

Social and Emotional Learning Program Transcript

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NARRATOR: In this segment, Professor Jennifer Symon describes social and emotional issues and techniques for specialized instruction.

JENNIFER SYMON: For children with special needs, we often see this connection between challenging behavior and appropriate social skills. If it's difficult to get your message across and communication might be challenging, then we see a lot of challenging behaviors occur. Therefore, it's important that we teach appropriate pro-social skills or emotional skills.

So we have a whole area of social and emotional learning that's really critical on any campus. And while the focus has often been in many schools still is on academics-- are the child reaching academically where their peers are-- we really need our students, not just our kids with special needs but for all the kids on campus to really understand the importance of appropriate social skills.

And we now see our kids with special needs in all different kinds of educational settings. We see them in special day classes. We see them mainstreamed into general ed classes, and we see them in general ed settings, also, throughout the day, sometimes with additional support and sometimes without additional support. So our kids with special needs are now having more access to peers, typical peers, but without specific instruction on how to help them facilitate interactions and be successful.

We're really not helping them as much as we need to be. So we're looking a lot at school-wide programs that would provide three tier access, where the first tier is like the primary level of intervention. We're looking at rules, creating rules that all the students follow, getting the whole staff and administrators and teachers on board together, even with family involvement, as well. And then from there-- and most of our students, they say about 80% of our students on any given campus would kind of-- that's as much support as they need.

Then we have this secondary level of support, where those students might need a little bit more additional support, whether it's counseling support, small group instruction, specific instruction in identifying certain skills they might need to learn. And that will take care of a big group of our students.

And then we have the tertiary level, or the third level of support, for students who are a lot more challenged in terms of the types of emotional or social support they might need. And then we might need individualized interventions for those particular students.

The role of an educational leader in promoting social-emotional development across any campus is critical. It really comes down from the administration to provide school-wide or district-wide levels of support for all the students, whether they have special needs or whether they're in the general ed.

And we see a lot of three-tiered level of support, where the first level of support, the primary level, is support for all the kids on campus. And that might include things like common rules that everyone abides by, that there's walking only in the hallway, there's no running. Or what the policy is on cell phones, what happens with tardiness, those kind of big, campus-wide behaviors, where we need to see consistency in how the different staff and teachers and administrators are following through when we see these types of behaviors occur. Then most of the students will, maybe about 80% of our students will just need that type of level of support.

Then we have our secondary levels of support, for some students who might have emotional behavioral disorders, or attention deficit disorders, or learning disabilities, or autism, or no specific diagnosis, where we see that students at the secondary level of intervention need some modifications and a little bit more support. They might need counseling support. They might need support in terms of using behavioral contracts or behavioral approaches, whether it's core content and during academic instruction, or whether it's outside on the playground.

And then our third level of support are-- those are for our kids who have more profound or severe challenges, where they might need a functional behavior assessment conducted to determine the reason what they're trying to communicate through using this challenging behavior, and they might need a lot more intervention targeted at their specific needs.

So in terms of administrators and educational leaders, they need to really be familiar with the ways that we're structuring our behavioral support to promote positive social interactions on campus. It's not just about discipline and reducing challenging behaviors, but really promoting social skills and really creating that community with a lot of collaboration between the whole staff-- I mean, teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators.

You know, if a child gets sent to the office but sits in the office all day, that might be reinforcing for the student, where another child might not get sent to the office, and they might be sitting in the hallway, and they're also getting reinforced by all the teachers and students walking by. So we really need to provide consistency.

And most importantly, they're not learning by sitting in the hallway or waiting for the principal to talk to them. So we need to teach skills at the individual, group, and universal levels, in order to really demonstrate that it's valued in our school. And that really comes down to the educational leaders on campus or in the district.

When we look at social-emotional learning, that can impact a student not only in social interactions with peers, but really can influence their ability to be successful across the academic day, in addition to the non-academic times. So if you think back on high school or you think back on elementary school, what a lot of people remember are the social opportunities to interact. And what we like to do with social and emotional learning is to really target teaching these pro-social behaviors and emotional health while we're in class.

So for instance, we could have a history lesson or a math lesson where the teachers are knowledgeable about how to embed either group work, or how to have peer buddies, or how to have students participate in ways that might be socially motivated or promoted. And without the leaders understanding the importance of social and emotional learning and understanding the research behind it that we've seen on positive behavioral support and scaling up from working with one particular student to a group of students to a whole campus of students, we're not going to see the importance of those skills targeted on any campus.

For instance, a little boy in a classroom that I saw a couple days ago, he was doing fine academically. He was sitting in his little pod desk with his peer buddies around him, and he was on task when the teacher was presenting instruction, and it was English and language arts. And he was doing really well.

And he had a little peer buddy. And part of the classroom routine was that if you finish first, you go around to the other pods with the desks, and you make sure that the other kids need some help or they would check their work. And another little girl came over to him and she was telling him that he reversed two of his answers, and he checked them, and that was his only social opportunity during the whole class period, even though he was well behaved.

Some of the other kids, when we took a pulse around the classroom, they were all chit chatting. And so while they may have all been doing well academically, he was missing the social opportunity. And according to his family members, he doesn't engage in play dates. He's kind of alone on the weekends unless his cousins are around. And so we really want to target not just the academic aspect of class, but really the social, as well. And it takes a really creative teacher to come up with ways to make academic curriculum also involving that social component.

So many of our students who have special needs require specialized instruction in social skills. And there's some literature looking at social skills training. And what that means is teaching, specifically teaching certain skills to enhance social opportunities and social success.

We see some mixed results when we look at social skills training. And the relationship between social skills instruction and social and emotional learning is

really critical. We see that we are teaching the skills that are challenging for the children who don't have those skills. So oftentimes, we see social trainings, where they're looking at teaching about being a good friend, or it could be something specific like teaching social initiations, or teaching appropriate behavior.

Whenever we're implementing a behavioral program, a social program for any individual or a group of students, it's important that we monitor progress across any skill that we're trying to teach, in order to know if it's effective, or if we need to modify, or if we can kind of fade ourselves out because we're doing so well that we need the skills to just maintain over time. And so it's important that we figure out how we're going to monitor our progress.

So different types of programs are going to monitor their progress in different ways, whether that's looking at the number of students who are involved in extracurricular activities, or if we're taking little probes of students during lunch time and looking at how many are using pro-social statements towards others, or if we target certain students and look at how many friends they've made or how many play dates they have. Or we might look at one child across settings and look at how their social interactions are throughout the day.

So there's various ways, whether it's individual students, whether it's kind of group wide. There are some computerized systems now that gather data looking at the number of office referrals, and looking at the number of tardies across campus. And there are some really quick ways to enter data that many districts have incorporated, and they're turning out to produce a nice database that schools can purchase and get access to our modify, to use at their own sites.

Leaders in the educational field must be familiar with evidence based practices and knowledge about where to go to determine which programs, which strategies, or methods might be most effective for their students that they support. And that can range from individual students, and that can range from campuses. They need to be the ones determining what kind of training their teachers or their other educators are going to get. They need to decide or help in the decision making for anything from the programs to the schedule, and allowing for collaboration to occur. Those are the types of things that are going to make it or break it, in terms of the success of specialized instruction in the classrooms.

I think something that's really important to look for is how instruction is set up and how opportunities to learn are created. Because across any content or outside of content area are learning opportunities. And as educators, that's our job. Whether you're setting up a lesson in writing or math or history, or whether it's transitioning and in between those unstructured activities throughout the academic day or the school day, those are sometimes the most important opportunities to create, whether it's promoting social opportunities to learn, whether you're promoting or enhancing education, communication, or academics.

As you're observing in a campus, pay close attention or keep in mind that every opportunity is an opportunity to learn or to teach, and it's important to understand where opportunities can be set up for specific students, whether it's based on their motivation or their interest. People learn better and they learn faster, and they're more motivated to learn when they like what they're learning. So sometimes you don't have to set up a math lesson during math time. You know, it could be a sports activity where you're learning statistics, or you're learning counting, or you're learning fractions, because someone's motivated by that activity.

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