Building relationships to support self-regulation

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Building relationships to support self-regulation

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The research addresses the question: Will emotionally discouraged children be able to regulate their emotions through positive relationship building with the classroom teacher? The results contribute to our knowledge of how to support children's ability to regulate themselves in the absence of external devices.

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BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS TO SUPPORT SELF-REGULATION

Non Thesis Research Paper
Submitted
For the Degree
Masters of Arts

Sherice Hetrick-Ortman
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has been approved as meeting the research requirements for the Masters of Arts in Education.

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Abstract

Discouraged students come to school unable to learn. Emotional and social factors affect their intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness and place them at high risk for school failure. This paper discusses the application of strategies influenced by; sociomoral atmosphere, trust development, self regulation, emotional intelligence, attachment theory, and cultural awareness. The research addresses the question: Will emotionally discouraged children be able to regulate their emotions through positive relationship building with the classroom teacher? The results contribute to our knowledge of how to support children’s ability to regulate themselves in the absence of external devices.
Introduction

Elementary education addresses a variety of domains and their components which include: personal and social development, language and literacy, mathematical thinking, scientific thinking, social studies, arts, physical development and health (Marsden, Meisels, Jablon, and Dichtelmiller, 2001). The emphasis of this paper will be personal and social development in elementary children.

Discouraged children who act in anti-social ways participate less in classroom experiences and are less likely to be accepted by peers and teachers. Beginning at an early age, teachers provide less instruction and less positive feedback to children with poor personal and social development. These children like school less, learn less, and attend less (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Building positive relationships with children that exhibit disruptive behaviors is difficult, but essential. Psychological theory and research provide strong support for the understanding that at the fundamental level of human motivation, all children have basic needs: to belong, to be and be seen as competent, and to be autonomous or to feel that they are the cause of their own actions (Watson, 2003).

This research explores the question: Will emotionally discouraged children be able to regulate their emotions through positive relationship building with the classroom teacher? This research is important because the results will contribute to our knowledge of how to support children’s ability to regulate themselves in the absence of rewards and punishment. The purpose of this study is to develop relationships with students versus the use of manipulation devices designed to change behavior.
Self-regulation refers to the ability to control one's behavior on his/her own. When children regulate their own behavior they develop social intelligence. External control and instruments designed to manipulate behavior focus on short-term results.

Socialization approaches based in learning theory or in Freudian theory hold that the motivation or desire to be "good" should be instilled in children from the outside by some kind of controlling or taming process. Attachment theory presents a very different picture. From this perspective, children are biologically predisposed to acquire the desire to be cooperative as a result of experiencing sensitive and responsive care (Watson, 2003).

Autonomy is moral and intellectual self-regulation (DeVries & Zan, 1994). Young children view rules as arbitrary impositions by adults (Piaget, 1932/1965). When children cannot understand the reasons for rules they seem arbitrary. This is due to the intellectual limitation of young children who are unable to think beyond what is observable. When adults say not to hit or grab, children who are moral realists experiences this demand as an arbitrary adult rule. Therefore, refraining from hitting or grabbing is done out of obedience to authority. The attitude of mindless obedience is described as heteronomy, in contrast to an attitude of reflective understanding or autonomy. An autonomous teacher supports children's reasoning as well as their emotional development (DeVries & Zan, 1994). Building relationships with discouraged children supports self-regulation and promotes autonomy.

According to attachment theory, emotional development and socialization are products of the relationship between children and their primary caregivers (Bowlby, 1973). A positive attachment results from a cooperative relationship between children
and caregivers in which the adults help the children accomplish the tasks of development (Watson, 2003). Within this cooperative relationship, the children develop basic trust. In addition, the children’s capacity for empathy and tendency to comply with a caregiver’s requests germinate from the children’s secure attachment relationship (Strayton, Hogan, and Ainsworth, 1971). Children with a history of responsive and sensitive caregiving tend to be cooperative and prosocial. They do not need to be manipulated with rewards or coerced with punishments. Secure children may need help acquiring the understanding to be kind or helpful in certain situations, but they usually want to be cooperative and to respond with empathy and care toward others (Watson, 2003).

For difficult or discouraged children, early socialization and attachment do not go well. Some caregivers are not able to provide their children with consistent, sensitive, and responsive care (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall, 1978). All children need the attention and nurturance of their caregivers, these children try to build and maintain relationships with them (Watson, 2003). However, because they cannot depend on their caregivers to meet their basic emotional needs, their attachment relationships are built on mistrust (Watson, 2003).

Young children who show signs of anti-social or aggressive behavior have low self-esteem, little or no trust that others can be relied upon to care for them, and a belief that relationships are conflictual in nature (Watson, 2003). In classrooms, these children need help building trust with the adults that work with them. It is the adult’s responsibility to develop a trusting relationship and maintain an environment that promotes autonomy and supports self-regulation.
Adlerian psychology supports relationship building versus the use of manipulation devices designed to change behavior. Rudolf Dreikurs worked closely with Adler and continued to develop Adlerian psychology after his death (Nelsen, 1996). Dreikurs was concerned by the way many adults attempted to practice Adler’s suggestions without understanding some of the basic concepts. Many of the techniques were used to win over children (Nelsen, 1996). “Winning over children makes them losers, and losing generally causes children to be rebellious or blindly submissive. Neither characteristic is desirable. According to Dreikurs, the valid interpretation of winning children over means gaining their cooperation and teaching responsibility, self-discipline, problem solving skills, and social interest” (Nelsen, 1996, p. 19).

Should behaviorism shape educational practices? What has worked in the past, may not work with students that come from non-trusting environments. B.F. Skinner believes that “inner” states are merely convenient myths. That motives and behaviors are shaped by environmental factors (Noll, 2003). These shaping forces, however, need not be negative, nor must they operate in an uncontrolled manner. Our present understanding of human behavior allows us freedom to shape the environmental forces, which in turn shape us. With this power, Skinner contends, we can replace aversive controls in schooling with positive relationships that heighten the students’ motivation level and make learning more efficient (Noll, 2003).

Aggressive and anti-social behavior affects children in classrooms across the nation. Can educators help discouraged children develop social and emotional intelligence by building positive relationships? Will discouraged children exhibit more self-regulation when a positive trusting adult relationship is developed? Will consistency
and predictability increase emotional intelligence? When children are given opportunities to discuss and develop control strategies to help them self-regulate will they apply them? In this study, the above questions are addressed.

Literature Review

Introduction to the Literature Review

The purpose of this paper is to implement and study strategies designed to support self-regulation in discouraged children. This review will introduce issues and problems in the discipline studied – emotional and social development. Primary sources include; published articles, NAEYC resources, and textbooks. The focus areas include; sociomoral atmosphere, trust development, self regulation, emotional intelligence, attachment theory, and cultural awareness. The following question will be addressed: Will emotionally discouraged children be able to regulate their emotions through positive relationship building with the classroom teacher?

A logical development in young children is to understand their ability to build positive relationships with others. Interpersonal relations are the context for children’s development of self, with its self-consciousness and complex self-knowledge (DeVries & Zan, 1994). Piaget (1964/1968) explained that intelligence develops in children as a function of social interactions and is too often disregarded. Early experiences affect the development of the brain and lay the foundation for intelligence, emotional well being, and moral development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Depending on the nature of the children’s relationships with adults, they learn if the world is safe or unsafe, loving or hostile, coercive or cooperative. Children learn to think of themselves as having certain
qualities in relation to peers (DeVries & Zan, 1994). How children integrate their intrapersonal awareness affects their peer and adult relationships.

According to DeVries and Zan (1994) a sociomoral atmosphere is the entire network of interpersonal relations that make up children's experience of school. The experience includes the relationship between the teacher and themselves, peer relationships, relationships with academics, and with rules. Moral classrooms are governed by a kind of sociomoral atmosphere. The teacher is responsible for developing the sociomoral atmosphere by relating to children in authoritarian and cooperative ways (DeVries & Zan, 1994). A safe environment with a trusting and caring adult provides a foundation for all children. A sociomoral environment goes beyond consistency and provides children with an opportunity to construct themselves gradually into personalities having self-confidence, respect for self and others, and active, inquiring minds that reason about right and wrong versus blind submission to authority (DeVries and Zan, 1994).

Jane Nelsen (1996) describes a misbehaving child as a discouraged child. According to Nelsen, a discouraged child may display one or more of the mistaken goals; need for undue attention, power, revenge, or assumed inadequacy. The strategies suggested by Nelsen (1996) are designed to help adults/educators understand the reason for the behavior and adjust the way in which they approach the situation. For example, children exhibiting power will attempt to win a power struggle. Adults often attempt to control these children. However, in a situation in which the children want to win, it will result in a power struggle in which the adult will usually lose control. Rather than engaging in a losing power struggle with powerful children, the adult can turn off or
diffuse the power by issuing a quiet reminder or a silent signal and walking away (Nelsen, 1996). A shift from “How can I control you?” to “How can I help you control yourself?” would support children’s ability to self-regulate and develop social intelligence.

Discouraged children often exhibit challenging behaviors that interfere with children’s learning, development, and success at play. Kaiser and Rasminsny (2003) explain that challenging behavior is harmful to children, their peers, and/or adults. Early social difficulty puts children at risk for later social problems or school failure (Chandler and Dahlquist, 1997; Klass, Guskin, and Thomas, 1995; Ritchie and Pohl, 1995). Challenging behavior is threatening, provocative, and stimulating, all at the same time according to Kaiser and Rasminsny (2003). Often children that appear discouraged have little control over their emotions. It takes time for children to understand how to regulate their emotions. A caring and constant adult must understand the needs of children with challenging behaviors and know how to help them help themselves.

Challenging behavior that becomes explosive can be the result of poor social knowledge and application according to Ross Greene (2001). Greene describes the flexibility, complex thinking, and rapid processing required in successful social interactions. If children’s thinking is rigid and inefficient then social interactions can be frustrating, this frustration can fuel many explosions which result in aggressive acts toward self or others (Greene, 2001). Language skills set the stage for many forms of thinking, including reflecting, self-regulation, goal setting, problem solving, and managing emotions (Greene, 2001). Language is promoted when a caring adult asks, listens, and supports children’s reasoning. An autonomous teacher supports children’s
reasoning as well as their emotional development (DeVries & Zan, 1994). "Respecting children requires communicating acceptance and affection. It requires providing an environment that encourages and supports children's expression of feelings, interests, and values. This means accepting the child's right to feel anger and sadness as well as positive feelings" (DeVries & Zan, 1994, p. 59).

Describing children as discouraged or challenging is not the only way adults explain the behavior. Other ways adults explain the behavior include: high maintenance, antisocial, high needs, bad, out of control, at risk, disruptive, aggressive, impulsive, oppositional, mean, attention-seeking, or noncompliant. The problem happens when adults/educators begin to label children versus trying to understand the reason for the behavior. Negative labels can easily become self-fulfilling prophecies. They prevent adults from seeing the positive qualities children possess and possibly affect the expectations the adult has for a particular child. His/her stubbornness could be viewed as persistence, which actually is an important characteristic for school success (Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2003).

Aggression is behavior that is aimed at harming or injuring others (Coie and Dodge, 1998). Discouraged children's challenging behavior isn't always aggressive, sometimes it is disruptive or antisocial or annoying. On the other hand, aggressive behavior is always challenging (Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2003). Research tells us that the prevalence of problematic behaviors, such as aggression, in young children is about 10 percent (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). The research provided by the National Associated for the Education of Young Children (2002) goes on to report that the prevalence rate of low-income kindergartners is considerably higher – 27 percent. Observational data on
preschoolers suggest that between 4 and 6 percent have serious emotional and behavioral disorders, and 16 to 30 percent pose ongoing problems to classroom teachers. In general, the more chronic the social, economic, and psychological stressors that young children face, the greater chance of poor social, emotional, and cognitive outcomes (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000).

*Issues and Problems*

B.F Skinner (1971) writes that when a bit of behavior is followed by a certain kind of consequence, it is more likely to occur again, and a consequence having this effect is called a reinforcer. Skinner explains that food is a reinforcer of a hungry organism; anything the organism does that is followed by the receipt of food is more likely to happen again whenever the organism is hungry. A reward is actually a "positive reinforcer". Skillful parents learn to reward their child for good behavior rather than punish him for bad (Skinner, 1971). He contends that there is nothing wrong with the use of "positive reinforcers," Skinner believes that society should deal with the social environment as simply as they would the nonsocial.

Carl Rogers (1983) opposes Skinner's view, that all the effective causes of behavior lie outside of the individual and that it is through the external stimulus that behavior takes place. Rogers finds the explanation inaccurate and inadequate. He believes it is the meaning of the decision which is essential to understanding the act. It is the discovery of meaning from within oneself, meaning that comes from listening sensitively and openly to the complexities of what one is experiencing. It is the burden of being responsible for the self one chooses to be (Rogers, 1983). His views would support the
notion of emotional intelligence and self-regulation. Children must reason about their behavior versus blindly submit to external force or coercion.

Critics question the concern over challenging behavior in very young children. Emotional development is progressive and can be explained as part of their awareness of self and others (Coie and Dodge, 1998). In one study, most mothers reported that their children often grabbed, pushed, bit, and hit by the time they turned two years old.

Children with siblings exhibit more aggressive behavior than only children, and when there is a bother or sister in the family, boys and girls behave equally aggressively (Pepler and Craig, 1999).

Even though aggressive behavior is often seen in young children, from the age of 30 months on, physically aggressive behavior begins to decrease as children learn to regulate their feelings and understand the view of others (Coie & Dodge, 1998). Tremblay (1999) identifies kindergarten as a milestone year for intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness. Children that continue to exhibit aggressive and antisocial behavior beyond age 3 might start down a road that will eventually lead to a delinquent adolescence and criminal adulthood (Coie, 1996). The longer children continue to use aggressive behavior, the more troubling the fallout becomes and the more difficult it is to change. It is important to intervene as early as possible (Slaby, Roedell, Arezzo, and Hendrix, 1995).

Social learning theory supports John Locke’s belief that children come into the world as a blank slate – *tabula rasa* – and experience makes them who they are (Dodge, 1990). Based on principles of conditioning and reinforcement, the social learning theory says that people learn aggressive behavior from the environment and use it to achieve
their goals. Peplar and Slaby (1994) explain that it is impossible to attribute all aggression to frustration, and the way each person responds to frustration probably depends on what that person has learned. Albert Bandura, the father of the social learning theory, contends that children learn aggressive behavior primarily by observing it. He continues to describe children as great imitators, and that they copy the models around them – family, teachers, peers, neighbors, television. In addition, they observe and experience the rewards, punishments, and emotional states associated with aggressive behavior (Kaiser and Rasminsky, 2003).

Attachment theory presents a very different picture. From this perspective, children are biologically predisposed to acquire the desire to be cooperative and prosocial as a result of experiencing thoughtful and responsive care (Watson, 2003). According to Watson (2003) the majority of children in most classrooms have had the benefit of secure attachment relationships. Cooperative and prosocial orientation of these children helps them acquire the additional understanding and skills they need to be cooperative and prosocial in school. It is possible for securely attached children to find the environment unresponsive to their needs. It is the sociomoral atmosphere that provides a match between the demands of the classroom and the needs and characteristics of the children (Watson, 2003).

Albert Bandura, according to Dodge (1991), explains that when an aggressive behavior is reinforced, children are likely to try it for themselves; when they experience the reinforcement directly, they are likely to repeat it. For example, when Zach hits Ben and gets the fire truck, he will almost certainly try hitting the next time he wants something. In contrast, Marilyn Watson (2003) explains that children with a history of
insecure attachment to their primary caregivers build “working models” of relationships as coercive and view themselves as unworthy of care. These children are likely to withdraw from social relationships or become focused on satisfying their own needs through dependency, control, or aggression. They look for ways to test adult caring, often by refusing to comply with reasonable requests. These children fully expect adults to fail their tests. If adults try to teach these children to want to be cooperative and prosocial by rewarding their behavior or punishing or controlling their unacceptable behavior, we succeed in confirming their view of relationships as coercive and encourage their view of self.

According to attachment theory, to build the desire to be cooperative and prosocial, we need to build responsive and nurturing relationships with children; by doing so we help them change their working models of themselves and their relationships (Stayton, Hogan, and Ainsworth, 1971). Watson (2003) explains that the building of caring and trusting relationships is the most important goal in the socialization of these children.

The cultural view provides an understanding of differences among children. Children in low-context cultures (Western Europe and the United States) begin to practice independence when they are young (Kaiser & Rasminskey, 2003). They value the individual over the group and consider individual independence the greatest virtue. This culture sees each person as a separate being who is born with needs, rights, and an identity all their own. The low-context culture teaches its citizens to assert themselves, take the initiative, explore, and achieve (Kaiser and Rasminskey, 2003).
Persons in a high-context culture (Southern Europe, Latino, African American, and Native American) value interdependence and see members as part of a group according to Kaiser and Rasminsky (2003). They teach their children that they are part of an extended family and that they are responsible for looking after one another. Self-esteem is based on their contributions to the good of the whole (Lynch, 1998).

Child care and schools are influenced by developmentally appropriate practice which is based mostly on the child development theory of Jean Piaget. Since it is embedded in European American culture, it naturally teaches the European American values of individualism and independence. These values and methods are not universal Kaiser and Rasminsky, 2003).

African American children learn to express themselves openly, frankly, and freely. They quickly learn to handle intense feelings without being overwhelmed. This behavior might lead some people to identify them as aggressive or confrontational, however it has a clear survival value for children living in an inhospitable environment (Kochman, 1987). Many African American parents feel that stern discipline is necessary for teaching their children to function in a society that is full of stereotypes, misconceptions, and overt biases (Denby and Alford, 1996).

Cultural knowledge respects individual differences. A teacher that identifies and recognizes those differences promotes an environment of mutual respect. Designing a program that supports emotional and social awareness of all members is purposeful. Good teaching is intentional – deliberately choosing what you need to do based on the understanding of self, the child, the family, the culture, and individual ability to design
and implement a program that reflects and respects the values of all group members (Kaiser & Rasminsky, 2003).

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to develop a positive adult/child relationship with a discouraged student. Trust and consistency were used to support emotional intelligence. Through discussions and support the child developed strategies to help him help himself. The subject selected displayed the phenomenon of interest (low emotional intelligence/inability to self regulate). The subject exhibited a lack of trust in adults. By building the adult/child relationship the child built a secure attachment and developed the sense of self.

Prior to collecting data on the subject, a standard application for human participants review was submitted and approved. The title of proposal: Building Relationships to Support Self-Regulation maintained the focus of this study. A student assent form was signed prior to the first meeting date between the researcher and the subject. A permission letter from Lowell Elementary School was attached to the application, along with a parental permission form, which was signed and returned before data was collected.

The subject that participated in the study was a six year old African American male in a regular education kindergarten classroom. He displayed little ability to self-regulate, low emotional intelligence based on the Work Sampling checklist, and lack of trust in adults. The screening process included a verbal exchange between the researcher and the classroom teacher based on inclusion criteria. All emotional and social indicators
on the Work Sampling instrument were checked needs improvement by researcher and
classroom teacher.

Two standardized pre and post assessments were used to measure development in
emotional/social intelligence (Marsden, Meisels, Jablon, and Dichtelmiller, 2001). The
summary report is a standardized checklist that includes; self-control, self concept, peer
interaction, and approaches to learning. Each item contains three performance levels;
needs improvement, meets expectations, exceeds expectations. An omnibus provides
examples of each indicator (to reduce the subjectiveness of the instrument).

The researcher met with the classroom teacher each week. When the subject’s
behavior caused class disruption or verbal/physical aggression was used by him, the
student met with the researcher to discuss and design a plan of what to do with the anger
he felt. The researcher collected the plans designed by the student on how to deal with the
anger and frustration. The subject came up with a signal that could be used by the
classroom teacher as a silent reminder of expected behavior. The self-selected signal
provided ownership for the subject, and offered a relationship building exchange between
the teacher and the student. The researcher and the subject shared the silent signal
following their 45 minute session together. The researcher kept a journal that included
direct quotes from the student along with written observations. To ensure credibility,
hours were spent talking with other professionals about the work in progress. The
researcher spoke to other professionals weekly who understood the research (peer
debriefing). Transcribed dialogue (Appendix A), written observations, and plans written
by the subject were collected weekly. Dependability was addressed through the collection
of field notes and observations recorded weekly.
The screening process included meetings between the classroom teacher and the researcher to discuss behavioral concerns. The emotional and social development checklist for The Work Sampling system determined a baseline.

The intervention involved 45 minute sessions once a week between the researcher and the subject to design a plan of what to do when he became angry. The researcher collected plans designed by the student. The plan format remained the same during the seven weeks data was collected.

The initial plan included the following sentence starters: Date, I am really good at, I have a difficult time with, It makes me feel, When this happens I can, When I forget, my teacher can help me by.

The document was signed by both the researcher and the subject following each session. The follow-up plans included questions designed to reflect on and modify the plan from the previous week.

Six weeks of follow-up plans included the following sentence starters: Date, I have been working on, It makes me feel, Other things I can do to control myself include, When I control myself I feel.

The researcher kept a journal that included direct quotes from the student along with observations.

The researcher, along with the classroom teacher, filled out the emotional and social development checklist after seven weeks to measure the subject’s growth in that domain. Questions were asked two weeks after the final session concluded.

Examples of questions asked during the follow-up interview (Appendix B):

1. What makes you angry?
2. What do you typically do when you are angry?

3. What other ways can you deal with the anger you feel?

4. How has writing plans helped you control your frustration?

The work calls for highly detailed evidence, and the procedures for analyzing such data are not codified nor are there established standards or conventions for judging the validity of the data or the credibility of the analysis according to the guidelines for developing qualitative research. However, process training has been used as a way to evaluate mechanisms. In the fieldwork applied to this research, process training involves direct observations. Seeking narrativity is a process used to analyze the data. Journals and first-hand accounts provide important keys to both process and subjectivity. Qualitative analysis is set-theoretic and not correlational in nature because it often seeks to identify uniformities or near-uniformities in social phenomena (set-theoretic relationships).

Results

During the first meeting time, the researcher picked up the subject “Dante” in his classroom. He was sitting in a chair near the teacher’s desk away from the other students. He had a frown on his face and his arms crossed in front of him. The classroom teacher informed me of his act of aggression the day before, “He shut someone in a locker.” This was discussed in front of Dante. When the classroom teacher introduced us, Dante gave no eye contact, but agreed to leave with me. Dante was quiet, but showed interest in games on my shelf. We played Connect Four together. He noticed a picture of my eighteen month old son on my desk. I talked briefly about my son. Dante said, “I have a sister. She be bad.” I asked how she is bad. He told me that she is always hitting. I said, “You have to show her what to do rather than hit. She can’t tell you what she wants yet,"
so she gets upset. Do you have any ideas on how you could help her?” “Nope,” he replied and then changed the subject to talk about basketball. I thought this would be a good time to introduce the plan. He completed the open-ended plan and I recorded what he said (due to the age of the subject and his limited fine motor development).

His responses on September 14, 2006 were as follows:

1. I am really good at “basketball.”
2. I have a difficult time with “shutting a person in a locker yesterday.”
3. It makes me “feel sorry.”
4. When this happens “I can open the locker.”
5. When I forget, “my teacher can help me by giving me a signal (point at me).”
6. When I feel like I want to do something unsafe with my hands, “I could hug them.”

Both the researcher and the subject signed the plan. The researcher and the subject walked down to the office and made two copies of his plan. He read his plan to his teacher, along with a copy, and took the other copy home to share with his mom.

The second session began by picking up Dante in his room. He was removed from the group again. This time he was sitting at his table with his head down while his classmates were at the carpet with their teacher listening to a story. The classroom teacher called his name and told him that I was ready for him. Dante joined me immediately. During the walk back to my room, Dante told me that he had the boy (“Sam”) that he shut in the locker last week shut him in the locker. I asked him how it made him feel when he was shut in the locker. He said, “I liked it.” I asked him if he thought the other boy like it when he was shut in the locker. Dante said, “No.” I asked
him, “How do you know he didn’t like it?” “He was crying,” Dante said. “Oh, I am sorry he was so sad. How did you help him feel better?” I asked. Dante said, “I told you, he put me in the locker.” I asked him if that made “Sam” feel better about what you did to him. “Yeah,” said Dante.

Once in my room, Dante and I played Connect Four again. I asked him if he could think of something to do for Sam to apologize for shutting him in the locker. Dante said, “No, I did. I have him shut me in the locker.” I asked if he thought Sam would want a card from him. Dante said, “Nope!”

Plan responses on September 21, 2006:

1. I have been working on “having them shut me in the locker, they open it up.”

2. It makes me feel “great.”

3. Other things I can do to control myself include “hug myself, that makes my arms don’t hit.”

Dante wanted to change the signal that he and his teacher shared. “My teacher scratches her nose for my signal now,” he explained.

During the third session, I again found Dante and another student removed from the group. When I arrived, the teacher told Dante to go with me. She yelled across the room, “Tell Mrs. --- what you did.” I asked Dante how he was doing, “bad,” he replied. “Do you want to talk to me about anything?” I asked. Dante said, “Nope!” Once in my room, I introduced a new game, Blink, Dante picked up on the idea of the game quickly. He enjoyed the game and talked to me about his week as we played. “I keep hitting my head on the fence at recess,” he confessed. I asked how that felt. He shrugged his shoulders. I asked, “Do you know why you do it?” He said, “Cause, none of those kids
will give me the ball." I asked him how it made him feel when the other kids won’t let him play. He told me he felt sad. I said, “I would be sad too. I remember when kids wouldn’t let me play with them when I was in school. I would play with someone else.”

Dante shouted, “I don’t wanna play with nobody!” I calmly said, “I understand.” We then read the book *When Sophie Gets Angry* by Molly Bang together.

Plan responses on September 28, 2006 include:

1. I have been working on “hitting my head against the fence.”
2. It makes me feel “It feels a little bit good.”
3. Other things I can do to control myself include “hold my hands together.”
4. When I control myself I feel “happy.”

Between session three and four, I began meeting with the classroom teacher before school to discuss Dante’s plan and classroom/playground behavior. When I picked up Dante for our fourth session, he was under a table and the classroom teacher was on the computer. He ran to me, but I quietly reminded him to tell his teacher where he was going. “How are you today?” I asked. Dante told me that he was bad because “Carlos” threw him down on the ground and he pushed him down. When I asked him what else he could have done he said, “My mama tells me if someone hit me, I hit em back!” I asked him what happened when he pushed Carlos back and he said that he got in trouble. I told him that it sounds like school rules are different than rules at home. I asked him if he knew he would get in trouble when he threw Carlos down. He said, “Yeah.” “Let’s think of a way you could have kept from getting into trouble,” I told him. After a long pause Dante said, “I could have hugged my hands like this (he wraps his arms around his body and folds his hands under his arms).” Once we were in the room, Dante selected the game
Blink again. I told him that he was getting so good at playing Blink that he could teach it to a friend in the classroom. I asked him if he wanted to check the game out and teach it to a classmate during free time or indoor recess. He was excited to take the game with him. Before we wrote the plan, he asked if he could make a birthday card for his mom.

Session four plan on October 5, 2006:

1. I have been working on "listening."
2. It makes me feel "hard."
3. Other things I can do to control myself include "hug my hands, cross my hands."
4. When I control myself I feel "happy."

He added at the bottom of his plan: “Someone threw me on the ground, so I threw them on the ground at the drinking fountain.”

During the session with the classroom teacher, she was noticing changes in his confidence and peer involvement. She said that Dante had not been physically aggressive toward himself or others, and was working on sitting at the carpet using "carpet basics" (a three point system designed by the classroom teacher – hands in lap, bottom on the ground, no talking to neighbors). She continued to use the silent signal (scratch her nose) to remind Dante of carpet basics. The classroom teacher mentioned that Dante had been teaching Carlos how to play Blink.

When I picked up Dante for our fifth session, he was at the carpet with the rest of the class listening to a story. When he saw me, he ran and retrieved the game Blink from his cubby and held my hand as we exited the room. He shared that he had taught Carlos how to play Blink, but that he was better at playing it than Carlos was. As we walked up
the stairs toward my room at the opposite end of the hallway, Dante was smiling and swinging his arms back and forth. At the beginning of our session, I introduced a spatial and verbal awareness activity. I chose the activity based on his interest in Blink, and I thought the language component would support verbal expression. He became frustrated when he had to use scissors and wanted me to cut it for him. I told him that I didn’t care how the shapes were cut out, that I was more interested in how he arranges the shapes on the paper. Following the activity we read *Why Do You Love Me* by Dr. Laura Schlessinger together.

Session five plan on October 12, 2006:

1. I have been working on “sitting on the carpet.”
2. It makes me feel “unhappy.”
3. Other things I can do to control myself include “sit in my chair.”
4. When I control myself I feel “great!”

DeVonte added to his plan: “Mrs. ---- (classroom teacher) scratches her nose to tell me that I need to stop moving so much.”

During week six, the classroom teacher was noticing Dante’s acclamation into the classroom community. She described him as happier and able to display self-control most of the time. She had no incidents of aggressive behavior to report.

When I picked Dante up for our sixth meeting time, he was busy coloring the letter S and making it into a snake. The rest of the students were enjoying the same activity. When he saw me, he ran to me and told the classroom teacher he would be back. She smiled and waved at him and he smiled back. He told me that he was going to be a Sumo wrestler for Halloween. He was excited about his costume and described what it
looked like during our walk to my classroom. I introduced the game charades, but Dante
wanted to play Blink. We talked mostly about movies he had seen and home, and what
costumes his classmates were wearing to the Halloween party. We read the book How to
Lose All of Your Friends by Nancy Carlson. After the book was finished, Dante said, “I
don’t lose friends anymore.” I said, “Doesn’t that feel good to keep your friends?” He
said, “Yeah.”

Session six plan on October 19, 2006:

1. I have been working on “not hitting or hurting anybody.”
2. It makes me feel “great!”
3. Other things I can do to control myself include “moving away from what
   makes me mad (hiding under the table).”
4. When I control myself I feel “still great.”

After we finished writing the plan, Dante said to me, “I don’t think I need to write plans
anymore. I know what to do.”

During our seventh meeting time I picked up Dante and he was sitting with his
classmates at the carpet. He jumped up, waved goodbye to his teacher, she smiled and
waved back. He held my hand and skipped upstairs toward my room. He talked the entire
time about the upcoming Halloween party. He asked me if I would be at the school that
night for the school-wide Halloween party. He said, “Good, you can meet my sister,
mom, and granny. They are coming too.” Once in the room he asked, “Do I have to write
a plan? I know what to do.” I said, “No, you don’t have to, but this will be our last
meeting time together and the very last time you would write a plan with me.” Dante
said, “Okay, let’s write it right now. Then we can play Blink.”
Session seven plan on October 26, 2006:

1. I have been working on “reading.”
2. It makes me feel “good, but I don’t know how.”
3. Other things I can do to control myself include “I control myself now.”
4. When I control myself I feel “awesome!”

Following Dante’s seventh session, I met with the classroom teacher and discussed his progress. We both decided that Dante no longer needed the 45 minute sessions to help with self-regulation. The teacher was pleased with his progress and noted significant improvements in all areas of personal and emotional development. We filled the checklist out together. We both agreed that Dante was either in process or proficient in all areas of Personal and Social Development (Marsden, Meisels, Jablon, and Dichtelmiller, 2001).

Pre and Post assessment indicators:

A Self concept

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre (9/9/06)</th>
<th>Post (10/27/06)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Demonstrates self-confidence</td>
<td>Not Yet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Show initiative and self-direction</td>
<td>Not Yet</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B Self control

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre (9/9/06)</th>
<th>Post (10/27/06)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Follows classroom rules and routines.</td>
<td>Not Yet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Uses classroom materials purposefully and respectfully</td>
<td>Not Yet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Manages transitions and adapts to changes in routine</td>
<td>Not Yet</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

C Approaches to learning
1 Shows eagerness and curiosity
   As a learner
   In Process
   Proficient

2 Sustains attention to a task,
   persisting even after encountering
   difficulty.
   Not Yet
   In Process

3 Approaches tasks with flexibility
   and inventiveness
   Not Yet
   In Process

D Interaction with others

1 Interacts easily with one or more
   children
   Not Yet
   Proficient

2 Interacts easily with familiar adults
   Not Yet
   Proficient

3 Participates in the group life of the
   class
   Not Yet
   Proficient

4 Shows empathy and caring for
   others
   Not Yet
   In Process

E Social problem-solving

1 Seeks adult help and begins to use
   simple strategies to resolve
   conflicts.
   Not Yet
   In Process

Two weeks after Dante’s final session, I met with him to conduct a follow-up interview.

Questions and responses to follow-up interview:

1. What makes you angry? “When people cuss at me.”
2. What do you typically do when you are angry? “Play my video games and shut my door.”

3. What other ways can you deal with the anger you feel? “Suck it in, shake my head to get the mad out. Move away from people I’m mad at. Put my hands to my side, that makes me don’t hit.”

4. How has writing plans helped you control your frustration? “It was pretty good. I know what to do. I get mad at home, not school!”

Discussion

The purpose of the study included relationship building over manipulation devices used to change behavior. The research was designed to answer the question: Will emotionally discouraged children be able to regulate their emotions through positive relationship building with the classroom teacher? The subject’s progress from a discouraged to an encouraged child, along with his ability to interact easily with the classroom teacher at the conclusion of the seven week study validates the research question.

Shonkoff and Phillips (2000) wrote that discouraged children who act in anti-social ways participate less in classroom experiences and are less likely to be accepted by peers and teachers. That was apparent during my first few sessions with Dante. When I picked him up in his classroom, he was not participating in the life of the class. He was physically removed from the group; either next to the teacher, facing away from his classmates, or at his table with his head down. His teacher would discuss behavior problems with me in front of him (which displayed a lack of respect for the child and perpetuated the self-fulfilling prophecy). When Dante left the room neither his classmates
nor his teacher would tell him “goodbye” and he would leave abruptly without acknowledging his departure.

In the beginning, Dante displayed little trust toward adults. He was unable to provide eye contact during our first meetings, which is explained by Kochman (1987) as a cultural indicator of a high-context culture. His responses were short and without explanation. His behavior paralleled the work of Marilyn Watson (2003) regarding trust. She explains that within a cooperative relationship, the child develops basic trust. In the absence of a trusting environment, the child cannot depend on their caregivers to meet their basic emotional needs, their attachment relationships are then built on mistrust.

In addition, the child’s capacity for empathy and tendency to comply with a caregiver’s request germinate from the child’s secure attachment relationship (Strayton, Hogan, and Ainsworth, 1971). Dante began to display basic trust by week four. He was regulating his behavior when the classroom teacher issued a silent signal. He changed his signal with his teacher from a point to a nose scratch. He preferred the later of these signals and laughed when he told me how she helps him remember appropriate behavior.

Autonomy is moral and intellectual self-regulation (DeVries and Zan, 1994). It was apparent that the classroom teacher was establishing a relationship of trust, supporting self-regulation, and promoting autonomy by week four when she allowed Dante to select a silent-signal and explore ways in which he could help himself. When I found Dante under the table I assumed he needed redirection, however the classroom teacher informed me that was his choice when he was having a difficult time controlling himself (a self-selected removal from the threatening experience). He later shared that
Building Relationships

with me during session six: Other things I can do to control myself include “moving away from what makes me mad (hiding under the table).”

Week five was a turning point in Dante’s intrapersonal and interpersonal awareness. He was participating in the life of the class by teaching a card game, Blink, to a classmate that had become a friend despite tension between to two at the beginning of the year. The classroom teacher had no aggressive behavior to repeat in over a week and a half (that was significant considering at the beginning of the year he either hit, pinched, or grabbed classmates daily). When I arrived to pick him up, he was at the carpet with his classmates. When we left, he told his class “goodbye” and they reciprocated. He held my hand and smiled as he swung his arms back and forth. His morphing process was the result of a positive attachment between himself and caring adults. A positive attachment results from a cooperative relationship between the child and caregiver in which the adult helps the child accomplish the tasks of development (Watson, 2003).

“Winning over children makes them losers, and losing generally caused children to be rebellious or blindly submissive. Neither characteristic is desireable. Winning children over means gaining their cooperation and teaching responsibility, self-discipline, problem solving skills, and social interest” (Nelsen, 1996, p.19). Dante taught himself how to be responsible, he exhibited self-discipline, problem solving skills, and social interest. During his sixth meeting time, Dante communicated his own understanding, “Do I have to write a plan? I know what to do.” During follow up sessions with the classroom teacher, Dante was able to implement his plan and transfer that understanding when met with adverse conditions during recess, in the lunchroom, or in the classroom. By the final
two meeting times, Dante was an encouraged, self-regulated kindergartner who cared about his teacher, classmates, family, and most importantly himself.

Recommendations

This research is important because the results contribute to our knowledge of how to support children’s ability to regulate themselves in the absence of rewards and punishment. Beginning at an early age, teachers provide less instruction and less positive feedback to children with poor personal and social development. These children like school less, learn less, and attend less (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Building positive relationships with students that exhibit disruptive behaviors is difficult, but essential. Over the course of seven weeks I was able to work with a discouraged child, provide consistency, develop a positive trusting relationship, and respect his ideas thus promoting self-regulation. The weekly sessions were then discussed with the classroom teacher providing ways in which the child and the adult could build a positive relationship and support the participant’s emotional intelligence.

It is imperative that educators understand the reason behind the behavior. When describing a misbehaving child I hear teacher’s say, “They know exactly what they are trying to do to me.” It is not about what they are doing to you, but more importantly to themselves. Attachment theory, sociomoral atmosphere, trust development, self-regulation, emotional intelligence, and cultural awareness influenced the design of this paper. My own personal struggles with disruptive behaviors lead to my construction of knowledge. I read extensively in the field of emotional and social intelligence. I understood that my role as classroom teacher was also one of caregiver. I quickly shifted my thinking from, “What is wrong?” to “How can I help?” Eventually that thinking
developed to include the goal, self-regulation. My line of questioning always included, "How can I help you help yourself?"

It makes sense that an environment of trust diffuses conflictual interactions. There is much educators can do to develop the child from within. Teachers and adults can benefit from understanding what makes their child/student discouraged. Theory provides a foundation. The application is part of the art and science of the teaching profession.

Emotional intelligence is the basis for a civilized nation. The work that teachers can do at an early age, regardless of the child's life circumstances, is powerful. Perhaps educators have a tabula rasa view on misbehaving children. Once a teacher gives up on a child, a child that has little or no self-acceptance will begin to give up or give in. Neither support emotional intelligence.

What that means for the teaching profession is that small, deliberate steps can be taken to support a child's self-awareness and regulation. It took five weeks before a noticeable change occurred in Dante. It took a few minutes each week to develop a trusting relationship, discuss student devised plans, and implement silent signals that built a positive relationship between the teacher and student. The results showed an increase in all indicators of Dante's emotional and social development; self-concept, self-control, approaches to learning, interaction with others, and social problem-solving. He was an encouraged student who participated in the life of the class and had a secure relationship with more than one adult in the school building.

For the critics that say, "Whatever is done at school is undone at home." I used Dante's follow-up interview as an example of how he transferred social knowledge into all areas of his life. During the follow-up interview Dante referred to incidents at home
versus school. When asked ways in which he dealt with the anger he felt, he provided three ways in which to diffuse the conflictual situation:

1. “I could suck it [my anger] in - shake my head to get the mad out.”

2. “Move away from people I’m mad at!”

3. “Put my hands to my side - that makes me don’t hit.”

Dante acquired ways to regulate his life, not only at school, but also at home.

Emotionally discouraged children are able to regulate their emotions through positive relationship building with the classroom teacher. The knowledge of how to support student’s ability to regulate themselves in the absence of rewards and punishment is vast and available. Educators can develop relationships with students versus the use of manipulation devices designed to change behavior. The opportunity to support and promote children’s emotional and social intelligence is available for receptive and caring adults.
References


Appendix A

Transcribed Dialogue

During the first meeting on September 12, 2006, I introduced myself to the subject. He told me his first name. I showed him a picture of my son he said, “I have a little sister. She be bad.” I asked, “How is she bad?” The subject said, “She always hit ‘n.” I told him, “You have to show her what to do rather than hit. She can’t tell you what she wants yet, so she gets upset. Do you have any ideas on how you could help her?” He said, “Nope.” I asked him, “Will you help me pick out a book that you could take home and read to your sister?” He told me, “Nope.”

The second meeting took place on September 21, 2006. The subject said, “I had Carlos shut me in the locker. It was dark.” I asked, “How did it make you feel when he shut you in the locker?” He said, “I liked it!” “Do you think the other boy liked it when you did that to him?” I asked. He said, “No.” I asked, “How do you know?” He told me, “He was crying.” I told him, “Oh, I’m sorry he was so sad. How did you help him feel better?” The subject said, “I told him to put me in the locker.” I said, “Did that help him feel better about what you did to him?” Dante said, “Yeah.”

I asked Dante, “Have you ever played Connect Four?” “Yes,” he said. “I have it in my room.” I asked, “Could we do anything for Carlos to help him feel better?” Dante said, “No, I already did. I have him shut me up in the locker.” I asked, “Do you think he would like a card from you?” He said, “Nope!”

The third meeting occurred on September 28, 2006. I asked Dante, “Do you want to talk to me about anything?” “Nope”, he said. I asked, “How are you feeling?” The subject said, “Bad.” I asked, “Would you like to play Blink? I think you will be very
good at it. You seemed to enjoy Connect Four and in this game you have to be a detective and find things that are the same. Much like how you found four of the same color in a row.” He said, “I’ll play, but I might want to play Connect Four too. Can we play both?” “If there is time,” I said.

Dante said, “I hit my head on the fence?” I asked, “How does that make you feel?” He said, “I don’t know, I just do it.” I asked, “Do you know why you do it?” Dante said, “Cuz, the other kids won’t give me the ball.” “When they won’t let you play, how does that make you feel?” I asked. Dante said, “Sad.” I told him, “I would be sad if someone did not let me play. I remember when kids wouldn’t let me play with them when I was in school. I would find someone else to play with.” Dante said, I don’t want to play with nobody.” I said, “I understand. Would you like to help me read a book?” Dante said, “Yeah.”

The fourth meeting occurred on October 5, 2006. I asked, “How are you feeling today?” He told me, “Bad. Carlos threw me down, so I did it back.” “What else could you have done?” I asked. He said, “My mama says if someone hit me, I hit em back.” I asked, “Then what happened to you after you hit Carlos?” He said, “I got sent to the wall.” I said, “It sounds like school rules are different than rules at home. Did you know you would get in trouble when you threw Carlos down?” He said, “Yeah!” I told him, “Let’s think of a way you could have kept from getting into trouble.” He said, “I could have hugged my hands like this.”

“Can we play Blink? I’m getting good at it. I think I can win today.” Dante said. “I think we have time for that after we write a plan.” I said. Dante said, “I don’t want to write a plan.” I asked, “Why not?” He said, “Cuz I want to play Blink and then we won’t
have time.” I said, “I will make sure we have time.” Dante asked, “Do I have time to make a card for my mom?” I told him, “Yes.” I asked Dante, “Would you want to borrow Blink for the week? Maybe you could teach it to Carlos? I will write your name down that you will check it out and let your teacher know that you can play it during your free time if that is okay with her.” Dante said, “Yeah, I will teach all my friends.”

The fifth meeting was on October 12, 2006. “I played Blink with Carlos. I beat him.” Dante said. “Did he like the game?” He said, “Yup. He didn’t know how to play, but now he knows.”

I asked Dante to use the pieces to build something that would help people. He said, “You cut out the shapes. I can’t.” I said, “I think you can. They don’t have to be cut out perfectly. I am more interested in how you use the shapes and what you tell me about your invention.” I asked him to help me read a book about a little boy. “Could you read some of these words with me?” I asked. He said, “I don’t know how to read.” I said, “I bet you could figure it out. You will be a word detective. The pictures will help you figure out some of the words.”

Session six took place on October 19, 2006. Dante said, “Guess what I am for Halloween?” I said, “Are you a super hero?” Dante said, “No. I am a wrestler, a really fat one. My costume is too big.” I said, “Did you tell your mom it is too big?” Dante said, “It’s supposed to be big. That’s what kind of wrestler it is.” I asked, “Does the wrestler have a name?” Dante said, “No. It will be me.” I said, “I will have to come to the Lowell Halloween party and see you.” He said, “I bet you don’t know it’s me.”

I said, “Let’s try a new game today. Have you ever played charades? You have to act out words on a card without saying anything and I have to guess what it is.” He said,
“I can’t read.” I told him that he doesn’t have to read. The cards have pictures on them too. He said, “I want to play Blink.” I said, “Okay, then I will need your help with another story. It’s called How to Lose All of Your Friends.” Dante said. “I don’t lose friends anymore.”

Final session was on October 26, 2006. Dante said, “Do I have to write a plan? I don’t want to. I know what to do.” I said, “You don’t have to, but it would be your very last plan that you would have to write with me.” Dante said, “Okay, let’s write it now. Then we can play Blink. Can I check it out again?” I said, “Are you going to teach some new kids how to play?” He said, “No, only Carlos.”
Appendix B

Follow-up Questions

1. What makes you angry?

2. What do you typically do when you are angry?

3. What other ways can you deal with the anger you feel?

4. How has writing plans helped you control frustration?