Navigating the Social World

The difficulty and complexity of navigating the social world often exceeds any academic challenge a student faces. In most cases, once an academic skill or concept is learned, it remains stable in the student's knowledge and repertoire of responses (2+2=4 doesn't ever change). In contrast, how does a student respond to a positive and smiling face from a peer one day and a putdown from the same person the next day, without any apparent reason for the change?

Students live in a complex social world where mistakes are an inherent and necessary way of learning skills and acquiring judgment. We cannot assume that students have the social and emotional skills necessary for success. Consequently, students need guidance and understanding from the adults in their lives. When we primarily rely on rules and the consequences attached to them to correct students, we are not giving them what they need to be successful in this social world. Helping them acquire these skills, however, shouldn't take time from the school day.

When teachers carefully select and emphasize key words and phrases in their daily interactions, they can help students make sense of the often confusing social world. This type of social and emotional learning embedded into the school day can be more effective than adding a program or curriculum.

The late Mark Ylvisaker, a noted speech and language therapist in the field of neuropsychology and traumatic brain injury, used Lev S. Vygotskian's theory as a basis for his clinical work. Under Vygotskian's theory, children learn in a zone of proximal development where they are "apprentices" to adults, imitating not just actions but also the words that go along with those actions. Rather than exclusively focus on the individual, Ylvisaker found more success when he facilitated changes in the way the people around the client spoke.

Ylvisaker applied his approach in classrooms at Lynnwood Elementary School near Albany, New York, where I served as principal for 17 years. He thought that if adults could "think out loud" using a clearer and simpler vocabulary to describe social events, it would facilitate the development of the internalized language that helps a student navigate the demanding social world. He developed a set of key words for our teachers to apply to many social situations occurring during the school day.

An Approach to Self-Regulation

Many of the social mistakes that students make are driven by an emotional response to a situation. Even if a student has good problem-solving skills, an immediate emotional reaction often impedes the student's ability to use any skill. In addition, an inappropriate impulsive reaction not only fails to solve the problem but also worsens it for everyone involved. Afterward, the student is confused about what happened and unable to learn from the situation.

The newer and less familiar the problem, the more a student is caught off-guard and unprepared to respond to it. This situation can trigger fear and sometimes panic, especially if the student feels defenseless and ill equipped to respond appropriately to the problem.

Words, however, have the power to mitigate the emotional response of fear because being able to put a label on what is happening gives students some degree of control over a situation. As students are better able to accurately assess and identify social situations, they are more likely to match the right response to the problem they experience.

Students who have confidence in their ability to solve problems are much more successful in school and in life than students who feel victimized by events and problems. This is why it is so crucial for adults to guide and support students in learning to regulate their emotions and navigate the social world.

Concept Pairs

Ylvisaker introduced several sets of concept pairs using familiar words that students know. Teachers use these concept pairs to prepare students for specific experiences and then afterward to reflect on them. They cover a range of typical problems that students regularly confront.

Ready/Not Ready: This pair relates to situations that require a degree of preparation for success. It can also remind students of what they need to do to be "ready" for an activity such as having physical objects available like a paper and pencil out on the desk, or a set of behaviors required at the start of a lesson such as looking at the teacher or being still.

Hard/Easy: This pair relates to academic tasks as well as social ones. For students who struggle academically, confronting a task that they perceive as difficult can trigger a set of avoidance behaviors. Teachers using this concept pair can coach students to understand that a hard task doesn't always require the "right" answer. More importantly, a teacher can help students see how effort itself helps them learn.

Choice/No Choice: This concept pair organizes a student's perception of the options available in a situation. A student is more likely to accept having "no choice" when they know that other choices are available. When teachers explain why some behaviors are not choices and why some are, they help students understand the purpose of rules and remove the mistaken assumption that rules and limits are just ways for adults to control them.

Context for Using Pairs

Each concept pair is used in the context of a simple and logical script. This spoken script mirrors the internal self-talk that eventually helps students regulate their behavior. Although using

the script might seem awkward or forced at first, over time it becomes natural for the teacher. In addition to being spoken, concept pairs can be posted to serve as a visual cue to students.

A script with a concept pair of big deal/little deal would sound like:

1. Losing my place in line is not **big deal**; it is a **little deal** (identify the issue).
2. It is a **little deal** because no one is getting hurt and I will get a turn eventually (state the reason for the label).
3. If I talk to my classmates, maybe someone can save a spot for me next time (offer a strategy).
4. If I talk it over with someone, there is usually something that works (offer reassurance about using the strategy).

Preliminary Results

After the first year of using this approach to self-regulation, Lynnwood teachers reported that students demonstrated greater self-reliance as well as improved problem-solving, independence, and self-organization. They also reported that it increased their level of confidence and reduced their anxiety level during difficult interactions. They reported a calmer and less emotional classroom atmosphere with an increase in instruction time.

Teachers estimated that they saved an average of 27 minutes per day that previously were devoted to behavioral issues. The schoolwide number of times students were removed or separated from group instruction dropped from 20 to 5.8 times per month within the school year.

Investing the time in educating students in the social and emotional domain yields greater time for academic instruction. The teacher's perceived role shifts from primarily controlling student behavior to educating the whole child. **P**

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