Strengthening Social and Emotional Intelligences Through Writing

Jeanne Hager Burth, Ed.D.
University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg

Michelle McConnell, B.S.
California University of Pennsylvania

Abstract

Using writing to allow children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) to express how they are feeling or to stimulate thinking about a social situation will allow the students the opportunity to strengthen social and emotional intelligences. By giving prompts about different social and emotional situations or ideas to children, the teacher allows the children to think about social circumstances and get used to new ways of thinking. Prompts may be associated with scenarios and followed by questions, such as "How would this make me feel?" or "How do you think the other person feels? How do you know?" By responding to the prompts, the students should be thinking more about their own emotions and about how the other person feels, along with what may have changed the situation. By using writing as a response to the prompts, students who have difficulty communicating will have the opportunity to be thoughtful about their responses before actually acting or reacting in a real situation.

Key Words: Autism Spectrum Disorder, Social Intelligence, Emotional Intelligence

Strengthening Social and Emotional Intelligences through Writing

In an Autistic Support, full-time special education classroom, a student with low functioning autism wants to eat more of her banana instead of doing her puzzle. Instead of voicing this request, this student, who is non-verbal, has to communicate in other ways. In order to tell her Personal Care Assistant (PCA) that she wants more banana before completing her puzzle, the young learner throws a puzzle piece at the banana. This student is not able to get others to understand her wants or needs without physically demonstrating them. This is a clear demonstration of a communication barrier. Social skills training may assist this student with communication in a more desirable or suitable manner. Additionally, using more acceptable means of communication or approaches may be enhanced by making this student more socially and emotionally aware of her own actions and the feelings of others.

Literature Review

Bradberry and Greaves (2005) found that children with autism have a desire to be socially involved with their peers, but since they are held back by deficits in social and emotional intelligences, they have difficulty forming relationships. Many common characteristics of ASD come into play, often hindering these children from forming

relationships. For instance, one common characteristic of individuals with ASD is a lack of understanding and comprehension of what other people are trying to say to them, especially when the communication is unspoken or when a spoken communication is not literal. This can lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Further, social interactions and social cues help individuals understand how emotions play into conversations. For example, a facial expression, such as smile can mean that one is reciprocating an enjoyable feeling after something pleasant is shared. A sigh can mean that someone is tired or frustrated. These cues are often missed by a person with ASD.

Emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize one's own and other people's emotions, to discriminate between different feelings and label them appropriately, and to use emotional information to guide thinking and behavior. Emotional intelligence focuses on the individual's ability to process emotional information and utilize it to navigate the social environment. It also encompasses the ability to self-perceive or to recognize one's own emotions or feelings.

Social intelligence is an important factor which leads to people understanding social skills and how well they can get along with others. Goleman and Boyatzis (2008) note that social intelligence is a set of interpersonal competencies built on specific neural circuits that inspire others to be effective. Goleman (2006) believes that social and emotional intelligences are connected. Therefore, it is important to instill these signals, cues and indications into children with ASD early on, so they are able to grasp the understanding of emotional awareness and socially acceptable behaviors.

There are specific key elements that play into social intelligence, including verbal fluency and conversational skills, knowledge of social roles, rules and scripts, listening skills, understanding other people, social self-efficacy, and management skills. These elements will allow one to become better at interacting socially.

The concept of emotional intelligence was questioned when some people with high intelligence quotients and very high levels of education did not manage their lives well, did not relate to other people appropriately, and were generally unhappy, while other people, who did not score well on traditional measures of intelligence, did extremely well in managing their lives and being fruitful and effective.

For example, Green (2011) shares Mayer and Salovey's 16-step model of emotional intelligence from childhood to adulthood, which comprises four branches:

- The ability to perceive emotions in oneself and others accurately.
- The ability to use emotions to facilitate thinking.
- The ability to understand emotions, emotional language, and the signals conveyed by emotions.
- The ability to manage emotions so as to attain specific goals.

In *The Emotional Intelligence Quick Book*, Bradberry and Greaves (2005) discuss that brains can be manipulated to change pathways, called plasticity, and by changing pathways, new connections can be reinforced where previous misinformation existed.

Further, Bradberry and Greaves (2005) discuss how Richard La China, "trained his brain" (80-81) by pushing himself past the discomfort of his old ways. With new challenges he was able to form new connections in his brain that helped him retrain his brain. With each reinforcement of the task, he had less trouble completing the same task.

The concept of social and emotional intelligences has been embraced by educators. Thousands of schools are teaching these intelligence skills to children, and it is part of a Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2016). These schools are requiring that students achieve a certain level of SEL skills. In Illinois, specific learning standards for every grade level have been established (Illinois State Board of Education, 2015). Some of the skills learned in elementary school include being able to identify nonverbal cues regarding how someone else is feeling. In high school, the students must be able to talk and listen in ways that resolve conflicts.

By exposing children to effective initiation and responses to social situations with peers, they begin to acquire these crucial intelligences. This understanding occurs as children develop. One recent study using peer training in an after school program for kindergarten and first grade students found success in using peers to prompt students with ASD to use phrases for social situations, such as "please" and "thank you," and "may I have a turn?" (Kamp et al., 2015). Shaul (2014) believes in visual techniques for teaching social skills and uses a train as a metaphor to teach conversational skills. Using illustrations of the freight wagons, the author shows how important turn-taking is in conversation. His book includes worksheets at the back for reinforcement and assessment.

Children with autism have a great deal of trouble understanding emotional indications and social cues. By learning to recognize the emotions of one's self and that of others, children with ASD can develop higher emotional intelligences and can benefit by increasing social intelligences, learning to distinguish social cues and then developing appropriate responses or ways to originate social interactions.

Social impairments are a critical element in the definition of ASD. The National Institute of Mental Health (2015) reports that most children with ASD have trouble engaging in everyday social interactions. For example, some children with ASD may:

- Make little eye contact
- Tend to look and listen less to people in their environment or fail to respond to other people
- Rarely seek to share their enjoyment of toys or activities by pointing or showing things to others
- Respond unusually when others show anger, distress, or affection.

Further, recent research (National Institute of Mental Health, 2015) suggests that children with ASD do not respond to emotional cues in human social interactions because they may not pay attention to the social cues that others typically notice. Children with ASD look at the mouth of someone who is talking and not the eyes. Without the ability to

construe another person's tone of voice as well as gestures, facial expressions, and other nonverbal communications, persons with ASD may not respond properly.

Rationale for the Study

Herbert and Weintraub (2012) discuss how, with enough therapy and interaction, the child can develop self-awareness to know when he/she has acted inappropriately. In some autistic support classrooms, there are different behavior plans set up for each student. Some students have charts or schedules. Charts can show contingency situations; for example, the teachers can use a chart with student A to help the student understand that if he does a task appropriately, then he will get a reward or a preferred task. Further, prompts and social stories are often used in autistic support classrooms to teach social skills.

Although behavior plans and contingency charts are helpful, there is a need for students to express how they feel and to respond in a non-threatening way. Writing is a tool that may be useful. Writing is an essential way for children to express themselves, whether it is about their favorite season or how their weekend went. This tool allows children to develop their writing skills while developing expression by writing more thoroughly.

Using writing to allow children with ASD to express how they are feeling or to stimulate thinking about a social situation will allow the students the opportunity to strengthen social and emotional intelligences. By giving prompts about different social and emotional situations or ideas to children, the teacher allows the children to think about social circumstances and get used to new ways of thinking. Prompts may be associated with scenarios and followed by questions, such as “How would this make me feel?” or “How do you think the other person feels? How do you know?” By responding to the prompts, the students should be thinking more about their own emotions and about how the other person feels, along with what could have changed the situation. By using writing as a response to the prompts, students who have difficulty communicating will have the opportunity to be thoughtful about their responses before actually acting or reacting in a real situation.

Since children with ASD have a hard time learning and expressing emotions, it is important to stimulate these emotions in different ways. Stimulating thinking of emotions or of social interactions allows the children to contemplate responses while not actually experiencing the real-life situation. The prompts not only stimulate the student to think about emotions and social skills, but they also help the students that are non-verbal to express themselves. Children who are non-verbal can replace speech by explaining their thoughts in writing. Giving the students writing prompts and writing journals for free writing will allow these skills to be reinforced. Starc (2014) discusses how journaling is a good form of self-expression for those who have difficulties communicating with others. Starc (2014) notes that writing is good way for children with ASD to work through issues that are troubling them without having to talk to people.

The Study

The goal of the study was to investigate whether an intervention that aims to improve social and emotional intelligences will help children learn how to express themselves and learn social skills and responses that are appropriate. By using writing journals, students with autism explored how to express themselves and ways to gain insight to appropriate and inappropriate social skills and responses. The prompts were designed to stimulate thinking about social and emotional skills.

Two times per week, participating students were asked to complete activities, such as responses to questions or stories. The activities or prompts were designed to stimulate thinking about emotions and appropriate social skills. For example, prompts such as the following were used:

- On the pictures of handshakes, write two words about being a good friend
- On the lines below, describe the following: if you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be and use three examples of how you could make that change?
- Using the shaded truths cards, one example might be, if a friend asks you if you like her outfit and you really do not like it, how could you answer in a way that would not hurt her feelings?
- When you are feeling a particular way, for example frustrated, draw a picture to show how you look and tell what your body does when you feel this way.

The writing was not limited to the biweekly prompts, but could also be a means to express emotions as a result of an incident that recently occurred. Students were given the opportunity to free write when an unplanned incident occurred. The prompts were categorized into the following areas:

- Adjusting Behavior by What People Are Thinking
- Being Part of a Group
- My Body and Mind
- My Language
- Observing Others
- Self-Awareness and Self-Monitoring
- What People Mean by What They Say
- Making Friends

Methods

This research design was teacher action research, which included pre and post surveys and qualitative data collected from the analysis of the journal writing. The surveys included pre and post attitudinal surveys of participating teachers of autism support classrooms and pre and post surveys of the participating students with autism who were in these classrooms. A comparison of pre and post surveys were analyzed for patterns, and findings were anecdotal in nature and are related to teacher views of their students.

Since the study group was small, as this was a pilot study, the surveys responses from the teachers were mostly open-ended, for example, “Have you noticed changes in students’ awareness of other people’s feelings? If yes, please give at least one example.” Another example is, “Have you noticed changes in students’ respecting other people’s opinions? If yes, please give at least one example.”

For the student surveys, some questions were open-ended, like “Things I do wrong when trying to make a friend…”, and “I should apologize when…” Some questions asked students to self-assess perspectives on social and emotional intelligences. See the following examples:

I get very angry when someone does not play with me.

A. True
B. Somewhat True
C. Not True

I have one good friend or more.

A. True
B. Somewhat True
C. Not True

In addition, data were gathered through an analysis of the participating students' journals. The journals were the medium used for expression and responses. The journal assignments were given 2 -3 times weekly and reviewed and discussed with the students by the teachers. Researchers reviewed the journal data each month. The pilot study lasted for 15 weeks.

Participants

Two teachers of autism support full-time classrooms participated in this pilot study. One teacher from each of the two participating autism support schools was included. The teachers were recommended by the director of the autism schools. An email assent was sent to the two recommended teachers followed by a formal letter. The teacher participation was voluntary, but a stipend of $200 was awarded to each for participation. Both teachers were females between the ages of 25 and 29 with 1 to 3 years of experience teaching students with disabilities. Both teachers earned a Master’s Degree and have experience teaching students in middle school/junior high and high school. These teachers reported having training in autism spectrum disorders through university classes while in graduate school, professional workshops, and independent readings. These two teachers rate themselves as confident and very confident in their abilities to provide direct intervention services as part of a team of professionals for students with autism spectrum disorder.

Two students from each participating classroom took part in the study. Students who are identified as having autism and who attend the participating autism support schools were considered potential participants. Parental permission, signed consent, was required for participation. A verbal assent was used by the researcher for the students who the

teachers recommended. Each child's participation in this project was completely voluntary. In addition to parental permission, the child was asked if he or she would like to take part in this project. Only those children who had parental permission and who wanted to participate were afforded the opportunity, and the students were able to withdraw participation at any time, able to withdraw participation at any time and for any reason without penalty.

Of the four students who participated in the study, two were females and two were males. Two students' ages ranged from 14 – 16 years, and the other two students were in the 17 – 19-year range for the study. All students were Caucasian and spoke English as their first language.

Results

The pilot study did not allow for a large participant group, and therefore the results are limited. However, there are some findings that are notable. According to the teacher post-survey, the following behaviors improved in the students who participated in the study: taking turns, sharing, helping others, playing with others, appropriate physical contact during play, following directions, raising their hands to be called on, not crying during school work, and not yelling at the teachers. One teacher explained that students are now using writing as a coping skill. One student is expressing how she feels instead of engaging in self-injurious behaviors, such as cutting. Another student uses writing to help her to stop worrying about situations which she cannot control. The second teacher shared that students have limited the amount of inappropriate touching with others. One exercise through the answering of writing prompts was to identify kinds of touch and to name persons for whom the kind of touch was appropriate, along with where (or in what setting) the touch was appropriate. For example, students identified giving a high five to friends at school, but kissing would only be appropriate with mom or dad at home. Teachers also said that students no longer tended to reach out to have their hands squeezed by others. Also, students have also begun raising their hands to be called on and are taking turns more during group activities.

Conversely, teachers noted an increase of the following negative behaviors: using appropriate voice tone and listening. According to one of the teachers, the students struggle during conversations and at times tend to monopolize a conversation. They interrupt often. The other teacher notes difficulty in following directions due to not listening or not reading instructions.

One of the most noteworthy results was that students are more aware of the feelings of others and of their own feelings. Teachers commented that if a student notices that a peer is feeling sad, or if a peer indicates on an emotion scale that he or she is feeling sad, the student will attempt to help make that classmate feel better. Further, students ask their classmates if they are okay when upset. They also state that they feel bad for a student or want to help a student when the other student is upset. The students confirm that they are more aware of the feelings of others.

Two of the four students identified expressing feelings as their most improved quality. For example, students recognize the following as things to do or say when scared: cover face, cuddle with blanket or stuffed animals, listen to music, read, play a video game, "Make it stop," or "Don't be scared," and "Don't be afraid." Students practiced, through the prompts, skills such as how to respond to others. One prompt asked students to respond to the question from a friend, "Do you want to join our group?" Examples of responses are: I would love to; No thank you. I would like to do this on my own, but maybe next time; I would like to work alone today. Other skills dealt with communication, for example what to do when a friend is talking to me. Some responses were: "be quiet and listen," "pay attention and look at the person," and "be happy."

Similarly, teachers noted changes in students' respecting the opinions of others. One student is starting to accept another person's opinion even though she still feels that she is always correct. Other students do not argue as much when someone voices an opinion about a topic and have started to understand opinions of others, especially when the other side is explained. Students are more willing to share with others how they are feeling instead of keeping the feelings to themselves and shutting down. One student, who previously preferred to socialize with adults, is engaging in social interactions with her peers and playing board games with peers. Students are accepting responsibility for their own actions and one student is apologizing after having a misbehavior. He now wants to take responsibility for his actions.

Teachers also noted changes in the students' coping skills. Students use writing as a coping skill instead of engaging in behaviors of concern. They use writing to help them deal with anxious feelings, often caused by an upcoming change in routine that may or may not be in their control. Also, as students become upset, they ask for more breaks to calm down.

The small participant group made findings difficult to identify. However, there are gains in areas like enjoying interacting with others as well as decreases in areas such as getting angry when someone does not play with me.

Most importantly, students identified the following as most improved areas: fidgeting, expressing feelings, sharing with friends, and telling the truth. They also noted improvements in how to handle teasing and how to listen when someone is talking to them.

Further research is needed in this area to confirm the findings of this small, pilot study. The researchers recommend that further research be done with a larger number of participants within multiple settings. The authors also suggest that the study be duplicated for students with other disabilities, in which social or emotional problems are common, such as emotional or behavioral disorders or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

References

Bradberry, T. & Greaves, J. (2005). *The emotional intelligence quick book.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

CASEL: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning. Retrieved from http://www.casel.org/social-and-emotional-learning/promotion

Goleman, D. (2006). *Emotional intelligence*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.

Goleman, D., & Boyatzis, R. (2008). Social Intelligence and the Biology of Leadership. *Harvard Business Review, 86*(9), 74-81.

Green, R. (2011). What is emotional intelligence? Kelmscott, Western Australia: The Emotional Intelligence Institute. Retrieved from http://www.theeiinstitute.

Herbert, M. & Weintraub, K. (2012). *The autism revolution*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Illinois Learning Standards (2015). Illinois State Board of Education. Retrieved from http://www.isbe.net/ils/social_emotional/standards.htm

Kamps, D., Thiemann-Bourque, K., Heitzman-Powell, L., Schwartz, I., Rosenberg, N., Mason, R., & Cox, S. (2015). A comprehensive peer network intervention to improve social communication of children with autism spectrum disorders: A randomized trial in kindergarten and first grade. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders. 45*(6), 1809-1824.

National Institute of Mental Health (2015). Autism spectrum disorder. Retrieved from http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/autism-spectrum-disorders-asd/index.shtml

Shaul, J. (2014). *The conversation train A visual approach to conversation for children on the autism spectrum.* Philadelphia: Jessica Kingley Publishers.

About the Authors

Jeanne Hager Burth, Ed.D., is a dedicated educator and child advocate who has been working in the field of education for 35 years. Currently holding the positions of Assistant Professor and Director of Field Placement and Teacher Certification at University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg, she has also served in the roles of Principal, Professor of Educational Studies, Professor of Literacy Studies, Teacher in grades 1, 2, and 3, Learning Support, and Gifted Education. She also served as the Western PA Director for the PA Multi-region STEM Math and Science Partnership Grant for six years.

Michele McConnell, B.S., is a graduate of the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg in the field of Early Childhood Education. She is currently enrolled in a Master's Degree program at California University of Pennsylvania.