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Components of Social Competence and Strategies of Support: Considering What to Teach and How

Heejeong Sophia Han[1] and Kristen Mary Kemple[1,2]

Decisions about how to support the development of young children's social competence must be made on the basis of knowledge of important competencies to be developed, as well as effective strategies to support those competencies. This paper combines a broad-definition model of components of social competence (Kostelnik, Stein, Whiren, Soderman, & Gregory, 2002) with a continuum model of support strategies ranging from most to least naturalistic (Kemple, 2004). Illustrations of specific strategies to support particular competencies are provided.

KEY WORDS: social competence; strategies; social skills; support.

To be a successful social member of human society there are many things one should know and be able to do. Simple things such as greeting someone in an appropriate way may be taken for granted by adults, but young children who are new to this society need to understand and acquire those social competencies. In early childhood, social competence has been defined as "the ability of young children to successfully and appropriately select and carry out their interpersonal goals" (Guralnick, 1990, p. 4), and socially competent young children have been described as "those who engage in satisfying interactions and activities with adults and peers" (Katz & McClellan, 1997, p. 1). Thus, social competence is indexed by effectiveness and appropriateness in human interaction and relationships.

IMPORTANT COMPONENTS OF SOCIAL COMPETENCE

The descriptions presented above focus primarily on the quality of interaction, as a component of relationship building and maintenance. Others have taken a broader view of social competence. Social competence has been described as involving the personal knowledge and skills which persons develop in order to deal effectively with life's many choices, challenges, and opportunities (Leffert, Benson, & Roehlkepartan, 1997). Building from this description, social competence has been conceptualized as consisting of six categories of competence: Adoption of social values, development of a sense of personal identity, acquisition of interpersonal skills, learning how to regulate personal behavior in accord with societal expectations, planning and decision-making, and development of cultural competence (Kostelnik et al., 2002). In the sections that follow, each of these components of social competence will be described.

Self-regulation

Self-regulation includes the abilities to control impulses, delay gratification, resist temptation and peer pressure, reflect on one's feelings, and monitor

[1]School of Teaching and Learning , University of Florida, PO Box 117048 Gainesville, FL 32611-7048, USA; e-mail: hjsophia@ufl.edu
[2]Correspondence should be directed to Kristen Mary Kemple, School of Teaching and Learning , University of Florida, PO Box 117048 Gainesville, FL 32611-7048, USA; e-mail: kkemple@coe.ufl.edu

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oneself (Kostelnik et al., 2002). Much of self-regulation involves the management of emotion. Emotional regulation is "the extrinsic and intrinsic processes responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions... to accomplish one's goals" (Thompson, 1994, pp. 27–28). In a recent study, preschoolers' emotional competence, including self-regulation, was found to contribute significantly to their long-term social competence (Denham et al., 2003). Much of this ability to regulate emotions develops from interaction with primary caregivers, from the child's inborn temperament, and from the match between caregiving and temperament (Calkins, 1994). However, as children enter the peer setting of early childhood programs, they continue to learn how to deal with various emotions such as frustration, joy, fear, anxiety, and anger (Cole, Michel, & Teti, 1994). Part of a teacher's role in strengthening social competence is to help children constructively channel and manage their feelings and impulses.

Interpersonal knowledge and skills

Social competence also includes understanding others' needs and feelings, articulating one's own ideas and needs, solving problems, cooperating and negotiating, expressing emotion, "reading" social situations accurately, adjusting behavior to meet the demands of different social situations, and initiating and maintaining friendships (Kostelnik et al., 2002; Odom et al., 2002). Acquiring social knowledge and mastering social skills are difficult and comprehensive tasks for young children; once children have learned new social knowledge and skills, they need to know when to use them, where to use them, and how to choose from among them (McCay & Keyes, 2002). Development and refinement of these skills is facilitated by the guidance of an informed teacher who knows when and how to offer support and teaching. Early childhood teachers can utilize a multitude of strategies and practices to enhance children's social knowledge and skills.

Positive self-identity

Positive self-identity, an intrapersonal category of social competence, includes sense of competence, personal power, sense of self-worth, and sense of purpose (Kostelnik et al., 2002). Children who feel good about themselves in these capacities are more likely to have positive interpersonal relationships, and anticipate success in their encounters with other people (Walsh, 1994). In turn, as a result of their social acceptance and success, it is likely that their positive sense of self-worth and competence is enhanced. The child with low self-esteem, on the other hand, can become trapped in a cycle of feelings of failure and rejection. How a child feels about herself is tied in important ways to other aspects of social competence. Early childhood teachers play an important role in facilitating the growth of a child's positive self-identity.

Cultural competence

Developing cultural competence includes acquiring knowledge of, respect for, and the ability to interact effectively and comfortably with people of varying ethnic or racial backgrounds. It also includes recognizing and questioning unfair treatment of others, and acting for social justice (Kostelnik et al., 2002). Individual cultures "prescribe what may be shared and how much, in what ways individuals may touch each other, what may and may not be said" (Katz & McClellan, 1997, p. 53). Lack of cultural awareness may lead to significant misunderstanding and even fear in young children. If children are appropriately encouraged to examine their feelings and attitudes, remain open to new information, and have opportunities to become familiar with a variety of people, they can build a foundation for cultural competence (Fry, 1994).

Adopting social values

This component of social competence is described as encompassing caring, equity, honesty, social justice, responsibility, healthy lifestyles and sexual attitudes, and flexibility. Social values are likely to vary by culture. Some more or less basic values may exist from culture to culture, yet these may be valued to different degrees and in different proportions across cultures. Social values may be defined and exemplified in varying ways from one culture to another. One social value often mentioned in the early childhood literature is the value of community. Building a sense of and appreciation for classroom community requires that children have an emerging awareness that they are part of a larger group, and that being considerate of others' needs and cooperative in interaction with others can benefit the group, themselves, and individual others. There are many strategies that teachers have used successfully to promote a sense of group cohesion (Howes & Ritchie, 2002).

Planning and decision-making skills

The ability to act in a purposeful way, by making choices, developing plans, solving problems, and carrying out positive actions to achieve social goals has been described as another important component of social competence (Kostelnik et al., 2002). Learning to make real and meaningful choices is generally considered an important goal of early education (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). As children engage in free play, for example, they gain important practice in making choices about where to play, what to play, how to play, and with whom to play. They develop plans (more or less consciously) for how to enter an attractive play activity already in progress, or how to create an airport in the block center. Teachers can help to scaffold young children's budding ability to be thoughtful, planful and intentional as they make decisions about social goals and as they act to carry out their plans.

SUPPORTIVE INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

A wide variety of strategies to support young children's emerging social competence has been supported by both the practical and research literature. A useful schematic for classifying strategies, as well as for making decisions about which strategies to consider first, is described by Fox, Dunlap, Hemmeter, Joseph, and Strain (2003). This hierarchical pyramid model suggests practitioners begin with naturalistic strategies such as developing meaningful relationships and creating a supportive classroom environment, and then move toward more specific and individualized teaching strategies and interventions as needed. A similar conceptualization describes four basic categories of intervention and support, along a continuum from most to least naturalistic: Environmental arrangements, naturalistic strategies, planned routine activities, and higher intensity interventions (Kemple, 2004). This model is used to organize the strategies described below.

Environmental arrangement

In any early childhood education program, adults and children interact within an environmental context. Broadly defined, this context includes the physical structures, objects, and organization of the classroom; the temporal organization of routines and activities; and the emotional climate of the setting. These elements can be manipulated to create the most optimal setting for children's social competence to flourish.

Arranging the physical environment is a fundamental step to facilitate the growth of social competence. Arranging the classroom into well-defined interest areas that can accommodate small groups of children sets the stage for the development of *interpersonal skills and knowledge*. As children disperse into smaller groups, the social demands are more manageable for young children. Some interest areas are more social in nature (e.g., blocks and dramatic play/housekeeping), and provide excellent opportunities for practice of social skills through the process of play. Other areas can provide private spaces that support *self- regulation*. Cozy private space where the rule is "one child at a time" (a beanbag chair, a refrigerator box with a cut out door, a pup tent) can provide a freely chosen retreat for the relaxed downtime that children sometimes need to cope with over stimulation or frustration (Moore, 1996). Careful selection of types and amounts of material can influence *positive self-identity*: materials that present the appropriate levels of challenge, and with which children can therefore be successful, contribute to children's feelings of competence.

Evidence suggests that young children are more likely to engage in peer interaction during informal free choice time than other times of the school day (Sainato & Carta, 1992), and a bare minimum of 30 minutes is recommended as appropriate for preschoolers (Christie & Wardle, 1992). Well-planned daily schedules or routines support children's *self-regulation*, as they manage their own activity pace. A developmentally appropriate schedule provides children with adequate time to practice *planning and decision-making skills* as they make and carry out plans for how to use their free choice time (Katz & McClellan, 1997).

Naturalistic strategies

Naturalistic strategies can be defined as those supportive techniques that are integrated within the natural flow of classroom interaction (Kemple, 2004). They require teachers' awareness, quick thinking, and thoughtful intentional use, but require minimal time and effort to use. Naturalistic strategies include 'on-the-spot support' and 'conflict mediation'.

On-the-spot support refers to the more or less spontaneous coaching and modeling that many teachers do almost continually within the natural context of school activities and routines (Ramsey, 1991). It may also include reinforcement which is embedded in natural interaction. A more structured

and pre-planned form of on-the-spot support has sometimes been referred to as "incidental teaching" (see Conroy & Brown, 2002). On-the-spot support can be used to promote *social knowledge and skills*. For example, a child's vocabulary for emotional expression can be enhanced when her teacher sees her scribbling a hole into her paper and says, "Rachel, you look very frustrated". This strategy, sometimes referred to as "affective reflection" (Kostelnik et al., 2002), provides Rachel with a word for what she is feeling. The powerful potential of this strategy is that the child hears the vocabulary word at the same time she is experiencing the physiological "feeling" of the emotion, and while she is still within the circumstance that precipitated the emotion. Thus, she is better able to use the word in the future to express her feelings.

Self-regulation can be supported through on-the-spot intervention. For example Phillip, who is anxiously and restlessly awaiting a turn on the cargo bike, can be reminded, "Wait. You can be patient, Phillip. Tell yourself, 'I can wait. I can wait'". This example combines attribution and self-talk to scaffold the child's ability to delay gratification.

Reinforcement refers to consequences that increase the likelihood that a particular social behavior will be repeated. Social reinforcement (praise, a smile, a pat on the back) can be used to support *adoption of social values*. For example, when a teacher notices evidence of caring, honesty, or responsibility, she can give a smile or a hug and say, "That was kind of you to help Jerome. He looked sad when his cupcake fell upside down," or, "You told the truth. I guess that was hard to do" or, "Thank you for remembering to put your sweater in your cubby. Now no one will step on it". Social reinforcement can support cooperation, interest in others, and acts of simple kindness, as well as *positive self-identity* and *planning and decision-making skills*, as when a teacher uses praise that is individualized, genuine, and specific like "You worked hard at that construction. You decided what you wanted to do, you made a plan, and you did it!"

Conflict mediation is the process of scaffolding young children's budding ability to resolve conflict through discussion, and without resorting to aggression. Conflict mediation is a special case of naturalistic teaching, which requires knowledge of a sequence of several steps. This process is designed to scaffold children's emerging ability to identify a conflict, share points of view, generate potential solutions, come to agreement on a solution to try, carry it out, and evaluate its success. Much has been written about the use of this process in early childhood programs (for example, see Carlsson-Paige & Levin, 1992; Dinwiddie, 1994). Conflict mediation is a naturalistic strategy which can be used to support acquisition of *interpersonal skills and knowledge*, including cooperation; compromising; acknowledging rights; and communicating ideas, needs, and feelings.

Planned routine activities

Planned routine activities are more structured and pre-meditated than the on-the-spot strategies described above. As is true of activity planning in general, a teacher who intends to use these strategies begins with particular objectives in mind. Activities are then designed for the purpose of maximizing the likelihood that children will attain the objectives. Planned routine activities to support social competence may fall into the following categories: cooperative learning activities; PALS centers; literature sharing and discussion; puppetry; group affection activities; singing, listening to, and reflecting about songs; and group discussion of real-life classroom social issues (Kemple, 2004). Two of these strategies will be described below.

Group affection activities

As exemplified below, group affection activities have been defined as typical preschool games, songs, and activities that have been modified to include teacher prompts for varying types of affectionate responses (McEvoy, Twardosz, & Bishop, 1990).

> A group of fifteen 3 ~ 4-year-old children are together for the circle time, singing a teacher-facilitated version of 'If you're happy and you know it'. Instead of the original, the children sing and enact the following: "If you're happy and you want to show it hug your friend... If you're happy and you want to show it pat your friend..." and so forth.

This strategy increases interaction by allowing all children to make contact and exchange friendly behaviors through non-threatening and fun activities. (Twardosz, Nordquist, Simon, & Botkin, 1983). Group affection activities can easily be employed to enhance use of *interpersonal skills* such as expressing affection, making friendly contact with others, and maintaining friendly relationships. This strategy also has great potential to enhance *cultural competence* by encouraging children to make friendly and affectionate contact with peers of various culture, race, or disability. This playful, "break-the-ice" practice can enhance children's comfort with and respect for

persons who are different from themselves (For more specific information about how to develop and implement affection activities, see McEvoy, Twardosz, & Bishop, 1990.).

PALS (Peer-Assisted Learning Strategy) center

A PALS center provides a structure within which small groups of children have multiple opportunities to practice a wide variety of social skills (Chandler, 1998). In creating a PALS center, the adult identifies specific social competence objectives for an individual child, and creates a structured small group play situation, which optimizes the child's opportunity to learn and/or practice the targeted competencies. The teacher does this by carefully selecting specific peer participants and materials, and by communicating clear expectations and goals for the children's activity. Research has demonstrated that children showed an increased frequency in peer interaction when playing in a PALS center, and some children were able to generalize peer social skills to other free play activities (Chandler, 1998). Depending on the objectives the teacher sets, the materials she selects, and the way she structures the PALS center activity, this strategy can be used to support *positive self-identity, interpersonal skills, self-regulation, planning and decision-making skills, cultural competence*, and *adoption of social values*. (For more detail information about PALS centers, see Chandler, 1998).

Higher intensity interventions

This category includes high intensity coaching and training interventions. These highly planned, teacher-directed, and teacher-monitored approaches typically involve directly instructing children in social skills and using intentional alteration of social contingencies to influence behavior. These interventions are often based on a careful functional assessment of the child's behavior (Chandler & Dahlquist, 2002). High intensity interventions are typically used for children with very significant difficulties related to social competence, for whom less intensive interventions (like environmental arrangement and on-the-spot teaching) have been deemed insufficient. Successful implementation of these higher intensity interventions requires both the combined expertise of the general classroom teacher and other professionals who possess knowledge and skills in behavior analysis, prompting, and effective use of reinforcement (for further information, see Kemple, 2004; Odom et al., 2002).

Higher intensity interventions include adult-mediated intervention and peer-mediated intervention. Adult-mediated intervention refers to a variety of approaches including teacher-provided prompts for social interaction, and teacher-provided reinforcement for social interaction. In peer-mediated interventions, adults teach a peer or group of peers to provide encouragement or reinforcement to the target child for a specific social behavior. The teacher's involvement, in this type of intervention, is with the selected peer or peers rather than with the target child. The teacher may closely monitor the intervention procedures, but does not intervene directly with the target child. Both adult-mediated and peer mediated high intensity interventions are typically used to increase specific desired behaviors that fall within the social competence categories of *interpersonal skills*, *self-regulation*, and *planning and decision-making skills*.

A FINAL WORD ABOUT CULTURE

A substantial majority of what we know about socially competent behavior, as well as teachers' strategies to support the growth of social competence, are based on studies of children in Western society, and North American culture in particular. It cannot be assumed that the same specific competencies are equally important in all cultures (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998). A growing body of literature suggests that they are not (Mendez, McDermott, & Fantuzzo, 2002; LaFreniere et al., 2002). Because we cannot assume that social skills, knowledge, and attitudes are universal, we also cannot assume that the same strategies for supporting the emergence of social competence are appropriate across cultures. This is particularly important to consider in early childhood settings which include children of various cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

While we have discussed the importance of children's growing cultural competence, it is of even greater importance that early childhood professionals (teachers, teacher educators, and researchers, for example) develop cultural competence. Questions of what constitutes culturally responsive teaching are of importance in all areas of teaching, but especially so in the social realm. How we interact and maintain relationships with others truly lies at the core of being human. Teaching and guidance in this realm must be handled with care, awareness, and sensitivity.

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