal and interpersonal intelligence in the 1980's, and Goleman's emotional intelligence and social intelligence in the 21st Century.

Current understandings of this domain indicate that SEL is a process of acquiring core competencies [4] across "cognitive, affective, and behavioural" domains that include "self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making p. 406)". The first four competencies are drawn from Goleman's conceptualisation of emotional intelligence [5] that has become popularised in educational discourse. When learnt and applied, these core competencies can assist individuals to handle interpersonal situations constructively [6]. Social skills are generally considered to be a subset of SEL [7] and have been defined as socially acceptable learned behaviours that enable an individual to interact effectively with others and to avoid or escape negative social interactions with others [8]. According to Elliott and Gresham [9], the categories of social skills include communication, cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, engagement, and self-control.

The development of social skills and other components of social-emotional learning is essential for young children and youth to be able to function effectively in our society. More specifically, these skills and understandings facilitate the development of mutually supportive relationships with others and in so doing enable academic skills and positive emotional growth [10]. As a result, social skills and social-emotional understanding are significant predictors of school achievement, problem behaviours and school attendance [11].

In response to the mounting evidence of the interaction between social and emotional learning and school achievement, Goleman and others founded the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) in 1994. Since then, CASEL has led the world in advancing understandings, research, networks, curriculum, and school practice in the area of personal and social learning.

2. SEL and the new Australian Curriculum

Australia is currently in the process of rolling out a National Curriculum that all educational authorities and schools are expected to implement. The Australian Curriculum (see http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au) is guided by the 2008 Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, that emphasises the importance of knowledge, skills and understandings of learning areas, general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities as the basis for a curriculum designed to support 21st century learning.

The Australian Curriculum sets out the core knowledge, understanding, skills and general capabilities important for all Australian students from the Foundation year to Year 10 (F-10). It describes the learning entitlements of students as a foundation for their future learning, growth and active participation in the Australian community and clarifies what all young Australians should learn as they progress through schooling.

Within the Australian Curriculum a set of seven general capabilities has been defined: Literacy, Numeracy, Information and communication technology (ICT), Critical and creative thinking, Personal and social capability, Ethical understanding, and Intercultural understanding. These capabilities provide an integrated and interconnected set of knowledge, skills, behaviours, and dispositions that overlay the curriculum content in each learning area and other cross-curriculum priorities, to assist students to live and work successfully. Students develop capability when they apply knowledge and skills confidently, effectively, and appropriately in complex and changing circumstances, both in their learning at school and outside school.

The Personal and social capability learning continuum is based on CASEL's SEL framework that includes a minimum foundation of four interrelated and non-sequential organising elements – Self-awareness, Self-management, Social awareness, and Social management. Specific skills and capabilities expected to be achieved by students across these elements at the foundation year and at Years 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10 are outlined, as well as how these might be embedded within other more traditional curriculum areas. Teachers are expected to assess and teach Personal and social capability and incorporate them within each learning area. Teachers are also expected to find further opportunities to explicit teach Personal and social capabilities. Since the teaching of Personal and social capability has not previously been identified as a universal area of teaching, many teachers are unlikely to have the knowledge or skills to assess and teach in this area, or to be aware of the effective available systems to improving SEL.

3. Assessment and Intervention Systems

Methods for assessing children's social skills include direct observations, interviews, role plays, and rating scales. Over the past two decades, however, the most frequently used method for assessing social skills has been rating scale measures [12, 13]. Rating scales are relatively efficient tools for representing summary characterisations of individuals' observations of other people or their own behaviour [3]. Two recent major reviews of measures of social and emotional skills for children and youth have been recently completed. Humphrey et al. [13] identified 189 measures, whereas Crowe et al. [12], using more restrictive search criteria, identified 86 measures all of which were identified by Humphrey et al.. Of these measures, the Humphrey team selected 12 measures based on the criterion of "used in four or more articles in peer-reviewed academic journals" (p. 625). Only three measures had been used in 10 or more research articles: The Diagnostic Analysis of Nonverbal Accuracy (DANVA), Scale of Competence and Behavior Evaluation (SCBE), and the Social Skills Rating Scale and the newer version Social Skills Improvement System Rating Scale (SSRS/SSiS-RS). The Crowe team identified the SSRS/SSiS-RS as the measure with the most citations – 1300 from 1988 to 2010 – of any published measure. Elliott et al. [3] provide a table summary of these 12 measures along with key technical dimensions.

This paper will now focus on the SSRS/SsiS-RS [14] because of its status in the research literature and its application in an Australian school.

The SSRS/SSiS-RS is the only social skills rating scale that yields information from three key rating sources: teachers, parents, and students. The instrument(s) have three forms reflecting three developmental age ranges: preschool (ages 3-5 years), elementary (grades K-6), and secondary (grades 7-12). All forms of the SSiS-RS include common social skills across seven subdomains: Communication, Cooperation, Assertion, Responsibility, Empathy, Engagement, and Self-Control. The SSiS-RS has strong psychometric properties in terms of internal consistency and test-retest reliability estimates. An examination of the SSiS subscales and items reveals it measures almost all the components of CASEL's SEL model that drives the Australian Curriculum Personal and Social capability. Specifically, Self-Awareness as defined by CASEL is analogous to Self-Control items on the SSiS-RS; Self-Management as defined by CASEL is virtually synonymous with the Self-Control Scale on the SSiS-RS; Social Awareness in the CASEL model is well-represented by items from both the Empathy and Engagement Scales on the SSiS-RS; Relationship Management Skills as defined by the CASEL model is a broad construct and is measured by items on the SSiS-RS's Communication, Cooperation, and Assertion Scales; and finally, CASEL's Responsible Decision-Making construct is very similar to Responsibility items on the SSiS-RS.

Effective methods for teaching social skills include: modeling correct behavior, eliciting imitative responses, providing corrective feedback and reinforcement, and arranging opportunities to practice new skills. A recent meta-analysis of school-based social skills interventions for preschoolers [15] found that children learned social skills through observing adult models, practicing the target skill, receiving immediate feedback, and discussing their experiences after practicing the target skill.

Several factors influence the effectiveness of social skills interventions [3]. First, selecting skills to target in the intervention should be based on assessment results, observations, and cultural and developmental expectations, and the skills must be socially valid for the target population. Second, teacher training and support to teachers implementing social skills intervention programs should be pre-planned and utilize evidence-based professional development and coaching practices. Third, intervention implementation should be monitored. The SSiS assessment to intervention system provides a comprehensive set of tools to realise these three factors so that educators are more likely to increase the prosocial behavior of preschoolers through to young adults. The family of SSiS rating scales informs the intervention methods. These intervention methods along with the target behaviors assessed by the rating scales are part of two intervention manuals. The SSiS Classwide Intervention Program (CIP) [16] focuses on the top 10 social skills identified by teachers and designed for an entire class of students. The SSiS Intervention Guide (IG) [17] focuses on students who are either non-responsive to the CIP or have more serious co-occurring problem behaviours that interfere with their social skill development.

4. Application of the SSiS System in a low SES Australian School

The SSiS program was chosen to drive a four year comprehensive assessment and intervention program with a low socio-economic status school in Eastern Australia. The 649 students were at risk in terms of poor achievement levels in numeracy and literacy on national achievement tests. School data indicated that 45% of students consistently require extra support in reading, and 33% of preparatory students were referred for speech and language support and developmental delays. The school community in 2011 targeted SEL for all students from the Preparatory (Foundation) year to Year 3 in an effort to support the well-being and academic learning of students with improved behaviour and learning as key outcomes [7].

The School Psychologist led the information sessions and training on current best practice around SEL, the SSiS and teaching social skills. All teachers of Preparatory to Year 3 ($N =$ 15) used the SSiS Performance Screening Guide (SSiS-PSG) to evaluate all students in their class against a 5-level Pro-social behaviour criteria. Almost 11% were judged to be at lowest level 1 and more than 21% at level 2, and so this third of students were subsequently assessed using the SSiS-RS Teacher Form to identify specific social skills for targeting and intervention. Social skill acquisition deficits identified by the SSiS-RS most common among

these students in their class were then specifically taught by the class teachers to the whole class, while others of the 10 social skills were also more generally covered by the class [3]. Preliminary data from Year 1 of the 4-year project indicated that teacher ratings of all students on all four components of the SSiS-PSG (Reading, Math, Motivation to learn, and Prosocial behavior) increased significantly after classroom training. Moreover, students with low prosocial behaviour (N = 81) who were evaluated on the SSiS-RS significantly improved on ratings of social skills and academic competence while problem behavior ratings were significantly lower. These positive results are very promising.

5. Conclusions

The SSiS provides a most comprehensive approach for classroom teachers to be able to apply an effective assessment based intervention approach to assist their students to meet the year level expectations posed by the Personal and social capability domain of the Australian Curriculum. The research project demonstrated that with effective training and appropriate tools, teachers can assess student social skills to effectively target and deliver social skills training to their students.

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