

Research Proposal

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EPSY-636

The Effect of Personal Introduction Skills and Body Language Training on
Special-Needs and At-Risk Students in 7th to 12th Grades

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Author Note

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Not all young learners pick up social cues and socialization skills naturally. At-risk learners may be deprived social rituals from which to model their own behavior. Special-needs learners may lack sensory integration and learning abilities to naturally absorb social rituals from their peers and community. When social skills learning doesn't occur naturally or neuro-typically, the intervention of purposeful social learning may be effective. Students can learn by doing, by making mistakes, and by watching others (peer modeling). Existing research provides evidence to support the effectiveness of social skills interventions. This project hopes to support the positive effect of social skills training on the people skills of at-risk and special needs students by exploring the effect of a custom-designed social skills intervention. The research question is, "Can social training intervention help at-risk and special-needs students increase their eye contact, gestures of social engagement, joint attention, and open (approachable) body language?"

The purposes of this research are:

- To measure the effectiveness of a 30-minute, small-group, 2-part social training intervention during Life Skills class time for at-risk and special-needs learners (including those in the autistic spectrum). The 2-part social skills training is attached as Supplemental Materials; One section is self-paced, the other section is a video. "We need to find ways to have kids spend time together. They are hot-wired to learn from each other," says Headmaster Dr. Jan Keating, of Stanford (Glader, 2009).
- To make available an at-home intervention for parents and families. This is discussed further in Anticipated Results and Implications.
- To make a modest contribution to the increasing growth of successful and effective interventions for students in need. Not always have the learning theories matched the interventions or their implementation. The literature shows steady improvement over time in what educational research data has been recorded, analyzed, and published, making use of ever-evolving tools and learning theories to prepare each individual for life. The more recent literature shows exciting dedication among enduring teams of researchers who follow-up on their own recommendations. Their reports are published in seemingly rapid succession. It is in this urgent spirit of "can't get it done fast enough" that the fewest possible students drop through the cracks. In-need students and their families benefit from this urgency to implement the best possible

interventions ASAP. The younger the brain, the more plasticity it has, and the better it can learn. Today's intervention is better than tomorrow's intervention.

In near-transfer and far-transfer of learning, our target learners benefit from increased personal effectiveness in social skills. This increased personal effectiveness due to better social skills could be generalized to a better life for at-risk and special needs learners struggling to adapt from school to work. This study humbly attempts to broaden educational practice and to contribute to research of learning theories and social training modules, to replicate results, and provide additional curriculum for the teachers.

Two meta-analyses referenced specifically cover decades of literature, providing a quick history of interventions published. These authors stated that in the earlier years, the data collection, analysis, and relevant learning theories were spotty, and called for improvements. Happily, improvements have steadily come, in the form of improved application of learning theories, research focus, continuity of research projects by in-tact teams, quantitative data collection, and statistical analysis.

A meta-analysis by Prideaux, Creed, Muller, and Patton (2000) reviewed 25 years (1975-2000) of such interventions. Prideaux et al. (2000) highlight available methodically-sound career development and intervention studies, with the purpose of showing the dearth of such studies that have been conducted in real-time high school environments. They make a comprehensive sweep of what meta-analyses research has been done during those 25 years, purposefully showing the statistical holes in the career intervention quantitative data through 2000.

To define "career education interventions", another meta-analysis literature review by Baker and Taylor (1998) cites the "most enduring definition" of career education as "offered by Hoyt (1997) as a process of concentrating educational and community efforts on interventions targeting children and adolescents that will aid in the acquisition and use of knowledge, skills, and attitudes for making work meaningful and satisfying" (Baker and Taylor, 1998, p. 376). Baker and Taylor concludes with the admission that there are a "relatively small number" of studies published for school-to-work transitions, and even when you find one, "critical data such as means and standard deviations" for conditions, participants, and dependent variables "are not provided". They say that such omissions "indicate that, as a profession, we still have a way to go to achieve maturity as researchers" (Baker and Taylor, 1998, p. 383). The good news is that since 1998, certain research teams are filling that analytical void.

Le, Casillas, Robbins, and Langley (2005) is another meta-analysis (the second in a series of meta-analyses by the same team of researchers) linking motivation, social skills and self-management predictors of college readiness and success. Within their two studies, they first created and then revised the Student Readiness Inventory, using student input to list and hone the psychosocial and academic skill factors that the students themselves feel will make for success in college. So, what if these same skill factors or predictors of success in college could be applied for non-college learners as they individually strive for success as defined in their own lives?

Elksnin and Elksnin (2001) discusses the social difficulties of students with disabilities. “The U.S. Department of Education (1996) reported that 29% of adolescents with disabilities required social skills instruction beyond high school” (Elksnin and Elksnin, 2001, p. 91). They list Occupational Social Skills Identified by Employment Experts (Elksnin and Elksnin, 2001, pp. 93-96), and recommend four ways to teach occupational social skills (See Table 1, last page of this report).

Peers can be part of the continual improvements. The success and efficiency of peer-tutoring and peer-mentoring are reviewed in Access Center (2008) from the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC). This resource includes WWC criteria for evidence standards in the study of peer-tutoring, Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS), and Reciprocal Peer Tutoring (RPT) as instructional strategies. By putting teams of low- and high-achieving students together, good things can happen in the form of cooperative learning structures benefitting both the tutee and the tutor. These concepts of teacher-directed peer activity builds on the social magic of peer role-modeling, social acceptance, and academic collaboration. Not only will the teacher save time, but the students will become more self-sufficient, thus better prepared for their futures. This study concludes that peer tutoring is “particularly advantageous in inclusion classrooms” to allow maximum student engagement and to allow the teacher to focus on as many learning needs as possible. (The Access Center, 2008).

Sadly, many in-need students suffer from sensory integration deficiencies. Patterson, Jolivette, and Crosby (2006) present some self-control intervention models for students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). The study matches deficits in appropriate behaviors to social skills training in pragmatic ways. There are concepts from this study that can be generalized to a broader learner population with sensory integration disorders (SID).

King, Baldwin, Currie, and Evans (2005) analyze existing transitions and real-life role preparation for youth with disabilities. Their four philosophical approaches (skills training, prevocational/vocational guidance, client-centered, and ecological/experiential) are further grouped in three levels (personal, person-environment fit, environmental), as shown in the concept map (King et al., 2005, p. 200). This same team (King, Baldwin, Currie, and Evans, 2006), then detail the most effective real-life transition strategies for youth with disabilities as they “face the fundamental task of constructing a satisfactory life” (Anderson & Clarke, 1982; King, Cathers, Miller Polgar, MacKinnon, & Havens, 2000; King et al., 2005). They discuss best choices for social interventions: real-life transitions are far more powerful than classroom practicing. For the children to best prepare for all that life will throw at them, they need real-life opportunities to practice (King et al., 2005; King et al., 2006).

Most of these cited studies involve complex and multi-faceted analyses using statistics. The two literature surveys covering the earlier years cite insufficient measurement and analysis, and call for improvements. Two articles are qualitative research, and yet are very useful and detailed in historical findings and educational theories.

There is growing momentum in social skills interventions for the emerging-but-delayed learner. It is inspiring to see how many researchers have been collecting data to help learners in need, with a growing number of learning techniques, tools and innovations to apply toward improving their education. To best assimilate all these benefits, the learners should be socially compatible with their peers, and it all starts with personal presentation, self esteem, personal motivation, and mutual social acceptance.

To prepare for this report, the PsycINFO database(via Texas A&M University) and Google Scholar were used to evaluate and collate the findings of others (Gall, Gall and Borg, 2007, p. 98). Key words used in searching were: “school-to-work”, “intervention”, “job coach”, “transition”, and “meta-analysis”. One web-based article, Reading Rockets on Peer Tutoring, is used but it is based on the published works of J. W. Fantuzzo and others as cited by the What Works Clearinghouse. Some reports were chosen for their wide swath in playing historical catch-up on what has and hasn’t worked.

Method

The local school district’s junior-high and high schools offer Life Skills classes to in-need students identified by the ARD process. This proposed one-time research project will be implemented during the regular

Life Skills class time, asking the teachers for volunteers among the 7th-12th students. A 2-part, small group, social skills training module will be offered as treatment curriculum. A class period will video-taped and later scored as the pretest by teacher observation using the proposed rubric (see p. 14 of this document). A 30-minute small-group social skills training treatment will be offered to the students. A posttest will be taken by the same teacher observation immediately following the instruction, as the students role play what they have learned. Ideally, this role play will be video-taped for later scoring by teacher observation using the same rubric. The control group will be engaged elsewhere during the treatment time. If there is success in student learning, the control group can be trained in the social intervention with little delay and thus little harm to them. Issues of observation methods, rubric scoring and benefits of video-taping are addressed in Procedure.

Participants

The participants will be the identified 7th – 12th grade special-needs and at-risk learners (as per the ARD process) within the Conroe I.S.D. The accessible population would be the target population reduced by any learners exempted by the teachers or who were unwilling to participate. The targeted learners could be those at-risk and special needs students with a “deficit in social competence through (1) an inability to establish or maintain satisfactory relationships with peers or adults, and (2) the expression of inappropriate feelings or behaviors under normal circumstances” (Patterson, D.S., Jolivet, K., Crosby, S., 2006). Conroe I.S.D. may have a different definition and selection criteria. It is hoped the accessible population could be nearly the same size as the target population. The sample will be n=100 (or larger if possible), the age range of the accessible sample population will be students in the 7th-12th grades. There will be no filtering for gender, race, sexual orientation, language preference, ethnicity, or socio-economic factors. Future studies may address those sub-categories. From that initial random sample, a control group of half the random sample will be randomly selected by lottery, then pretested. The control group will not receive the treatment. The remaining learners within the random sample chosen (n=50), will become the treatment group, will be pretested, and then given the social training. Both groups will be posttested.

Design

This study will be conducted using a pretest, treatment, and posttest experimental design. The measurement of change, the gain scores, will be analyzed by Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) and t tests. (Gall et al., 2007, p. 440). Further analysis may be used, and could include Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Repeated Measures. Table 13.5 (Gall et al., 2007, p. 442) also shows that mean and standard deviation are calculated. Because the pretest and posttest will be measured in frequency during intervals, product-moment correlation coefficient or Pearson r will be used to test for correlation between the social behaviors of the learners before and after social skills training. According to Table 11.5, Pearson r has the smallest standard error (Gall et al., 2007, pp. 347-348). The Independent Variable (IV) is the social skills of at-risk or special-needs learners as affected by a social skills intervention. The Dependent Variable (DV) is the change in behavior as measured by the observational rubric. The class room is the anticipated setting of the pretest observation, the training, and the posttest observation. It would be optimal for the pretest, intervention, and posttest to be completed by or before one month, to minimize internal and external validity concerns as discussed in Limitations and Future Directions.

Instruction Instrument (Intervention)

The intervention was designed for at-risk and special-needs learners (including but not limited to those in the autistic spectrum). The intervention has 2 sections: A self-paced PowerPoint on personal introduction skills and a Camtasia video on making friends. Intervention attributes include: low cognitive load, near- and far-transfer, relevant learning theories, visual literacy, and sensory integration considerations. The pretest and posttest observation rubric is to be measured and assessed by teacher observation using frequency tick marks to count times of (for example, but not limited to) eye contact, smiles, positive body language, and joint attention. Each learner should be scored during a random 5-minute interval which should randomly capture moments of engagement and joint-attention.

Procedure

Both the control group and the treatment group will be unobtrusively pretested by teacher-observation during class time. Ideally, the students would be unaware that they are being evaluated. If possible, there would be some outsiders present to trigger existing social skills; being engaged with outsiders should provide manifestation of

near-transfer and far-transfer of existing social skills. If possible, the class time could be video-taped, allowing review by the teacher-observer(s). The control group will be given no social training. The intervention group will be given a 30-minute social training intervention on how to introduce themselves, make eye contact, shake hands, analyze facial expressions, read body language and win friends. The students will gather in small groups (2-3 students each), allowing the learners time together which will simulate real-life far-transfer conditions. Both groups will then be given a teacher-observation posttest unobtrusively during an informal peer-to-peer role-playing session; ideally, a video-taped session with people not known to them. If necessary, the permissions for school-use-only videotaping will be gathered. The one-page observation rubric for pretest and posttest is designed to be scored quickly with tick marks for frequency. Access to the video-tape should make the scoring easier for the teacher-observer(s). The observations will take place in the daily class room during Life Skills class time. It is requested that if there is success in student learning, the control group will be trained in the social intervention promptly to bring everyone to par.

Analysis and Discussion

In addition to data presented in the Design section, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) for Repeated Measures, Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA), and analysis of Pearson's r will be used to test for correlation between the social behaviors of the learners before and after social skills training. This data could be saved year-to-year, the treatment repeated once or twice in each school year, thus forming a basis for a local longitudinal trend study.

Anticipated Results and Implications

This training module will be offered to local junior high, high schools and online to special-needs organizations. It is anticipated that the social skills training will positively affect the social behaviors of the target learners. Further research could explore the effect on middle school students (5th and 6th grades) and on on-line learners. It is also hoped that this study would trigger deeper and wider peer-tutoring, and improved learner transitions into effective citizenship. This study could also assist special-needs parents, for it is possible to self-publish an iPad application via Lulu.com, processing the .pdf file into an ePub file (or other appropriate file type), and get the app into the iTunes store. It takes some time, energy and a small fee to make that happen. Many

special-needs students are finding iPads and similar tools greatly improve their communication and learning opportunities.

Limitations and Future Directions

A major limitation will be getting Life Skills class time. The observation rubrics for pretest and posttest may require some field testing. The training module must show age-appropriate and skill-appropriate learning theories. The module and test delivery must be acceptable to educators. The teacher must believe that the time will be wisely spent improving social skills that positively affect self-esteem and self-image of at-risk and special-needs students.

Interval validity concerns: One concern is the maturation of the sample, so the study should be completed in the shortest possible time; one month is suggested as acceptable. There is also concern of testing and instrumentation internal validity due to multiple instructors making the observations (the video-taping should help). Experimental treatment diffusion could occur; it may be slightly off-set by the low-profile pretest and low-profile posttest observations in a casual environment; ideally, the students will be unaware they are being observed (the video-taping should also help this).

External validity concerns: There are limitations to validity in the scoring of the rubric if observer effect is involved (the video-taping should help), and limitations to validity in generalizing across the target population with such a wide range of learner issues. Population validity concerns include the John Henry effect and possible test sensitization. The interaction of time of measurement and treatment effects should be minimal if the testing occurs within a short period of time. Missing data is not anticipated if all parts of the experiment are completed within a month or less.

Human Subjects Protection will be respected and implemented according to IRB standards. Because this study deals with learning disabilities, the IRB application is non-exempt. Informed consent rules will be followed. Letters of consent will be sent once the IRB application is approved. The letters of consent will be coordinated with school district policy, and the video-tapes of observations would be disposed of according to school policy.

For future direction, an effective means of assessment could be direct feedback and observations from trained peer-tutors. In actual experiences of near-transfer and far-transfer of learning, our targeted learners will

benefit from increased personal effectiveness both within their peer groups and with the larger adult populations as they mature into the workforce and become citizens. This increased personal effectiveness could be generalized for a larger population of at-risk and special-needs learners struggling to adapt to an ever-changing social environment. Future studies could attempt to broaden educational practice and to contribute to research knowledge by interfacing learning theories in this and subsequent social trainings, to replicate results, and provide additional curriculum for the teachers (Access Center, 2008). Rapid prototyping of the intervention could address outlier scores to nudge those learners toward meaningful self-motivation.

The factorial experimental design could be useful in further studies. Due to the variance of existing social skills among the special-needs and at-risk learners, it could be possible that the factorial design would better pinpoint “whether the effects of different instructional methods are influenced by the cognitive or personality characteristics of learners” and whether Aptitude-Treatment Interaction (ATI) would yield better research (Gall et al., 2007, pp. 418-425).

Further research could explore the possible effectiveness of correlational and causality of three or more variables (Gall et al., 2007, p. 335) to measure the intrinsic motivation of the learner to stretch personally in uncomfortable ways in order to be socially accepted within a larger community. These changes would be attributed to increased personal motivation, self-esteem, and desire for improved communication and community respect.

It would be appropriate to study the effects as social skills training become accepted by the students as on-going expected curriculum, and the teachers implement Classwide Peer Tutoring (CWPT), Peer Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS), and Reciprocal Peer Tutoring (RPT), (Access Center, 2004). By teaching, the peer instructors not only learn but prove that they have learned both discrete and concrete facts, and can visualize and synthesize their learning. The tutees also benefit from the high-quality interaction with the tutors. As the social skills training becomes accepted by the students as on-going curriculum, teachers would ideally begin implementing peer programs.

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Observational Rubric

Frequency Interval Counting

(during time that student shows joint-attention and engagement with others)

1. Student name
2. Grade of student (check boxes for 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th)
3. Date and time of observation
4. Observer name
5. Control group pre-test (check box)
6. Post-test (check box)
7. During 5 minutes, how many times did student give direct eye contact lasting for 1+ seconds?
8. During 5 minutes, how many times did student use open and receptive body language for 1+ seconds?
9. During 5 minutes, how many times did student individually acknowledge greeting or existence of a fellow student?
10. During 5 minutes, how many times did student smile?

It is recommended that the class be videotaped, for ease of scoring outside actual class time, reviewing any observation, and for standardization of observer training.

Table 1

Literature Review Scoring Rubric

<u>Authors</u>	<u>Synopsis</u>	<u>Effective Interventions</u>	<u>Future Studies</u>
Baker & Taylor (1998)	Overview of 12 studies between 1983 and 1996	None specifically listed	We need better data documentation in our educational research
Elksnin & Elksnin (2001)	<p>Young learners with disabilities, especially learning disabilities, benefit from social skills training and need to be taught occupational social skills by (in Table 1):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Modifying general social skills programs with vocational examples; 2. Using social skills programs that were created with an occupational focus; 3. Using the Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS; U.S. Department of Labor, 1991), “competencies or occupational standards”; and 4. Creating a program “based on ecological assessment of the student, occupation, or both” (Elksnin and Elksnin, 2001, p. 96). 	<p>SCANS basic social skills.</p> <p>Interpersonal behaviors, peer-pleasing social skills, teacher-pleasing social skills, self-related behaviors, assertiveness skills, and communication skills</p>	Develop better transitions in four categories (general social skills, occupational social skills, SCANS and occupational standards, and ecological assessments)
King, Baldwin, Currie, & Evans (2005)	<p>Four major transition approaches (skills training, prevocational/vocational guidance, client-centered approach, and ecological/experiential approach) with three levels of intervention (personal, person-environment fit, and environmental)</p> <p>Figure 1, Levels of Intervention, p. 200.</p> <p>Both studies are particularly elegant in their historical summaries of interventions and highly useful in detailing which interventions have proved most successful.</p>	<p>Real-life practice in preparing for life roles</p> <p>Improved practices in transition education and planning</p> <p>Recommendations on pp. 221-212</p>	Future research on transitions must focus on commonly-used strategies, rather than on specific techniques used to implement any specific strategy, and focusing on better understanding of the effectiveness

<p>King, Baldwin, Currie, & Evans (2006)</p>	<p>Ten main strategies providing transition education and planning services for youth with disabilities. Existing literature lacks specifics on what interventions work the best.</p> <p>Figure 1, Levels of Intervention, p. 158</p>	<p>Be engaged in multiple roles with communities of their choice. This study builds on their previous study (King et al., 2005)</p>	<p>Better design transition approaches, as no one strategy addresses all that is needed</p>
<p><u>Authors</u></p> <p>Fantuzzo, Davis, & Ginsburg (1995); Fantuzzo, King, & Heller (1992)</p>	<p><u>Synopsis</u></p> <p>Discusses the power of peers within the learning environments</p> <p>Peer tutoring in many forms. Group dynamics of synergistic team collaboration, social motivation, neuro-typical peer modeling, and greater social acceptance help all students involved.</p>	<p><u>Effective Interventions</u></p> <p>Peer-tutoring: Cross-age tutoring, Math PALS, Reading PALS, and Reciprocal Peer Tutoring</p>	<p><u>Future Studies</u></p> <p>Further studies on peer-tutoring</p>
<p>Patterson, Jolivette, and Crosby (2006)</p>	<p>Some at-risk learners are unaware they have a social skills deficit.</p> <p>It is important to assist students with emotional and behavioral disorders learn more appropriate behavior and resultant outcomes</p>	<p>ZIPPER Strategy (Zip your mouth, Identify the problem, Pause, Put yourself in charge, Explore choices, and Reset)</p>	<p>Plan and implement more successful social skills interventions</p>
<p>Prideaux, Creed, Muller, & Patton (2000)</p>	<p>Overview of 25 years of school-to-work interventions.</p>	<p>Many types reviewed, no real conclusions on what is best</p>	<p>Future improvements to educational research of career interventions</p>