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Practice Report

Development and Implementation of a Curriculum to Develop Social Competence for Students with Visual Impairments in Germany

Elke Wagner

Research has shown, and educators in the field have acknowledged, that students with visual impairments (those who are blind or have low vision) who are in general education, as well as in special education, settings, can lack social competence (Bauman, 1973; Davidow, 1974; Doll, 1953; Hatlen, 2000, 2003; Huebner, 1986; Sacks, Kekelis, & Gaylord-Ross, 1997; Sacks & Silberman, 2000; Schindele, 1974; Stockley & Brooks, 1995; Tuttle, 1987; Van Hasselt, Hersen, & Kazdin, 1985). For a person who is visually impaired, social competence is a key component of a positive self-concept, higher self-esteem, more assertive behavior, and the ability to accept one's disability as a part of oneself.

There is no doubt among professionals in the field that lessons in how to acquire social competence need to be an integral part of teaching students who are visually impaired to increase their self-confidence and self-efficacy. Despite their awareness of the need to teach these skills, professionals "do not seem to be able to implement a creative, sequential curriculum in this area" (Sacks et al., 1997). Various programs to teach social skills have been developed in the United States and many other countries over the past decades (Johnson & Johnson, 1991; Stockley, 1994; Stewart, Van Hasselt, Simon, & Thompson, 1985; Thienwiebel, 1996; Van Hasselt, Simon, & Mastanuono, 1982), but most of them were training or intervention programs of short duration (usually 4–16 weeks, followed by a booster session). In addition, these programs generally had a limited focus on social skills in the context of social interaction (for example, teaching nonverbal or verbal communication skills) and did not include a more holistic approach of teaching visually impaired students more of the skills that are needed to acquire and develop social competence.

Background and development of the curriculum

In Germany, special education teachers have approached the challenges of teaching social competence to students with visual impairments in the same manner as those in other countries. To professionals in the field, it is obvious that if the goal is

to help students acquire social competence, it is important to enhance a student's identity and self-concept by "strengthening the person from inside" (Thienwiebel, 1996). But how could they do so, and was this the correct approach?

A curriculum that provides detailed steps in learning and that can be applied individually would help educators teach the necessary skills to acquire social competence to students who are visually impaired. But the development of such a curriculum has been fraught with many obstacles. As Sacks et al. (1997, p. 1) noted:

> Although other disciplines have designed powerful training programs in the area of social skills, practice in our field [of visual impairment.… has been somewhat of a folk art, in which training techniques and established approaches have been passed from one professional to another with little basis in theory or research.

The goal of enabling students who are visually impaired to become socially competent has not been accomplished.

Social competence and *social skills* are often used synonymously. However, the term *social* competence, which is used in many different contexts, is a broader term than *social skills* and encompasses a multidimensional concept that consists of various social capabilities and social skills (Hatlen, 2000; Sacks et al., 1997; Wagner, 2003). The general school system emphasizes the need for students to display

social competence, in addition to academic competencies, to enable them to achieve their goals in school, in their future careers, in their personal lives, and in recreational activities. Social competence is normally learned through observation and modeling, as well as through incidental learning. For students with visual impairments, learning by these techniques is impossible or, at least, extremely difficult. (Huebner, 1986; Hutto & Hare, 1997; Mc Gregor & Farrenkopf, 2000; Sacks & Silberman, 2000; Tuttle, 1987; Wolffe, 1999, 2000). Since the field of special education emphasizes the importance of social competence for students who are visually impaired and because of the complexities of teaching these students how to acquire and develop social competence, a special curriculum was needed.

Teaching social competence in an expanded approach is necessary to enable visually impaired students to be autonomously integrated into society, so that they can be active participants in the sighted community (Hudelmayer, 1997; Mersi & Schindele, 1983). Therefore, it is not enough just to strengthen the confidence and identity of students in discussions of problems related to their visual impairments and in narrowly focused short-term intervention programs.

Social competence consists of skills that help people who are visually impaired manage or cope with challenges in activities of daily living (ADLs), orientation and mobility (O&M), public encounters,

personal affairs, and interactions with other people (Mersi & Schindele, 1983). Professionals in the field must follow a holistic approach, providing a conceptual framework that can be filled with content that, depending on the population they are teaching, looks at the problems related to social competence from a broader viewpoint so that the content can be included in the educational process in a more individualized manner.

Consequently, after a review of the international literature; close observations of students; and interviews with teachers, caregivers, and the students themselves, I developed a conceptual framework for a curriculum (see Box 1). This curriculum encompasses more than the traditional contents of social skills programs and the "traditional" approach to strengthening a student who is visually impaired from the inside by supporting the development of the student's identity and reinforcing the student's self-confidence through discussions about such issues as the student's emotional status. The curriculum also emphasizes an approach that strengthens from an "outside point of view," through techniques that provide information, strategies, and hands-on experiences in the natural environment. Therefore, in addition to the traditional approach, this curriculum contains additional tasks that are necessary for developing social competence.

Major categories of the

curriculum

Four major categories or units were developed as the framework for this curriculum:

Personal management and self-care

In this unit, students are presented with a description, explanation, and analysis of their visual impairments, which forms the basis for future explanations of certain behaviors, limitations, or actions, as well as for the promotion of strategies for dealing with their visual impairments. This cognitive approach is centered on presenting information on eye diseases, eye examinations, eye surgeries, and strategies for dealing with visits to ophthalmologists and opticians and for handling low vision aids. Students are also enlightened about how their actions and mannerisms influence the impressions that sighted people have of them. Certain areas (such as personal appearance, awareness of strengths and weaknesses, and compensation for stress) are presented through information and instruction.

Information on the conventions and rules that are generally observed by sighted people and strategies that reinforce proper behavior and correct inappropriate behavior need to be taught as the basis for adapting and adjusting to living with a visual impairment. As Sacks and Corn (1996, pp. 421–422) stated:

> One cannot minimize the impact of knowledge on psychosocial adjustment. If children who are blind or visually impaired and families can gain a sense of understanding and awareness about visual disabilities and their implications for functioning, then gaining self-identity, interdependence, and social competence will occur naturally. It is through education that children with visual impairments will move toward a better sense of self and acceptance of their strengths that will carry them into adult life.

ADLs in combination with O&M

The second unit is action oriented. The students need to have firsthand experiences (good and bad) to be able to conquer difficulties, especially in the context of ADLs and O&M. If a student does not have information about and does not develop necessary strategies for doing household chores, buying and preparing food, having proper table manners, traveling as independently as possible, acting independently in a restaurant, and identifying and organizing personal belongings, for instance, his or her self-confidence cannot be sufficiently developed, and the student will consequently feel uncertain and have low self-esteem.

Giving students with visual impairments information; strategies; and, especially, opportunities to have their own experiences and to practice the strategies in natural situations will help them to overcome many obstacles of daily life. As Rosen (1993, p. 18) noted:

> Life skills are as important as academic skills in preparing children and youths with visual handicaps for future

employment, social integration, and participation in the community. The ability to perform life skills as independently as possible also enhances self-esteem and feelings of self-worth, which are central in the psychosocial development of children and youths with visual handicaps.

Career education

> Many visually impaired students reach their teen years naive about the world of work. Through no fault of their own, numerous youngsters who are academically trained have little or no work experience and thus little practical understanding of the labor market, jobs, and how one progresses through jobs to capture one's career goals (Tuttle, 1999, cited in Wolffe, 1999, p. xiv).

"Without vision or with impaired vision, it is difficult to learn incidentally about work roles, the types of jobs available, what tasks are inherent in different jobs, and what work behaviors are expected of employees" (Wolffe, 1999, p. 13). The combination of information, practical application, and reflection in both a structured learning environment and a natural habitat can help students develop the attitudes, knowledge, and skills that are necessary for them to prepare themselves for their future careers. Besides giving students information and strategies that are work related, this unit emphasizes a more emotional aspect of the subject. In this unit, talking about feelings, fears, and hopes is as important as learning to manage money, read work contracts, establish savings accounts, gather information on jobs, prepare for job interviews, and develop appropriate work habits and

behaviors. The skills and capabilities that are acquired in the first two units prepare students for this third unit. The goal is to enable students who are visually impaired to explore and become knowledgeable about opportunities for employment and to feel confident about entering the labor market.

Social interaction and leisure activities

To be socially integrated, a person who is visually impaired has to have verbal and nonverbal communication skills and to learn how to structure his or her spare time and to take an active part in recreational activities. As Huebner (1986, p. 350) stated:

> Nonverbal communication is an inseparable part of dynamic communications and interactions. We communicate through appearances, dress, facial expressions, body postures and positions, gestures, eye behaviors, vocal cues, and the distance we maintain between ourselves and others. By observing nonverbal signals, we can often tell whether our audience is interested or bored; agrees or disagrees; is pleased or angry; understands a parent's stare that means "No"; as well as a smile, which means "I am so proud." We learn to send nonverbal cues which convey specific meanings in our culture through observing, testing, and mimicking. Thus the inability of visually impaired children to observe subtle nonverbal communication cues can make personal and social interaction difficult.

The unit on social interaction and leisure activities emphasizes an emotional approach of compensating

for visual impairments in interactions with others and in leisure activities. Students need to be informed about recreational opportunities and taught strategies for getting involved in community activities. In this unit, misconceptions that sighted and visually impaired people have of one another, which frequently lead to misunderstandings, are explored.

Recreational activities are fundamental to everyone's life, making it important to inform students of their possibilities and to teach them the interaction skills they need to participate fully in these activities. According to Huebner (1986, p. 357),

> the primary goals of leisure are first, that students develop the skills and attitudes needed to fully participate in recreation activities and second, that they become knowledgeable of recreational choices as they can intelligently select how they spend their leisure time. Visually impaired children often live a highly structured life. Too often, too many decisions are made and activities are selected for them.

In summary, the key elements of teaching the content of the curriculum to develop social competence are as follows:

- presenting information
- mediating information
- providing hands-on experience
- teaching problem solving

- process learning
- allowing enough time to learn by experiencing activities in the environments in which they naturally occur
- teaching strategies
- role-playing, usually after having hands-on experiences in natural settings to find alternative strategies or just to reenact a situation
- discussing issues and feelings
- mediating with peers
- mediating with teachers
- discussing the emotional aspects of dealing with visual impairments and overcoming obstacles or learning to accept being limited by visual impairments.

One key element of the second unit is placing the students in situations in which they will have both good or bad experiences and consequently helping them develop strategies for dealing with similar situations. Instruction at this stage is done mainly through what might be called a “sink or swim” approach. Discussion and role-playing the situation and finding suitable solutions (if the problem has not already been solved) occur afterward in class. The

curriculum begins on a cognitive level by giving information and teaching strategies and advances to a more practical level by creating “real-life ” experiences that will cause more emotional responses during follow-up discussions of the experiences and how the students feel about them.

Conclusion

It is difficult to cope with and overcome limitations, practical and emotional, that are caused by visual impairments without acquiring knowledge of and gaining experience in confronting obstacles, meeting challenges, and engaging in activities that develop problem-solving skills and strategies. The *curriculum* is a framework that can be adapted to any group and modified as necessary. Without the active support of parents and teachers, it is difficult to implement it.

Is it necessary to have a general curriculum, or can educators just find solutions to problems as they occur? As Wolffe, Sacks, and Thomas (2000, p. 10) noted: “The goal of social-skills instruction is to provide blind and visually impaired youngsters with the information and skills they need in order to feel confident and comfortable in social situations.” Could a curriculum help to cover the most important areas? This curriculum addresses areas in which the students with visual impairments have difficulties and deficiencies, but it is not set in stone and can be adapted as needed. One should not think of the curriculum as being

inflexible; rather, it should be viewed as a framework that can be adjusted to meet the needs of individual students with visual impairments. Although parts of the curriculum could be incorporated into the general education curriculum, some items are time intensive and need to be implemented during additional class activities. Furthermore, the curriculum is long-term and emphasizes continuity, rather than a traditional short-term intervention approach.

The sum of many social skills does not yield social competence. Social competence is exhibited in the application of the appropriate social skills required in various situations and related to personal needs.

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Elke Wagner, Ed.D., *professor, Department of Special*

Education on Low Vision and Blindness, University of Education, Zeppelinstrasse 1, 69129 Heidelberg, Germany; e-mail: <wagnerluke@aol.com>.

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