CHAPTER 4: Training Teachers to Target and Develop Social Skills as an Academic Enabler

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Social and emotional competence benefits all children. Social skills and social emotional learning (SEL) are fundamental to children’s mental health, academic learning and motivation to cooperate and achieve. Along with problem behaviours and school attendance, social skills are significant predictors of school performance. A strong evidence base is developing which promotes the inclusion of SEL into the whole school curriculum. However, school wide intervention programs need to be both effective and sustainable if these programs are to fit into the current busy curriculum. Low Socio-economic Status (SES) schools that are more likely to have students with low levels of SEL provide more of a challenge. This chapter outlines preliminary information on the comprehensive and longitudinal (4 year) implementation of a proactive SEL intervention with all students in Preparatory to Year 3 in a low SES school setting in Australia. While the social skills improvement system (SSIS, Elliott & Gresham, 2007) has recently been applied in Australian schools (Kettler, Elliott, Davies, & Griffin, 2011), this chapter provides insights into the applicability of the SSIS in this challenging setting. It outlines the use of the SSIS Screening tool for all students and the use of a Rating Scale (Gresham & Elliott, 2008) for students with low Prosocial behaviours to identify social skills for targeting and delivery of social skill training to the whole class, rather than intervention on an individual basis. The chapter then raises the importance of teachers as social skills trainers, particularly in early year classrooms, and teachers’ perception of this role in this one setting. Teachers’ reflections on the SSIS as an intervention program in this setting are also provided. Teachers’ experiences in this project also provide an indication of the efficacy of the model of training classroom teachers through professional development in the school setting to deliver social skills training to their students with support from school psychologists and the whole school system. Considerations regarding the school based training model compared with undergraduate and postgraduate University based training are then provided.
Introduction
Social skills and social emotional learning (SEL) are fundamental to children’s mental health, academic learning and motivation to cooperate and achieve. Effective mastery of social and emotional skills and competencies is associated with greater well-being and better school performance whereas the failure to achieve competence in these areas can lead to a variety of personal, social, and academic difficulties (Eisenberg, 2006; Guerra & Bradshaw, 2008; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Weissberg & Greenberg, 1998).

Social emotional learning (SEL) has been defined as the process of acquiring core competencies to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situations constructively (Elias et al., 1997). While no specific definitional comparison of SEL and social skills was found in the literature, it seems apparent that learning social skills is a subset of SEL. In their recent meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions and their impact on enhancing students’ SEL, Durlak, Weissberg, Dyminicki, Taylor, and Schellinger (2011) indicate that SEL covers a broad conceptualisation of core competencies across “cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies” that include “self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (p. 406)” Social skills have been defined as socially acceptable learned behaviours that enable an individual to interact effectively with others and to avoid or escape negative social interactions with others (Gresham & Elliott, 1990). According to the SSIS system that Elliott and Gresham (2007) have developed, the categories of social skills include communication, cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, engagement, and self-control. These skills would seem to be embedded within SEL core competencies. Certainly the link between social skills and academic performance and behaviour problems is clearly articulated in the literature (see January, Casey, & Paulson, 2011), as is SEL.

A strong evidence base which promotes the inclusion of SEL into the whole school curriculum has been developing (Zins & Elias, 2006). More recently, Durlak, et al. (2011) presented findings from a meta-analysis of 213 school-based, universal SEL programs involving over 270,000 students in settings from kindergarten to high school. Participants demonstrated significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes about self, others and school, and improved prosocial behaviours compared to controls, with corresponding reductions in conduct and internalising problems. Academic performance reflected a noteworthy 11 percentile gain on achievement tests and grades. These positive effects remained statistically significant for a minimum of six months after intervention. The largest effect size was for social-emotional skill performance that targeted emotional recognition, stress-management, empathy, problem-solving, and decision-making. Classroom teachers and other school staff effectively conducted these programs, demonstrating that these interventions can be integrated into routine classroom programs.

A range of compelling person-centred rationales for the linkage between SEL competencies and improved school attitudes and performances of students were offered by Durlak et al. (2011). Students who set high academic goals, have high self-discipline, manage stress, and are organised
learn more and achieve higher grades (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Elliot & Dweck, 2005) and those who are more self-aware and confident try harder and persist in the face of challenges (Aronson, 2002). Those with problem-solving skills to overcome obstacles and make responsible decisions do better academically (Zins & Elias, 2006). From an interpersonal, instructional, and environmental support perspective, school performance is lifted by the following: high expectations and support for academic success by peers and adults; caring teacher-student relationships; engaging teacher approaches such as cooperative learning; and safe and orderly environments. As Durlak et al. (2011) summarise, a combination of improvement in student social emotional competence, a safe and caring school environment, teacher practices and expectations, and student-teacher relationships is most likely to contribute to these positive student outcomes. It seems apparent that SEL programming can also foster whole school community building activities and family connectedness that can provide a broad supportive culture. School wide intervention programs can be both effective and sustainable; however, low socio-economic status (SES) schools that may have students with low levels of SEL provide more of a challenge. Studies have shown that children who live in situations of poverty, family dysfunction, abuse and neglect are more at risk of developing behavioural, social, academic and mental health issues (Doll & Lyon, 1998, cited in Buchanan, Gueldner, Tran, & Merrell, 2012). These children are also more likely to have language and learning difficulties which make access to the learning environment more problematic. Incidents of trauma and other stressful events also tend to be more frequent in low SES communities (Hatch & Dohrenwend, 2007, cited in January, Casey, & Paulson, 2011).

**Recommended SEL program practices for developing skills in children**

Durlak et al. (2011) summarise the extensive research on SEL that has led to the provision of recommendations on procedures and practices necessary to achieve effectiveness in skill training. They propose that there is broad agreement on four recommended practices, and that these practices form the acronym SAFE: Sequenced, step-by step training; using active forms of learning; that focus time and attention; to achieve explicit goals. These practices are outlined in more detail in Table 1.

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<th>Practice</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<td>Sequenced, step-by step training</td>
<td>breaks skills down into smaller learning steps that can be sequentially mastered, combined, and chained (Gresham, 1995)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Active forms of learning</td>
<td>involve practice, and the application of skills (Salas &amp; Cannon-Bowers, 2001)</td>
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<td>Focus sufficient time and attention</td>
<td>on developing the skills for learning to be achieved</td>
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<td>Explicit learning goals</td>
<td>that are driven by clear and specific objectives or sub-goals that identify what is expected to be learnt</td>
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*Table 1: Recommended practices for developing social skills & SEL*
Identification of these SAFE practices provides criteria upon which SEL and social skill programs can be evaluated in relation to espoused procedures and practices, and their actual implementation.

**Training teachers to deliver social skills and SEL training**

The success of SEL intervention programs in schools relies on teachers’ confidence “in their abilities to implement a program and have the skills and resources to deliver the program as designed” (Buchanan et al., 2009). It is strongly recommended that teachers need training (Voegler-Lee & Kupersmidt, 2010), regular support (Payton et al., 2000), and constructive feedback on their performance (CASEL, 2002).

In promoting a framework of effective practices to promote social skills and emotional development, to support children’s appropriate behaviour, and prevent challenging behaviours, Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, and Strain (2003) outline four central components of teacher training. These components include building positive relationships with children, families and colleagues, designing supportive and engaging environments to promote positive behaviours, teaching social and emotional skills, and developing individualized interventions for children with the most challenging behaviours. Voegler-Lee and Kupersmidt (2010) outline the approaches that are used in training teachers to facilitate the social and emotional development of children. Two common but distinct training objectives were identified:

1. Education on theory and practice of carrying out intervention programs in classroom settings: workshops on conceptual basis for the curriculum and its components, and opportunities for hands-on learning and practice with lessons, activities and materials.

2. Target teacher behaviours, knowledge, beliefs and attitudes to ensure that they exhibit high levels of social emotional functioning, have the education, skill and resources to manage the challenging behaviours of young children. Teacher behaviours are mediators of change in children’s behaviour.

Buchanan et al. (2009) found that of those teachers who had received training in SEL, the majority (30%) gained their knowledge through workshops while in-service training included attending full-day (13%) or half-day (15%) programs. Almost 19% obtained information from relevant books, while others gained knowledge by undertaking a College/University course (15%), on-site coaching (12%), having prior work experience (14%), and watching a video/TV program (11%). Voegler-Lee and Kupersmidt (2010) confirmed this finding by suggesting that workshops or didactic training are typically conducted, as well as access to trained classroom consultants who provide mentoring and coaching to assist teacher planning and implementation of new SEL curricula in classroom settings. With consultation such a critical component of training, Buchanan et al. (2009) reported that more than a third of teachers are willing to receive consultation support during implementation of SEL programs, with almost two thirds willing to be observed while teaching a lesson and to receive feedback.
Voegler-Lee and Kupersmidt (2010) suggest that teacher training also needs to target teacher beliefs and attitudes, since these are critical as mediators of change in children’s behaviour. Buchanan et al. (2009) sought information regarding a range of teacher attitudes and beliefs regarding the validity of SEL programming, as well as other issues. Almost all teachers in their study regarded SEL as important to be successful in school and life, and that it enhances academic outcomes, and over two thirds of teachers believed SEL programs should be taught in the classroom. While teacher beliefs seem to strongly support SEL programs, only two thirds of them implemented SEL in their classrooms. Only a third of teachers believed it to be *very feasible* to devote one period per week to SEL, and when asked about barriers to implementing SEL programs in their classrooms, the lack of available time to teach the lessons was identified by almost two thirds of teachers, with lack of preparation time and lack of resources as barriers identified by approximately half of the teachers. Current level of training in SEL was reported to be *somewhat or very much* a barrier by over half of the teacher cohort. Despite this concern, teachers were somewhat reticent to receive one-on one consultation support (37% of teachers), although they were more willing to have a lesson observed (62%) and receive feedback (66%).

The setting of the current study

The State School (SS) is a low SES National Partnership school with a student population of 649. The 2011 NAPLAN Performance Measures indicate 93.9% of Year 3 students Australia wide achieved the National Minimum Standard (NMS) while just 86.8% of Year 3 students at SS achieved the NMS. Similarly, 45% of Year 3 students in Australia achieved results within the top two bands of reading and just 16.2% achieved the same standard at SS. School data also shows up to 45% of students consistently being identified for extra support in reading through the Year 2 Diagnostic Net process conducted state wide by Education Queensland. In addition 33% of preparatory students were referred for speech and language support and developmental delays. In 2011 the school community reached an agreement to target social and emotional learning as a key initiative of the four year National Partnership Plan in an effort to provide a school wide approach in supporting the mental health and academic learning of students.

A number of initiatives have been embraced as part of providing a supportive school environment in which student well-being and mental health are a priority. The key focus areas are SEL, behaviour, and learning. The school fosters a whole school commitment to universal practices which promote resilience and student well-being and to building capacity in the skill sets of teachers to ensure sustainability in programs and interventions into the future. School-wide positive behaviour support (SWPBS) was introduced into the school in 2007 as a system based approach to managing behaviour. This model is a three-tier continuum that defines various levels of support and uses data to ascertain risk and to identify the level of intervention. Tier 1 is a universal proactive system for all students; Tier 2 is proactive, involving classroom management and small group programs and is aimed at students considered at higher risk of developing problem behaviours. Tier 3 involves
complex case management for students with a diagnosis or extreme and challenging behaviours. The school has just engaged in Tier 2 training (classroom management and practice).

The school Guidance Officer (GO) researched and identified an SEL program (SSiS) based on best practice and sustainability that would dovetail into current school universal services. The school leadership is committed to providing resources, materials and training to assist teachers in the delivery and integrity of the program. The behaviour specialist (Student Welfare Officer) is on staff for 4 years to manage targeted support for more challenging behaviours and as a key resource in training class teachers. The GO was being employed for an extra two days a week to assist in the implementation of this process, and an experienced offline curriculum team is available to assist teachers in differentiating curriculum.

The school has a strong commitment to professional development (PD) for staff and for funding research. All teaching staff were originally provided with an information session which presented current research and best practice around SEL, its relationship to both academic performance and behaviour problems, an overview of the SSiS, and an outline of the research project. In addition PD was provided to all staff around the implications of poverty, family dysfunction and abuse in placing students at risk for social, emotional and mental health issues, and disengagement from the education system. Teachers were challenged to consider not only the importance of teaching literacy and numeracy and improving academic outcomes but to think about the importance of developing social and emotional competencies, given the social challenges facing students at the school.

The project aims to promote resilience and broadening the social, emotional, and behavioural repertoires of Preparatory to Year 3 students by providing proven and instructional intervention methods that help students learn and apply social skills across a range of contexts. The SSiS is a multi-tiered model of universal assessment and intervention which enables efficient and effective class wide interventions. The assessment components of the SSiS have recently been applied in Australian schools (Kettler et al., 2011). The SSiS Screening tool is generally applied to all students, and a Rating Scale is additionally used with students with low Prosocial behaviours to identify social skills for targeting and training. Normally the Rating Scale drives individual interventions, but in this project it was used to target the more common skill deficits and drive interventions to the whole class.

**Teacher Training**
The GO and SWO delivered a half day training SSiS workshop in Term 2 to all class teachers participating in the intervention, using Pearson’s Train the Trainer Tool. Teachers were provided with class release time.

The workshop provided:
- Information about SEL, current research and best practice.
- Training in the implementation of SSiS and completion of the Class wide screener.
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- Demonstration and modelling of a lesson from the modules.
- Opportunity to familiarize with the materials and lesson plans.

Ongoing support involved the following:
- Additional resources to assist with planning and implementation.
- Release time to complete the Class wide Screener.
- Team teaching of a 1 lesson with GO or SWO.
- 1 observation by SWO or GO.
- 1 self-reflection that could be used as the basis of discussion in a peer review model.
- Ongoing training in behaviour management/classroom practice facilitated by SWO.

Procedure
The primary goal of the project was to undertake and evaluate an early intervention SSiS program targeting the Preparatory to Year 3 cohort. Class teachers completed the class-wide screener to evaluate the SEL of students in their class. This process involved screening of 320 students across the four class grades. Students identified at level 1 (N = 35) or 2 (N = 68) on Pro-Social Behaviour were targeted by the Rating Scale for Teachers. The most frequently occurring social acquisition deficits identified by this data were to be specifically taught by the class teachers to the whole class, in addition to the more general coverage of all 10 social skills to the class.

The Survey
The survey used in this study was developed to understand teacher perspectives regarding the project to this stage and to provide feedback to further training and support. Many of the questions were drawn from a comprehensive survey outlined in Buchanan et al. (2009) based on the literature and SEL programming. Classroom Teachers of students in Preparatory year to Year 3 teachers who had been involved in presenting social skill modules to their students for approximately 4 weeks were invited to complete the survey and all consented to participate. Survey materials were disseminated to participants and completed surveys were personally sealed in envelopes and confidentially returned by registered mail to the University researcher. Fourteen teachers (five Preparatory, four Year 1, two Year 2, and 3 Year 3) completed the 12 likert type five point scale (not at all, a little, somewhat, much and a great deal) survey questions, along with some open ended questions.

Survey Results
Data from teachers in this study provided similar results to those reported by Buchanan et al. (2009) on his larger sample of 264 teachers. All teachers believed that Social Skills enhances academic outcomes, and that Social Skills should be taught in the classroom by classroom teachers. All indicated high levels of motivation to implement Social Skills training in their classrooms and all were doing so. In terms of their satisfaction with their current knowledge and skills to implement the SSiS social skills training in their classroom, they were generally satisfied, and indicated a strong
belief that they had the ability to effectively implement the SSiS social skills training program. They regarded that they had been trained to implement the SSiS in a SAFE way, that is, sequenced, active, focused, and with explicit goals.

In terms of support, the majority were strongly willing to receive one-on-one consultation and mentoring during the implementation of the SEL program, while some were somewhat willing and a few were not at all willing. A similar range of responses were recorded in relation to teacher willingness to be observed while teaching a lesson and receive feedback from either the GO or the Behaviour specialist, or to team teach with either of these professional supporters.

In relation to implementation, teachers had a broad range of responses to the feasibility of devoting three 30 minute lessons per week to the SSiS program, with the majority indicating that this was somewhat and much feasible. In terms of barriers to implementing the SSiS in their classroom, time available to teach these lessons was perceived to be the main barrier, followed by current level of training in SSiS, time available to prepare for teaching the lessons, and the number of students in my classroom.

Some interesting comments were also provided by the teacher respondents. One commented that the students who function well socially enjoy the program, but those students who need social skills often don’t respond to the worksheet, or sit long enough to listen and take in the talk, and comment on how boring it is. Inappropriate behaviour was identified by many respondents as a barrier to getting through the content. A number of respondents suggested that the program needs more role plays and other strategies to make teaching the SSiS more fun and engaging. Another commented that worksheets were tricky to complete with one teacher in a multi-age classroom.

Discussion
This chapter provides insights into the applicability of the SSIS in this challenging setting. The SSiS Screening tool was used to screen all students and indicated that a high proportion of students in the classes from Preparatory year to Year 3 at SS were rated low on Prosocial behaviour. These students were subsequently assessed using the Rating Scale to identify social skills for targeting and delivery of social skill training to the whole class. Usually the Rating Scale is used to identify intervention targets for the individual rather than the whole class, and so the current study indicates that this information has helped form the intervention strategies for the whole class. Teachers in this setting strongly believe that they have an important role as social skills trainers in their classrooms. Perhaps because they are a small cohort of teachers in the challenging setting, their level of commitment to classroom intervention seemed to be stronger than that reported by Buchanan et al. (2009). Teachers in this study would seem to have high levels of confidence in their knowledge and skills and ability to implement the SSiS program, once again at a higher level than teachers in the Buchanan et al. (2009) study. Teachers seem happy with the SSiS as an intervention program, and reported that it meets the SAFE criteria, in that the program is sequenced, with connected and coordinated activities, with active and engaging lessons, is focused on at least one social skill component, and it
targets specific social skills by identifying explicit goals. However, in this challenging setting, with so many students with social skill deficits, teachers recommended that extra activities needed to be presented to hold the attention of these more challenged students and to reduce off-task and inappropriate behaviours.

Teachers believe that SEL is important, that social skills need to be delivered by them in their classroom, and that they can receive enough training and support through in-school training opportunities. The main barrier for teachers to implement SEL programs is the time to prepare and to teach social skills, even when they are provided with a complete set of social skill modules. This difficulty is exacerbated in challenging settings when more engaging training materials need to be developed to ensure students connect and develop the targeted social skills. As evidenced by the current study, when all teachers are involved in SEL programming to students with difficulties, peer support in the development of these new materials and sharing of these materials greatly assists individual teachers. While lack of time is acknowledged, the project coordinators in this study and many teachers in this project are mindful that social skills are an academic enabler. They recognise that students with social skill deficits have great difficulty engaging with learning and unless these students improve their social skills through direct instruction, they will fail to engage and learn academic skills. As such, it would seem to be imperative that students in these challenging settings must be provided with social skills training as early as possible or in conjunction with academic programming if the learning and development goals of these students are to be realised.

The literature indicates that few teachers gain knowledge and skills in delivering SEL programs from college or University training. The majority of teachers gain their skills through attending workshops and school in-service training that is augmented by on-site coaching, reading books, and watching videos. Consistent with this literature, teachers in this study seemed confident in implementing the SSIS as a result of the workshop and extended on-site support delivered by the project personnel. Delivering training on site and providing feedback and coaching on the basis of observed lessons provides a considerable advantage in instruction being realistic, related and relevant, and ensures the validity of this training strategy. University based training can provide theoretical background and provide information to encourage the development of knowledge and skill that can be applied in project related work. However, unless University courses have school based workshops and direct feedback, the practical application and related mentoring of skill development are unlikely to be at the same level of efficacy. Teachers’ experiences in this project also provide an indication of the efficacy of the model of training classroom teachers through professional development in the school setting to deliver social skills training to their students with support from school psychologists and the whole school system.

References

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