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Effectiveness of an social skills training course with EBD students

David Langston Cunningham

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The Effectiveness of an Social Skills Training Course with EBD Students

By

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Action Research

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts in Special Education

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I would to thank my parents, John and Eleanor Cunningham for supporting and encouraging me in my pursuit in education since 1979. I would like to thank my family, friends and loved ones for their support, patience and understanding while I completed my Master's degree. A special dedication and thank you goes out to the following individuals who have passed on but help lay the foundation for any success I may attain: my friend Doris Lemon, my uncle Arnold Brown and my coach Goran Raspudic.

I would also like to thank my research advisor Sr. Gabrielle Kowalski and the rest of the Special Education department at Cardinal Stritch University for their outstanding guidance and leadership throughout this research.

I finally would like to dedicate this to every Special Education student who fights a daily battle for growth and acceptance.

This action research
Has been approved for
Cardinal Stritch University by

Dr. Gabrielle Kowalski

Date August, 2012

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Chapter One

Introduction

Special Education students are provided with various services and options once they are identified. Depending on the classification, assistance is provided in and out of the classroom, and at various levels of support. Unfortunately, in some cases, support can only come in the form of counseling, assistance, and intervention after the student has created a disturbance in the learning environment. Many strategies are geared towards the responding to the disturbance as opposed to a taking a preemptive stance. Specifically, students with Emotional/Behavioral Disorders (EBD) have been the victims of this process. School systems and districts have reacted rather than teaching students productive strategies and insight into understanding their behaviors. But recently, programs and curriculum have been developed that are teaching students, in both general and special education, appropriate functional behavior. As an elementary school EBD teacher, I was looking for ideas, strategies and techniques that could be beneficial to my students. I decided to study a program that my district, Milwaukee Public Schools, chose to implement. Assessing its effectiveness would be a beneficial exercise for my class, school and district.

Purpose of Study

This social skills training program I decided to analyze is called "Second Step." Second Step is a social-emotional curriculum that teaches students social skills, coping strategies and replacement behaviors to use in school or home (Committee for Children, 2012). I decided on this program because there are few classes that teach social behavior. Milwaukee Public Schools decided to purchase this curriculum for implementation in their general and special

education classes. Many available programs promise to increase assessment scores in the core subjects of Reading and Math, but few promise improvements in behavior. Second Step was taught and implemented with the same frequency as traditional academic subjects. Evaluating the effectiveness of this curriculum may assist many teachers in addressing behavior issues before they arise. New curriculum, teaching strategies, and new age programs are starting up every year. Districts across the country spend millions to improve the schools and the quality of education for their students. We live in a current society that's faces yearly cuts in education. Purchasing a curriculum is a huge financial investment for a school district. Therefore, it's important to distinguish between a program that's a fad and one that is highly effective. I was excited to study this program and test its merits. I implemented the program and analyzed the results before and after implementation, using behavior charts, incident reports and self-assessments from the student population. I was interested in knowing if treating social skills behavior as an educational subject would prove to be advantageous for the students and instructors. I interpreted the results of the Second Step curriculum in terms of whether it was another educational fad or an effective program addressing behavior.

Scope and Limitations

My study was centered on five EBD students enrolled in fifth through eighth grades in a Most Restricted Placement (MRP) class. These students participated in the Second Step program and their behavior was documented in their Special Education class, general education class and in various school settings. All students had a history of behavior problems. Each individual also came from a low social economic background. Three of the five individuals were

minorities. None lived with both biological parents nor were they performing at grade level academically. Furthermore, four of the five students were currently on medication to help control and modify their behavior. School attendance for all the participants was over 75%.

Definitions

Emotional Behavioral Disability (EBD) - "Emotional or behavioral disorders" means an established pattern of one or more of the following emotional or behavioral responses:

- A. withdrawal or anxiety, depression, problems with mood, or feelings of self-worth;
- B. disordered thought processes with unusual behavior patterns and atypical communication styles; or
- C. aggression, hyperactivity, or impulsivity”.

MRP (Most Restricted Placement) – refers to a student enrolled in Special Education who is separated from his non-disabled peers greater than 75% (or a majority) of the time.

Summary

How effective can a social skills training course be? It was an interesting and intriguing analysis that gave me insight on not only the program but the structure of elementary education overall. Does participation in the Second Step program change the behavioral performance of special education in class? In this research, I attempted to answer that question and discuss how it affected my specific students, school and district. The research and the

results that followed, shed light on social skills courses in general, Second Step and the students these programs are intended to help.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Most educators would agree that a student's behavior has a direct effect on his or her academic performance and progress. The biggest obstacle than many teachers face is not teaching concepts but teaching appropriate behavior so that adolescents can focus on assimilating the presented concepts. Therefore many schools and districts have adopted social skills training curriculum to incorporate in their classes in order to teach students social behavioral skills that will assist them in and out of school. But what are the different trends and theories involving social skills training (SST)? Also, what are some of the results of its implementation and how have SST programs influenced the instruction of special education students? My literary analysis set out to answer these questions while learning the history, various scholarly perspectives and conceptual framework of SST curriculum.

Why Was SST Created?

SST was first created in the 1970s as a technique used in teaching students who demonstrated problems in developing peer relationships (Chen, 2006). The next decade saw an increase in the techniques and ideology for teaching SST courses. The decade of the 80s saw a number of educators call for schools to take a more formal and systematic approach to teaching social skills to students with both skill and performance deficits" (Chen, 2006, p.144). Today, SST is relevant across every state and district. The curriculum is mandatory in many schools and new programs are being created yearly. But why did the need for SST increase over the last 30 or so years? It was an interesting exercise researching how different

scholars felt about the growth in this area. “There was a time not too long ago when our social structures included extended families and strong communities where there existed naturally occurring opportunities for social skill development. However, those natural ‘social skill builders’ are no longer in place” (Ollhoff, 2004, p. 110).

Different Styles of SST

There are different methods in teaching social skills. Some programs are taught by teachers individually within their classroom. Others are taught by special education professionals for use with specific students in the school. Recently, there has been a collaborative district and school-wide approach in teaching social skills. Some school districts mandate that each of their schools teach the same SST curriculum. Many professionals see the positives to teaching in a unified manner because the same values and teaching points are reinforced throughout the building repeatedly. “Benefits associated with teaching social skills as part of a comprehensive, school wide intervention include improvements in students’ fluent use of social skills, perceived school safety, academic achievement, and problem behaviors across setting” (Simonsen, Myers, Everett, Sugai, Spencer & Labeck, 2012, p. 260).

Advantages of Using SST

Why is SST necessary in our schools today? The potential success of these programs may assist students in all academic areas. There are many advocates in the field who support the use of SST curriculum within school. Many experts agree that the lack of functional social skills will eventually negatively affect an individual in all facets of their life, including the classroom. “Youths who lack social competence have been at risk for many difficulties, including but

limited to, aggression, rejection by peers, academic failure, loneliness, social dissatisfaction, difficulty maintaining employment and relationship with others” (Maag, 2006, p.4). Teaching social skills was ignored for many years but now researchers and educators are aware of the need for social skill training as an integral part of the overall development of an adolescent. “By advances in research we have demonstrated the importance of social competence in childhood for later social functioning, academic and psychological.” (Favazza, 2000, p. 491). Studies suggest that the need for this curriculum has always been present but until recently educators haven’t had the tools to teach it. Proponents of comprehensive programs emphasize that schools are likely to be most successful when they integrate strategies to promote children’s academic, social, and emotional learning (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). The need to address the social skills of students has become an additional task inherited by educators. Many teachers worldwide have found it difficult to teach the A, B, C’s and 1, 2, 3’s to students who don’t know how to mind their P’s and Q’s. No longer is it sufficient enough to post classroom rules in September and trust that the majority of students will follow them. In reality, many students, intentionally and unintentionally, simply won’t follow them creating disruption in the learning environment for everyone present. Unfortunately in many cases, discipline won’t solve these issues or promote change because some adolescents are not equipped with the proper social skills needed in order to be successful at school or in the community. “The larger the discrepancy there is between teachers’ demand or expectations and the student’s actual social and behavioral performance, the harder time the student is likely to have adjusting appropriately in school” (Cook, 2008, p. 133). Social and behavioral performance is an area of need for many students but is it as important as any educational subject taught? Many would

say yes, and surmise that not addressing the social shortcomings of today's adolescents will hamper the acquisition of knowledge in the other subjects. "The pivotal role that social skills play in students' academic achievement is not limited to standards reform. Classroom teachers have long recognized the importance of social and behavioral skills, viewing cooperation, self control, and other social skills as critical to achieving academic and behavioral success" (Schoenfeld, Rutherford, Gable & Rock, 2008, p.18). Within the last 30 years, the education field has shifted in how it sees social skills. What was the responsibility of the parent has turned into a sometimes daily lesson plan. In the past, teachers may have tried to incorporate social skills into their academic units. But with instructors facing many adolescents lacking the proper social skills, teaching SST has become a priority. "In addition to their general importance for daily interaction, social skills can have a big impact on a child's ability to succeed in an academic setting. The classroom becomes both a training ground for development of social skills and an arena in which those skills are put to use" (Steadly, Swartz, Levin & Luke, 2008, p.2).

Effect of SST on Special Education

A major question in education is whether SST can have an impact on special education students. Specifically, educators are trying to implement various SST programs with EBD students. There have been many strategies and techniques used to assist EBD students in school. The new popular wave of strategies to use with EBD students is SST courses. Many districts nationwide are now mandating SST classes for EBD students. Some researchers suggest that this is appropriate transition and that SST is another useful tool for educators. They believe that teaching SST curriculum should be standard practice within EBD special education classes.

“Thus, in order for students with emotional disabilities to be successful in all classroom settings, they must possess the social skills necessary to meet the expectations of both teachers and peers” (Cumming, Higgins, Pierce, Miller, Tandy & Boone, 2008, p.23). Many educators believe that SST is the best intervention strategy available when dealing with EBD students. “Teaching social skills at the school wide level can efficiently support the behavioral needs of all students in a school” (Simonsen, 2012, p.260). The opportunity to focus on various skills that EBD students are deficient in, within a classroom setting, appears to be a useful tactic. Progress with EBD, no matter how big or small, is still considered a success for some researchers. “For the most part, SST has been shown to be effective in improving the social behaviors of students with E/BD at certain period of time and in a limited number of settings” (Chen, 2006, p.147). Another positive could be that these courses might address specific disruptive behavior of EBD students. By participating in these programs, educators therefore are assisting in treating the student’s disability, on a regular basis. “Such programs have been shown to be successful in addressing the problems of children with Disruptive Behavior Disorders, and are thus likely to remove some of the burden from the mental health system”(Preece & Mellor, p.100).

Negative Opinions Regarding SST Courses

Many SST programs are rather new and data regarding their effectiveness with special education students are still being gathered. Opinions vary on whether the implementation of SST for special education students is successful or not. Although many educators and researchers promote the use of SST within schools some individuals doubt their effectiveness and the use with the special education population. “The problem may be that public schools do not have the personnel, expertise, resources or inclination to effectively implement SST”

(Maag, 2006, p.14). Also, areas of concern seem to be the length and consistency of these programs. Most programs don't extend over the course of an entire school year. The majority is shorter and last only a marking period or semester. The lessons aren't taught daily but rather a few times per week. Some detractors in the field argue that the subject matter isn't taught long enough to be permanently effective. "A major criticism of short-term programs is that they do not produce lasting results." (Preece & Mellor, 2008, p.89). Any skill or behavior being taught faces that battle whether it is leaning to play a new instrument, a sport or improving social skills. But the question remains, is there enough repetition during the school week to make these programs successful? Also, are these programs effective with EBD students? Will the lessons taught during this course, carryover with EBD students into their other school settings and classes? Some authors wonder if that is even possible. "In spite of its popularity, SST has not been shown to be a particularly strong intervention for students with high-incidence disabilities" (Greswham, Sugai & Horner, 2001). Others say that whether short or long term, SST programs are helpful in dealing with students who have EBD. "There is some evidence to suggest that brief social skill training programs are effective for children with disruptive behavior problems" (Preece & Mellor, 2008, p.88). "The state of SST with students with EBD seems to range from dismal to guarded optimism." (Maag, 2006, p.14) Regardless of the mixed sentiment regarding these programs, most believe that SST courses, in some fashion or another, are here to stay. It appears most authors think social skills are an area of need that must be addressed in the school setting. Many of the programs and concepts may still need improvement but their impact on all students, including those with EBD, are vital. "SST cannot

be detached from evidence-based practices for improving the academic skill of students with EBD” (Maag, 2006, p.14).

Conclusion

SST programs appear to be here to stay, not only in the United States but all over the world. However the educational system continues to wait to see the long term results from these programs. Can SST be successful in all classrooms across the nation and be an acknowledged strategy for use with EBD students? Or will the recent onset of many SST programs be just another fad to be replaced by more functional and flexible curriculum programs, currently in development. I think you have to take out the next sentence. You have no references to this in the chapter. There is a business side to education and districts pay high prices to companies for their new programs that promise to deliver positives results for their students. It was interesting to see the results of my research on SST programs. After reviewing the literature, it seems that the perception is split on the success and usefulness of SST programs. But the success of our students coincides with their appropriate social functioning. “As an education community committed to the success of all students, we must help these children build the social skills they need to succeed in school and in life” (Steadly, Swartz, Levin & Luke, 2008, p. 5).

Chapter Three

Methodology

I implemented the SST curriculum and measured the effects it had on my students. I incorporated the method of data triangulation for my research. Because I was working with such a small sample size, I wanted to collect data from three sources in order to better answer my hypothesis. The independent variable in this study was the Second Step Social Skills training course, while the dependant variable was the student's performance in the three focus areas.

Participants

The class in which the research took place was made up of five students identified as EBD. There were four males and one female. The ages are 12-13 and all five students are in between the 5th and 7th grade. Three of the five are minorities and four come from low socioeconomic backgrounds. These students were removed from the general education environment for more than 60% of the day, due to their disruptive behaviors. The behaviors that these students exhibited in the past prevented not only their learning but the education of their peers. Three of the six students had behavior intervention plans (BIP) in their IEPs. Four of the six students had also been expelled from prior schools based on their behavior.

Procedures

Each week, the students were taught three SST lessons, the first two from the "Second Step" curriculum (CFC, 2010) and the third was a supplemental activity created by the teacher.

The class period was 50 minutes long. Each week the students worked on a specific topic and skill. The first lesson was taught by the school’s social worker with assistance from the classroom teacher and paraprofessional. The next session was run by the classroom teacher and it followed up the first lesson. Students watched a video, had a discussion and acted out or modeled both the inappropriate and desired behaviors. The final lesson of the week tied in the concepts studied throughout the week. This lesson was flexible and ranged from discussion groups or written assignments to quizzes but was directly related to the “Second Step” curriculum. This final lesson was intended to wrap up and reinforce material learned during the week. The next week, another topic or skill was introduced and the format repeated itself during the 9 week duration of the study.

Materials

The following is a copy of the weekly behavior chart that was used for this study.

Table 1.1: Weekly Behavior Chart

BEHAVIOR CHART FOR: _____ FOR THE WEEK OF: _____ TO _____

	Did not follow directions the first time given	Refused to work in class, and interrupted learning of peers.	Swearing or using inappropriate language	Argued with peers/Teasing classmates.	Did not keep hands to himself or herself.	Daily Point Total
Monday	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	
Tuesday	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	
Wednesday	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	
Thursday	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	
Friday	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	1 2 3	

Week Total	
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Table 1.1: Weekly Behavior Chart Continued

DAILY BEHAVIOR SCALE		
POINT TOTAL	DESCRIPTION	CONSEQUENCES
0-5 Points	Good day overall, many positive choices made	No action required
5-10 Points	Adequate day, room for improvement. Beginning to get off task, behavior affected learning at this point	Extra Homework assignment given, Phone call and letter may be sent home.
11-15 Points	Off task throughout the day, many poor choices made.	Student will be written up and administrative/parental contact will be made.

The following table details the weekly lesson plan and learning objectives for the Second Step curriculum during the time of research.

TABLE 1.2: Second Step Curriculum**Grade 6 Scope and Sequence****Empathy and Communication****Lesson 1: Working in Groups****Students will be able to:**

- Identify behaviors involved in listening and respecting others' ideas
- Apply group communication skills
- Define *empathy*
- Apply empathy skills while identifying feelings

Lesson 2: Friends and Allies**Students will be able to:**

- Apply empathy skills
- Apply active listening skills
- Identify ways to make friends and join groups
- Define the term *ally* and identify when and how to be one

TABLE 1.2: Second Step Curriculum Continued**Lesson 3: Considering Perspectives****Students will be able to:**

- Understand that people’s perspectives are based on their feelings, experiences, and needs or wants
- Recognize the value in being able to consider another’s perspective
- Apply perspective-taking skills

Lesson 4: Disagreeing Respectfully**Students will be able to:**

- Apply perspective-taking skills
- Distinguish between disrespectful and respectful disagreement
- Identify and apply effective communication skills
- Apply skills to give constructive feedback

Lesson 5: Being Assertive**Students will be able to:**

- Distinguish differences between passive, assertive, and aggressive communication styles
- Identify and assume the physical and verbal characteristics of assertive communication
- Apply assertive communication skills

Bullying Prevention**Lesson 6: Recognizing Bullying****Students will be able to:**

- Recognize and define *bullying*
- Understand how bullying can affect them and their peers
- Empathize with individuals who are bullied
- Understand what they can do if they or someone they know is bullied

Lesson 7: Bystanders**Students will be able to:**

- Recognize and define the role of a bystander in bullying
- Understand how a bystander can be a part of the problem or part of the solution
- Apply empathic concern and perspective taking
- Identify ways to be part of the solution to bullying

Emotion Management**Lesson 8: Emotions—Brain and Body****Students will be able to:**

- Understand what happens to their brains and bodies when they experience strong emotions
- Identify the first three Steps for Staying in Control
- Understand why using self-talk is a key to managing emotions
- Apply self-talk strategies

TABLE 1.2: Second Step Curriculum Continued

Lesson 9: Calming-Down Strategies

Students will be able to:

- Apply centered breathing techniques correctly
- Recognize self-talk that intensifies or calms down strong feelings
- Use self-talk to manage emotions
- Identify calming-down strategies that work best for them

Problem Solving

www.cfchildren.org 800-634-4449, ext. 200 © 2008 Committee for Children

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were generated by comparing each student's functional behavior before and after the implementation of the program. Archival data were used to identify the students' functional behavioral performance at the outset, of the study and current data collected measured growth from that point. I examined behavior charts, report card grades and incident reports before and throughout the course of the study. Drawing data from three separate sources eliminated bias. Data were collected weekly, after an incident and at the end of the marking period. The students' performance in all educational environments was documented by me, my classroom assistant and other school personnel. What did you use to document this performance? Describe and put a sample in the appendix. Throughout the study, I also observed and made notes on how the students responded to the curriculum and their comments about it. The data used measured the short term growth of the students. The study wasn't long enough to measure long-term growth. Had the behavior of the students changed while being enrolled in the "Second Step" program? Did the concepts taught transfer to other areas of the student's school life? I made this determination by if there was a change in the three selected areas.

CHAPTER IV

INTRODUCTION

The focus during the analysis of my research data was on three sources. I analyzed the report card grades, weekly progress notes and behavioral referrals of my five target students. In order to determine the effectiveness of the Second Step curriculum, I examined the program's impact in those three areas. First, I used archival data on each student's performance in those areas before the implementation of the program. Throughout the nine week marking period, I continued to record and collect data for each student. After the course was taught, I then analyzed and interpreted the data in order to determine whether my research hypothesis had been supported.

RESULTS

The following table (Table 2.1) summarizes the students' performance in the three selected areas before Second Step was introduced.

TABLE 2.1: Data for the 2nd Grading Period of the 2012 School Year

Prior to	Social Skills	Training	Course
STUDENT	REPORT CARD G.P.A (4.0 scale)	SCHOOL INCIDENT REFERRALS	AVERAGE WEEKLY PROGRESS NOTES POINTS
Student 1	2.4	2	53.2
Student 2	2.8	0	18.2
Student 3	1.6	2	42.7
Student 4	2.2	1	33.1
Student 5	1.6	4	65.8

This table shows the archival data I used for each student prior to the start of the Second Step course. The first two columns are the student's grade point average and number of incident referrals that were officially recorded. The last column is the average progress notes score earned per week for the nine-week marking period. An average point total ranging from 0-25 indicated an overall good week of on- task behavior. Averaging 25-50 points showed that the student experienced some difficulties but had a satisfactory week overall. Students that averaged 50-75 points were off task for the majority of the week, and their behavior led to parental and administrative involvement. Two students fell into that category. Two others scored satisfactory and one averaged good on task behaviors for the marking period before Second Step was taught.

The following data (Table 2.2) shows the grade point average, incidents and weekly progress notes that were recorded during and at the end of the marking period Second Step was instituted.

TABLE 2.2: Data for the 3rd Grading Period of the 2012 School Year

After The STUDENT	Social Skills REPORT CARD G.P.A (4.0 scale)	Training SCHOOL INCIDENT REFERRALS	Course AVERAGE WEEKLY PROGRESS NOTES POINTS
Student 1	1.8	7	70.3
Student 2	2.4	1	21.4
Student 3	1.4	3	45.8
Student 4	2.4	3	44.5
Student 5	0.8	9	70.9

The following is a comparison of pre and post data for the second and third period.

TABLE 2.3: Pre and Post Data for the 2nd and 3rd Grading Periods of the 2012 School Year

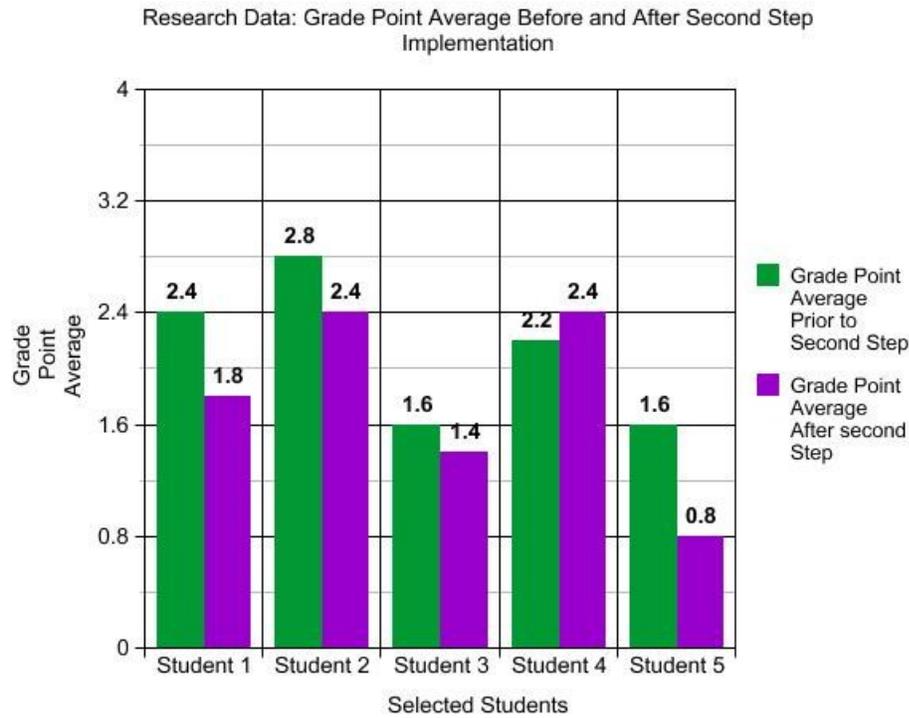
STUDENT	G.P.A.PRIOR TO SECOND STEP (4.0 scale)	G.P.A AFTER SECOND STEP (4.0 scale)	SCHOOL INCIDENT REFERRALS PRIOR TO SECOND STEP	SCHOOL INCIDENT REFERRALS AFTER TO SECOND STEP	AVG. WEEKLY PROGRESS NOTES POINTS PRIOR TO SECOND STEP	AVG. WEEKLY PROGRESS NOTES POINTS AFTER SECOND STEP
Student 1	2.4	1.8	2	7	53.2	70.3
Student 2	2.8	2.4	0	1	18.2	21.4
Student 3	1.6	1.4	2	3	42.7	45.8
Student 4	2.2	2.4	1	3	33.1	44.5
Student 5	1.6	0.8	4	9	65.8	70.9

DATA ANALYSIS

The results offered a definitive answer to my research question. The data showed that the implementation of the Second Step social skills training program did not positively affect the performance of the five students with EBD being instructed. Specifically, four out of five students scored more poorly in all three categories after Second Step was implemented. The fifth student scored more poorly in two out of the three categories. Therefore my hypothesis was not supported and Second Step was shown to be unsuccessful with the five target students. The report card grades dropped from a combined 2.12 average to 1.76. The number of incident referrals more than doubled during the second marking period. They increased from 9 referrals to 23. Finally, before Second Step, the weekly progress notes average 42.6 among the five students. Afterwards, this average rose slightly to 50.5, which is on the border of the noncompliant/administrative action stage.

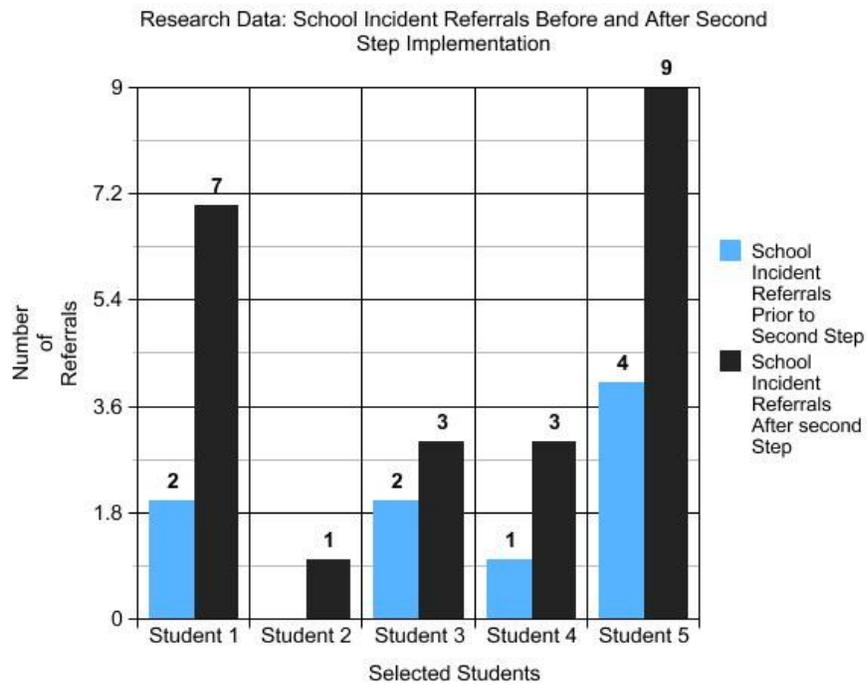
Below are three graphic tables that summarize the changes that occurred before and after Second Step were implemented.

Table 3.1: Grade Point Average



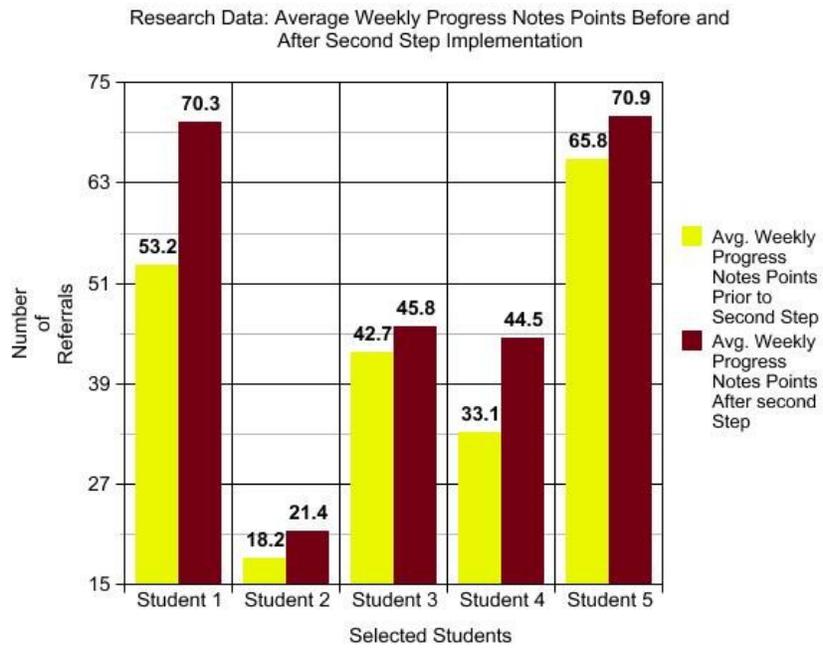
The next table details the changes in the number of school incident referrals from the second marking period, to the third.

Figure 3.2: School Incident Referrals



The final table looks at the average number of weekly progress notes accumulated, and how that average rose during the third marking period.

Figure 3.3: Average Progress Notes Points



CHAPTER V

RATIONALE

There may be several reasons why the results indicated a change for the worse. One factor that affected the success of the program was the students' perception of the curriculum. The students seemed to dislike the Second Step class and complained when it was time for the lesson. Students often stated that the class was "stupid" and "childish." Participation during the Second Step lessons was limited. The students didn't seem to take the class seriously and therefore benefited from the curriculum on a limited scale. Two students also repeatedly complained that they were forced to take part in this class, because of their special education label and past behavioral issues in school.

Another factor that affected the success of the program was that the specific behaviors of the students with EBD did not change during this course. In other words, the behavioral difficulties that their disability presented during traditional subjects were evident during this course. This prevented them from comprehending the curriculum and putting in use the techniques taught in their other classes. On many occasions, arguments among the students broke out preceded by name-calling, teasing and rude behavior that disrupted the lesson. Twice, these disruptions turned into violence as a chair was throw on one occasion and a physical fight occurred during another.

Another possible reason for the lower post- intervention results could be related to timing. The five participants were in the third marking period of the school year. Their performance in the Second Step class and in other subjects may have been affected by the

proverbial “mid-year blues.” February through early April is a time of year when students are stressed. Additionally, behavior may have been affected by students looking forward to Spring Break (2nd week of April) instead of focusing on their studies within school. Both reasons are disputable but may have had, regardless of how small, an impact on these students’ mindset in school.

The final reason that may explain the results is the Second Step curriculum itself. The overall structure of the curriculum may have negatively influenced the effectiveness of the program. It can be argued that the program simply did not work because of its format. First, not all the lessons and DVDs appeared to be age appropriate for the intended audience. Some actors did not appear to be middle school aged which prompted some students to ignore their message. Also, at times because of “poor acting” by the actors in the video, the students in class ignored the core of the content being presented.

But a major issue students encountered was that they were not ready, or were unwilling, to participate in a lesson that addressed feelings and social skills. This curriculum required a certain level of maturity and dedication that it seems three or four students simply didn’t have at the time. The topics taught provided useful strategies to use in the educational environment. Unfortunately, the benefits and usefulness did not seem to resonate with the majority of the students. Because of this, the course schedule was routinely disturbed. If the majority of the class did not pay attention during the first lesson, it was difficult to participate in role playing, videos or the reflection journals the rest of the week.

IMPLICATIONS

Although the small sample size was small, the results raised more questions than answers. First, in this present format, is this program successful? There can be changes to make the curriculum more effective for every class that uses it. For example, should it be taught every day? Another question that may arise is “should parents be involved somehow in the teaching of this curriculum?” There could be many benefits of a successful SST program, in and out of the classroom. Therefore, perhaps parental input and participation should be required to make the program work to its fullest potential.

Another issue that remains is the overall effectiveness of SST programs in schools. This program proved to be ineffective with my students, but may prove to be successful elsewhere. Should specific SST programs be tested within the district first before the district makes a long term commitment and mandates a specific program for its schools? With many professionals in the field split on the usefulness and productivity of SST programs in general, it is safe to conclude that some programs won't work within some schools. Second Step did not work with my students, but another SST program may be beneficial for them. This study may indicate that schools and districts should have a specific criterion or guidelines in place to assess the effectiveness of any SST program they choose to implement. Before adopting an SST curriculum, educators should have in mind what areas they want to address to see improvements. Do they want to reduce suspensions, raise grade point averages or use SST as a tool for inclusion with specific students in special education? Therefore, it can be argued that

mandating a SST program for middle school students with EBD in an entire district, without prior goals in place, is a flawed concept.

RECOMMENDATIONS

I would make a few recommendations not only for the Second Step curriculum but for any SST program. First, I believe that only certified teachers should teach any SST course. Although most SST programs have training sessions for those who teach the course, teachers have experience in how to teach a selected curriculum. Therapists and social workers may be taught how to implement a specific program but they may not be adept at carrying out quality lesson plans with the same effectiveness as a highly trained educator. What happens when their lesson plan breaks down? What if some students do not understand the curriculum or concepts being taught? A teacher is trained to handle these problems and incorporate effective solutions. Also, teachers routinely have more background knowledge about the learning abilities of their students as opposed to someone who visits the class a few times a week. Teachers already know the different strategies and techniques that are effective for their class. It is difficult for a visitor to come in and acquire this knowledge and maintain classroom control while teaching a productive lesson. Every student and every class is different, and only a teacher knows what it takes to make the group function properly. If the SST curriculum is important enough to implement than it is vital to have certified educators teach it. Second, I would start this curriculum at the elementary school level. I believe that the earlier you start the easier it is to teach later on. There are elementary level programs for Second Step but for middle school aged students to start this curriculum now for the first time, getting pushback

from them may be inevitable. Not only should it be taught at the elementary level first but it should be taught every day to increase its effectiveness. Teaching a SST curriculum may be more effective with added repetition. Also, if students are expecting it every day, and have been doing it since elementary school, they won't complain when it is implemented at the middle school level. It would be as common as a Reading or Math lesson. To expand on this point more, districts should require that students receive a report card grade for this course. Students, parents and educators would then take the SST course more seriously. Grades could also serve as tool to gauge the program's influence on students.

Following the first two recommendations, the final one is an appropriate transition. I would make is that districts should require every student to take an SST course for the following reasons. First, students in special education would not feel singled out to take this course because of their label. I wondered if the course would have been better received if the students knew everyone had to take it. A student with EBD can potentially see the class as a punishment as opposed to an intervention strategy. Another benefit would be that the overall behavior of every student in the school might improve since the social skills taught are applicable to general education students. Having SST techniques available can potentially stop an argument in class or on the playground, a fight at recess, and even help curtail bullying. The lack of appropriate social skills is not a problem facing only students with EBD.

I believe these recommendations would increase the effectiveness of the Second Step program and would apply to any SST course being implemented. Children would approach the course and its content more seriously, parents would be involved, and educators would see a

difference in the communication skills of their students, within every learning environment.

That is intended purpose of any SST program created.

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