

Social, Emotional and Behavioral Skills Programs

The Growing Need for Social, Emotional and Behavioral
Skills Programs in our nation's schools.

Melanie West

Business and Information Technology Teacher

Original Contribution

December 21, 2014

Abstract

The needs of our students have drastically changed over the years and school districts are increasingly finding themselves in need of new programs and curricula to address the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of their students. Student achievement and readiness is impacted due to a lack of basic skills needed in the classroom. This paper proposes that a Social, Emotional, and Behavioral Skills Program either created by the school or purchased from an education reform company can lead to student positive self-esteem and self-confidence, which in turn helps to create a positive and healthy environment for the entire school. Two such programs are Positive Action and LifeSkills. Both programs have lessons and curriculum ready for schools to use on a grade level basis and can help students to prepare themselves for the classroom.

Key Words

Behavioral, Character, Curriculum, Education, Emotional Programs, Schools, Skills, Social and Students

Social, Emotional and Behavioral Skills Programs

School districts large and small across the county have been challenged with students who have social, emotional and behavioral issues. Many students in our nation's schools are unfortunately coming to class every day lacking some of the basic social skills that are appropriate for their age and grade level. Schools are challenged with teaching these students the necessary skills that will help them to catch up with other students and put them on an even playing field academically. All of our students are required to act with the appropriate behaviors in the classrooms, out in common areas and in the neighborhoods. Regardless of the size of the school, these students pose concerns for the classroom and the community at large.

Over the past few decades students have been walking into schools with a number of issues that can seriously affect their academic success. Drugs, alcohol, violence and family issues can certainly weigh heavy on students' minds and spiral out of control. Many students lack social-emotional competencies and become less connected to school as they progress from elementary to middle to high school, and this lack of connection negatively affects their academic performance, behavior, and health (Blum & Libbey, 2004). Many young children are not ready for this challenge as indicated by a nationally representative survey in which 20% of kindergarten teachers reported that at least half of the students in their respective classes lacked the social skills necessary for success in that setting (Domitrovich, Cortes, & Greenberg, 2007). By high school as many as 40%–60% of students become chronically disengaged from school (Klem & Connell, 2004).

Social, Emotional and Behavioral Skills Programs

With such a huge variance in the student populations, it is next to impossible to have all students in a grade level prepared and at the same emotional and behavioral levels to complete the standards of learning that the state department of education requires. Many students do not have the necessary emotional and behavioral skills to insure that they are ready for a school year. It is also in the schools' best interest to make sure that the students who are struggling with their social skills that they do not impede or distract from the other students in the classroom. Supporting emotional health for children is critical in promoting academic and lifetime success. According to the CDC Division of Adolescent and School Health, if left untreated, "mental health disorders in children and adolescents lead to higher rates of suicide, violence, school dropout, family dysfunction, juvenile incarcerations, alcohol and other drug use, and unintentional injuries" (Inman, van Bakergem, LaRosa, & Garr, 2011).

In the lower grades, student social, emotional, and behavioral issues are different than those of the high school students. Younger students often come to schools not yet socialized to be away from their families for long periods of the day. Large populations of students come from single-parent households where the social and behavioral training may be lacking or non-existent. Many students come to school not knowing the basics of math, spelling, or reading and that can cause feelings of inadequacy or lowered self-esteem in the students and some may act out in class because of these deficiencies. Students' self-esteem, self-management, and self-efficacy skills and status significantly predict their academic engagement and academic achievement (Arkansas, 2009).

Social, Emotional and Behavioral Skills Programs

For the high school students, there has been a change in the recent past of issues that face many of our communities. Students are facing social and peer pressures for drugs, alcohol, sex, gangs, and violence. Older students face many more roadblocks from the severe peer pressure to fit in and take part in these risky behaviors. With the advent of smart phones and social media students can be anonymously bullied at a distance and seen by the entire community. “Psychologists have also found that ‘the distance between bully and victim . . . is leading to an unprecedented—and often unintentional—degree of brutality, especially when combined with a typical adolescent’s lack of impulse control and underdeveloped empathy skills” (Harmon, 2004). The school community needs to help out young adults understand the need for smart social decision making.

Without a properly written and defined social and behavioral curriculum many of the students may not catch up and learn the skills that are appropriate for their grade level and that may have long term effects on their education. Schools are coming up with creative curriculums of activities to teach, apply, and infuse positive behavior to achieve social skills mastery in our students. It is in the best interest of all parties involved to have the classroom teachers facilitate a Social, Emotional and Behavioral Skills Programs (SEBSP). In order for any of these programs to be successful, it is imperative that teachers fully understand the programs and have an authentic professional development and opportunities for collaboration as the program progresses. Teachers should have time set aside on a regular basis to meet and reflect with other teachers and the healthcare professionals in the school. Teachers of a grade level should meet and discuss the positives and negatives of the program and see if

Social, Emotional and Behavioral Skills Programs

perhaps it needs to be updated for their particular students. If in fact the school district has purchased a prewritten SEBSP curriculum from an education reform company, they program may not meet the exact demographics of a particular school. Teachers should be the best ones to meet and discuss solutions and possible changes to the one size fits most program.

It is always best for feedback to be given as close to the time of the activity as possible especially if changes for the next class or school year will need to be made. Schools need to make sure that they are putting in the appropriate amount of time into a SEBSP in order to guarantee success. If not enough time on a regular basis is given the students may feel that it is not a school wide priority. Having the SEBSP as part of the regular day and set as a routine will make success easier to achieve and it will show the students that the schools are determined to teach these skills to the students. If this is an infrequent activity, then students may not believe that there is the need to learn the skills.

Effective teachers spend a good deal of time during the first weeks of school introducing, teaching, modeling, and rehearsing procedures. Do not expect the students to learn all the procedures in one day. Behaviors must be taught, modeled, practiced, monitored, and retaught (Wong & Wong, 2009). Classroom teachers know that it is important to establish from the first seconds of the school year who is in charge, what is right and what is wrong, and how things are done. If procedures are not established from the beginning, it is so difficult for a classroom teacher to un-train a behavior and then teach the correct one. It is imperative that it is taught the right way from the beginning before a wrong way is ever acted out.

Social, Emotional and Behavioral Skills Programs

Educational reformers and psychologists and teachers have created a slew of new programs and curriculums to raise awareness and tackle these issues. These programs have the ultimate goal of improving the emotional and behavioral well-being of all students in all grade levels. School districts are often tasked with evaluating different programs that are promoted by various education reform companies. Due to funding and for the sake of simplicity and time, districts often purchase new character education and social skills programs instead of creating their own programs holistically and organically. The companies that create these skills and academic programs put hours of valuable research into the programs insuring the schools who purchase them that the information contained in their curriculum and programs is truly backed up by scientific study and evidence. When the schools purchase these programs, they are buying a guarantee that the program works and has all of the information and materials required for easy implementation by a school district.

Character education programs teach moral values through the curriculum and attempt to create a climate of caring and moral discipline. Social and emotional learning programs stress goal-setting, emotion identification, responsible decision making, perspective-taking, and effective interpersonal skills within a caring and engaging school climate. They implement strategies that lessen those risk factors, such as by changing attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and environments, to disrupt developmental pathways to violence. What each of these universal school-based approaches has in common is the desired goal of promoting students' social development and reducing engagement in problem behavior. As a group, these approaches aim to improve social and character development (Stage & Quiroz, 1997).

Social, Emotional and Behavioral Skills Programs

Programs should be organized by grade level and teaches students the premise that when they feel good and positive about ourselves that we will in turn do good and positive actions. There is a belief that a cycle and chain of events in which good creates good and will positively affect the classroom and the learning process. When the cycle turns negative then students do not set themselves in the appropriate setting for learning in the classroom. The goal of any program is to create a positive, healthy environment that is conducive to learning and other positive behaviors.

There are two specific programs that can be purchased as a curriculum of activities by a school district for implementation. Positive Action and Life Skills offer a variety of teaching aids ready to be put into action at a school. Both programs are backed by scientific research and offer differentiation for grade levels and student diversity.

The Positive Action Character Education Program was started by Carol Gerber Allred, Ph.D., as the founder of Positive Action company of Twin Falls, Idaho. According to the company's website, the program has been used in all 50 states, over 15,000 schools, community-based organizations, and taught to over 5 million students. The program is one that a district would purchase as a comprehensive program with training for teachers and faculty, lesson plans, activities, models, scripts, and online computer support. Lessons can be adapted to the local needs and cultures of the school employing them.

The program is organized by grade level and teaches students the premise that when we feel good and positive about ourselves that we will in turn do good and positive actions. They believe that positivity by liking it to a cycle and chain of events in

Social, Emotional and Behavioral Skills Programs

which good creates good and will positively affect the classroom and the learning process. When the cycle turns negative then students do not set themselves in the appropriate setting for learning in the classroom. The goal of the program is to create a positive, healthy environment that is conducive to learning and other positive behaviors.

In order to create this positive environment, the program has a 6 unit sequence of activities to follow.

Unit 1 – Self-Concept

Unit 2 – Positive actions for your body and mind

Unit 3 – Managing yourself responsibly

Unit 4 – Treating others the way you would like to be treated

Unit 5 – Telling yourself the truth

Unit 6 – Improving yourself continually

Each of the units will deal with topics that negatively impact a student's positive momentum and affect the school environment and their academic success.

- Absenteeism
- Alcohol
- Behavior
- Bullying
- Character
- Drop Out
- Drug Use
- Family
- Mental Health
- School Quality
- Tobacco
- Violence

Social, Emotional and Behavioral Skills Programs

- Weapons

Positive Action claims that by using their lesson plans and activities, a school can make improvements in individual students and the student body as a whole. The website also contains a list of testimonials from schools, districts, and organizations that have used the product and believe in its success. They also list government agencies that support this program (Positive Action, 2014).

While Positive Action is more of a character education program, Botvin LifeSkills Training is a program that promotes healthy life skills by making appropriate social choices. The program was created by Dr. Gilbert Botvin to help schools with negative social issues that have been pervasive in schools over the past decades. Both programs believe in healthy and positive personal development. Botvin LifeSkills is also a program geared towards elementary students however they do also have programs for middle and high school students. Just like the Positive Action program, LifeSkills has the evidenced-based research to back up that their plan will help lower incidences of negative activity (drugs, alcohol, etc.). The program is not meant to teach the dangers and tell kids to “just say no”; instead, it is a comprehensive plan to promote healthy alternatives to these negative behaviors.

The elementary school program has the three objectives:

- Personal Self-Management Skills
- General Social Skills
- Drug Resistance Skills

Social, Emotional and Behavioral Skills Programs

These objectives are taught in a smaller eight session package for students.

These lessons include

- Self-Esteem
- Decision-Making
- Smoking Information
- Advertising
- Dealing with Stress
- Communication Skills
- Social Skills
- Assertiveness

The LifeSkills program relies on lesson plans that have students working in groups to have open discussion on the topics and facilitate a dialog with the teacher. Students also have reflective time to journal their thoughts on the topics (Botvin LifeSkills Training, 2014).

Both programs take into consideration evidence-based characteristics of an effective social skills program. They have studies and empirical evidence that they state supports their claims. These programs believe in building the confidence and positive behaviors on a grade-level basis and believe that students need interactions with their peers and parent involvement. Each program also believes in having the entire school community active in the success of the program. All faculty and parents need to be on board if they would like to achieve success. This is not a teacher-student initiative only. Other characteristics include the consistent natures of the teacher methods and the belief in student responsibility and accountability.

While these programs have a set of lesson plans and activities for teachers to use in the classrooms to promote a healthy Life Skills, there are some differences between them. The Positive Action program is geared at having students maintain a

Analyzing Character Education and Social Skills Curricula

larger scale positive and healthy lifestyle. It incorporates attitudes and feelings of self-worth and self-esteem. On the other hand, the LifeSkills program is one to prevent students from taking part in the unhealthy and illegal activities of drinking, drugs, and violence (among others). This program is geared at steering students away from the social cues that often steer students into these negative behaviors and activities. Even though both programs have activities geared at these issues, the LifeSkills program is much more intensive.

Two other differences with the programs are the audience that they are geared towards. Positive Action seems more directed at the younger elementary students with more programs and activities. LifeSkills has programs directed towards the activities of the older students as they are the ones that are being confronted with alcohol, drugs, and violence on a greater basis than the elementary students. LifeSkills also seems to have a greater number of activities for the parents and they realize that a key to student success will be the parent involvement.

School districts should spend the money to purchase these programs. There is evidence that supports their success and they certainly know that there is a need for schools to teach these valuable lessons to the student body. "Improving the social and emotional climate of schools, and the social and emotional soundness of students, advances the academic mission of the schools in important ways....Satisfying the social and emotional needs of students does more than prepare them to learn. It actually increases their capacity to learn" (Arkansas, 2009).

Analyzing Character Education and Social Skills Curricula

With all of the negative social issues out there that are affecting our students, school districts need to take a proactive approach in dealing with them. By instating a Social, Emotional and Behavioral Skills Programs such as Positive Action or LifeSkills, as part of the regular academics in our schools, they can insure that all students learn the necessary grade level skills that they may not have learned at home. Programs with a written and evidenced-based set of grade level curriculum can enhance the academics and help bring about a healthy and positive environment that is conducive to the successful learning of the academic benchmarks.

References

Botvin *LifeSkills Training*. (2014). Retrieved from Botvin LifeSkills Training:

<http://www.lifeskillstraining.com/overview.php>

Postive Action. (2014). Retrieved from Postive Action: www.positiveaction.net

Arkansas, D. o. (2009). *School-wide Discipline, Behavior Management, and Student Self-Management: Focusing on Social Skills Instruction and Selecting and Evidenced-based Social Skills Program*. Little Rock: Arkansas Department of Education.

Blum, R. W., & Libbey, H. P. (2004). School connectedness— Strengthening health and education outcomes for teenagers. *Journal of School Health*, 74, 229–299.

Dewar, G. (2013). Social skills activities for children and teenagers: Ideas inspired by research. *Parenting Science*.

Domitrovich, C. E., Cortes, R. C., & Greenberg, M. T. (2007). Improving Young Children's Social and Emotional Competence: A Randomized Trial of the Preschool "PATHS" Curriculum. *The Journal of Primary Prevention*, 69.

Fuller, H. (2004). The Struggle Continues. *Education Next*, 1.

Harmon, A. (2004, August 26). *Internet Gives Teenage Bullies Weapons to Wound From Afar*. Retrieved from New York Times:

<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/26/us/internet-gives-teenage-bullies-weapons-to-wound-from-afar.html>

Analyzing Character Education and Social Skills Curricula

- Inman, D. D., van Bakergem, K. M., LaRosa, A. C., & Garr, D. R. (2011). Evidence-based health promotion programs for schools and communities. *American journal of preventive medicine*, 40(2), 207-219.
- Klem, A. M., & Connell, J. P. (2004). Relationships matter: Linking teacher support to student engagement and achievement. *Journal of School Health*, 74, 262–273.
- Knoff, H. M. (2009). *School-wide Discipline, Behavior Management, and Student Self-Management: Focusing on Social Skills Instruction and Selecting and Evidenced-based Social Skills Program*. Little Rock: Arkansas Department of Education.
- Potochink, S. R., & Perreira, K. M. (2010). Depression and Anxiety among First Generation Immigrant Latino Youth: Key Correlates and Implications for Future Research. *The Journal of nervous and mental disease*, 470.
- Stage, S. A., & Quiroz, D. R. (1997). A Meta-Analysis of Intervention to Decrease Disruptive Classroom Behavior in Public School Education Settings. *School Psychology Review*, 333-368.
- Wong, H., & Wong, R. (2009). *The First Days of School*. Mountain View, CA: Harry K. Wong Publications.