RESEARCH REPORT

Building Social-Emotional Competence of Elementary Students Through Noncompetitive Basketball Embedded with Social Skills Training

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Approximately 30% of children and adolescents experience emotional and behavioural problems, with girls exceeding boys in all age categories (Pathak et al., 2011); and there has been a rise in the prevalence of mental illness and maladaptive behaviours in adolescence. To address these growing concerns, this study approached the task of enhancing the social-emotional competencies of children through noncompetitive basketball embedded with social skills training. Twelve female students in grade 4 participated in a 5-week program consisting of 10 sessions of noncompetitive basketball embedded with social skills training. Commercially produced surveys were completed before and after the intervention to measure student change in social-emotional competence and to evaluate the program's effectiveness. A Basketball Interest Inventory was collected to measure the change in student interest as a result of participation in the program, and a Social Validity Questionnaire assessed the social acceptability of the program. Analyses of the data revealed positive changes to students' social-emotional competence scores, indicating that the intervention program was effective as a means for social skill remediation. A slight increase in the average level of basketball interest was observed across all participants. Furthermore, the program was evaluated positively by teachers enhancing its social acceptability and validity. Positive results from this study may be used in future educational practices to proactively identify and provide preventative support to children and adolescents who experience emotional and behavioural problems and provides current educators and clinicians with an alternative social skill instruction method to the programs currently available.

Implications for Practice

Most children learn social skills and develop their social competencies informally through interactions with their peers and with significant adults in their lives. Socially competent students are shown to experience positive academic and psychosocial outcomes (Gresham & Elliott, 2014). They often have numerous friends; they get along well with peers and adults; they are more confident in themselves; are good problem solvers, and can adapt well to different environments. However, there seems to be an increasing number of students, that for many reasons, have difficulty with (a) picking up social skills informally or (b) distinguishing which social skills to use when, where, and with whom (Meadows, 2013). Students who demonstrate social skill deficiencies are more likely to experience interpersonal difficulties (Dodge & Crick, 1990; Kupersmidt & Coie, 1991; Weiss & Hechtman, 1993) such as peer-rejection, fewer friends and difficulty maintaining long-term relationships; and to achieve less success academically.

Increased Accessibility to Social Skills Training Through Sports

As a result of the insurmountable research supporting social competence for children and youth, child professionals are continuously developing and promoting various service-delivery and instructional approaches aimed at remediating deficits in social competence functioning. One of the most popular of these approaches is social skills training (SST). Unfortunately, in light of their proven effectiveness in remediating social skills, SST programs are not always accessible or available in every community due to a variety of circumstances including cost

incurred by the program itself, or cost of training; there may not be personnel available for training, or training available within a reasonable distance. The current study, which embedded SST into noncompetitive basketball, offers an attractive alternative to traditional SST approaches which are not always easily accessible, adds to the current literature supporting SST in sport, and encourages a shift in current practice beyond discrete delivery of social skill curricula in segregated classrooms or clinical settings and instead contextualizes social skills to be practiced in more generalized social contexts.

Previous researchers have provided several reasons for programming social skills in sports (Cartledge & Loe, 2001; Orlick & McCaffrey, 1991; Walker et al., 2004). For one, organized sports are readily available to children in practically every community, throughout every country. In contrast, social skills programs are not always accessible or available in every community. Another reason for programming social skills in a sport is that many skills learned in sport can be transferred to other life domains such as goal setting, problem-solving, working with a team and within a system, handling both success and failure, and receiving and implementing corrective feedback. Based on the research, social skills training should typically occur in a small or large group setting providing a social learning environment in which skills can be taught and practised. Sports teams, such as the team of participants in the study, offer a social group setting in which children are provided with prompts and models of appropriate social skills, imitate, model and practise or rehearse the skills learned while receiving corrective feedback and support. An added benefit of a social skills program delivered through sport, such as the noncompetitive basketball program, is that the children are not only exposed to models of the behaviour from the coach/instructor but by nature of the sports team they receive models of behaviour from age-related peers.

Increased Generalization of Social Skills in Natural Environments

One of the greatest criticisms of social skills training today is the limited research on generalization to the natural environment (Tierney et al., 2016). Social skills interventions often occur in un-natural environments (i.e., segregated classroom or clinical setting) which lack generalizability, without the involvement of an appropriate peer group in which to socialize and develop skills with (i.e., small group, pull-out program). New approaches to social skills training move beyond discrete delivery of social skill curricula in segregated classrooms or clinical settings, and instead contextualize social skills to be practised in classrooms, lunchrooms, hallways, on playgrounds and buses. The intervention described in the current study addressed criticisms of traditional programs as it was designed to readily allow participation for all children, and increased opportunities for students with social skill deficits to be exposed to age-appropriate role models. The program that was delivered in the school gymnasium also has the potential to be adapted to other naturalistic settings such as the playground, community recreational facilities, or even the local recreational park. It requires very minimal equipment and therefore any school facility, wherever it may be, should be capable of implementing the program as long as a gymnasium or playground is available. Adaptations to the sport specific skills could also be made to implement the intervention program through another variety of sport (i.e. soccer, football, baseball) based on the availability of equipment, and/or the specific interests of the teachers and students at each particular school. The program used in the study is also available at no cost, unlike many social skills programs currently available; does not require any specific training; and can be carried out by a classroom, physical education or resource teacher, or any other professional in a school or recreational setting.

Early Identification and Intervention

The majority of research to date has focused on students who have or are at risk of developing social-emotional difficulties. In other words, intervention is focused on a skills deficit

model (Bierman, 1990). The deficit model of current social skills programs negatively presents identification and intervention. Children who are pulled-out for these special education programs are viewed as problems, and furthermore rejected by their peers due to their social skill deficiencies (Kauffman & Landrum, 2013). If we shift the focus to creating preventative and proactive programs, social competence may be viewed from a different perspective, thus ultimately maximizing children's potential rather than emphasizing the deficits. One such way in which to shift the focus may be to deliver social skill training through sport, which is a very common practice or activity for many children today. Such a shift in practice may lead to a reduction in such negative attitudes toward these students, and social skill programs. By integrating social skills training in sports opportunities, students will continue to receive the social skills intervention they require to develop their social-emotional competencies, without the current negativity and rejection associated with current social skills training practices.

Another way to shift away from the deficit model of current social skills programs is to proactively measure students' social and emotional skills to identify skill deficits and provide intervention before a student demonstrates frequent or increasing behavioural concerns, such as in the current "wait to fail" model. It appears that there are many tools currently available for measuring social and emotional skills, however, a problem with many of these tools is that they are very resource intensive and are not designed to be administered repeatedly to assess change over time. To address this issue, the researcher of the present study implemented the Child Trends Teacher and Student Surveys (Child Trends, 2014) to determine its effectiveness at measuring social-emotional competence and identifying social-emotional deficits early in childhood/adolescence. One of the many benefits of these surveys is that they are available online, at no cost, unlike many traditional social-emotional measurement tools. They are easily administered and require participation solely from teachers and students, removing the possible burden and responsibility placed on the parent to complete surveys, found in many other tools available today. Furthermore, the Child Trends Surveys have the potential to be used to identify proficiency levels of all students in kindergarten through Grade 5, to gauge student competencies in social skill areas that matter for students' success, in school and beyond. The surveys can be completed relatively early, within one to two weeks of the start of a school year or program to establish a baseline. Identification then allows a school to provide interventions to students in their quest to improve children's social and emotional skills and can be used on an ongoing basis in a school/program setting to measure student development and change in skill level over time.

Summary

More and more, schools are seeking ways to integrate social and emotional learning in their classrooms and programs as the mounting evidence suggests social and emotional skills play a central role in shaping student achievement, workplace readiness, and adult well-being (Chien et al., 2012; Delale-O'Connor et al., 2012); whereas the absence of social and emotional skills has been shown to have tremendously negative consequences such as academic failure, violence, ostracism, substance abuse, and even possible incarceration (Tierney et al., 2016). This study approached the task of enhancing social-emotional competencies of children in elementary schools through an activity (i.e. basketball) both developmentally appropriate for children of this age, and thought to be socially valued by children this age, embedded with social skills training. The practical implications of the sample group provided students with the opportunity to participate in a social skills training program that promoted success for all participants. The program gave children opportunities to develop their social skills with peers in a naturalistic setting such as schools, with less artificiality then has been true of other social skills training programs, and it removed the negative stigma associated with many "pull out" intervention programs specifically designed for students that exhibit skill deficits.

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