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Effectiveness of “Second Step” Violence Prevention Curriculum

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Professional Responsibility: This project has been reviewed by collegial professional peers and has been submitted for online publication before being evaluated by faculty members from Portland State University. I am the author and take full responsibility for the project’s contents and quality. This work serves as a baseline for my professional school counselor skills and demonstrates what I have done to develop and/or assess my actions directed toward serving students and schools. In other words, this is a snapshot or one indicator of my work at this stage of my career.

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to show whether or not the “Second Step” Violence Prevention Curriculum being used with fourth grade students at Mountainside Elementary School is effective in promoting empathy, impulse control/problem solving, and anger management skills to assist students in improved citizenship and social awareness.

Introduction

Have you ever witnessed road-rage where a slight infraction, often a mistake, was made only to result in an intense and aggressive reaction? Or, how about trying to have a conversation with someone who was so involved in sharing only their thoughts they didn’t even notice you had nodded off or were looking at your watch repeatedly to signal you were no longer interested? What about the eager youngster that wants to please, but can’t seem to do anything without agonizing reassurance and external direction? These are examples of important skill deficits that are appearing more and more in today’s homes, classrooms, and world. These skills: anger management, impulse control, empathy, understanding social skills, problem solving, and self-confidence, are essential to helping people get along with others and become effective contributors in school and later in life. (Coie, Dodge & Kupersmidt, 1990; Spivack, G. & Cianci, N.,1987). Studying the effects of “Second Step” curriculum seemed a logical way to see statistical impact on improving these skills in our school, which should also lead to improved citizenship and decreased discipline referrals.

Program and School Background

“Second Step” is a violence prevention curriculum designed by the Committee for Children to “reduce impulsive and aggressive behavior in children and increase their level of social competency” (Committee for Children, 1997 p.3). The Committee for Children is a non-
profit organization known for their efforts to prevent child exploitation. In 1987 the violence prevention curriculum, “Second Step” was developed by their team and pilot studies were conducted (Committee for Children, 1997). The “Second Step” curriculum now used extensively in classrooms across the United States and Canada, is designed to be taught at every grade level from Kindergarten through eighth grade with skills building on each other. “Second Step” is a research-based curriculum with proven effective results, however, this researcher felt it would be interesting to challenge the curriculum first hand. This study chose to focus on one grade level in particular due to a high number of discipline referrals during the 2004-2005 school year and no prior “Second Step” exposure.

The research completed for this project took place with fourth grade students during the 2005-2006 school year at Mountainside Elementary School located in a suburb approximately 20 miles southwest of Portland, Oregon. The school’s demographics are based on a quickly growing school of five hundred kindergarten through fifth graders. There is a relatively low turnover rate for students moving out of the school. Many new students are moving in as families are attracted by the significant amount of new, upscale housing being built within this school’s boundaries. The gap between the increasingly wealthy and significantly poor is becoming more evident in this school’s population. There were approximately 70 incoming students and only about 5 students leaving from January 2006 to June 2006. The student population statistics indicate that 87% of the student body are Caucasian; 9% Hispanic; <2% African American; <2% Asian/Pacific Islander; and <1% American Indian/Alaskan Native. Mountainside prides itself on the longevity of staff. The majority of teachers have been at this school for more than twelve years, many at least 20 years or longer.
This project aligns nicely with the School District goals of improving citizenship in addition to reading, writing, and math. It also fits within the National School Counseling Standards’ Comprehensive Counseling and Guidance program, targeting the areas of learning to learn, learning to live, learning to work; as well as the Oregon Framework of learning to contribute (American School Counselor Association, 2003; Oregon Department of Education, 2003). Mountainside Elementary and this researcher have fully supported these efforts and beliefs; so collecting data on the effectiveness of a program that also supports these was a natural fit.

**Area of Focus Statement**

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of the “Second Step” curriculum with fourth grade students at Mountainside in increasing citizenship through prosocial behaviors; specifically, improving problem-solving skills, impulsive behaviors, and anger management techniques. Another goal was to see a reduction in the number of discipline referrals for this grade level, which had been high the previous year.

**Review of Literature**

An ever-increasing amount of children are experiencing the effects of busy family life, leaving the adults around them with fewer personal resources to interact with the children as well as the potential for increased conflict, substance abuse within the family, and television or video games as the child’s source of example (Bullough, R.V. Jr., 2001). A significant number of families are experiencing both parents working outside the home, leaving children less supervised or in childcare situations. Children learn from modeling. Though a childhood full of conflict, abuse, poverty or neglect does not always cause a child to become violent towards others, children are more likely to have their emotional needs neglected. This can happen even in
well-intentioned homes when life just gets too busy. When no modeling or recognition of pro-social behaviors or caring is given, children are more likely to demonstrate angry or hurtful behavior as a means of getting their needs met (Day, 1996).

Research has shown that early intervention or exposure to learning can make children more capable learners. This includes exposure to problem solving skills and good social modeling (National Research Council, 2001). Teachers are having to spend more time addressing angry, aggressive, or apathetic behaviors in students while also receiving more and more pressure to help students achieve higher test scores. The government’s well-intentioned “No Child Left Behind” Act, was aimed at targeting students performing poorly in school and increase the standards to help them achieve higher academics (NCLB, 2001). However, recent debate of the program’s effectiveness is controversial. Educators are not feeling the support needed to back up the high expectations is there. Also, there are many factors beyond the school’s control that have not been addressed. With children not coming to school as socially and emotionally prepared to learn, the task of learning becomes more difficult (Capuzzi & Gross, 1996). Violence in the schools is increasingly portrayed on the news across the United States. Drastic measures to ensure safety in the schools have been implemented including:

1. Establishing policies and procedures that mandate strict punishments for infractions of school rules
2. Controlling access to school grounds and school buildings
3. Requiring visitors to sign in
4. Using metal detectors at school entrances
5. Conducting random metal detector checks
6. Using full-time or part-time security guards

These measures can improve school safety when implemented consistently, however they all focus on reactive strategies that don’t address the underlying roots to this type of behavior. In their book, Violent and Aggressive Youth, by Bemak and Keys, they add, “spending time and energy in developing good prevention programs is an investment in the future and time well spent” (p.24). Helping students learn to control impulses and understand empathy can provide tools for youth to express frustrations in socially acceptable ways and think about how their actions may affect others, thus leading to less violence. Teaching tools to help children, teachers, and parents recognize what they are feeling or thinking and ways to calm down can be helpful even to those with diagnosed disorders, which naturally make these skills difficult (Green, 2001).

The developers of the “Second Step” curriculum, Committee for Children (1997), have done their own extensive research on the effects of violence, aggression, and being socially neglected. This researcher agrees with their findings, indicating specific skill deficits including: empathy, impulse control, problem-solving skills, anger management and assertiveness can lead to antisocial behavior (Committee for Children, 1997). Grossman (1997) and his colleagues at the University of Washington undertook a one-year evaluation of the “Second Step” curriculum. Their findings showed physical aggression decreased and pro-social and neutral behaviors increased.

**Human Subjects (HSRRC)**

This study involved direct contact with fourth grade students, so a Human Subjects proposal was written and submitted to Portland State University’s Human Subjects Review Committee. Approval from the HSRRC was granted on December 12, 2005. This was an interesting process, as I believe it is philosophically sound but was long and formulaic. Ethically,
as well as legally, it makes sense, offering researchers working with human subjects the opportunity to look carefully at potential harmful effects of any study. This researcher learned a lot about the types of questions to ask when developing a study, especially to consider potential harmful effects from the subjects’ perspective.

However, this researcher found the process lacking in understanding of an elementary school setting. The disclosure statement and informed consent were more of a concern to students and parents than any feedback ever received about the Second Step Curriculum itself. The HSRRC or future researchers may consider less intimidating releases in situations where research will be conducted in a classroom setting with curriculum already in place as part of a school program. This would be especially true if all students were expected to participate in pre/post tests as part of the school/district curriculum. Delicate wording around exemption from participation may need to be looked at more closely.

**Essential Question for Research**

Is the “Second Step” Violence Prevention Curriculum effective in increasing citizenship and decreasing discipline referrals by teaching pro-social behaviors such as empathy, impulse-control/problem solving, and anger management?

**Data Collection/Methodology**

Subjects chosen were all fourth graders enrolled at Mountainside during the 2005-2006 school year. Students took a pretest assessment prior to any of the curriculum being taught and a post-test assessment upon the lessons’ completion. The study was limited to the data from students returning a signed permission slip from parents/guardians as well as a student assent to have their information used as part of the study. Students also must have taken both the pre and post-test assessments. Assessments included items such as labeling emotions from a picture,
multiple choice, and fill in the blank questions using scenarios of empathy, problem solving, and anger management. A total of 27 lesson concepts were taught using the “Second Step” curriculum. “Second Step” lessons were taught by the regular classroom teachers and this researcher: the building counselor. Lessons were alternated, lasting 30-40 minutes each, twice a week. The following topics were included:

**Unit 1: Empathy Training**

Lesson 1: Introduction to Empathy Training.

Lesson 2: Identifying Feelings

Lesson 3: Feelings Change

Lesson 4: Conflicting Feelings

Lesson 5: Similarities and Differences

Lesson 6: Preferences

Lesson 7: Perceptions

Lesson 8: Predicting Feelings

Lesson 9: Communicating Feelings

**Unit II: Impulse Control**

Lesson 1: Introduction to Interpersonal Problem Solving

Lesson 2: Recognizing Impulses

Lesson 3: Identifying a Problem

Lesson 4: Choosing a Solution

Lesson 5: Step-by-Step (breaking down a solution and evaluating if it will work)

Lesson 6: Keeping a Promise

Lesson 7: Giving and Receiving Compliments
Lesson 8: Making Conversation
Lesson 9: Dealing with Fear
Lesson 10: Taking Responsibility for Your Actions

Unit III: Anger Management
Lesson 1: Introduction to Anger Management
Lesson 2: Anger Triggers
Lesson 3: Calming Down
Lesson 4: Self-Talk
Lesson 5: Reflection
Lesson 6: Dealing with Putdowns
Lesson 7: Dealing with Criticism
Lesson 8: Dealing with Being Left Out  (Committee for Children, 1997)

Generic discipline referral information from the Principal was also reviewed for this study. The total number of referrals for the subjects as third graders without “Second Step” was compared with the total number of referrals as fourth graders while receiving “Second Step”. Only students enrolled both years were included in the data. Since this data was given in numbers with no student names, this researcher includes it as a point of interest in the study rather than a pure statistical value with research significance. In retrospect it may have been interesting to receive permission to compare individual student information for behavior and academics as well.

Data Analysis

Of the 85 students enrolled in fourth grade during the time of this study, only 33 met the two criteria to be included in the final results. The criteria consisted of: 1) Returning a signed
permission slip accepting participation in the study by both parent and student and 2) completing both the pre-test and post-test assessments. Some students chose to complete both assessments but did not return the permission slip to have their scores included in the study. Also, some who had returned their permission slip did not complete both assessments.

The following data is based on the 33 students meeting both criteria. While the total number of students eligible for inclusion in the data is much less than this researcher hoped, it can still be considered a representative sample of the group with some statistical value.

All three classrooms made significant gains in understanding pro-social behaviors as evidenced in the number of assessment items correct from the pre-test to the post-test. Classroom One made the greatest gain in learning as they increased from a total of 114 items correct up to 200 correct, or from 50% to 88%. Classroom Two increased from 99 to 154, or 52% up to 81% correct. Classroom Three also improved, increasing from 115 items correct to 183, or a 55% to 88% gain. It is interesting to this researcher how similar the scores are between the three classrooms.
The average number of questions correct as an entire grade level increased from 9.9 on the pre-test up to 16.3. This is a total gain of 6.4 questions per assessment. The questions posting the most gain were those listing ways to calm down, steps to guide problem solving, and noticing how feelings change.
The total number of items possible was 627 for the entire grade level. As a grade level, students scored only 328, or 52% correct on the pre-test. Students performed significantly better on the post-test by scoring 537, or 86% of items correct. This shows a 34% improvement in student knowledge of empathy, impulse control/problem solving, and anger management. The consistency between grade level scores is notable and would indicate validity to the assessments.

Further evidence of growth and learning may be found in looking at the office discipline referrals from last year to this year. When comparing the fourth grade group of students enrolled both last year as well as this year, there is a notable change. During the 2004-2005 school year; as third graders, this group did not receive Second Step lessons and obtained a total of 28 office referrals. During the 2005-2006 school year, with the addition of Second Step, this group as fourth graders only received a total of 8 office referrals for the entire year. While this is a significant change and “Second Step” was one difference, there could also be the following factors to consider as well: Students may have had different teachers (although one teacher looped up with her class), and maturity of students.
Limitations

Limitations are unavoidable in most studies and this is no exception. Being an elementary school and using “Second Step” as a building-wide curriculum presented some unforeseen challenges for this researcher. The required disclosure and permission forms caused some confusion about whether students had to participate in the curriculum given the nature of Human Subjects approval to publish results. Some students did not buy into the lessons, feeling they could choose to opt out of the entire program with the informed consent/permission slip (instead of just opting out of their anonymous data being used).

Due to this researcher’s limited resources, the study was restricted to one grade level and one age group of youth. Participation in sharing results was also dependent upon parents returning permission slips, which can be difficult at times with elementary age youth.

Considerations for Future Research

Should others decide to study the effectiveness of “Second Step” violence prevention curriculum in their school, some future considerations are as follows: 1) use a larger sample—an entire school or even more schools within a district, 2) use a control group, 3) implement a survey for lunchroom and recess personnel to gain adult feedback on pro-social behaviors, 4) include discipline referral information and academic reports on specific students, and 5) add on student climate survey questions to the assessment.

Conclusions

Overall, the results of this study are astounding and undoubtedly show this curriculum is effective. The increase in knowledge of pro-social behaviors such as empathy, impulse control/problem solving, and anger management appear also to have improved behaviors such as citizenship, understanding for others, and problem solving. The significant drop in office
referrals and immensely improved scores on the pre-test and post-test assessments is evidence of this. While this study was limited to one sample from one grade level, it is exciting to see the positive impact “Second Step” curriculum had within this researcher’s building and realizing efforts within the district to implement “Second Step” is a worthwhile venture. It is this researcher’s conclusion that “Second Step” does aid in improving the District’s goal to improve citizenship. It is also concluded while students are learning and practicing pro-social behaviors they will also prove more physically, mentally, and emotionally able to improve skills in other fundamentals such as reading, writing, and mathematics. This may be achieved by students remaining in the classroom, feeling safe, understanding how to get along with others, and to handle problems effectively.

Lastly, it is evident that “Second Step” can very much be considered a part of any Comprehensive Counseling and Guidance Program as outlined in the National Standards and Oregon Framework (American School Counseling Association, 2004; Oregon Department of Education, 2003) It directly aligns within the Personal/Social Domain of the National Standards, specifically, Standard 7: “Students will acquire the attitudes, knowledge and interpersonal skills to help them understand and respect self and others” (ASCA, 2004 p.26).
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