Teaching Social Decision Making

An essential element of the Improving Social Awareness-Social Problem Solving approach is an eight-step strategy students of all ages can use to cope with stress and to make informed decisions.

Our schools are now acknowledging that fostering the socialization of students must be counted among their primary goals. Educators and parents alike recognize that children are subjected to undesirable and confusing socialization messages from peer networks and from the music, television, motion picture, and print media (Maccoby 1983).

This "hidden curriculum" forms the context for much of what children are asked to do in school. Because of the prevalence of disrupted or troubled family circumstances, too many children do not hear stable, positive alternatives to these messages (Stephens 1981). Bronfenbrenner (1979) warns that the long-term impact is to undermine the constructive role of schooling and to create psychological casualties: children who grow up without the full range of competencies needed to manage an increasingly complex adult life.

To be successful, educators, parents, and policymakers cannot afford to ignore the hidden curriculum. Recent reviews suggest that effective schools are not organized around purely academic content (Rutter 1983, Wynne and Walberg 1985–86). Rather, explicit attention is paid to the social development of students. For schools beset by high dropout rates, teenage pregnancy, and subgroups that feel disenfranchised, a greater emphasis on basic academic skills is unlikely to reduce the number of students "at risk" for problems in adulthood—unless they include similar efforts to improve students' socialization and sense of "connectedness."

Historically, efforts to socialize students have come under the rubric of affective education. But critics agree that most school-based programs have not been viable alternatives to the hidden curriculum (Beane 1985–86) because they have been viewed as incidental to the main goal of transmitting basic skills. Fortunately, the new emphasis on critical thinking skills in *academic* domains coincides with powerful evidence of the importance of cognitive instruction in the *interpersonal* domain.

A Learning Laboratory

For the past eight years, the Improving Social Awareness-Social Problem Solving (ISA-SPS) Project has served as a learning laboratory for adults interested in building children's capacities to cope with stress and handle interpersonal situations (Elias 1985, Elias et al. 1982). The project began in Middlesex Borough, New Jersey, under the leadership of Virginia Brinson, Ronald Campbell, and Thomas Schuyler. Schools from other districts in New Jersey and in Illinois, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Washington, and also in England are now using the approach.

The core of the project is an action research collaboration involving Rutgers University, the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey-Community Mental Health Center at Piscataway, and the school systems of Central Valley, Middlesex Borough, Old Bridge, Perth Amboy, South Plainfield, and Woodbridge, New Jersey.

Building on the work of Dewey, Piaget, Shure and Spivack (1974), and others, the project is based on several key tenets.

1. *Teach an ordered sequence of skills.* A hierarchy of skills underlies competent interpersonal behavior, a primary aspect of which is children's social-cognitive problem-solving skills—those they use to analyze, understand, and prepare to respond to everyday problems, decisions, and conflicts.

2. *Focus on decision-making situations.* Many problems of our youth originate in concrete decision-making situations that usually occur in the absence of adult, or at least parental, supervision. Vandalism, school failure and dropping out, and substance abuse are among the difficulties that can begin through spontaneous encounters such as: "C'mon, let's spray-paint the school" ... "I can't believe you're worried about schoolwork. Forget it and forget class. Come with us" ... "You gotta smoke—everyone else is." A child's pathway to higher risk or to greater competence is strongly influenced by decisions made under high-pressure circumstances.

3. *Provide a cognitive strategy.* Traditional approaches to affective education too often are organized around *content*: a unit on alcohol, a unit on stereotypes and group differences, one on nutrition, and so on. Much more promising is a common framework that unifies the content areas and a strategy that can be employed across content areas to meet a variety of mandates. The ISA-SPS project has successfully used the framework of *decision making* and the strategy of *problem-solving thinking skills* with success in a number of schools. In essence, the steps shown in Figure 1 are presented in the language we currently use with elementary, middle, and high school students. Students learn these steps as a problem-solving strategy. Curriculum activities also include applications in a variety of decision-making situations (Elias and Clabby 1988). This approach capitalizes on the utility of thinking frames as organizers. It also reinforces learning and use of the strategy by preparing students to use decision-making skills in important life areas (Jones 1986, Perkins 1986).

4. *Make it usable by educators and parents.* Because the decision-making framework and the problem-solving strategy can be used consistently throughout or across all developmental periods, they provide educators and parents with powerful tools to combat the negative effects of the hidden curriculum. The eight sequential steps are the primary building blocks for helping children develop a strategy for generalized use in interpersonal and decision-making situations. As children grow, their understanding of situations and their cognitive abilities become more sophisticated. And yet, the decision-making framework taught to 4th graders can still be used in high school. Educators and parents can keep pace with these developmental changes, building on students' sound and growing foundation of skills and experiences.

5. *Build in activities to aid maintenance and generalization.* Given the psychological, social, and biological upheavals of the middle school years, the project team has devised a practical working principle based on social learning theory (Rotter 1954): maintenance and generalization of skills are a function of both the salience of the strategy and the extent to which the appropriate use of the strategy is reinforced by the environment.

Without reinforcement, many affective programs in the schools fail to achieve satisfactory carryover to the real world. For this reason, we build in application. We train teachers, special service personnel, educational administrators, and especially parents (Clabby and Elias 1986) in how to prompt and encourage children's use of problem solving as everyday decision-making situations occur.

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We have found that successful outcomes are obtained in direct proportion to the amount of maintenance and generalization actively encouraged in the children's environments. At their best, the eight skill-building steps become a shared language of problem solving, creating a school climate rich in social awareness, mutual problem solving, and a spirit of accomplishment. Children who learn decision-making skills develop a sense of "I can," which can prevent troubled students from giving up and students just beginning to experience difficulty from withdrawing.

Primary Working Principles
The eight steps are an amalgam of research findings about critical thinking and problem solving. Each step has important theoretical and practical links to positive socialization. The first step—*Look for signs of different feelings*—is an excellent example. Often omitted from thinking-oriented programs, this step represents students' potential entry into a cognitive problem-solving process. In a decision-making situation, affective cues will be present and relevant. If students learn to recognize feelings of stress, hassle, or uncertainty as a signal to begin problem solving, rather than a feeling to be eliminated or avoided by automatic flight-or-fight reactions, then they can exercise some cognitive control and use their problem-solving capabilities. Similarly, being able to attend to signs of others' feelings provides information essential for guiding a healthy response to a given situation.

Once feelings are acknowledged and put into words, they can be linked to a specific situation: "I feel nervous in my stomach because I have a test tomorrow" or "Those kids looked really tough and got me very worried." Then, the student can determine his or her goal in the situation—a necessary guide for effective behavior and problem resolution: "I want to do well on that test" or "I want to keep away from those tough kids."

Validation and Refinement of the Approach
Funding from the William T. Grant Foundation, the National Institute of Mental Health, the Middlesex County Board of Mental Health and Board of Chosen Freeholders, our host settings, and collaborating school districts has enabled us to evaluate the impact of ISA-SPS curriculums and various refinements and field-test the approach over an eight-year period. In the process, we have learned ways to enhance the effectiveness of the problem-solving approach. Perhaps the two most essential are (1) to teach students a set of "readiness for problem solving" skills that emphasizes building self-control and a sense of group awareness and trust that allow problem-solving and decision-making lessons to proceed more easily; and (2) to establish a set of principles to help guide the process of implementing, adopting, and institutionalizing the approach into the fabric of the school routine (cf. Commins 1986, Elias and Clabby 1984, Sarason 1982).

Evaluation findings from both regular education and classified students suggest that teachers can effectively teach the skills, that children enjoy the lessons and learn the skills, and that their learning is associated with improved coping with stressors, positive adjustment, and improved performance in academic areas linked to the problem-solving lessons (Elias 1985).

Countering the Hidden Curriculum
Reflect for a moment on the stress and disruptiveness that occur when one's goals are unclear or too numerous. Many of us are fortunate that socialization experiences were available when we were children that helped us learn to "read" situations and our feelings, focus on a problem, and define and prioritize our goals. However, the hidden curriculum and the family conditions noted earlier are reducing opportunities for today's children to learn these critical thinking steps naturally and have them consistently reinforced for use. Together, the eight

skill-building steps compose the elements of a sound and useful strategy that can help young people avoid serious socialization problems.□

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Arguments for and against particular curriculum content. For example, is California's new plan to emphasize history rather than "expanding environments" in the early grades a good or bad idea? Should the high school curriculum be like Secretary Bennett's James Madison school? We welcome reports of current projects intended to restructure curriculum content, and responses to the 1988 ASCD yearbook on *Content of the Curriculum.*
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Papers should be written in direct, conversational style and be as brief as possible (five to ten double-spaced pages).

References may be cited briefly in the text (Jones 1978) and listed in bibliographic form at the end of the article, but citations in the form of endnotes are also acceptable. For examples of either style, see *The Chicago Manual of Style* (13th edition, University of Chicago Press) or a recent issue. Please double-space everything.

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