The Impact of Using Direct Instruction to Teach Social Skills in a Middle School Self-Contained Special Education Classroom

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The Impact of Using Direct Instruction to Teach Social Skills in a Middle School Self-Contained Special Education Classroom

by

Julie Matukewicz

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A thesis submitted to the
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APPROVED BY:

[Signatures and dates]
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Chapter One: Introduction

My classroom is filled with students of differing abilities, strengths and challenges. One area in which all of my students demonstrate difficulty is social development. The following is an example of a conversation I had with one of my students.

Julie: (Greeting student at the bus) Good morning, Katie.
Katie: Your hair down?
Julie: Good morning, Katie.
Katie: Hi. Your hair down?
Julie: Yes. How are you?
Katie: April here today?
Julie: How are you, Katie?
Katie: Good.
Julie: Look at me. What did you do last night?
Katie: I have OT today?
Julie: Katie, listen. What did you do last night?
Katie: Blow bubbles. I have OT today.
Julie: I don’t know. Do you have OT today?
Katie: Yes.
Julie: (Entering classroom) Put your things away.
Katie: (Entering classroom) Hi, Gail. Hi, Gail. Hi, Gail.
Julie: Katie, you need to walk over to Gail and look at her before saying hello.
Katie: Hi, Gail. (calling from across the room) Gail, hair a mess.
Julie: Be a good friend, Katie. Now put your things away.

Like all of my students, Katie (all student names are pseudonyms), struggles with appropriate conversation skills. The students also have difficulty greeting others, making eye contact, remaining on topic, understanding proximity, and using manners. While I model and practice these skills with my student on a daily basis, I was eager to find other strategies and techniques that would help them improve their social skills and abilities.
Problem Statement

Robert Frengut (2003) stated that “success in life is largely determined by the degree of social acceptance one can achieve” (para. 14). I am challenged every day by this idea in my work as a teacher of students with disabilities. I have realized that as a teacher, I do not only teach academics, I seek to help my students become well-rounded individuals in all aspects of their lives.

My classroom is made up of eight students who have a variety of disabilities including mental retardation, autism, traumatic brain injury, and multiple disabilities. A common characteristic across these disabilities is a deficit in social development. All eight of my students have difficulty understanding basic social concepts such as greeting others, conversation skills, manners, turn-taking, listening skills, understanding emotions, and problem solving. I have found that modeling and teaching these skills in the moment have elicited little success. Rather, I have observed that my students benefit from multiple practice opportunities across a variety of settings to learn, practice and generalize new concepts. In addition, I have observed that the use of concrete hands-on activities supports my students’ understanding of concepts related to cognitive development. For example, the use of objects and pictures has helped my students develop letter-sound relationships. Thus I was curious to see how the introduction of social skills through hands-on activities might improve my students’ social and emotional development.
Significance of Problem

Social skills are essential to a student’s development of interpersonal relationships. Students who fail to develop appropriate social skills are at risk for peer rejection, loneliness, poor academic performance, and dropping out of school. A student’s ability to build and maintain positive relationships is a strong predictor of his/her social adjustment later in life (Gresham, Van & Cook, 2006).

Adolescence is a time when students begin to find their identities, a process that happens in large part through interactions with peers. For students with disabilities who often lack developmentally appropriate social skills, this is an enormous challenge. If a student with a disability does not develop the proper social skills needed to interact with his/her peers during adolescence, further negative outcomes could result (Stephens, Dieppa & LeBlanc, 2006).

Purpose

The purpose of this study, then, was to provide my students with a variety of social skills activities in an effort to improve their social competence. These activities included role playing, games, listening comprehension, and hands-on tasks. The following research question was addressed: What is the impact of using direct instruction to teach social skills on the social development of adolescent students with disabilities? I determined which social skills to address based on my students’ social development goals on their Individualized Education Programs, the New York State Learning Standards and Alternate Performance Indicators, my observations, and input from parents and school therapists. I administered a pre-test and post-test to assess the effectiveness of the social...
skills activities. I also observed my students' social behavior throughout each school day and recorded these observations as anecdotal notes in my teacher journal. Through this study I hoped to examine the impact of the use of direct instruction to teach social skills had on my students. I shared the findings of my study with my students, parents, school colleagues and administrators.

Rationale

Finding ways to increase students' appropriate social skills is a challenge for special education and general education teachers alike. This study was an investigation into the impact of direct instruction of social skills on students' social development. The integration of the various social skills activities coincided with the daily classroom routine and fit into the weekly schedule. Activities were created for large or small groups of students. These activities captured a variety of learning styles to help each student master the lesson's objectives. Due to the mixed ability levels in the classroom, activities were adapted to meet each student's developmental level.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are used throughout this study. These definitions will clarify their usage within this context.

- Direct instruction consists of teacher-directed activities in which I provide information through explanations and examples.
• Social development refers to the degree and quality of relationships with peers and adults, feelings about self and social adjustment to school and community environments.

Summary

Social skills are an essential part of development, yet a missing component of many educational programs is data-driven social skills training (Bellini & Hopf, 2007). Canney and Byrne (2006) found that if social skills are addressed in the classroom it is most often done through teacher modeling and behavior shaping rather than through explicit teaching methods. These researchers also state that many teachers believe that their students are not meeting the classroom expectations for social behavior however they are not using effective methods to teach those skills. Adults experience situations requiring social competence much more frequently than those requiring academic skills (Canney & Byrne, 2006). In order to help my students be successful outside of the classroom, I must find effective ways to teach them appropriate social skills.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Social skills are a central part of educational development. Students develop social skills through peer interaction, modeling, role-playing, sports, and games. Social skills are not always directly taught to students although many teachers would agree that students often lack appropriate social skills. Significant research has been done in the special education population because a common characteristic of students with disabilities is a deficit in social development. There has also been research in the general education setting on school-wide programs as well as smaller classroom studies. Providing teacher training on how to teach social skills has also been a topic of interest. I will examine these categories of research within the area of social skill development.

Students with Disabilities

Schlitz and Schlitz (2001) discussed the importance of the development of social skills for academic and vocational success. Research suggests that schools are lacking in curriculum related to formal social skills training. Teachers tend to focus on decreasing inappropriate behavior but are not teaching appropriate social skills. Students with disabilities, especially, lack developmentally appropriate social skills and need to be taught these skills. This study was conducted because the participants were exhibiting inappropriate social behavior which resulted in poor social acceptability and lack of integration in the community.

The study took place in two different Chicago public schools and focused on four students with moderate to severe cognitive delays. To determine the social skills that needed improvement, the researchers conducted parent and teacher surveys. The results
of these surveys indicated that teachers and parents were most concerned about the students’ ability to follow directions, communicate needs and opinions, and ask for help appropriately. The interventions included direct instruction, role playing, and cooperative learning activities focusing on social skills.

Two students from each school were the focus of the study although the activities were completed by the entire class. Each student had moderate cognitive delays and speech and language impairments. The study took place over a five week period with 40 minutes of social skills activities daily. At the conclusion of the study, all four of the students demonstrated a significant increase in all three areas of social development. The results show that direct teaching of social skills can help improve students’ social development.

Seevers and Jones-Blank (2008) found that while most students are able to learn social skills from interactions with others, students with disabilities may need to learn these skills more directly. A characteristic of many students with disabilities is a lack of appropriate social skills. The purpose of this study was to provide social skills training to teach students with disabilities the necessary skills to be successful during social interactions with their non-disabled peers.

The study participants were eight students with mental retardation and other health impairments. The students were assessed using the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) prior to the intervention. The researchers used instructional strategies such as modeling, role playing, positive reinforcement, and practice/rehearsal, in an effort to increase the students’ social competence. The necessary social skills were taught to the students in small groups for 30-45 minutes a week for eight consecutive weeks.
At the conclusion of the study, the posttest scores demonstrated a significant increase within the social skill areas. The researchers found that it is important for educators and parents to reinforce the learning of social skills with direct and indirect instruction. With an increase in negative societal influences such as drugs and alcohol it is imperative that schools and families help facilitate the social learning process (Seevers & Jones-Blank, 2008).

It is not necessary for social skills activities to be a separate subject within the school day. Canney and Byrne (2006) evaluated Circle Time as a classroom intervention to improve social development. The researchers found support for incorporating social skills training into real life daily situations for students with disabilities.

The study took place in a school for students with mild intellectual disability, aged eight to 18, in Ireland. All 15 class teachers were trained in the Circle Time philosophy and techniques which involve activities aimed at developing self-esteem, listening skills, awareness of self and others, and promoting mutual trust. The teachers were then asked to use Circle Time in their classrooms for three weeks. During the summer, those who used Circle Time were asked to complete a questionnaire about their experiences.

The results of the study suggested mixed opinions of Circle Time. The teachers who used it the most, found the most positive results. For example, the teachers who used it the most found it to be a very enjoyable experience for the students. Those teachers that only used Circle Time a few times had a negative experience. Despite the variation in results, the teachers were unanimous in their belief that Circle Time is an effective way to enhance social skills.
Another approach to teaching social skills is to provide students with a thinking strategy to apply to social situations. Bock (2007) researched the impact of the SODA strategy on the social interaction skills of students with Asperger syndrome. SODA is a social-behavioral learning strategy that provides students with a set of rules designed to help them process social cues and provide them with appropriate social skills for particular situations. The students learn to stop (S), observe (O), deliberate (D), and act (A) during social situations.

Four male elementary students diagnosed with Asperger syndrome participated in the study. Data was taken before and after the intervention during the students' social studies cooperative learning activities, noon recess, and lunch. Prior to the intervention, the researcher and the teachers collaborated to write a SODA story for each student and for each activity. These stories were specific to each student and explained thinking strategies to be used during the specific social situation.

Immediately before the students were to attend social studies, recess, or lunch, they read their SODA story. When they were finished reading the story they discussed it with the teacher. The teachers used a SODA teaching script to lead the discussion. The script included questions such as “What does the D in SODA represent?” and “What questions do you ask yourself when you deliberate?” Data was then taken on the students’ social behaviors during the next activity. The results of this study demonstrated increases in all four of the students’ social skills. The students were also able to maintain these skills over a five month period. The findings suggest that the SODA strategy may teach students with Asperger syndrome the learning strategies they need to facilitate their social problem solving.
According to Peterson, Young, Salzberg, West, and Hill (2006), research suggests that a variety of social skills can be taught to students with disabilities using a structured learning approach. Students with disabilities often have difficulty generalizing learned skills to new environments. The researchers state that the success of a social skills program depends in part on the extent to which students use appropriate social skills in settings other than those in which they were learned.

The study was designed to increase the number of settings in which students with disabilities were required to apply learned social skills. Five middle school students in a large urban district in Utah participated in the study. The school was participating in the Prevention Plus program, a comprehensive approach to preventing and reducing anti-social behavior. The study participants were enrolled in regular education courses and took one class each day of social skills training.

There were six target behaviors addressed in the social skills training class. These included being on-task, being off-task, following directions, accepting no for an answer, accepting teacher feedback, and appropriately getting teacher attention. The students rated themselves in each of these areas during each class. The teachers rated the students as well. The students then earned points when their scores matched the teachers' scores and when they were exhibiting appropriate behavior. The students were able to redeem their points for prizes at the end of the week.

The baseline data taken prior to this intervention indicated that all participants demonstrated variable but high percentages of off-task behavior and used appropriate social skills inconsistently. Following the intervention, the students' appropriate social skills increased across settings and their off-task behavior decreased. The findings
demonstrated that self-monitoring was an effective strategy for increasing social skills and on-task behavior.

**Direct Teaching of Social Skills**

In their study, Fraser, Galinsky, Smokowsi, Day, Terzian, Rose, and Guo (2005) explored the concern in education that students having social difficulties early in school could be linked to long-term social adjustment problems and found that interventions designed to improve students' social and emotional skills may improve their social development. The purpose of the study was to examine a school-based prevention program that promoted social competence and was intended to decrease aggressive behavior. The program, Making Choices: Social Problem Solving Skills for Children (MC) was designed to teach students how to interpret social information, identify and manage feelings, and respond appropriately during classroom interactions.

The researchers defined aggression as behavior that is aimed at harming or injuring another person (Fraser et al., 2005). Research states that students displaying aggressive behavior are less able to manage their emotions or interpret social cues. The ability to regulate emotions has also been linked to cognitive problem solving. The researchers defined social aggression as actions designed to harm another's self-esteem, social status, or friendship patterns (Fraser et al., 2005) and state that social aggression is related to a lack of social-information processing (SIP).

The MC Program was based on the research linking physical and social aggression in childhood to social and emotion deficits later in life. The activities outlined in the program focused on social, emotional, and cognitive skills that would help build
social relationships and collaboration with peers. These interventions were designed to increase social competence and positive peer interactions as well as decrease peer rejection and aggressive behavior. Two versions of the MC program were implemented with the hypothesis that the participants would display greater SIP skills and social competence following the completion of the three year study.

The participants in this study were third graders in two different schools. During the first year of the study the students participated in the school’s routine health program. During the second year, the MC Program supplemented the routine health program. During the third and final year, the MC Program Plus supplemented the routine health program. During the MC Plus Program, classroom teachers used supplemental activities and behavior management strategies along with the other MC activities three times a week. Newsletters were also sent home to parents with home activities and parent meetings were held as well. Teachers rated the students’ behavior during the fall and spring semesters and the students’ SIP skills were tested every spring using the Carolina Child Checklist Teacher Form and the Aggression subscale of the Child Behavior Checklist-Teacher Form.

The results of this study demonstrated that after students participated in the MC Program, their social competence and positive peer interactions increased. Upon completion of the MC Program Plus, students displayed fewer social and physical aggressions and demonstrated improved cognitive problem solving skills. Each MC Program helped improve students’ social skills and the additional activities included in the MC Plus Program seemed to produce greater improvements.
The concerns described by Fraser et al. (2005) related to lack of social
development were also examined by Meier, DiPerna, and Oster (2006). In their study,
the researchers investigated teachers’ expectations of students’ social skills across
elementary grades and found that students not meeting teacher expectations were at
increased risk for future academic and disciplinary problems. Although social skills are
essential for student success, these skills are rarely taught in schools (Meier et al, 2006).

In a multi-year study across six elementary schools, researchers studied teachers’
perceptions of the importance of particular social skills. They also examined the stability
of these perceptions over one school year. The Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) was
used to gather this information from teachers. Teachers rated the occurrence of particular
social skill on a 3-point Likert scale, 0 = never, 1 = sometimes, and 2 = very often. A
Likert scale was also used to rate the importance of cooperation, assertion, and self-
control (0 = not important, 1 = important, and 2 = critical). Researchers also used paired
sample t-tests were used to compare these perceptions from the beginning and end of the
school year.

The results of this study indicated that teachers rated cooperation and self-control
as more important than assertion skills; self-control was also rated slightly higher than
cooperation. Teachers’ opinions seemed to remain stable across the school year. There
was no statistically significant difference between importance ratings taken at the
beginning and end of the school year. These findings can be useful to school personnel.
For example, administrators could assess whether the social skills that teachers find most
important are being taught; if necessary, classroom and school-wide instructional
approaches could be created to promote the development of these skills.
Gresham, Van, and Cook (2006) also stressed the importance of social skill development in their research with social skills training. They support Fraser et al.'s (2005) idea that inadequate social competencies can lead to future negative outcomes such as peer rejection, dropping out of school, and poor academic performance and found that a student's ability to build and maintain interpersonal relationships has a large impact on his/her future social adjustment.

The researchers designed a study that implemented a high intensity social skills training intervention with students with social skills deficits. Four students from a large suburban southern California school district participated in three hours of social skills training each week for 20 weeks. There was a school-wide behavior support system in place, which included a lottery and response cost system. Students earned tickets for appropriate behavior which were turned in for a drawing at the end of each week. Lottery prizes included free time, access to computers, and opportunities to talk with friends. Students who broke the school rules lost recess time, points in class, or had a note sent home to parents.

The results of this high intensity social skills program decreased the students' alone time and total problem behaviors. The post-test scores for total social skills demonstrated an increase from the pre-test. The four students moved from a pretest mean in the 7th percentile to a posttest mean in the 50th percentile. Two months after the completion of the study some maintenance of these benefits was still evident. The researchers concluded that students receiving intense social skills training demonstrated a 17% decrease in problem behaviors and a 23% increase in social skills.
The importance of strong social skills in the primary grades was emphasized in the research of Denham, Hatfield, Smethurst, Tan, and Tribe (2006). The researchers highlight the increased responsibility placed on schools to become more inclusive settings. Many schools are implementing social inclusion interventions in an effort to meet this responsibility. Effective interventions that help make social inclusion possible include cooperative learning, co-teaching, peer-tutoring, and in-class support. The researchers examined the effects of peer-tutoring and skills training on students' social skills.

Forty-five males and 23 females, ages 7-11, participated in this study. Two different interventions were used in this study: peer mentoring and skills training. The peer-mentoring intervention was designed to increase social skills through group problem-solving activities. The skills training consisted of direct-teaching of social skills. Each student participated in only one intervention which was chosen based on that individual student's needs. Students participated in a 30 minute small group once a week for 12 weeks. Students, parents, and teachers completed a pre-test and post-test social skills questionnaire.

The results of this study demonstrated increases in scores on the social skills questionnaires for both peer mentoring and skills training. There did not seem to be a significant difference in the effectiveness of either intervention. The reason that one intervention did not prove to be more successful than the other was probably because the interventions matched the students' needs. The participants of this study were positive about its effects.
Williams, Yanchar, and Jensen (2003) highlighted the importance of reinforcing social skills throughout the teenage years in their research. They found that more attention has been paid to character education in schools due to the increase in irresponsible and destructive behavior. Since antisocial behavior is more common in the teenage years, they suggest beginning early in childhood and reinforcing those social skills as students get older. The researchers believed that the use of a variety of settings and experiences could help students learn from naturally occurring character lessons.

The study explored the Unified Studies program at one high school. Students applied to the program which integrated English, science, fine arts, social studies, and recreation. The activities within the program focused on real-life experiences in and out of the classroom. The goal was to help students become life-long learners and increase their personal development in all areas of life.

Graduates of the Unified Studies program were interviewed and invited to discuss their experiences in the program. The results of the interviews and questionnaires showed that the program helped students establish an ethical, experiential, and intellectual foundation for character that they continued to build upon throughout their lives. Students gained character by working through problems, being part of a team, living up to their responsibilities, and helping others. This study was not limited to direct teaching of social skills which helped the students play a part in discovering valuable lessons for themselves.

According to Webb, Brigman, and Campbell (2005), teachers are not the only school personnel being held accountable for student academic and social achievement. School counselors are also being asked to address students' academic and social needs.
In their study, Webb et al. randomly selected 418 fifth and sixth grade students from 20 different schools to participate in weekly sessions with the school counselor over an 8 week period. The researchers recorded math and reading scores prior to the intervention using the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. They also administered the School Social Behavior Scales to the teachers of the students in the treatment group. The 45 minute sessions addressed academic, social, and self-management skills. Booster sessions were also held once a month to reinforce the skills being taught.

The results of the study indicated that the students' math, reading, and social skills increased after the intervention. Eighty-five percent of the students in the treatment group improved their math scores by an average of 27 points. Seventy-five percent of the treatment group improved their reading scores by an average of 26 points. Seventy-two percent of the treatment group improved their social behavior scores by an average of 19 points. The results of the study suggest that interventions led by school counselors using research-based techniques to teach specific skills can improve students' academic and social performance.

Teacher Training

Research suggests that direct teaching of social skills can improve students' social development across different ages. For example, Farmer-Dougan, Viechtbauer, and French (1999) suggest that teacher support and consultation are necessary components of a social skills program. They studied the implementation of a skillstreaming program in two preschool classrooms. One teacher received consultation and additional training regarding the program while the other teacher did not.
Social skill assessments were administered as pre-tests and post-tests. The results of the intervention demonstrated that the social skills of the students whose teacher received additional consultation and training increased significantly at the end of the study. The students of the teacher who received no consultation ended the study with no significant changed in social skill scores.

Barton-Arwood, Morrow, and Jolivette (2005) also examined teachers’ ability to address students’ social needs and found that many students are ill-equipped to meet the social demands required at school. Schools must provide social skills instruction and provide students with the opportunity to practice those skills.

The study evaluated the effectiveness of a training workshop focused on effective social skills training. Pre-tests and post-tests were used to measure the effectiveness of the teacher training. The results indicated that the participants increased their knowledge and confidence using the social skills program. Students are at risk for future failure and rejection when they lack appropriate social skills. The study’s results also emphasized the importance of providing teachers with the knowledge, confidence, and ability to meet the students social skill needs.

Summary

A common theme across the literature is that social skills are important for student success. Additionally, teachers believe that students do not possess all of the necessary social skills to meet school expectations of social behavior. In order for students to meet expectations and be successful, effective social skills activities must be
developed and incorporated in the classroom. Deficits in social development have the capacity to negatively impact students in all aspects of their lives.
Chapter Three: Study Design

Introduction

This study was designed to explore the impact of using direction instruction to teach social skills on the social development of students with disabilities. I addressed specific social skills through group activities which included role playing, games, listening comprehension, and hands-on tasks.

Participants

I conducted this research in my 8:1:4 special education classroom. The classroom was in an ungraded middle school building of an agency servicing students with developmental disabilities in a medium-sized city in western New York. Eight students, six girls and two boys were invited to participate in this study: students ranged in age from nine to 14. Four of the students were African-American, two were Middle-Eastern, one was Hispanic, and one was Caucasian. All of the participants were from low to middle-income families. The students were asked to participate in the study due to their limited social skills.

Procedures of Study

Once it was determined, through parent and therapist surveys, which social skills would be of focus for this study, I created activities for large and small groups of students. These activities captured a variety of learning styles to help each student master the lesson objectives. Due to the mixed ability levels in the selected classroom, activities were adapted to meet each student’s developmental level.
Prior to the intervention, I administered a pretest to each student individually. I then conducted social skills activities twice a week during this four week study. The four social skills which were determined to be most important from the parent and therapist surveys were addressed. I created two 30-minute lessons for each of these social skills so that one social skill was highlighted each week of the study. At the end of the four weeks, I administered the posttest. I also sent a follow-up survey to parents and therapists to gather feedback on any changes observed in the students’ social skills. I then analyzed all of the data to determine the impact of the intervention in the classroom.

Data Collection and Analysis

Several data collection techniques were used in order to explore the impact of using direct instruction to teach social skills. I gathered input from the students’ social development goals on their Individualized Education Programs, the New York State Learning Standards and Alternate Performance Indicators, my observations, and input from parents and school therapists.

Surveys

The parent survey (see Appendix A) included questions that asked parents to choose the areas of social development they felt were most important for their children. It also allowed for explanation of these choices.

The therapist survey (see Appendix B) was similar to the parent survey in that it included questions that asked therapists to choose the areas of social development they felt were most important for these students.
I sent a cover letter (see Appendices C and D) explaining the research, along with the survey. Parent surveys were sent home with students. Therapist surveys were placed in school mailboxes. All surveys were asked to be returned within one week.

At the conclusion of the study, I sent out follow-up surveys (see Appendices E and F) to the parents and therapists. This follow-up survey included questions that asked the parents and therapists to indicate any changes in the students’ behavior related to the social skills addressed. All follow-up surveys included a cover letter (see Appendices G and H) and were asked to be returned within one week.

*Pre and Post Test*

I administered a pre-test and post-test to students to assess the effectiveness of the social skills activities. The pre-test (see Appendix I) made up of 15 questions assessed the students’ prior acquisition of social skills. I gave the pre-test to the students individually, recording the students’ answers to each question. Students were provided with multiple choice picture choices if they were unable to answer verbally. No feedback was given to the students regarding correct or incorrect answers. I used the same tool in the same manner as a post-test at the end of the study.

*Behavior Data*

I also collected data on students’ social behavior. This included IEP objectives as well as other areas within social development deemed important through the parent and teacher surveys. I recorded the degree of assistance required for the student to complete a social development objective on the data sheet (see Appendix J).
Lastly, I kept a teacher journal where I recorded weekly observations. This allowed me to capture student quotes and behaviors related to the social skills activities.

**Analyzing the Data**

First, I administered the pre-test to all eight students. I scored them and kept them for comparison with the post-test. After I collected the parent and therapist surveys, I determined the four most popular social skills and developed my lesson schedule based on these social skills. After the lessons began I took data on the students' social behavior and compared it to the baseline data taken prior to the study. I also reviewed my teacher journal for changes in behavior after the study began. I collected quantitative data on the students' behavior using their percentage of independence with social skills and their pre/post-test scores. I also collected qualitative data using observations and feedback from parents and therapists.

**Limitations**

Initial limitations to this study include small sample size, length of the study, and number of social skills addressed. There are only eight students in my classroom, making the data less significant than if a large number of students participated. The study was also only four weeks long. More data and observations could be gathered during a longer study. The length of this study also prevented me from gathering data on skill maintenance. With more time, I could test if my students are able to maintain their skills after the social skills lessons. There were only four social skills being addressed in this
study. If more social skills were used, more significant changes could be observed.

These limitations should be considered when reviewing this study.
Chapter Four: Results

I used several data collection techniques in order to explore the impact of using direct instruction to teach social skills. I administered surveys to parents and therapists before and after the study. I gave a pretest to each student individually prior to the social skills lessons. I gave the same test as a posttest at the conclusion of the study. I also collected behavior data prior to and throughout the study.

Surveys

Five surveys were returned and available for data analysis. Four surveys were completed by parents and one was completed by a therapist. I asked the participants to choose the three areas they believed were most important for the students to receive additional classroom instruction (see Appendices A and B). Table 4.1 illustrates how the parents and therapist ranked the social skills in order of importance. The pie graph (Figure 4.1) illustrates that the parents and therapists felt that interacting with others and conversation skills were the most important social skills to focus on in the classroom. Expressing emotions and other were identified as the least important. The therapist was the only participant who selected the other category. The therapist felt that asking questions was another area in which the students could benefit from additional instruction.
I distributed follow-up surveys (see Appendices E and F) to the parents and therapists after the eighth and final lesson was completed. Two surveys were available for data analysis: one completed by a parent and one by a therapist. The parent noted that her child began using his communication device more frequently to ask for different things at home. The therapist noted that two of the students—Elizabeth and Britney—improved their participation during group activities and one student—Zoe—was initiating more conversations. The therapist’s findings correspond with the pretest and
posttest results for Elizabeth and Zoe. The results for Britney remained about the same on the posttest in the area of group participation.

**Pre and Post Tests**

I administered the pretest and post tests (see Appendix I) individually to all eight students. I performed a one-tailed t-test to compare the overall pretest and posttest averages by student. The probability level was $p = .000403304$, which indicates that there was a highly significant difference between the scores on the pretest and the scores on the posttest. Table 4.2 illustrates the averages and results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pretest</th>
<th>Posttest</th>
<th>P-Level</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>49.25</td>
<td>75.125</td>
<td>.000403304</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I also completed an item analysis of the results of the pretest and the posttest to determine the difference in scores according to each test item. Table 4.3 shows the results.
Table 4.3: Item Analysis of Pre/Post Test Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item Number</th>
<th>Number of Correct Answers on Pretest</th>
<th>Number of Correct Answers on Posttest</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Conversation Skills</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Interacting with Others</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>+5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Asking for Help</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Participating in Groups</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Expressing Emotions</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Conversation Skills</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Interacting with Others</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Asking for Help</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>+3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Participating in Groups</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>+4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Expressing Emotions</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Conversation Skills</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>+4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Interacting with Others</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>+3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Asking for Help</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Participating in Groups</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Expressing Emotions</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The test scores for each item increased or remained the same. The average gain per item was two points. This supports the finding that the students improved or maintained their social competence after the social skills activities. The dramatic gain in items two, nine, and eleven might have been because the information in those questions
was reviewed more frequently in the classroom during daily social situations. For example, these questions addressed what to do when you bump into someone, what to do when you know the answer during a group activity, and what to do when the teacher is talking to you. All of these scenarios occurred in the classroom on a weekly basis and were discussed at that time as well as during the lesson activities.

**Behavior Data**

I also collected data related to the students' social development and behavior. Specifically, I documented the progress students made toward their annual goals outlined on their Individual Education Plans (IEPs). Table 4.4 illustrates these results.

**Table 4.4: Results Related to Behavior**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Behavior Prior to the Study</th>
<th>Behavior After the Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Katie</td>
<td>makes eye contact with adult or peer during conversations given 2 cues</td>
<td>makes eye contact with adult or peer during conversations independently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gail</td>
<td>initiates a conversation with a peer given 2 prompts</td>
<td>initiates a conversation with a peer independently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britney</td>
<td>raises her hand to request a turn given verbal and visual prompts</td>
<td>raises her hand to request a turn given 1 verbal prompt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>gains an adult's attention appropriately given 2 prompts</td>
<td>gains an adult's attention appropriately without prompts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>maintains eye contact with the speaker for 5 seconds 20% of the time</td>
<td>maintains eye contact with the speaker for 5 seconds 60% of the time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>actively participates in groups by taking turns given multiple prompts</td>
<td>actively participates in groups by taking turns given one prompt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoe</td>
<td>maintains attention during group activities given multiple prompts</td>
<td>maintains attention during group activities independently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>maintains attention during activities for 5 minutes given multiple prompts</td>
<td>maintains attention during activities for 10 minutes given one prompt</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Each of the students made improvements toward their annual goals. The improvements were measured by the student's ability to reach the goal independently. Katie, Gail, April, and Zoe were able to meet their goals by the end of the four-week study. Britney, Sam, Mike, and Elizabeth increased their independence by requiring fewer prompts to complete the tasks. I observed these results during the lesson activities as well as during other activities throughout the day.

Lesson Activities

Interacting With Others

I completed two lessons each week on one social skill area. The first week's lessons focused on interacting with others. During the first lesson, I read a social story about greeting other people. The students then brainstormed different greetings. I then showed a poster with words and pictures illustrating what steps to take when you want to greet someone. These steps included look, smile, and say hello. The students practiced these steps with each other. The students then completed a worksheet where they identified these steps through illustrations. Lastly, we reviewed the test questions, which related to interacting with others.

During the second lesson focusing on interacting with others, we began by reviewing the steps for greeting someone. The students practiced greeting each other and evaluating if they completed all of the steps. I then read a book about making friends. The students brainstormed ways to be a good friend and work together. I recorded their answers on a poster. The students then worked together to make a butterfly craft.
The students’ participation during the first week’s lessons varied greatly. Mike had a limited understanding of the topic but was able to correctly answer basic questions when he was able to go back to the stories and review. Gail and Katie were very successful. They loved practicing the steps with each other and were able to offer correct answers to most of my questions. Elizabeth participated very well and communicated the most. Zoe was confused at first about the role playing but improved with practice. Sam and Britney had a difficult time focusing and needed assistance to participate.

**Conversation Skills**

The topic for the second week was conversation skills. I began the first lesson by reviewing the steps for having a conversation. These steps included look, listen, and talk. We then completed a worksheet about how to answer questions appropriately. The students were given scenarios and they had to decide whether the person was answering a question correctly. We then played a dice game. The students rolled a die that contained six questions: Where do you live? What is your favorite color? Do you have brothers or sisters? What is your favorite food? Do you have any pets? and What is your favorite TV show? The students then chose a peer and asked him/her the question. The students practiced the appropriate steps for having a conversation while asking the questions. Lastly, we reviewed the test questions which related to conversation skills.

I began the second lesson about conversation skills by reviewing the steps. I then practiced a conversation about a different topic with each of the students. The students then practiced these scenarios with each other. We concluded by reviewing the test questions again.
The students’ participation varied again this week but improvements were noticeable. April did a great job learning the steps and with maintaining eye contact. However, she needed assistance in order to ask the questions correctly. Mike had some difficulty maintaining eye contact but was showing some improvement. He had trouble understanding that he was asking questions to his peers and not answering them. Katie improved her eye contact greatly and memorized the steps quickly. Elizabeth and Gail needed reminders to maintain eye contact but they were able to elaborate during the conversations. They were able to keep the conversation going without assistance from me. Britney and Sam again had difficulty participating. Zoe did a nice job, asking questions and was doing better with making eye contact.

**Asking For Help**

The third week of lessons focused on asking for help. The first lesson began with scenario cards. I read scenarios aloud and the students had to decide if it was an occasion to ask for help or not. I then reviewed the steps for asking for help. These steps included try it, raise your hand, and say “I need help please”. I then showed illustrations of people asking for help in a variety of ways. The students looked at the cards and decided if the person was asking for help appropriately. We then reviewed the test questions related to asking for help.

I began the second lesson on this topic by reading scenarios about getting the teacher’s attention. The students identified if the scenario was appropriate. I then asked the students to name people they can go to for help. I then gave different scenarios such
as you can’t reach something, and asked the students to identify who could help them. I then reviewed the steps for asking for help. We ended by reviewing the test questions.

The students demonstrated great improvements during these lessons. Mike needed some prompting to participate but did well by watching his peers. April did a great job and answered the questions independently. Gail and Katie did excellent work during the lessons. They had a correct answer for all the questions and were very engaged. Elizabeth needed some help with how to get the teacher’s attention appropriately which corresponds to her behavior in the classroom (calling out, not using her manners). Sam cried throughout the group and demonstrated little participation. Britney showed tremendous growth. She raised her hand to participate and answered the questions correctly. Zoe needed a little help with the scenarios but was able to answer why questions, which are often difficult for her.

**Participating in Groups**

The last week of lessons focused on participating in groups. The first lesson began with a story about group participation. The students then brainstormed appropriate behaviors to use in a group situation. I then reviewed the steps for taking turns during a group activity. These steps included listen, raise your hand, and wait quietly. The students then sorted behavior cards into good and bad behaviors during group activities. We ended by reviewing the test questions related to participating in groups.

The last lesson began by reviewing the steps for taking turns. The students practiced these steps throughout the lesson. I explained the importance of participating in groups and the students identified the differences between individual and group activities.
We then played a manners game. The students chose a card and had to find the match. One card stated “Your friend wants to borrow your crayons during group. What do you say?” The student then needed to find the card that said “Let’s share.” The lesson concluded by reviewing the test questions.

The students demonstrated more improvements during the last week. Gail and Katie did a great job. They were very focused and asked questions and made comments during the story. They enjoyed playing the game and did not need any help answering the questions. Sam gave limited attention to the story but was able to answer questions correctly on his communication device. Zoe and April had great accuracy during the game and were very focused. Mike and Elizabeth did great during the game with a little prompting.

Most of the students made gains across the social skills areas. This was evident in their posttest data. The following table demonstrates these results.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>Conversation Skills</th>
<th>Interacting with Others</th>
<th>Asking for Help</th>
<th>Participating in Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Katie</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gail</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britney</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zoe</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Observations**

Throughout the four-week study, I documented observations in my teacher journal. All of the students demonstrated improvements. One such observation was that many of the students began initiating more conversations with their peers and the staff. They also began improving their eye contact while in conversation. The students became more aware of each other’s behavior and began helping each other without being prompted. One student was eager to share her completed work with her peers and those peers began giving her comments without being prompted. These improvements were seen during the lesson activities as well as throughout the school day.

**Conclusion**

The results of this study support the notion that using direct teaching activities to teach social skills can increase the social competence of students with disabilities. I gathered input from parents and therapists to determine the social skill areas that should be addressed during the study. I then gave the students a pretest to gain baseline data. After the eight lessons were complete the students took a posttest, the results indicated that students made significant gains in their social competence. All eight students also demonstrated improvement toward their annual IEP goals. Not only did the students increase their social competence, but I learned about the effectiveness of using a variety of direct teaching activities with my students.
Chapter Five: Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusions

Discussion

The main purpose of this four-week study was to explore the impact of using direction instruction to teach social skills had on the social development of students with disabilities. Social development has always been an area of focus in my classroom but finding a more effective way to address these skills has been a challenge. I wondered if using direct instruction to teach social skills would improve my students’ social competence. The results of the study demonstrated that these direct instruction methods were successful.

In comparing the average score of the students on the pre test and post test, the students’ average score was higher on the post test. In fact, all eight students scored significantly higher on the post test. There is a 19.9 point difference between the average scores on the pre test and post test. This difference demonstrates a highly significant result. The students also increased their independence toward their social development goals.

After completing this study I realized the dramatic changes I saw in my students. I think I underestimated what influence eight lessons could have on them. I also witnessed the impact of using direction instruction to teach social skills. This was a new concept for me and now I wish I would have included it in my classroom sooner. The students made significant gains in a short period of time. This supports the results found by Schiltz and Schiltz (2001) who found that during a five-week study, all four students made significant gains in all three areas of social development that were addressed.
The students carried their skills learned in the group activities over to other activities throughout their day. For example, the students were increasing the number of conversations they initiated with their peers and were asking for help more appropriately during their clean-up routine. I also began directing the students to each other when they needed something. If a peer was capable of assisting them, I directed the students to ask a peer for help first. This encouraged them to interact more and practice their conversation skills, which ties in with the peer mentoring activities which were found to be successful by Denham et al. (2006).

Recommendations

Although the data yielded positive results, there are points to consider before replicating this study. Fraser et al. (2005) and Seévers and Jones-Blank (2008) highlight the importance of having parent involvement in relation to students’ social skills. I did not receive as much input from the parents and colleagues and I had hoped. In order to promote more involvement I might want to call the parents or discuss my research with them during a meeting at school. I think this would make them feel more comfortable and give them a better understanding of my topic than communication only through a letter or survey. I would also send home materials for the parents that support what the students learned in the classroom. This would allow students to carry over the skills at home and in the community.

To gain more feedback from my colleagues I might want to discuss my topic at length during a department or team meeting. I think explaining my passion for the topic in person may get them thinking more about the topic and prompt them to give me
feedback. This need for teacher support is discussed by Farmer et al. (1999) in their study related to social skills.

Another change I would make to this study would be to get my teacher aides more involved. If they are not present during the lesson activities, I would fill them in on the lesson objectives so that they could help reinforce the concepts with the students throughout the day. I would also get more feedback from them on the students’ progress in the social skill areas.

The results from this study along with the study about Circle Time by Canney and Byrne (2006) have encouraged me to reevaluate other activities in my classroom. I would like to change morning meeting to include more social skills. I would also add an activity called Partner Projects where the students are paired to work on a craft project. They would be given a set of directions and one set of materials so that they have to communicate and work cooperatively to complete the project.

The study was limited to four weeks but if I were to extend it or continue with social skills activities in my classroom I would want to find ways to help the students maintain their skills. I would review the material often and have posters hung in the classroom for reference. I would also want to give my students more opportunities to practice the skills in other environments. I could discuss the objectives with the specials teachers so that they could also reinforce the social skills. I may also want to set up scenarios where the students have to interact with unfamiliar staff. This would put more responsibility on the students to decide how to interact without expecting me to direct them.
Although the results of this study were positive, there are several ways in which it could be improved or expanded. The small sample size allowed me to look closely at all eight students. I was able to see small changes quickly. Another study using a small group of students could offer a comparison. The outcomes of this study have allowed me to expand my ideas about social skills to several areas in my classroom.

Conclusions

Overall, my students were very excited to participate in this study. I had them decorate folders to hold all of their work from the study. They were anxious to take these folders home at the end. Although the activities in each lesson varied, there were parts that occurred in each lesson. For example, I reviewed the steps in each category using visuals and reviewed the test questions during each lesson. The students began to anticipate these parts and ask when they were coming up. They even asked to repeat certain activities like the dice game and scenario cards.

A main goal I have for my students is to demonstrate skills across environments. I want my students to take what they learn during the lesson activities and apply it to social situations with their friends, during therapy sessions, physical education, music therapy, home, and the community. Students with disabilities often have difficulty transferring learned skills to other environments. Throughout this study, I found my students demonstrating improved social skills such as conversation skills, group participation, maintaining eye contact, and asking for help not only during the direct instruction activities but throughout the day, across settings. I also had parents asking for visuals to assist their children with social skills at home. One parent asked for additional
buttons to be programmed on his child’s communication device. Another parent asked for a visual to help during car rides. I was excited to see the carry-over of social skills at home.

To hear one of my quietest and shyest students lead a conversation with complete confidence demonstrates the positive impact of this study. The following scenario occurred during the third week of the study.

Zoe: Julie, Why are you wearing your sweatshirt?
Julie: Because I am cold, Zoe.
Zoe: I’m cold, too. Can Katie help me with my jacket?
Julie: Sure, Zoe. You just have to ask her.
Zoe: Katie, can you help me with my jacket please?
Katie: Ok. (She is looking at Gail.)
Zoe: Katie, I need your help please. (Katie continues to look at Gail.)
Katie, mind your own business. I need your help with my jacket.
Katie: Ok. (Helps Zoe with her jacket).
Zoe: Don’t stare at Gail. It’s not nice, ok, Katie?

Zoe always enjoyed greeting other people but her interactions were very limited. If she needed something she would often wait for a staff person to offer her help. She wanted to be around her friends but did not know what to say to them. This scenario demonstrates her confidence in initiating and maintaining the conversation. Even when Katie was not paying attention to her she redirected her to get what she needed. I am so proud of her independence.

When planning social skills activities I think it is important to keep several things in mind. The particular activities should center on the students’ individual needs. Bock (2007) created individual stories for the students, which proved very successful. Each student may benefit from a different type of activity. A teacher should use a combination of activities to further reinforce the skills and allow more practice. Gresham et al. (2006) used multiple approaches when looking to increase social competence and recommend
that students have opportunities to carry over the skills to other environments. Williams et al. (2003) used real life learning experiences to increase students' social skills. In addition, as Fraser et al. (2005) recommend, it is important to have parent and school involvement. Assessing the students' progress in a variety of ways is also important. Finally, it is critical to review the material often so that the students can maintain their skills.

The positive results from this study have motivated me to increase the number of direct instruction activities that focus on social skills in my day-to-day work with students. Previously, students were making limited gains in this area. During this study, the students seemed to blossom. The results of this study have been positive for me, the students, the parents, and the therapists. I plan to share these findings with my colleagues and assist them in creating activities, which may help their students improve their social skills.
Appendix A

Areas of Social Development

Parent Survey

Which areas do you think your child would benefit from additional classroom instruction?

Please mark the 3 items you find most important.

- conversation skills
- interacting with others
- asking for help
- participating in group activities
- expressing emotions
- other (please explain)

2. Please explain why you chose the above items and what progress you hope to see in each.
Appendix B

Areas of Social Development

Classroom Therapist Survey

Which areas do you think the students in my classroom would benefit from additional classroom/therapy instruction?

Please mark the 3 items you find most important.

_______ conversation skills

_______ interacting with others

_______ asking for help

_______ participating in group activities

_______ expressing emotions

_______ other (please explain)

2. Please explain why you chose the above items and what progress you hope to see in each.
Appendix C

Dear Parents/Guardians,

As a part of my graduate work in Education and Human Development at The College at Brockport, State University of New York I am conducting a survey about social skills activities. An important area in your child’s IEP is social development. Through this survey I would like to determine areas you think your child would benefit from additional instruction in the classroom. I would greatly appreciate your input. If you choose to participate, please send the completed survey in with your child by (date).

Thank you for your anticipated support.

Sincerely,

Julie Matukewicz
Appendix D

Dear Classroom Therapists,

As a part of my graduate work in Education and Human Development at The College at Brockport, State University of New York I am conducting a survey about social skills activities. An important area in our students' IEPs is social development. Through this survey I would like to determine areas you think our students would benefit from additional instruction in the classroom or in therapy. I would greatly appreciate your input. If you choose to participate, please place the completed survey in my mailbox by (date). Thank you for your anticipated support.

Sincerely,

Julie Matukewicz
Appendix E

Parent Follow-Up Survey

What changes, if any, have you seen in your child at home during the past four weeks in the following areas?

1. Conversation skills

2. Interacting with others

3. Asking for help

4. Participating in group activities

5. Expressing emotions

6. Other (please explain)
Appendix F

Therapist Follow-Up Survey

What changes, if any, have you seen in my students in therapy or in the classroom during the past four weeks in the following areas?

1. Conversation skills

2. Interacting with others

3. Asking for help

4. Participating in group activities

5. Expressing emotions

6. Other (please explain)
Dear Parents/Guardians,

As part of my graduate work in Education and Human Development at The College at Brockport, State University of New York I am conducting a follow-up survey about the social skills activities your child participated in during the past four weeks. Through this survey I would like to determine if you observed any changes in your child's social skills at home. I would greatly appreciate your input. If you choose to participate, please send the completed survey in with your child by (date). Thank you for your anticipated support.

Sincerely,

Julie Matukewicz
Dear Classroom Therapists,

As part of my graduate work in Education and Human Development at The College at Brockport, State University of New York I am conducting a follow-up survey about the social skills activities my students participated in during the past four weeks. Through this survey I would like to determine if you observed any changes in my student’s social skills in therapy or in the classroom. I would greatly appreciate your input. If you choose to participate, please place the completed survey in my mailbox by (date). Thank you for your anticipated support.

Sincerely,

Julie Matukewicz
Appendix I

Social Skills Pre/Post Test

Name: ___________________________ Date: __________

1. Your friend says good morning. What should you do?

2. You bump into your friend. What should you do?

3. You can't open your locker? What should you do?

4. You are playing a game and it is your friend's turn. What should you do?

5. Your friend took your toy. How do you feel?

6. Your friend asks you to play. What should you do?

7. The teachers are talking but you need help. What do you do?

8. You can't get your coat zipped. What do you do?

9. The teacher asks a question at group and you know the answer. What do you do?

10. Your friend pushed you. What should you do?
11. Your teacher is talking to you. What should you do?

12. Your friend picks up a paper you dropped. What should you do?

13. You can’t reach something up high. What should you do?

14. It is time for morning meeting and the teacher asks who wants a turn. What should you do?

15. Your stomach hurts. What should you do?
## Student Behavior Data Sheet

**Student:** Gail  
**Annual Goal:** Gail will initiate conversation and maintain 2 verbal exchanges with a peer.  
**Benchmarks:** 3 prompts, 2 prompts, 1 prompt

<table>
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References


