

Effectiveness of Small Group Social Skills Lessons with Elementary Students

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Author Note

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Abstract

This action research study (ARS) describes the effectiveness of small group social skills lessons with elementary students, using *Too Good for Violence: A Curriculum for Non-violent Living* by the Mendez Foundation. The school counselor and school social worker taught the curriculum in a structured small group of 4th grade students in 8 weekly sessions. The skills taught were conflict resolution, anger management, respect for self and others, and effective communication. The ARS provides current findings to school counselors, regarding the impact that the social skills lessons have on elementary students' knowledge of skills, behavior, and academics.

Keywords: small group, social skills lessons, elementary students, school counselor

Effectiveness of Small Group Social Skills Lessons with Elementary Students

By teaching students personal and social skills, school counselors facilitate students' preparation for the future (Tomori, 1995). The American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2005) states the school counselor's purpose in a comprehensive program is to teach proactively certain skills to support students' school success. School counselors provide a valuable service

to students by leading small groups, which can have a counseling or guidance focus. Students are taught skill building lessons in small groups, generally in the area of personal/social or academics. Action research (AR) can help school counselors gather information on how effective their interventions are in causing a positive change in the lives of students. Based on AR results, changes can be made to increase the intervention's effectiveness (Mills, 2011). The purpose of this action research study (ARS) was to describe the effectiveness of small group social skills lessons in an elementary school by looking for an increase in the students' (a) knowledge of skills, (b) positive behaviors related to the skills learned, and (c) academic achievement.

Review of Curriculum and Best Practices of Skills

Since the ability to cope socially is an important predictor of success in young adulthood, implementing interventions early in a child's development is important. "Promoting the development of social competencies and reducing involvement with delinquent peers may protect at-risk youth from engaging in serious delinquency in early adulthood while increasing their educational success" (Stepp, Pardini, Loeber, & Morris, 2011, p. 464). Ogilvy's (1994) evidence suggests children lacking social skills are expected to have academic, social, or psychological issues. If students learn social skills early, then the expectation is that students will apply these skills and avoid problems in later stages of development. Improving social skills allows the possibility for improvement in the academic achievement. Marzillier and Winter (as cited in Verduyn, Lord, & Forrest, 1990) found one problem teaching social skills is the difficulty for students to generalize the skills learned outside of the group setting. Verduyn's et al. (1990) findings demonstrate students can gain the ability to generalize the skills in other situations and that school is an appropriate setting for groups, since it is most similar to daily life.

This reinforces the need to find effective programs for the elementary school level in order to correct any skills deficits and possibly lead to academic and personal/social success sooner.

An early study by Tomori (1995) found that teaching social skills in group counseling provides a positive and supportive environment. that can lead to effectively learning of skills and improving self-esteem. Groups can help students find a sense of belonging as they identify with other students who have the same concerns. Whiston and Quinby (1995) found that when presenting guidance curriculum, small group work is more effective than guidance lessons presented to an entire class. They also suggest group interventions are more effective when used as a response to students' problems or difficulties. Finally, Whiston and Quinby's research found that group counseling is effective with younger children but more research is needed regarding the format of the groups. Brantley and Brantley (1996) conducted a study using small group counseling lessons to decrease acting-out behaviors with students attending an impoverished, inner-city elementary school. In their environments, the students were exposed to elements related to violence and drugs. The school district invited school counseling interns to lead the interventions because they had no elementary school counselors. The study compared a structured and unstructured small group approach and found the structured approach demonstrated a slight improvement in behavior over the unstructured approach. Since the findings did not demonstrate a significant improvement, it appears more research could be conducted with unstructured and structured group approaches.

A few studies indicated that the use of small group interventions did not have significant positive results. Villalba (2003) used a 6-week solution-focused small group intervention with third, fourth and fifth grade students, who are English-for-speakers-of-other-languages /English-as-a-second-language (ESOL/ESL) to determine the effects on self-concept, school success, and

student attitudes toward school. Although the results demonstrated that students were more aware of their ESL teacher's impact and were more satisfied with their school success, after treatment there was no significant difference between the control and experimental groups in regards to self-concept and attitude towards school. Bland, Melang, and Miller (1986) used a small group intervention focused on self-concept, study skills, learning skills, and goal setting with fourth grade underachievers. The groups met twice a week for 9 weeks. The findings indicated a significant difference only in the mean change scores between the treatment and control groups but no other significant differences were found. The results suggest this intervention may help with work habits and classroom behavior according to teacher input, however, caution should be used when viewing the results. Since some small group interventions used in elementary schools with specific student subgroups presented varying results, additional research is needed that specifies the student population in the study as well as the intervention and results.

ASCA National Standards provide a framework that helps school counselors develop the competencies in their program (2005). The goal is for the students to know and be able to demonstrate the personal/social, career, and academic standards after participating in a comprehensive school counseling program. Barna and Brott (2011) found school counselors view both academic and personal/social standards as important and put these standards into action in their counseling programs. "A growing body of evidence reinforces a positive link between students' academic achievement and personal/social development in such areas as emotional intelligence (EI), social competence, academic enablers, and behavior" (p. 242-243). Parker et al. (as cited in Barna & Brott, 2011) indicated that EI has a positive impact on students' academic achievement. Steen and Kaffenberger (2007) conducted an elementary school study,

which taught small group lessons focused on both personal/social concerns and academic concerns. The results support that group counseling is an effective intervention to address the academic and personal/social needs of the students. Verduyn et al. (1990) conducted a study with 10-13 year old students, with either observed behavior issues and/or problems with social interactions, to evaluate the effectiveness of a social skills program taught in a school. The students attended training sessions, which met twice a week for 4 weeks. Each session was structured and focused on a certain part of social interaction using a variety of teaching methods such as discussion, modeling, and role playing. The results support that teaching social skills to students with behavior issues in school is effective.

Conclusions of Literature Review

When school counselors effectively teach social skills, the positive impact can spread from improved social relationships to possible success in academics and adulthood. As the students demonstrate improvement in social competence, their competence can reduce barriers to learning and increase academic achievement. This review of literature gleaned no landmark or classic studies. Yet, the review of literature suggests that teaching these skills in the school setting, specifically in structured small groups, may be the most effective way for the students to learn. The ARS provides data on the effectiveness of a structured small group approach to social skills lessons. The structured small group met with the school counselor and school social worker weekly for 8 weeks. The discussion describes the effect on the students' knowledge and application of the skills, as well as their academic achievement.

Methods

For this study the principal investigator (PI), who was also the school counselor, implemented an ARS to find out if the format and delivery of the small social skills group were

effective. Using AR allows school counselors to evaluate the impact guidance has on student outcome (Mills, 2011). The PI looked for any changes that would increase the effectiveness of future small groups. AR is the appropriate design for this study because the PI strives to improve her elementary school counseling program by finding the most effective small group lessons to help students learn and apply social skills. This design allowed the PI to perform research on her own work to find methods that lead to student success. The goal of the AR was to find if the small group lessons positively increased the 4th graders' knowledge, behavior, and academics. Student knowledge was determined by the student's ability to answer multiple choice questions correctly regarding the concepts taught. Student behavior was observed by the classroom teacher and rated on a Likert scale for the frequency of positive and negative social behaviors. An increase in academics was determined by comparing the students' grade point average (GPA) on their report cards before and after the group. The information was gathered and analyzed to determine the effectiveness of the small group social skills lessons.

Participants

A total of 8 fourth grade elementary students participated in the small social skills group. The group makeup of students was 50% female and 50% male. The population was composed of 62.5% Black, 25% White, and 12.5% Multi-racial; ages ranged from 9-10 years. The 12 students were referred by a teacher, administrator, or school counselor for a social skills group. The group was narrowed to participants, for which the PI obtained parental consent as well as child assent to participate in the group. Six students were referred because they had participated in the same type of group the previous year and the school counselor wanted them to have the opportunity to continue with the new 4th grade lessons this year. Five of the 6 chose to participate again. However, one withdrew her consent after 4 group sessions. Of 6 newly

referred students 3 chose to participate. One student gave his assent but withdrew from school before the group began, while 2 of the students did not give their assent. The students attend a suburban Georgia elementary school, which teaches kindergarten through 5th grade students, with a total enrollment of about 800 students.

Measures

The survey assessing student knowledge data was collected in a group meeting before and after the group lessons completion. The 10 multiple choice questions and answers were read aloud to the students, while they were asked to circle the one correct answer. The PI collected the students' report card grades for the reporting period prior to and after the group lessons. The teachers received and filled out the survey that rated student behaviors before and after the group lessons were taught. Teachers completed these independently and returned them to the PI. At the conclusion of the group, 2 teachers volunteered to provide an individual structured formal interview with the PI. The teachers provided additional information on their student's behavior. The student knowledge survey and the teacher behavior rating scale survey were provided with the Mendez Foundation curriculum, which is a research-based program that has been proven valid and reliable. The PI developed teacher interview questions and this survey did not undergo validity or reliability study.

Procedure

The small group curriculum, *Too Good for Violence: A Curriculum for Non-violent Living* by the Mendez Foundation, was presented in 8 weekly sessions. The PI and school social worker both led the group sessions after previously being trained by the Mendez Foundation in the curriculum. The weekly 40 minute lessons covered the following areas to teach social skills: conflict resolution, anger management, respect for self and others, and effective communication

(Mendez Foundation, 2009). The curriculum contains 7 lessons that are scripted for the leader and includes most all materials needed to conduct each lesson. Student booklets come with the curriculum, which allowed for individual and group activities that coincided with the lessons. Each lesson reviewed previously learned material and then taught a new skill through stories, group discussion, and activities to demonstrate or practice the skill. The PI and school social worker implemented an incentive for the students to be engaged in the lessons by offering candy at the conclusion of the sessions to decrease talking out of turn and encourage staying focused on the group activity.

Results

Student Knowledge Survey

Results of the Student Knowledge instrument show an increase from pre to post survey. The mean score for all participants on the pre survey was 68.3%, while the mean on the post survey was 76.6%. The group's mean score increased by 8.3% (see Table 1). Three of 6 students increased their score from the pre to the post survey. Two students maintained the same score from pre to post, however the pre and post scores were high at 70% and 90%. One student score decreased from pre to post by 10%.

Table 1

Student Knowledge Survey

Participant	Pre survey	Post survey	Change
#1	70%	70%	No change
#2	90%	90%	No change
#3	40%	50%	Increased 10%
#4	50%	90%	Increased 40%
#5	80%	70%	Decreased 10%
#6	80%	90%	Increased 10%

Note: Student knowledge survey question topics:

- Differences between cooperating and competing
- Identifying a communication roadblock or exaggerating
- Conflict resolution and management
- Ways to show respect to other people; handling disagreements with beliefs or opinions
- Identifying bullying
- Conflict escalation and de-escalation

Student Behavior Checklists

Student Behavior Checklists (SBC) scored by classroom teachers yield varied results. The checklist contained 6 items in 4 categories, which included emotional skills, social skills, social behaviors, and inappropriate social behaviors, for a total of 24 items. The SBC post survey results are discussed by category. In the area of emotional skills 1 participant received 4 of 6 marks for most often displaying emotional skills, while 1 student received 2 of 6 positive marks. Three of the 6 participants had 1 of 6 marks in the positive scale range, while 1 student received no positive marks. In the area of social skills one student received all 6 marks for most often displaying social skills, while one received 3 positive marks out of 6. Two of the 6 received only 1 positive mark of 6 for the item, “likes or feels attached to teacher(s).” The remaining 2 participants received no positive marks in this area. In the area of social behaviors 2 students received 5 or more marks for most often displaying positive social behaviors out of 6. One participant received 1 positive mark for the item, “helps other students,” while the remaining 3 received no positive marks in the social behavior category. In the area of inappropriate social behaviors the students scored high for almost never displaying these behaviors. Three participants scored 3 or more marks for almost never displaying inappropriate

social behaviors. The remaining 3 participants scored 1 or less for almost never displaying the behaviors. The checklists were scored for each participant by averaging the 6 responses in each of the 4 categories. The highest possible positive score was 5 while the lowest possible score was 1.

Grade Point Averages

Student GPAs were compared for the 2nd 9 week report card (before group began) and the 3rd 9 week report card (1 week before group ended). At the 2nd 9 week report 4 of 6 students had a 3.4 GPA or higher. At the 3rd 9 week report 4 of 6 students had a 3.2 or higher. Overall, two students' GPA increased, while Participant 1 stayed equal and Participant 3 decreased.

Table 2

Participant Report Card GPA

Participant	2 nd 9 weeks Report Card GPA	3 rd 9 weeks Report Card GPA	Change in GPA
#1	3.40	3.85	Increase
#2	3.40	3.28	Decrease
#3	2.70	2.10	Decrease
#4	3.85	4.00	Increase
#5	1.85	.85	Decrease
#6	3.70	3.70	No change

Teacher Interviews

Structured formal teacher interviews were conducted with 2 teachers, who volunteered to be interviewed. When teachers were asked if they noticed their student applying the skills taught in the group, the teacher of student #4 noted improved communication skills in the classroom and with peers. The other teacher noted she had not observed the application of any of those skills for student #1. The teachers also were asked to indicate if any of the following negative behaviors were observed: disrespect to self or others, ineffective communication, anger outbursts, or not handling conflicts peacefully. Student #4's teacher did not see any of the

negative behaviors before or after the group. The teacher for student #1 did not see any of the negative behaviors before or after the group, but noted that the student is very impulsive and not able to keep her hands to herself. Finally the teachers were asked if any change was noticed in the student's ability to focus on learning in the classroom. The teacher for student #4 noticed her student participating and asking more questions in class. She also stated her student appears more comfortable (i.e., not afraid to read aloud). For student #1 the teacher did not notice a change in this area. Following is a discussion of the results, which includes interpretations and how the PI can apply adjustments to future interventions. Figures A-1 through A-4 summarize results:

Figure A-1. Emotional Skills Pre and Post Surveys

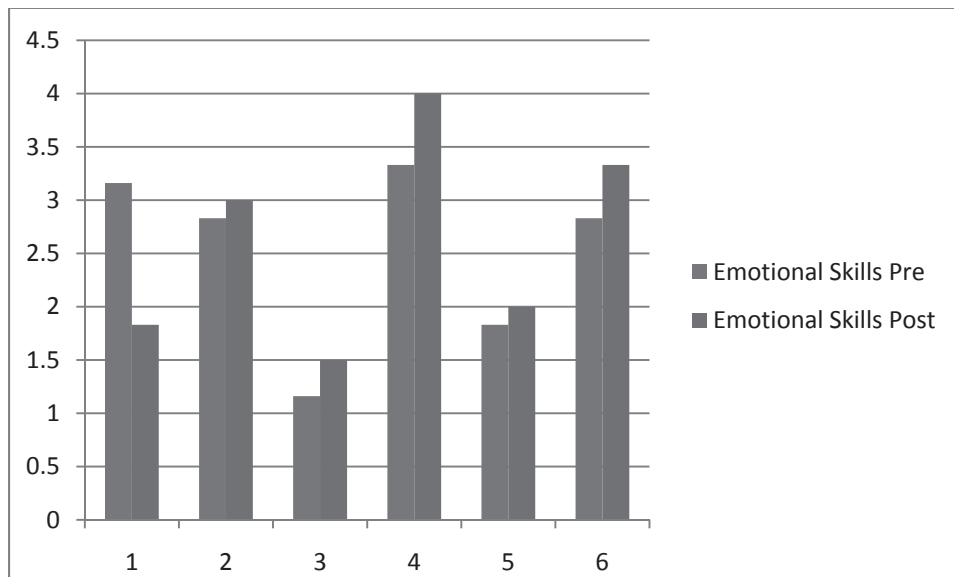


Figure A-1. Participants 1 through 6 mean emotional skills scores are shown with the highest positive rating of 5 and the lowest rating of 1.

Emotional skill items on checklist:

- Uses “I feel messages” to share his/her feelings
- Sets goals in the classroom
- Stops and thinks before acting

- Calms him/herself down when stressed or upset

Figure A-2. Social Skills Pre and Post Surveys

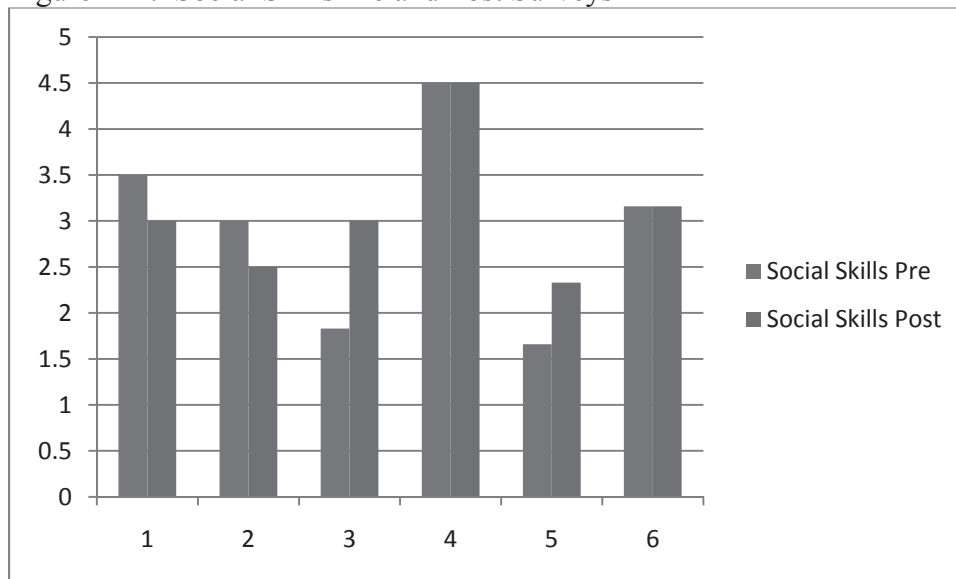


Figure A-2. Participants 1 through 6 mean social skills scores are shown with the highest positive rating of 5 and the lowest rating of 1.

Social skill items on checklist:

- Treats other students with respect
- Uses positive strategies to resist peer pressure (e.g., avoid, ignore, walk away, humor).
- Listens to other students' feelings and points of view.
- Resolves problems with other students on his/her own.
- Likes or feels attached to teacher(s).

Figure A-3. Social Behaviors Pre and Post Surveys

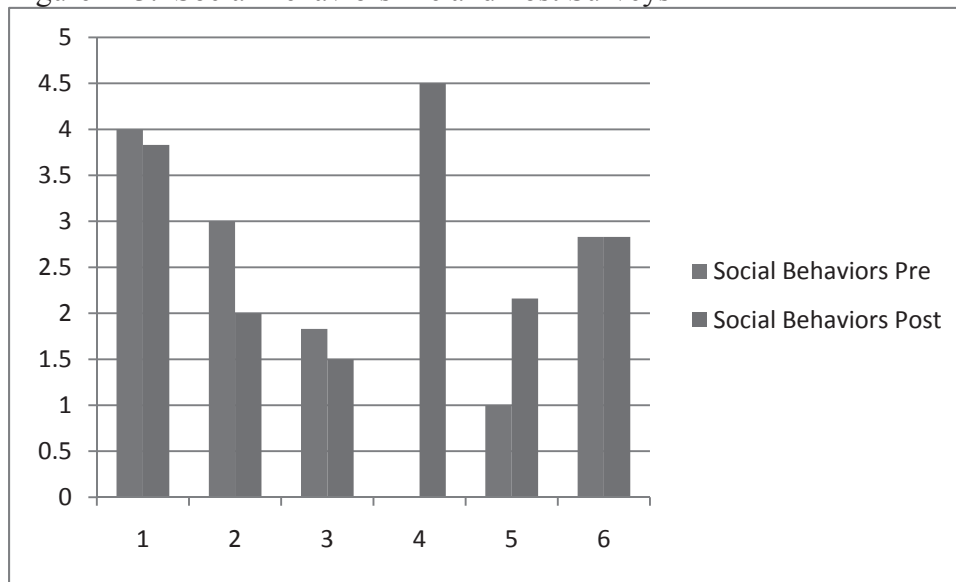


Figure A-3. Participants 1 through 6 mean social behavior scores are shown with the highest positive rating of 5 and the lowest rating of 1. The teacher left this category blank on the pre survey for participant 4.

Social behavior items on checklist:

- Helps other students.
- Comforts other students when they feel badly or sad.
- Says “I’m sorry” when appropriate.
- Says nice things to other students.
- Takes turns, shares and plays fair.

Figure A-4. Inappropriate Social Behaviors Pre and Post Surveys

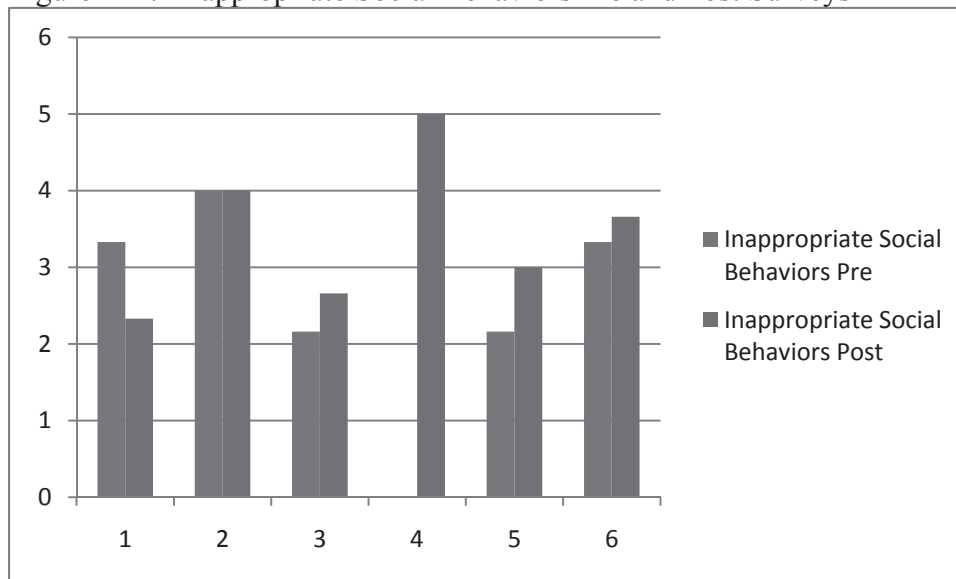


Figure A-4. Participants 1 through 6 mean inappropriate social behavior scores are shown with the highest rating of 5 (the behaviors almost never occurred) and the lowest rating of 1 (the behaviors most often do occur). The teacher left this category blank on the pre survey for participant 4.

Inappropriate social behaviors on checklist:

- Difficulties getting along with other students (argues, displays aggression, or bullies)
- Disrupts instruction and/or procedures

Discussion

The number of participants in the ARS decreased from 8 to 6 because 1 student chose not to continue after a few sessions. Due to personal circumstances another student was not able to attend school during the conclusion of the group. While 8 was an ideal group, the data for 6 group members was substantial.

Overall the group's mean scores demonstrated that participants gained knowledge about the social skills taught in the group lessons because 83% scored a 70% or higher on the post knowledge survey. Only 50% of the students showed an increase from the pre to post, while

33% had pre and post scores that remained the same at 70% and 90%. Since the 33% (2 students) had previously attended a similar social skills group as 3rd graders, the higher pre scores could be due to knowledge retained. However, 2 other students, who had not previously attended a social skills group, scored 80% on the pretest. Maybe the high pre-survey scores indicate that certain students already had prior knowledge of the skills yet may not have been using these skills appropriately.

The PI noticed one question on the post survey was missed by all 6 participants. The question was, “to get from a conflict to a solution, start by.” Four of 6 students chose, “agreeing to disagree,” which was one of the strategies taught to solve conflicts. One student chose, “telling the other person why he or she is wrong,” while another chose “competing with each other.” The correct answer was “agreeing to travel together to solve the problem.” The results suggest that further explanation would be needed in future groups, to insure students understand first an agreement to work out the conflict is needed, and then to focus on solutions. A question regarding respect for other people listed choices that were all examples of respect, with the last choice stating “all of the above.” Two of 6 answered incorrectly by circling the first answer choice. The incorrect answer could be due to not using good test-taking skills, which calls for reading all statements before answering, since they did not read and/or recognize that all of the answer choices were correct. The PI noticed limited time for the post survey was scheduled at the end of the group before classes dismissed for lunch and some students may have rushed their answers. In the future the PI will remind the students when taking the survey to consider all of the answer choices before marking an answer and to take their time to choose the best answer.

Regarding student behavior, the PI expected that as the students’ knowledge of social skills increased, their application of skills would increase in the classroom. With 83% scoring

70% or higher on their post knowledge survey of social skills, the PI expected the majority of the participants to improve in the behavior checklists also. The PI considered any increase from the pre to post score an improvement but also considered any score above 3.0 (which was the neutral answer of “sometimes” on the behavior checklist) as positive. The majority of the participants increased in the area of emotional skills. For social skills a third of the participants increased scores, while another third maintained a positive score. In the area of social behavior there was only a small increase in scores, but a third of the post-survey were positive. For inappropriate social behavior the majority of participants either increased or maintained a positive score. Overall, the areas that had the most improvement and highest scores were emotional skills and inappropriate social behaviors.

In the literature review some studies taught both social and academic skills to students, who found academic success. Even though this ARS did not teach academic skills, the PI expected an improvement in grades for students who gained the knowledge and applied the social skills. Regarding grades, 66% of the participants' GPA began and ended with a 3.0 or higher, which demonstrates that they were already academically successful. Only 33% showed an increase in their grades, while another 33% maintained a 3.0 or higher. The students who increased their grades were student #1 and student #4, whose teachers participated in the voluntary survey. Student #1 increased her grades but did not show improvement in her knowledge survey or on any category of the behavior checklist. This could be due to some attention and impulsivity issues, which her teacher noted in the interview. However, she progressed with her academics without these issues interfering with her learning. Student #4 increased her grades as well as showing the most improvement on her pre to post knowledge survey (50% to 90%). She scored between a 4.0 to a 5.0 on the post behavior checklist, which

were the highest scores in each category. According to the teacher this student did not display any of the negative behaviors before or after the group, which could be a reason for her higher scores on the checklist. The PI concluded that since the intervention in the ARS did not focus on academic achievement, the increase or decrease in social skills did not directly affect the students' academic progress. In future groups focused solely on social skills, the academic aspect would be dismissed.

Implications of the ARS

Many factors can affect the rate of a student's learning and application of skills such as, ability to focus, motivation to improve, duration of time measured, amount of experience, awareness of knowledge and behavior being measured. For future small social skills groups, the students would be made aware that their teachers are filling out pre and post surveys of their behavior. This knowledge might motivate them to show more positive behaviors. The PI would allow 4 weeks after the last group session before asking the teachers to fill out the behavior checklist to find if with additional time students are able to demonstrate the application of skills. For students who are not applying the skills, the PI could offer a review session. Increasing the number of sessions to 9 would allow more time to cover the material and completion of the surveys. When administering the knowledge survey, the PI will remind students to consider all answer choices and to avoid rushing. An incentive for a certain score or percentage on the post knowledge survey and/or behavior checklist may also be implemented to see if with motivation the students demonstrate higher knowledge or application of skills. The academic component would be dismissed for future groups. The PI plans to invite these students to participate in the 5th grade Too Good for Violence small group with new strategies in place. By continuing to

conduct AR the PI expects to find the most effective social skills group for her students. Action research has relevance for an individual program and its audience (Mills, 2011).

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