Social Skills Instruction Carried Out by Teachers Working at Private Special Education Institutions in Turkey

Ayten Uysal and Yasemin Ergenekon
Anadolu University

Abstract: As social beings, humans have to learn social behaviors, too. The social behavior repertoire is increased by learning and is affected by any factors that may impact learning. Individuals with developmental disabilities need systematic teaching in order to acquire social skills (SS) in natural settings. Via SS instruction, SS are taught to individuals who have social inadequacies or, in other words, such individuals are taught how to use the skills they already have in their repertoire. In this study, in order to determine the SS teaching practices of teachers who work at private special education centers, semi-structured interviews were conducted and the data collected have been analyzed by using inductive analysis procedures. The participants of this study were 14 teachers. The results demonstrated that teachers were having serious problems and inadequacies regarding SS instruction. It can be said that, there is a need for supportive services for systematic planning of SS instruction for pre-service and in-service teachers.

Humans are defined as social beings. In order to be a social being, a person has to learn social behaviors just like any other behavior. SS instruction is supposed to be a lifelong learning process (Driscoll & Carter, 2004). The most critical time in a child’s life in this process is the early childhood period. Any delay in the child’s SS development during early childhood may result to some limitations in this area in adulthood (Driscoll & Carter, 2004; Elliott & Gresham, 1987; Odom et al., 1999).

The social behavior repertoire, increased by learning, is affected by any learning impacting factors (Guralnick, Neville, Connor & Hammond, 2003). Thus, some of the individuals who have typical development and most individuals with developmental disabilities have difficulties to adapt in social environments, to build up relationships, to demonstrate self-control and to obtain a job during both school years and adulthood (Cartledge & Kiatie, 2001; Hillier, Fish, Cloppert & Beversdorf, 2007; Pierce-Jordan & Lifter, 2005).

Individuals with developmental disabilities need systematic teaching experiences to learn SS as well as the other skills necessary in their daily lives, since the acquisition of SS is related to the adequacy of their cognitive and communication skills (Driscoll & Carter, 2004; Guralnick, 1999; Guralnick et al., 2003). Demonstrating social behaviors requires the exhibition of an appropriate reaction to a prompt that is received from a situation or a person. Individuals with developmental disabilities learn social behaviors in forms, but they have trouble in using these forms in the appropriate situations (Driscoll & Carter, 2004).

SS instruction is one of the most important developmental areas that needs to be taken into consideration in different periods of development with different approaches (Driscoll & Carter, 2004; Licciardello, Harchik & Luisselli, 2008; Pierce-Jordan & Lifter, 2005). SS practices have to be appropriate for the age of the child concerned. Especially, for children between the ages of 0 and 3, practices should...
focus on the important adults in the child’s life. However, the families’ beliefs, attitudes and knowledge of the child’s adequacy, impact his/her SS learning process. If the beliefs, attitudes and knowledge in question are positive it would be possible for the family to raise a child that has positive relationships with both peers and adults (Guralnick, Connor, Neville & Hammond, 2006; Guralnick et al., 2003). If, however, the family’s attitudes are negative, it becomes crucial to include SS instruction as a part of the special education services received by the child, in order to reduce the impacts of the family’s negative attitudes.

With SS instruction, SS teaching is offered to individuals who have social inadequacies, or, in a similar vain, such individuals are taught how to use the skills they already have in their repertoire in appropriate settings. However, in school, academic instruction is prioritized, and therefore, most frequently, teachers assign very little, if any, time to SS instruction. Hence, it appears to be quite important to include SS instruction in curricula for individuals with developmental disabilities and inadequate SS (Cartledge & Kiarie, 2001). During the instruction planning stage, the utilization of evidence-based practices on SS instruction can provide teachers with effective teaching practices and efficient educational time.

There are various methods of improving the social functions of individuals with developmental disabilities referred to in the relevant literature. These methods can be listed as direct instruction (Sargent, 1991; Sugai & Lewis, 1996), peer-mediated practices (Gena, 2006), collaborative teaching (Avcioglu, 2005), social stories (Cartledge & Kiarie, 2001; Delano & Snell, 2006), cognitive process approach (Ciﬁ & Sucuoglu, 2004), adult mediated methods (Disalvo & Oswald, 2002), written prompts (Thiemann & Goldstein, 2004), natural instruction methods (Brown, Odom & Conroy, 2001), and video supported recordings, discussion and role playing (Elias & Maher, 1983). There are also methods such as modeling, prompting, shaping, behavioral practices, providing feedback, social reinforcement, and fading used in SS instruction (Schloss & Smith, 1994; Zirpoli & Melloy, 1997). In addition to these methods, video-mediated SS instruction (Hansen, Nangle & Meyer, 1998), activities related to play, and generalization of spare time play are mentioned in the SS instruction related literature (Pierce-Jordan & Lifer, 2005; Vauhgn et al., 2003).

SS instruction consists of the introduction of positive behavior and strategies, behavior and strategy modeling, trying positive behaviors and strategies in natural or pretend settings, and teaching self-observation, evaluation, and reinforcement in different settings (Rutherford, Chipman, Digangi & Anderson, 1992; Kenneth & Forness, 1999). Moreover, individual and small group SS instruction is usually based on working together, sharing, and collaborating (Bierman, 2001).

Teachers should have the necessary competencies to implement the aforementioned instruction methods and arrangements. There are some courses providing practice skills in programs which train special education teachers in Turkey. However, there is not a separate course for teaching SS. Programs usually try to close this gap by providing such knowledge in courses that are related to skills instruction in general.

The perceived necessity of including SS teaching in the education programs of children with developmental disabilities (Licciardello et al., 2008) directed the researchers of this study to determine the practices of teachers in this area, and to initiate some necessary programs of SS instruction development. Thus, the purpose of this study was to determine the practices related to SS instruction of those teachers who work at private special education centers for children with developmental disabilities.

Method

Participants

The subjects were 10 female and four male teachers who volunteered to participate in this study and who worked at private special education centers in Eskisehir at least for one year. Six of the participants had undergraduate degrees in special education, and eight of them were elementary school teachers who received in-service training and had obtained a certificate in special education.
Before the study, the authors explained the goal of the study and the process to be followed to the participants. Furthermore, they stated that the interviews could be recorded and both the recordings and transcriptions would only be handled by the authors with no exceptions. Teachers and authors signed the informed consent forms specifying the above information.

**Development of Data Collection Instrument**

Interview questions were prepared in order to determine the practices of the SS instruction practice of teachers who work with children with developmental disabilities in private special education centers. The last form of questions was given after the inspection of the specialists in the field. Seven questions were asked during the interviews.

**Data Collection**

Data were collected between February 19th and 27th of 2008. Interviews were carried out on the dates and times that teachers determined at the centers they worked. All the interviews were conducted by the first author. The interviews took 12–25 minutes and all interviews were tape recorded. As a result of the transcription of these interviews a total of 145 pages of data were collected. All teachers were given pseudonyms in order to be used during the study.

All interview questions were asked of all participants by the first author. If needed, the author would ask extra questions to elaborate the subject. If teachers could not understand the questions, the author proceeded to clarifications, cautious of any possible diversion.

**Design**

In this study semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teachers who worked at private special education centers for at least one year and the data collected were analyzed by using inductive analyses procedures.

**Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed inductively (Creswell, 2005). The purpose of inductive analysis procedures is to constitute the themes or categories that were driven from raw data in order to make the complex data understandable to readers (Thomas, 2003). The steps of analysis are explained below:

1. Each interview was transcribed verbatim.
2. The second author checked if the transcriptions were correct and separated the paragraphs of related interview documents.
3. The first author checked the paragraphs of related interview documents.
4. The second author collected the answers of each participant for each question in different folders.
5. Both authors coded the data independently.
6. Then, the authors worked together until they reached an agreement on codes.
7. Both authors created themes and sub-themes from the codes independently.
8. The authors worked together until they agreed on the themes and sub-themes.
9. Themes and sub-themes were written from the raw data after the agreement of the authors in order to reach the results of the study.

**Results**

As a result of the data analysis, seven main themes were found. These were:

1. Determining the SS that will be taught
2. The content of SS instruction
3. The cause of inadequacy throughout SS instruction
4. The stages that were felt inadequate throughout SS instruction
5. The importance of SS instruction
6. The self-evaluation of teachers regarding SS instruction
7. Suggestions regarding SS instruction

**Determining SS that will be Taught**

The participants’ opinions on this issue were divided in two.

a. The criteria for determining SS. Teachers take into account different criteria when determining the SS that will be taught. Six of the teachers reported that they determine SS ac-
cording to the current environment of the children, whereas two of them said that they determine SS in relation to their future environment. For example, Banu stated that she determines SS by “looking at the relationship of children among each other” in the current environment, and Zeynep said she preferred to determine SS by considering “what could happen in the future in children’s life, what would await them in the future.”

Moreover, five teachers reported that they determine SS according to the child’s performance, four teachers reported that they determine SS as a result of observation, three of them said they consider the family’s requests and two of them said they determine SS according to the needs of the children. For example, Ziya said he decided SS that he would teach by looking at “the results of rough evaluations,” while Gulsum and Hande reported that they decide to teach those “skills that children lack.”

b. SS that are a priority according to teachers.
Four of the teachers reported that they teach those SS that they consider a priority. Asli and Yesim said they taught children how to say “hello, how are you, goodbye” prior to any other skills, and Banu said she preferred to teach children how to use “you” politely when they interact with elders as a sign of respect.

Content of SS Instruction

Three different opinions surfaced on this theme.

a. Teachers who were unaware of the content of SS. Seven of the teachers gave some examples of SS they were teaching. Dilek taught “how to wear a sweater,” Zeynep taught “cooking pasta and doing laundry,” and Ferhat taught “which bus to take and finding home” as SS. Also, Banu said she taught “going to bakery, post office, and picnic and riding a horse as SS, whereas Mehmet asked the interviewer to give him an example of SS.

b. Teachers who did not have any background related to SS instruction. Most of the teachers (10) reported that they did not have any training on SS instruction during undergraduate courses and certificate programs. Ziya said he took courses about skills and concept instruction during his undergraduate studies, but he did not receive any knowledge about SS instruction. Moreover, Banu, Dilek and Serpil said “I would have remembered SS instruction, if they would have taught.”

c. Teachers who did not have adequate knowledge on SS instruction. Seven of the teachers stated that they did not receive adequate information about SS instruction during their undergraduate education and certificate programs. Only one teacher stated that he gained some skills during his last year practicum. Hasan said they were “given some notes as undergraduates and trained themselves by reading them.” However Asli, Ferhat and Gulsum said that “SS instruction was not emphasized and they were not given any kind of documents about the subject.” They also added that had they been given “any kind of information, they would have developed their skills on SS instruction.” Ziya reported that they gained “some knowledge and learned how to prepare some programs during the last year practicum.”

The Causes of Inadequacy throughout SS Instruction

Four different opinions were stated regarding this theme.

a. Teachers who find the instruction theoretical.
Five teachers reported that SS instruction was described briefly or they were only given course notes and the information they were provided was theoretical. Asli, Gulsum, Hasan and Mehmet described the information that was provided as “theoretical.” Moreover Ferhat said that they were given photocopies and CD’s and added “I guess they thought this is a classroom teacher, he should know how to teach SS to a child.”

b. Teachers who could not apply theoretical information in practice. Four teachers reported that they were provided with information on SS instruction during undergraduate and certificate programs, but they were unable to apply this knowledge. Banu, Hande and Mehmet said; “We cannot implement anything that training provided us with. We are doing everything by experience.”

c. Teachers who did not know what to do. Five teachers stated that they did not know where, when, and how to start SS instruction. Banu, Gulsum and Serpil expressed their opinions by saying; “I don’t know and I can’t say any-
thing else”, while Mehmet said; “It is necessary to handle children with love.”

d. Teachers who did not do systematic teaching.
Six teachers reported that they do not plan in advance, they taught when the proper time came and when it was necessary. Hande said, “We are doing it whenever necessary. There is no planning but we do it when we think it is necessary.” Serpil explained how she taught SS by saying, “I am always talking to the student and encouraging him/her to talk. There is nothing else I can do right now.”

The Stages when Teachers felt Inadequate Regarding SS Instruction

Teachers expressed two different opinions about this theme.
a. Teachers who felt inadequacy about planning.
Seven teachers reported that they feel inadequate when planning SS instruction. Dilek, Ferhat and Mehmet had trouble about finding “books or resources” regarding planning. Ziya and Pakize had trouble “making decisions on the method” that is appropriate for the SS, which they planned to teach.
b. Teachers who felt inadequacy about generalization.
Most of the teachers (13) declared that they feel inadequate about generalization. Five teachers stated their opinions on inadequacy about teaching generalization and eight teachers stated their opinions about family involvement on SS instruction.
   b1. Teachers who had inadequacy about teaching generalization. Five teachers stated that the SS taught by them in the educational environment were not observed functioning in the natural environment of children. Melek and Yesim reported that they mostly taught SS in a structured environment more than in daily, living ones. Zeynep stated that there was a problem with the generalization of the skills she taught, due to the resilience of the people in the given environment that such a generalization occurs.
   b2. Teachers who found family involvement insufficient. Eight teachers sustained that families should exhibit some more interest in their children acquiring SS. They also stated that family plays a very important role when it comes to the generalization of learned SS. Gulsum emphasized the importance of the role of the family by saying, “If there is no collaboration with the families, my work will not have any results.” Ferhat, Hande and Mehmet stated that the family role on SS instruction is “of the utmost importance.” However, Banu and Melek reported that families were often somewhat overprotective, a fact which, in turn, would prevent them from allowing their children to practice the acquired SS in their natural settings.

The Importance of SS Instruction

Eight teachers expressed the opinion that it is important for children with developmental disabilities to receive SS instruction in order to be accepted by the community and live independently. Ferhat, Melek and Ziya emphasized the importance of SS instruction by saying that children without SS are “more recognizable” in the community and their families are “bothered” by this. Pakize stated that SS instruction helps children have better acceptance levels in inclusion classrooms.

The Self-Evaluation of Teachers Regarding SS Instruction

Teachers expressed four different opinions on this topic.
a. The preferred methods of teaching SS.
Eleven teachers stated their views on their preferred methods of SS instruction. Teachers preferred to teach SS by using modeling (7), drama (4), story telling (3) and teaching by doing and living techniques (3). They reported other techniques as well, such as providing verbal reminders (2), creating needs (2), errorless instruction (2), reinforcing (2), showing models (2), explaining what to do (1), demonstration (1), taking roles (1), peer training (1), and repetition. Asli, Dilek, Gulsum, Hande, Hasan, Melek and Ziya declared their preference for modeling, as evidenced by the phrase “First I do, and then I wait for the kids to do as well.”

b. Teachers who thought they possessed an inadequate SS instruction competence.
Four teachers affirmed that they found themselves inadequate regarding the subject without stating a reason for their feeling. Banu, Gulsum, Hasan and Pakize stated that they were “inadequate” as regards SS instruction, and Pakize added
that “she felt very inadequate in real life SS
instruction.”

c. Teachers who found themselves adequate in
planning SS instruction. Two of the teachers
mentioned that they had no trouble while
planning SS instruction. Zeynep and Hasan
said “there isn’t anything too difficult for me”
in this.

d. Teachers who did not take responsibility of SS
instruction. Two teachers stated that there is
nothing that they can do about SS instruction
as teachers. Banu stated her opinion on SS
instruction by saying, “there is nothing we can
do for them.” Furthermore, Ferhat said, “we
are asking from these children to exhibit SS
that are possible only for children who are
typically developed.” Thus he stated his opin-
ion that children with developmental disabil-
ities could not acquire SS like their peers with-
out disabilities.

Suggestions Concerning SS Instruction

Eleven teachers made suggestions about SS
instruction. Those teachers’ suggestions were
as follows: (a) practice opportunities should
be provided while teachers were trained, in
order to acquire the competencies necessary
for SS instruction (6), (b) teachers should
have the opportunity to watch examples of SS
instruction (4), (c) teachers in training
should be provided with the time necessary
for the development of a SS instruction com-
petence (3), (d) there should be a separate SS
instruction course (2), (e) there should be
in-service training or conferences on the sub-
ject (2), (f) there should be planning for gen-
eralization (2), (g) there should be a variety of
instructed techniques (2), (h) there should be
community training (1), (i) there should be
more research on SS instruction (1), (j) the
concept of SS instruction should be broad-
ened (1), (k) teachers should be given exam-
amples of SS instruction plans (1), (l) teachers
should be given examples of different SS in
different environments (1), (m) children
should be taught SS by group instruction (1),
(n) there should be separate SS programs for
every child (1), (o) there should be an appro-
priate environment for SS instruction (1), (p)
there should be two or more teachers in the
classroom (1). Banu, Hande and Yesim em-
phasized the importance of practice opportu-
nities by saying “I may ace the exam, but this is
not important. What is important is how to
implement this knowledge.” Hande, Hasan,
Pakize and Zeynep stated that it would be
helpful “if videos were played in the classes.”
The numerals in the brackets show the fre-
quencies of the statements.

Discussion and Suggestions

The purpose of this study was to examine the
practices of teachers who provided services to
children with developmental disabilities at pri-
vate special education centers.

Half of the teachers emphasized the impor-
tance of SS instruction for children with de-
velopmental disabilities. This coincides with
the literature on this area (Cartledge & Kiarie,
2001; Driscoll & Carter, 2004; Elliott & Gresh-
am, 1987; Hillier et al., 2007; Odom et al.,
1999; Pierce-Jordan & Lifter, 2005). However,
it was interesting to see that teachers do not
exercise any systematic planning and practices
of SS instruction even though they constantly
emphasized the importance of it. Although
some teachers emphasized the importance of
SS instruction, it was interesting to see that
they did not feel responsible for SS instruc-
tion. In this context, it is possible to increase
the awareness of teachers by emphasizing the
function of SS for the children with DD in
their daily lives.

Like all other skills instruction, the first step
for SS instruction is to decide which skills to
teach. The literature suggests deciding which
skills to teach according to the child’s devel-
opmental level and his/her performance
(Cartledge & Kiarie, 2001; Driscoll & Carter,
2004; Licciardello et al., 2008; Pierce-Jordan &
Lifter, 2005). However, participants in this
study determined the SS to be instructed by
looking at the skills that children lack in the
environment where they work together. It is
possible for teachers to have expectations ac-
cording to the child’s physical development
and chronological age, when they do not take
into account the developmental level and per-
formance of the child. In this situation, teach-
ers may be unsuccessful in teaching SS, which
children were not developmentally ready to
be taught. In fact, in this study teachers felt
unsuccessful without stating any reason which
supports this possibility. Also, teachers re-
ported that they did not know which skills to work on in the concept of SS instruction. This feeling may be a result of the lack of knowledge of SS instruction in the undergraduate courses and in-service trainings they received. In order to close this knowledge gap, there could be separate courses for SS instruction specifically, in special education departments, or the content of SS instruction could be increased in other skills courses. For teachers who are in the field at the moment, there could be seminars and in-service training on SS instruction.

The second step of SS instruction is to decide how to teach. The literature suggests deciding how to teach SS according to the child’s developmental level and to the severity of the disability of the child. The literature also suggests that for young children it is appropriate to teach SS with their parents and peers in play, and that in later years it is appropriate to teach SS by peer tutoring (Driscoll & Carter, 2004; Guralnick et al., 2006; Guralnick et al., 2003; Licciardello et al., 2008; Pierce-Jordan & Lifter, 2005). Moreover, the selection could be planned according to the severity of the disability in environments that are natural or very structured (Rutherford et al., 1992; Kenneth & Forness, 1999). However, teachers in this study reported that they taught SS when necessary, without any systematic planning and that they used role modeling as the teaching method. These results are inconsistent with the literature on this subject. However, some participants stated that the information they received on SS instruction was very theoretical and they did not feel competent to determine a method according to the child’s developmental level, the severity of the disability and the particular skills that need to be taught. Also, they stated that they felt inadequate to put their knowledge into practice. Almost fifty percent of the participants reported that they did not know what to do about SS instruction. It seems impossible for teachers to implement appropriate methods of SS instruction without previously closing the gap of knowledge in this area. Although it might not be possible to have time to practice SS instruction in courses, it might be possible to show videos of suggested methods supported by research.

The last and one of the most important steps of SS instruction concerns the generalization of skills (Driscoll & Carter, 2004). In this study, fifty percent of the participants found family involvement to be insufficient in order for the children to use SS functionally and to become able to generalize these skills in their natural environments. The low expectation of families may prevent encouraging their children to use SS in their daily lives (Guralnick et al., 2006). However, teachers can solve the generalization issue in systematic instruction by using effective teaching methods. This situation once again brings to mind the participants’ inadequacy when it comes to planning. As a remedy for this, the course contents could be widened, in order to give the necessary skills for generalization instruction to pre-service teachers.

In sum, interviews demonstrated that teachers in the field had serious problems and inadequacies regarding SS instruction. The situations reported by the participants, in which they feel inadequate, such as determining which skills to teach and planning SS instruction, impacted negatively their other teaching practices. The participants required information related to a training that would help them increase their skills on SS instruction. As a result, in order to have a systematic planning and practicing on SS instruction, there should be supportive services for both pre-service and in-service teachers. In a few years, another study could be conducted with the same participants to see the effect of such supportive services for these teachers.

References


Received: 18 March 2009
Initial Acceptance: 10 May 2009
Final Acceptance: 8 September 2009