

**A Program Evaluation: Implementation of an Abbreviated Social  
Skills Program Using Folk Literature in the Regular Classroom**

by

Lara Beetham Monasch, M.S. Ed.

A Doctoral Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree  
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PREVIEW

**PACE UNIVERSITY**

**PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENT  
PSY.D PROJECT  
FINAL APPROVAL FORM**

NAME:

Lara Beetham Monasch, M. S. Ed.

TITLE OF PROJECT:

A Program Evaluation: Implementation of  
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DOCTORAL PROJECT COMMITTEE:

PROJECT ADVISOR:

Barbara Mowder, Ph.D.  
Director of Graduate Psychology Programs,  
Pace University

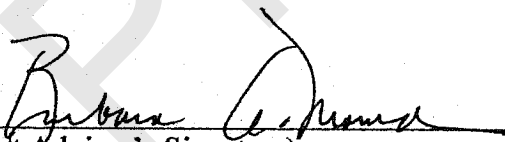
PROJECT CONSULTANT:

Leonard Bart, Ph.D.  
Professor, Pace University

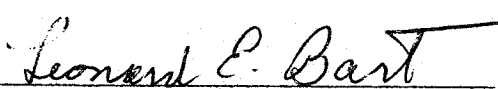
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**FINAL APPROVAL OF COMPLETED PROJECT:**

I have read the final version of the doctoral project and certify that it meets the relevant requirements of the Psy.D. degree in School-Clinical Child Psychology.

  
(Project Advisor's Signature)

8/26/03  
(Date)

  
(Project Consultant's Signature)

8/22/03  
(Date)

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this project to the memory of my father, Stanley Williams Beetham. He has always inspired me with his pursuit of knowledge and challenged me with his theoretical questioning. While he will never know of the completion of this project, his words of support and encouragement have helped me see this project to the end.

PREVIEW



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## ABSTRACT

Many demands are placed on families today as a result of hectic lifestyles, an increase in divorce rate, single-parenting, dual careers, and family mobility. Consequently, social skills are being concentrated on less and less by the family. In addition, schools are not taking the child with social and behavioral difficulties out of the regular classroom due to research questioning pull-out special education programs. Research has determined that successful attainment of important social skills helps a child become a well-adjusted adult. Therefore, a regular classroom, school-based social skills program can be a valuable tool in shaping the adults of tomorrow.

The present investigation evaluates the effectiveness of an abbreviated social skills program, utilizing the curriculum from the Working Together: Building Social Skills Through Folk Literature program, in building social skills and decreasing behavior problems. This research utilizes a regular classroom setting of second, third, and fourth grade students. This project responds to the concern of teachers for more “regular education” children to receive instruction in social skills and the need for children to generalize social skills taught in their natural setting. A summary of pertinent developmental theories and social skill instructional techniques is followed by a detailed description of the abbreviated program.

To evaluate this program, a pretest posttest design utilizing a program group and a waiting comparison group was utilized. Classroom teachers completed the Social Skills

Rating Scale – Teacher form for 250 Westchester County, New York elementary students, prior to and after the social skills program was implemented in the Fall of 1996. ANOVAs were conducted to examine changes between pretest and posttest scores on the social skill and problem behavior variables. There were no significant changes in either social skills or problem behaviors as a result of the abbreviated social skills program. Implications and limitations of this research are presented, as well as indications for future research.

## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

Social learning occurs within a variety of interdependent systems. The most fundamental system, and the initial setting for social skills development, is the family. Additional systems, such as schools and social groups, command an ever-increasing influence in children's lives as children experience social settings outside of the home (Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren, & Soderman, 1998). Bruner (1961) asserts "schools must also contribute to the social and emotional development of the child if they are to fulfill their function of education" (p. 9). However, most educators consider basic academic skills instruction to be their sole responsibility, and think social skills instruction is the parents' responsibility. Thus educators expect children to arrive at school with all the necessary social skills. Educators have been compelled to reconsider the importance of social skills instruction, however. Research indicates a connection between early childhood social skills problems and adult mental health, school performance, adult unemployment, and violence in the community (Elksnin & Elksnin, 1998). This reconsideration apparently has not led to a methodical approach to social skills instruction in education, as Cartledge and Kiarie (2001) assert there is little evidence that social skills are being systematically taught in the schools.

#### *Social Competence and Social Skills*

The terms *social competence* and *social skills* are often used interchangeably (Merrell, 2003; Merrell & Gimpel, 1998). However, these are two distinct, albeit related, multidimensional constructs which necessitate individual consideration. Therefore, definitions of the two terms, for the purpose of clarification, are needed and warranted.

Social competence is an evaluative term based on judgments from others reflecting the adequacy of one's implementation of social skills (Merrell & Gimpel, 1998). Gresham (1998a) defines social competence as the "degree which children learn to establish, develop, and maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and adults" (p.19). Fox and Kreuger (1987) state that social competence should be built through a positive, proactive, and systematic approach.

Merrell and Gimpel (1998) state that the most influential model of social competence was developed by Reschley and Gresham in 1981, revised in 1986, and again in 1987. This model is composed of three subordinate constructs: (a) adaptive behavior, (b) social skills, and (c) peer acceptance. Adaptive behaviors consist of: independent functioning skills, physical development, language development, and academic competencies. Social skills include three subcomponents: (a) interpersonal behavior (e.g., conversational skills, cooperative behaviors), (b) self-related behaviors (e.g., positive attitude toward self, expression of feelings), and (c) task-related behaviors (e.g., following directions, completing tasks, and working independently). Peer acceptance, while a subcomponent of social competent behavior, is also seen as a result of adequate performance of adaptive behavior and social skills.

The difference between social competence and social skills is explained by the often-cited research of Hops (1983), “competence is a summary term which reflects social judgment about the general quality of an individual’s performance in a given situation. The concept of social skills from a behavioral perspective is based on the assumption that specific identifiable skills form the basis for socially competent behavior” (p. 14).

Merrell (2003) states that there is no one definition of social skills that has been agreed upon. In fact, he finds 15 different expert definitions. Looking at the common elements, Merrell and Gimpel (1998) summarize social skills as “learned, composed of specific behaviors, include initiations and responses, maximize social reinforcement, are interactive and situation specific, and can be specified as targets for intervention” (p. 5). Further analysis groups social skills into cognitive, behavioral, and ecological definitions (Merrell & Gimpel, 1998). Sheridan and Walker (1999) offer a definition of social skills that includes these three aspects; social skills are “goal-directed, learned behaviors that allow one to interact and function effectively in a variety of social context” (p. 687). However, for the purpose of this study, social skills are understood to be “socially accepted learned behaviors that enable a person to interact effectively with others and to avoid socially unacceptable responses” (Gresham & Elliott, 1990, p. 1).

Gresham (1998b) organizes social skills definitions into three general conceptualizations. The *peer-acceptance definition* characterizes children as socially skilled if their peers accept them. This definition is deficient because it does not

identify the specific behaviors that lead to peer-acceptance. The *behavioral definition* describes social skills as behaviors that increase the chance of being reinforced and decrease the chance of being punished. Despite support from the behavior therapy perspective, this definition fails to recognize that behaviors or skills result in socially important outcomes. The third definition Gresham offers is based on the work of McFall (1982). This conceptualization is termed the *social validity definition*, which asserts that specific behaviors result in important social outcomes. Important social outcomes, such as friendships, teacher and parent acceptance, and school adjustment, are adaptive and functional. From this perspective, social skills are specific behaviors that individuals exhibit which allow them to perform a social task competently.

In recognition of the differences among the definitions of social skills, Caldarella and Merrell (1997) conducted a meta-analysis of 21 studies, which included over 22,000 children and adolescents, to develop a taxonomy of childhood and adolescent positive social skill behaviors. The resulting taxonomy consists of five dimensions of social skills: (a) peer relations (e.g., compliments peers, offers help), (b) self-management (e.g., controls temper, accepts imposed limits), (c) academic (e.g., independent study skills, completes assigned tasks), (d) compliance (e.g., follows directions, follows rules), and (e) assertion skills (e.g., initiates conversations, acknowledges compliments). While many benefits are derived from such a taxonomy, the one most relevant for this study is the identification of children's strengths or weaknesses. This identification leads to the design of behavioral interventions or social skills training.

Gresham and Elliott (1990) developed a similar taxonomy to that of Caldarella and Merrell (1997). Their Social Skills Rating System specifies domains of cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, and self-control. However, Merrell (2003) continues to cite his research as the most recent to address the classification or taxonomy of social skills for children and adolescents.

### *Importance of Social Skills*

Social skill development has either positive or negative consequences depending on whether the individual is successful or unsuccessful in the development of socially appropriate social skills. The importance of social skill development is most noticeably manifested in interpersonal relationships both in and out of the school setting. Merrell and Gimpel (1998) observe that literature on the topic of social skills focuses predominately on the negative consequences that result from poor social skill development or performance, rather than on positive outcomes associated with successful social skill development. Despite this imbalance, it is important to identify positive social skill development, as well as the lack of or poor social skill development.

Gresham and Elliott (1990) state that social skills and peer acceptance have been related to long-term adjustment outcomes, and that teachers consider certain social skills as critical for success in the classroom. Walker, Irwin, Noell, and Singer (1992) developed an interpersonal social-behavioral competence model for considering school competence; they find that adaptive teacher-related social skills (e.g., follows rules/directions, listens, cooperates) lead to academic success and



teacher acceptance. Similarly, peer-related social skills (e.g., leads peers, assists peers, cooperates with peers) lead to peer acceptance, positive peer reactions and friendships.

Christopher, Nangle, and Hansen (1993) assert that social interactions are critical for a child's adjustment. Positive interpersonal social skills development enables the child to establish support systems for emotional and social needs, develop moral judgment and social values, improve or maintain self-esteem, promote interpersonal competence and adult-like behavior, and develop independence that will aid in separation from the family as the child matures. Merrell and Gimpel (1998) refer to Hartup (1983) who recognized the ability to relate well to others as an essential factor in positive growth and development.

A child who has developed appropriate social skills has a greater opportunity to experience *fun* and make choices in a social situation (e.g., whether to play with someone or not) than does a peer who has not achieved the same level of social skills. *Fun* is understood as the "greatest sense of euphoria and the least evidence of psychopathology" (Dowrick, 1986, p.14). Overall, effective social skills equip children to interact effectively with others in a productive, meaningful, and non-violent manner (Bartz & Matthews, 2001). Merrell (2003) finds that the development of a solid foundation of social skills in early life is linked to many positive outcomes in social, academic and occupational adjustment later in life.

Negative consequences that result from poor social skill development manifest in diverse venues. A large proportion of children rejected by others lack

positive interaction skills, such as being cooperative, helpful, or considerate toward others (Asher & Williams, 1993). Peer relationship problems resulting from the lack of positive interaction skills lead to long-term adjustment problems (Stuart, Gresham, & Elliott, 1991).

A multitude of disorders may be attributed to poor development of social skills in childhood. Withdrawal and aggressive behaviors can result from failure to obtain social skills at an early age (Dowrick, 1986). Failure to obtain the necessary social skills (e.g., ability to play with peers, assertion, self-management) may result in social anxiety, depression, or even anti-social behavior. Social problems of withdrawal and anti-social aggression in children may lead to serious interpersonal problems in later life (Eisler & Federiksen, 1980). Greene et al. (1999) present strong evidence of a significant relationship between social impairments and the likelihood of children abusing substances such as tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs in adolescence.

In their interpersonal social-behavioral competence model, Walker et al. (1992) find that maladaptive teacher-related social skills (e.g., defies teacher, disturbs others, ignores teacher) lead to school failure, school drop out, and teacher rejection. Maladaptive peer-related social skills (e.g., starts fights, short temper, brags) lead to social rejection and loneliness. Deficits in social skills correlate with poor academic achievement (Gresham & Elliott, 1987) and may be predictive of social adjustment problems in adolescence and adulthood, with dropping-out of school a particularly frequent outcome. Research results indicate that, on average, about 25 percent of

low-accepted children drop out of school compared to eight percent of other children (Parker & Asher, 1987). This finding suggests that children with deficits in social skills are at-risk for academic and social problems and, thus, social skills assessment should occur as early as the kindergarten screening process (Flanagan, 1994). Since school success and social skills are positively correlated (Cartledge & Milburn, 1978), one can conclude that school-based interventions may enhance student performance by addressing social skill development.

Without social skill development, children may experience a range of negative outcomes. However, there is a question of whether social skill deficits cause behavioral difficulties, or do behavioral difficulties cause social skill deficits? Merrell and Gimpel (1998) subscribe to the current thinking that social skills deficits are both the cause and effect of various emotional and behavioral problems. This thinking is based on Bandura's (1977) theory of reciprocal determinism, which is discussed later.

### *Social Skills Training*

Recognition of the importance of social learning has grown over the years. Since the late 1970s there has been an abundance of research in the field of social skill development (Merrell, 2003). Much of this research has been dedicated to investigating, developing, and refining methods to promote social skills development. Gresham (1998b) identifies four primary objectives for social skills training: (a) promoting skill acquisition, (b) enhancing skill performance, (c) reducing or removing competing behaviors, and (d) facilitating generalization and maintenance.

Despite widely held beliefs in the value of social skills training, research findings on the effectiveness of social skills training do not consistently demonstrate positive results, whether for general education students or for specialized populations (e.g., emotional and behavioral disorders, ADHD, learning disabled) (Bullis, Walker, & Sprague, 2001; Gresham, 1998a; Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001; Kavale & Forness, 1996; Lo, Loe, & Cartledge 2002; Pfiffner & Burnett, 1997; Quinn, Kavale, Mathur, Rutherford, & Forness, 1999). Evan (2000) indicates that the absence of positive results stems from two factors (a) failure to match skills with deficits, and (b) the intervention setting, rather than the training method.

Sheridan, Hungelmann, and Maughan (1999) concur with the importance of the intervention setting, asserting that an ecological-contextual model enables children to learn skills in their regular social environment with a greater opportunity for generalization. In response to these evaluations, Gresham (1998a) recommends three ways to *rebuild* social skills training: (a) improve assessment by considering social validity and the sensitivity of outcome measures to the skills being taught, (b) match social skills intervention strategies to targeted social skills, and (c) program for functional generalization by adopting a contextual approach to social skills training within a competing behaviors framework.

The evolution in thinking that led to the ecological-contextual approach has taken more than two decades. Many of the original studies addressed specialized populations in a pullout-type program (Gresham & Nagle, 1980; La Greca & Santogrossi, 1980); later studies note the cost-effectiveness of preventative classroom

instruction of all children (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, Solomon, & Schaps, 1989; Possell & Abrams, 1993; Stiefvater, Kurdek, & Allik, 1986; Weissberg et al., 1981; Wooster, 1986), thus supporting the approach from a financial perspective. More recently, Sheridan et al. (1999) identify generalization as a critical objective, recommending an ecological model to promote generalization. This approach enables children to improve social skills in their natural environment.

In support of the ecological model, and in recognition of the importance of generalization, new scrutiny is being applied to social skills training approaches. McClellan and Katz (2001) assert that children should achieve minimal social competence by approximately six years of age to avoid future risks in adulthood, such as difficulties in social and emotional adaptation, academic achievement, and cognitive development. A proactive approach of implementing a social skills program in the elementary level may alter the classroom and school environment to provide an environment conducive to learning academics (Possell & Abrams, 1993).

One of the most common concerns throughout the social skills literature is the ability of students to generalize social skills obtained in a small group setting to everyday life situations (Elksnin & Elksnin, 1998; Evans, Axelrod & Sapia, 2000; Gresham, 1998a; Merrell 2003). Prior common practice was to remove children from the classroom setting for social skills training in small groups or in clinical settings. However, the reality is that targeted children fail to utilize these newly learned skills in everyday settings. The other approach is having the instructor go into the classroom to assist and reinforce the occurrence of desired behaviors. The advantage

of this classroom approach is that students learn social skills in their natural environment with their peers, and there is opportunity for practice and reinforcement from both teachers and peers; these are key factors that enable generalization to everyday situations (DuPaul & Eckert, 1994; Eisler & Frederiksen, 1980).

Two approaches that incorporate social skills training into the classroom are Collaborative Teaching (Allsopp, Santos, & Linn, 2000; Korinek & Popp, 1997) and the Responsive Classroom (Elliott, Malecki, & Demaray, 2001). Collaborative Teaching requires a team of two or more educators (e.g., teachers, guidance counselors, special education teachers, school psychologist) who are interested in teaching social skills in the mainstream classroom. Korinek and Popp (1997) list three steps to the teaching process: (a) target an academic or social skill, (b) match the targeted skill to a complementary social or academic skill, and (c) weave social skills into the general curriculum.

Allsopp et al. (2000) further defines the task of integrating social skills into the curriculum as follows: break the skills down into teachable steps, develop an instructional plan that includes a teachable strategy for performing the skill, determine the instructional setting and collaborative roles, deliver the instruction, provide opportunities for student practice, give reinforcement, and allow for self-monitoring. The Responsive Classroom also incorporates the pairing of academic and social skills in the mainstream classroom, as well as parent input to developing goals at the beginning of the school year. This approach is discussed in detail later.

By incorporating social skills into the curriculum, enhancements of both academic and social skills occur.

Teaching social skills in the classroom faces an inherent obstacle; the primary school focus is teaching academic skills, so taking time away from traditional education activities poses a conflict. Since classroom time is necessarily intended for teaching academics, innovative and abbreviated programs have been developed and implemented (Daniels, 1990; Mehaffey & Sandberg, 1992; Possell & Abrams, 1993). For instance, utilizing literature to encourage the development of social skills and social competence, while implementing a language arts curriculum, is potentially beneficial to the development of both social and language arts skills in children, as well as attractive to educators (Cartledge & Kiarie, 2001; DeGeorge, 1998; Gerber & Harris, 1983; Pardeck & Pardeck, 1990).

One social skills curriculum that utilizes literature for teaching social skills in a whole classroom environment is *Working Together: Building Children's Social Skills Through Folk Literature* (Cartledge & Kleefeld, 1994). This curriculum provides a structured approach to teaching social skills to elementary-aged children through listening to folktales from all over the world. The curriculum encourages social skill development through these four steps: (a) identifying the steps necessary to learn a skill, (b) internalizing the social skill taught through the folktale by discussions of the content and skill, (c) practicing the skill utilizing role plays and other activities, and (d) generalizing the skill through discussion and follow up activities.

An abbreviated social skills program utilizing the Working Together curriculum (Cartledge & Kleeefeld, 1994) has the potential to teach social skills in an ecological setting that enables generalization, while utilizing classroom time efficiently by also teaching language arts skills. This research project examines the usefulness of such an abbreviated social skills program in the regular classroom for second, third, and fourth grade students. This program is used to teach social skills and was evaluated using a pretest posttest model.

A systematic evaluation of pretests and posttests of two groups, those receiving and those not receiving the social skills program in Fall 1996, was conducted utilizing the Social Skills Rating System - Teachers Form by Gresham and Elliott (1990). In order to provide social skills education to all students, those students who did not receive the abbreviated social skills program in Fall 1996, instead received the social skills program in Spring 1997. However, the students who received the social skills program in the Spring were not further assessed for their skill development since the scope of this project only looks at the social skill development during Fall 1996 (i.e., October 1996 through December 1996). Other professionals who assess approaches to teaching social skills may find this evaluation to be beneficial.

### *Research Questions*

To evaluate the effectiveness of this abbreviated social skills program, the following research questions are posed: