Outcomes for young children's social status from playing group games: Experiences

from a primary school in Hong Kong.

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Research Ethics   The study was approved by the Human Research Ethics

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study involved a structured group-games intervention to develop

first-grade students' social competence. The effects were evaluated by assessing

possible outcomes for the children's social status. A sample of 119 first-grade

mixed-ability students from a Hong Kong primary school participated in the sessions

(63 males; 56 females: mean age 74 months). Sessions were led by trained

parent-volunteers and involved a 60-minute session each week for eight weeks in the

children's own classrooms. Peer nominations were used before and after intervention

to assess participants' social status under five possible categories   popular, rejected,

controversial, neglected and average. Improvement in children's social awareness

and social status was noted following the intervention. Children's competence in

playing group-games was found to be positively correlated with their social

acceptance. The findings support the value of early social intervention in classrooms

as a practical way for preparing first-grade students for primary school life.

Key words: first-grade students, group-games, Hong Kong, peer status, play, social

competence, social intervention

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Introduction

Peer relationships and social status are believed to reflect an individual's underlying

social competence (Cillessen, 2011; Ladd, 2005), and social status among peers is

predictive of children's later social and psychological adjustment (Newcomb,

Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993; Parker & Asher, 1987). The influence of good peer

relationships on students can result in feelings of 'school connectedness', which in

turn has an impact upon students' academic outcomes and personal growth (Ross,

Shochet, & Bellair, 2010; Thomas & Smith, 2004). International research literature

reports high correlations between social competence, peer relations and academic

success in Western cultures (Bukowski, Cillessen, & Velasquez, 2012; McCelland,

Morrison & Holmes, 2000; Powdrill, 2004), and the same appears to hold true in

Chinese studies (Chen, He, & Li, 2004; Chen et al., 2010). Social status is therefore

an attribute that needs to be considered and fostered in the early years of schooling.

Background

Under the Hong Kong education system, young children normally study three years

at privately-run kindergartens before entering a primary school, where they then

spend six years (Hong Kong Education Bureau, 2014a). The competition for

first-year primary places, particularly in elite schools, is always intense, so

kindergarten programmes tend to be academically-oriented, often limiting the

amount of time children can spend in play. This is important, because children need

to acquire appropriate social skills in order to settle easily into a new school

environment (Eccles, 1999; Rodkin et al., 2013). In addition, recent education

reforms have placed increased emphasis on using collaborative project-work in

primary classrooms, and this means that children need even better social skills to

work cooperatively (Hong Kong Education Bureau, 2014b).

Concern has increased in recent years that young children's social competence

may be declining, and that this in turn adversely affects their adaptation as they move

into primary school learning environments. This declining social competence has

been observed in Hong Kong, due perhaps to limited chances for a child to play with

siblings or peers in families with only one child. Though play is not the only means

to develop social skills, playing provides the natural context where children can

socialize through interacting with each other (Fleer, 2013; Newton & Jenvey, 2011).

Family size has been decreasing in recent years, from 3.1 in 2001 to 2.9 in

2011(Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, 2012). Many parents also work

long hours and so have less time to play with their children, and the children also

seem to have less time to interact socially during recess at school (Estes, 2005; Ng et

al., 2003; Yip, 1999). There has been a rapid increase in solitary activities such as the

use of digital devices. For example, the Hong Kong Department of Health (2014)

reported that some toddlers began using tablet computers at an average age of 16

months; and one in five primary and secondary pupils interviewed spent more than

three hours a day with electronic devices. Such 'addiction' to these devices may be

contributing to children's reduced social interaction with peers (Hirsh-Pasek &

Golinkoff, 2004; Shek, Tang & Lo, 2009). Social skills can only be gained and

practised through interpersonal interactions (Csoti, 2009; Plummer, 2008) such as

those offered by opportunities to mix and play with others (Fleer, 2013).

In Chinese culture, parents are generally more concerned about children's

academic achievement than their social development, and they may be relatively

unaware of a child's lack of social competence with peers at school (Chen et al.,

2004; Chen & Jiang, 2002; Leung 2010). However, where children lack social

competence it is essential that some form of intervention is provided to increase their

skills. Bloomquist (2013) has rightly pointed out that children can only really work

on social skills through opportunities to interact directly with peers. Under these

circumstances, pre-schools and primary schools must endeavour to play a more proactive role in creating opportunities for social interactions among students.

Many young children may experience mild social difficulties for a short period for example when transferring to a new environment   but this does not reach a clinical level of severity requiring specific therapeutic intervention. Instead, the programme described here is intended to prevent these young students from missing out socially through disengagement from group activities, or through inappropriate behaviour causing peer rejection. Such problems can result in delay in social development and academic difficulties (Guralnick, 2011; Kjøbli & Sørlie, 2008).

Early intervention

Early intervention is intended to enhance children's social competence and increase the likelihood of positive school experiences and learning outcomes (Palmen et al., 2011). Researchers recommended *school-wide* social intervention for all children to prevent intensifying problems associated with social incompetence (Algozzine & Algozzine, 2005; Lane, Wehby, Robertson & Rogers, 2007).

Social intervention programmes are relatively common in Western contexts (Cohen, Duncan, & Cohen, 1994; Margolin, 2001; Parton & Manby, 2009), including some with a focus on social competencies for transition into formal schooling

(Fabian & Dunlop, 2002). In the US there are also early intervention programmes to support children's peer-related social competence (Guralnick, 2011; Pellegrini et al., 2002).

When children do not have adequate opportunities to acquire and practise social skills in free play, they may require play-based social intervention to develop and reinforce these skills (Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2005; Greene et al., 2011; Resiliency Resource Centre, 2011). In the West, social skills in young children are commonly developed through informal activities such as free play and unstructured games rather than through direct teaching or intervention (Macintyre & McVitty, 2003; Papalia et al., 2012). However, for some children   particularly those who may lack easy access to neighbourhood play opportunities, like children in Hong Kong where high-rise buildings and crowded streets are the norm   a more structured and deliberate approach may be needed to enhance the social learning process.

Research gap in Hong Kong context

Peer status has been the focus of research attention in Western cultures for many years (Coie & Dodge, 1983; Crick & Ladd, 1990; Mayer et al., 2007). Until recently the topic was relatively neglected in Chinese settings, but there are now more studies emerging that have examined the impact of peer group on social competence (e.g.,

Chen, Chang, & He, 2003; Chen et al., 2004; Xu et al., 2008). This has included

research focused on preschoolers (Chen & Jiang, 2002), middle childhood (Xu et al.,

2008; Schwartz, Chang, & Farver, 2001), and longitudinal studies (Chen et al., 2010).

However, locally the studies have mostly targeted adolescents (Chang, 2003; Ma et

al., 2000) or have focused on *the effects* of peer status, rather than evaluating

outcomes from social intervention to improve status (Chang, et al., 2007; Schwartz,

Tom, & Chang, 2010). Studies on school-wide social programmes are fairly limited,

and those that exist have been concerned mostly with secondary schools (Shek et al.,

2009; Sun & Shek, 2010; Tong & Zhan, 2012), sixth-grade students (Hui & Chau,

2009), or with therapeutic approaches for children with special educational needs

(Caldarella et al., 2009; Lak et al., 2010). None have explored the issue of improving

social competence at first-year primary school level.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to provide first-grade children with a programme that

encourages social competence by using group-games as the training medium. The

intention was to evaluate the outcomes by reference to any changes in each child's

social status, as perceived by peers participating in the same group. To our

knowledge this is the first study evaluating a classroom-based social intervention

programme for first-grade students in Hong Kong.

Rationale

Playing games and interacting with peers is believed to help all children learn to get

along together. This principle is underpinned by theories of child development

(Piaget, 1970) and by social learning theory based on the work of Vygotsky (1978).

Within Vygotsky's theory, social interaction with adults and more competent peers

helps children advance positively within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

Similarly, the notion of a 'Social Play Continuum' (Broadhead, 2006) concurs with

the concept of ZPD by depicting a progression of social development through play

enhanced by adult intervention.

Play is a bridge connecting children socially, and has positive implications for

their social competence and adjustment (Erikson, 1977; Fleer, 2013; Frost et al.,

2005). Erikson suggested that in the early years, children naturally learn to cooperate

with peers and adults, but those who experience social difficulties can be at

long-term risk. Contemporary studies concur that children who lack interactive play

with peers are impeded in their social functioning. This is true in both Western

culture (Broadhead, 2006; Leadbeater & Hoglund, 2009) and Chinese culture (Chen

et al., 2008; Chen et al., 2004; Chen & Jiang, 2002).

The social programme

The social programme implemented in this study (Hong Kong Education Bureau,

2006) utilized the interactive nature of group-games, structured with specific learning

targets covering communication, interpersonal skills, cooperation and team building.

The intervention was in accord with the concept of 'eduplay' (Leung, 2010; Rao &

Li, 2009)   that is, deliberately helping young children learn from their social

experiences beyond simply participating in an activity. The programme adopts a play

approach that can include children from different ability levels in an inclusive setting.

Through differentiation of activities, and by adding variations, the approach could

meet the needs of the high-ability children as well as those who were less advanced

(Renzulli & Reis, 2008; VanTassel-Baska, 2011). The activities were designed to

create social opportunities for all children to interact very frequently with classmates.

Format of the social intervention

The intervention involved a block of 60 minutes of contact per week for eight weeks

in children's own classrooms. Students played in groups immediately after the lunch

period. Each classroom was cleared, with tables moved to the walls, leaving chairs

arranged in a U shape surrounding a center area. The format of a 60-minute

intervention is presented in Appendix 1 using the first session as an example. The

same general format was applied in all seven sessions.

A key element in playing the group-games was to maintain *game order*.

Children took turns to lead a game, and all players learned to respect the leader.

Gradually children would adjust to the routines and rhythms of playing together, and

more time would be spent on playing more rounds of games. The time spent on

setting out game order (illustrated in Appendix 1) would be reduced accordingly. The

themes and activities implemented in each intervention session are described in

Appendix 2. Children first practised simple games by responding to instructions;

then games were increased gradually in complexity, and were differentiated by

adding variations, as illustrated in Appendix 3.

Parent-volunteers scaffold social learning

The programme deployed parents as volunteers to play group-games with the young

children. Before the intervention began, the parent-volunteers attended two half-day

workshops where they learned how to conduct and manage group-games to achieve

the intended learning outcomes. During these training sessions they practised the

activities described in Appendix 1, 2 and 3. Their two key roles were to encourage

participation, and to help children interpret and reflect upon meaning of social cues

in their interactions with peers.

When playing with the children, parent-volunteers were also expected to recognize and reinforce children's use of positive social behaviours, such as sharing, taking turns, being helpful, expressing ideas, and following rules. Parent-volunteers selected a child who exhibited positive behaviours to lead each game. This procedure is in keeping with the concept of 'social modeling' (Stephens, 1992) where children learn through observing and imitating others. In addition, the children were helped to understand that their desirable behaviours would be rewarded when performed (contingency management). Even without prior contingencies, parent-volunteers would also catch and praise the moments when children performed appropriate social or pro-social behaviours (social reinforcement: Stephens, 1992). The techniques were based on well-established reinforcement theories for building positive habits (Fisher, Piazza, & Roane, 2011). Scaffolding of social learning through adult intervention in the programme is illustrated in Appendix 4.

The programme was structured with different games to engage children with different learning styles and preferences, and to introduce different game skills. The parents were able to apply flexibility in choosing different games, as long as the intended social learning outcomes were met.

Playing group-games naturally involved social interactions, during which

positive behaviours were always reinforced. The practice of scaffolding social

learning (Appendix 4) was implemented in each session, regardless of the actual

games being played. The programme was structured in such a way that each session

was based on a different theme and was self-contained. In other words, participation

in a session was not dependent on having participated in a previous session; any

children who were absent occasionally were thus not disadvantaged. The

parent-volunteers recorded attendance figures for their groups. The rate of

absenteeism was low during each intervention   on average, fewer than three

children were absent per class.

METHOD

The target school was selected because it had operated the social intervention

programme for every new cohort of first-grade students since 2006.

Participants

Students: All child participants in the intervention (N = 119) were first-grade

Hong Kong students who had recently joined the school (age range 5.67 to 6.57

years, mean 74 months, SD=0.29 year; 63 boys and 56 girls). Written parental

consent was received from 119 (96.7%) out of 123 first-grade students invited to take

part. Only one boy was absent during the nomination activity. The students were

based in four primary classrooms (class size 30 to 31). The programme operated as a classroom module during normal school hours, and attendance rate was above 90%.

Demographic variables for the participating children were similar in terms of socio-economic status (mainly middle class families), ethnicity (97.6% Chinese), and native language (96.7% Cantonese).

Trainers of parent-volunteers: A total of 6 trainers participated. They were experienced adults who had completed game-skills training. To maintain strict confidentiality and avoid bias or conflict of interest, trainers were not to be parents of any participating children. The trainers were also responsible for overall management of the programme, and for conducting the one-to-one data collection interviews with the children.

Parent-volunteers: A total of 24 parents participated. They were volunteers from parents of first-grade students, and were assigned to play group-games with the students. These parent-volunteers always worked with their child's classmates, not directly with their own child. There were two parents in each group, and three groups in each of the four classes.

Procedure

Peer Nomination by first-grade students: The data collected before and after

the intervention comprised children's nominations of the three *most-liked* (ML) and

three *least-liked* (LL) classmates to play with. This procedure followed that

recommended by Coie et al. (1982). The information was then analyzed to identify

five categories of social status (popular, rejected, controversial, neglected, and

average) after summing the ML and LL choices each child received from classmates.

Social preference (SP) was obtained by the subtraction of LL score from ML score.

Social impact (SI) was computed by the addition of ML and LL scores. Finally, five

socio-metric status groups were formed: *popular* (SP>1.0, ML >0, LL<0); *rejected*

(SP<-1.0, ML <0, LL>0); *neglected* (SI<-1.0, ML <0, LL<0); *controversial* (SI>1.0,

ML >0, LL>0); *average* (SP>-1.0, SI <1.0). For interpretation purposes, popular

children *and* average children are regarded as having *positive social status* (were

relatively liked by peers). Rejected children and neglected children are regarded as

having *negative social status*. 'Controversial' children are those with conflicting

liked and disliked votes.

Data were collected at the beginning (Time 1) and at the end of the intervention

period (Time 2) to evaluate outcomes for children's social competence and to

identify any changes in their peer relations status. The academic year in Hong Kong

runs from early September to June, so the initial data were collected in late

September to allow students to become familiar with their classmates in different

study and play scenarios. Prior to the study commencing, the school had arranged for

all first-grade students to become well acquainted with each other by joining in

'getting-to-know-you' activities during an orientation week.

Qualitative data were collected from multiple informants for analysis.

Informants included the trainers (n=6), parent-volunteers (n=24), and the first-grade

students (n=119). After the intervention, informants completed the same procedures.

Prior to individual interviews (Time 1), each participating student viewed

photos of all classmates (n = 30 or 31) to become very familiar with names and faces.

The photo chart was then used by the six trainers during the one-to-one interview

when students were asked to nominate 'most liked' and 'least liked'. Trainers used a

standard script to ensure consistency of the procedure. The overall atmosphere

enabled the children to enjoy the naming activity as if they were participating in a

game. To increase the fun, a neon ring was used to circle the photo of each choice.

Each child was also asked to give reasons to justify each 'most liked' choice, but not

'least liked' (for ethical reasons). Exactly the same activity was carried out after the 8

weeks of intervention (Time 2). Any change an individual's status was noted.

The qualitative data from reasons given for 'most liked' choices were decoded

and categorised according to 14 social indicators in the *Early School Behavior*

Rating Scale (ESBS; Caldwell & Pianta, 1991), as well from any unique reasons that

came from children's stated justifications. Social indicators were descriptions such as:

"X shares toys or materials", "X helps with tasks at school", "X likes to meet new

people", "X is a leader in groups". All nomination reasons given by the children

could fit into the 14 ESBS categories, except the item "play well on his/ her own".

 Focus group interview: Focus group interviews with the six trainers were

conducted after each peer nomination activity. During the interview, trainers reported

their observation of children's responses (e.g. child's confidence level, speed of

responding, any evidence of careful thinking rather than impulsive choosing). This

information was used where relevant to complement the quantitative analysis of the

nomination records.

 Parent-volunteer Nominations: After the second week of the programme   and

without knowing the results of the first peer nominations   the parent-volunteers

began to use ESBS (Caldwell & Pianta, 1991) to identify the social behaviours of the

individual children during group-games, and to identify those who did not play well

in their groups. The social indicators were related to the interactive nature of

group-games such as: "Plays well with other children", "Follows rules" and "Sits still

to watch or listen". While at first glance "sitting still" may not seem like a social skill, in this study "sits still" at appropriate times is interpreted as socially desired behaviour in a group-learning context. Children who sit still to watch and listen are demonstrating appropriate self-regulation necessary for successful participation in a cooperative group situation (Savina, 2014). They are able to attend to instructions and can retain the rules of a game in memory. Less socially competent children tend not to sit still, and often have a poor attention span and impulse control (Newton & Jenvey, 2011).

RESULTS

At commencement of intervention (Time 1)

The socio-metric results indicated that within the total group of students 10.9 % were rejected, 16.8% were neglected, 6.7% controversial, 51.3% average, and 14.3% popular. This distribution is not markedly different from the reference range suggested by Cillessen (2009; 2011) for fixed nominations (i.e., 15% popular or rejected, 5 to 10% neglected or controversial, and 55% average). In this sample the percentage rated as rejected was slightly lower, and those rated as neglected was slightly higher. Results also agree with Cillessen (2009; 2011) who suggested that research reveals girls are more popular than boys (in the study reported here the ratio

was 11 girls to 6 boys), and more rejected boys than girls (here the ratio was 11 boys

to 2 girls).

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

Negative social status and play competencies

At Time 1, parent-volunteers identified 34 children (28 boys, 6 girls) out of 119

(28.6 %) as 'inferior players' who did not play well with other children or follow

rules at group-games. Results indicated that 12 out of 13 rejectees (92.3%) and all 8

controversial children (100%) nominated by their peers were identified as inferior

players by parent-volunteers. Play competencies in group-games were therefore

highly correlated with rejected and controversial social status. Of all neglected peers

(9 boys, 11 girls), only 6 were identified as inferior players, but more than half (2

boys and 9 girls) improved to positive status. All popular children at Time 1 had

maintained a positive social status after intervention, except one popular girl who had

changed to neglected status.

Following the intervention, one rejected boy (who was not an inferior player)

performed well in the group activities and increased to positive social status. The

only popular boy identified as inferior player gradually began to play well, and thus

maintained a popular status. Among the total of 34 inferior players, 26 were also

rated as having negative social status (76.5%). Those rated as average increased from

7 to 13, while children of controversial status and neglected status decreased from 8

to 5 and 6 to 2 respectively. Out of the 8 controversial children (7 boys, 1 girl), 3

improved to average status (all boys). Attention was drawn to the 9 rejectees who

remained at rejected status, and the 4 inferior players (2 controversial, 1 neglected, 1

average) who became rejectees. This had occurred even though most had shown

some improvement in play performance during group-games. It was clear that, for

them, further interventions would be required.

[INSERT TABLE 2 HERE]

After Intervention: Most Liked (ML) and Like Least (LL)

After intervention, only 3 students (2.5%) kept all nominations from Time 1

unchanged. In contrast, 31 students (26.1%) made three new ML choices, 60 students

(50.4%) nominated 2 new ML peers, and 25 students (21%) voted 1 new peer. This

trend may simply reflect that at this age perceptions of others often change quite

quickly as children get to know each other better. Results indicated that some

children may meet new friends while keeping established friendships. Multiple

friendship relationships were also noticed; that is, Child A played with B, and B liked

to play with C, then A liked C. The social circle of each individual child was

enlarging. According to the nomination record, after the programme 16 children out of 119 (13.4%) nominated only 'like-most' peers and did not name any 'like least' peers.   In addition, one-third of the children did not nominate all 3 least-liked peers.

Findings from Trainers

During the first nomination period (Time 1), children were observed to have difficulty giving perceptive reasons to justify their choices of 'like most' and 'like least', and took longer time to come up with an explanation. There were 13 cases of children who nominated others but couldn't give reasons. Children generally gave a brief reason such as "we have recess together" (23.7%), "same kindergarten" [or] "knew her before" (15.1%) and "on same school bus [or] in same group" (13.3%). At Time 2 reasons were more perceptive and carefully considered, perhaps based on their increasing social experience and knowledge of the class members. At Time 2 only 2 students could not state a reason for a choice. They also resisted making 'least liked' choices, possibly because they had increased empathy for the feeling of others, or because basically they didn't *dislike* anyone. Trainers reported that children explicitly related their justifications to their play experience in recess.

Trainers reported that at Time 2 all children except two could identify all classmates from the 30 -31 photographs, again suggesting broader social awareness.

Children also described experiences hinting at increasing informal social contacts across the class, such as chatting with X at school bus stop, going to library with Y, and so on.

Findings from Parent-volunteers

Parent-volunteers reported their nominations of inferior players in their groups. They identified 34 children out of 119 as inferior players at Time 1. During the pre-intervention workshops the parents had enjoyed rehearsing the games, but had then been very surprised to find out during the early weeks that children were not used to playing cooperatively together. They could not comprehend why the children were unable to cooperate, had poor attention spans, and did not listen to instructions. This situation caused some problems at first in establishing rules and game order. Additionally, progress would be hindered when too many inferior players were allocated to one group. The parent-volunteers found it was best to operate with no more than two inferior players in a group of 10 children. This ratio could allow the inferior players to learn from their competent peers with adequate adult intervention. The parent-volunteers reported that most inferior players engaged in group activities with their classmates by the fourth session.

Out of 14 social behaviours (Caldwell & Pianta, 1991), the parent-volunteers

found that some social indicators were highly correlated with the interactive nature

of group-games   "Plays well with other children", "Gets along well with other

children", "Follows rules", "Follows directions" and "Sits still to watch or listen".

These specific skills were improved noticeably during intervention. When children

became familiar with the rhythm of play in groups they could interact positively and

find group activities enjoyable. More social attributes could then be observed and

reinforced such as "Accepts correction or criticism", "Is aware of others' feelings",

"Seems proud of what he/she does", "Is a good leader in groups" "Likes to meet new

people" and "Seems happy".

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Transition to school

This study involved the delivery of a games-based social intervention aimed at

developing first-grade students' social competence for a smooth transition to formal

schooling. The programme was an approach that enabled children of different ability

levels to join in successfully. The intervention encouraged children to follow rules,

listen to instructions, and cooperate within the group (Frost et al., 2005; Papalia,

2012). The games were intended to facilitate social interactions among children and

enhance the learning of positive social behaviours (Stephens, 1992). It was expected

that between Time 1 and Time 2 most students would discover a great deal about

their classmates through playing and working with them and forming friendships.

The model could have value in schools for monitoring students' social development

and social status as it changes over time.

It is fully acknowledged that many factors other than the programme content

could have influenced changes in children's social status over the period between the

Time 1 and Time 2 assessments. A study with a control group that did not experience

the programme would be required to discover whether the observed changes could be

directly attributed to the intervention. The results above are therefore interpreted with

some degree of caution.

Social awareness

Improvements in social growth and awareness were most evident in the students'

increased ability at Time 2 to provide much more perceptive reasons for liking

certain students more than others in the peer group. Most children at Time 2 could

explain their preferences with multiple reasons to justify their social choices.

Self-regulation

Findings during the early sessions of the programme indicated that about

one-third of participants were identified as 'inferior players'. There is some recent

evidence in the research literature to support the use of 'games with rules' to promote

self-regulation and positive social relations (Savina, 2014); so it was expected that as

these children became familiar with the rhythm of play in groups they would acquire

better social skills and competencies, and transfer them to other group settings.

Narrowing the gender difference

Results indicated a high proportion of rejected boys and controversial boys

(n=18 boys) relative to girls (n = 3) at the start of the intervention. This concurred

with studies that young boys are more likely than girls to have social and behavioural

problems (Barbu, Cabanes & Le Maner-Idrissi , 2011; Cook & Cook, 2009). After

the intervention 6 boys, including the rejected boy who was not an inferior player,

had improved to positive status. These boys may have benefitted from the

programme by improving their self-regulation and their communication skills in the

social setting (Savina, 2014). The gender difference in social competence was

therefore narrowed at Time 2.

Status of neglected children improved

Overall, a high percentage of neglected children (9 girls and 2 boys out of 20)

improved to a positive status by the end of the intervention. This was supported by

the qualitative analysis of comments from parent-volunteers and trainers. Any

intervention that can help neglected children gain notice and acceptance in the class is welcome, given that there is an unfortunate tendency for teachers, as well as peers, to overlook the needs of students who are "invisible" (not assertive). Much of the work of Guralnick (2011) recognises that neglected children can benefit from social intervention.

Quality of recess play

The programme of games may have facilitated and accelerated the pace at which children became familiar with their peers. They were better able to describe new social experiences they shared with other children. They enjoyed more social contact at recess time, during school and after school. In terms of transfer and generalization of skills and behaviours, it is possible that the quality of recess play improved due to better interactive skills. When play or interactive opportunities arose, children were more socially competent to create their own games and engage in social and imaginative play, confirming the belief of Pellegrini et al. (2002) that playing games at recess brings positive growth in social competence and peer relations. Playing competently clearly indicates social learning in first-grade students (Frost et al., 2005).

Social cohesiveness

Social cohesiveness among the young students appeared to be enhanced. For

example, at Time 2 the total number of dislikes dropped, with one-third of

participants unwilling to make all three dislike choices. Perhaps some 'like least'

votes were given at Time 1 simply because the children had not yet really got to

know one another although they knew names and faces. Playing group-games

together may have facilitated the mingling of classmates and established a sense of

'community'. New friends were made, while keeping one or two old friends; and the

social network gradually developed through interaction among multiple friendships.

Play competencies

In this study, competencies in participating in group-games were positively

correlated with participants' social status. For example, 92.3% of rejectees and 100%

controversial children were also identified as inferior players (not able to listen or

work cooperatively). Studies have indicated that rejected children actually love to

play, but often lack the skills and behaviours needed to participate in groups (Erath et

al., 2009; Hill & Merrell, 2004; Mayer et al., 2007). These students are often rejected

because they display aggressive behaviours, or they are very passive. Both these

traits affect peer acceptance and performance in group activities (Crick & Dodge,

1994; Schwartz et al., 2001). Practising group-games could thus help these inferior

players learn self-regulation and re-establish social status (Savina, 2014).

The data seem to indicate that the intervention may have had a positive influence on competencies in participating in group-games. Eight inferior players improved to positive status after intervention, though had not yet reached 'popular' level. If these children now practise and transfer social skills as they interact with others during recess and when play opportunities come up, they are likely to maintain or improve their status over time. Children who remained as inferior players, and with negative social status, might need more time to acquire group playing skills, or in a very few cases might need more intensive social skills intervention. 'Play therapy' (which typically involves just a few participants under clinical supervision) could be considered as a further treatment following this intervention. The programme as implemented here may well represent a natural screening procedure for identifying such children who are potentially socially at risk when they enter a new school.

Parent involvement

The uniqueness of the programme is its ability to involve parents for maintenance and continuity of training. If more schools introduce programmes of this type it may increase the likelihood that families in Hong Kong will recognize the

importance of creating play opportunities at home and outside school hours.

CONCLUSION

In this study, children's competencies in playing group-games were highly correlated with their social acceptance among peers. The format of the intervention enabled all first-grade students to participate in a social intervention that exposed them to rules and codes of behaviour, and helped them become aware of the characteristics of their classmates in a games-playing situation. Early intervention of this type can also help teachers identify children at-risk who may require more intensive social skills training.

LIMITATIONS

The first limitation of the study is that it was based on a sample from a single school, where most children came from the middle class homes. The programme may not be so easy to implement, or have such apparently positive effects, in schools that are regarded as 'socially disadvantaged'. However, these disadvantaged schools do need to place great emphasis on developing children's social competence.

A second limitation is lack of a control group. It could be argued that some of the observed outcomes here are simply a result of the children's natural maturation between Time 1 and Time 2. It is important to point out that this study was

exploratory and did not employ experimental methods. Instead, a large treatment

group was used to gather initial data to guide future studies. This preliminary work

was mainly concerned with accelerating the pace at which children became familiar

with others in the peer group, and how this affected their social status. A control

group should be included in future research in order to detect any significant effects

from the intervention.

A third limitation applies to qualitative data collection. Parent-volunteers

were asked to report observations on the children's social behaviour and

development. Although care was taken to ensure that parents did not work with their

own child, the parents' evaluations could still be subjective (for example, by

overstating the progress that a 'pleasant' child has made; or being too critical of a

child who sometimes behaved badly). A refinement would be to use *independent*

observers to record changes in students' social behaviours and social status.

Despite these limitations, the present study is the first to use this design to

evaluate a school-wide social programme for first-grade students in Hong Kong.

FUTURE RESEARCH

There is a paucity of studies involving social development of elementary

school children in Chinese settings. More effort should be devoted to evaluating

social intervention strategies. Future studies could explore the feasibility of introducing a similar programme in elementary schools that are regarded as disadvantaged.

A longitudinal study of first-grade students could explore ongoing changes in social status and social competence over time, and how this affects school performance. Is there a connection between academic achievement and early social status? Further research should certainly focus on the students who did not appear to benefit much from this programme. What factors account for this? How can these students who lack social status and skills best be helped?

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APPENDIX 1

An example: Format of Session One (1 hour)

Duration	Game Activities	Roles of Parent-volunteers	Objective of Activities
5 minutes	Introduction and ice-breaking	Introduce themselves and start playing with a story to form groups	Form groups
5 minutes	Ground Rules	Demonstrate the ground rules and guide children to follow instructions responsively	Establish game order and promote self-regulation
5 minutes	Body Language	Demonstrate the gestures of different body language	Introduce social cues for reinforcements
5 minutes	Group name & Slogan	Guide children to suggest a group name and create a slogan for their group	Encourage team spirit
5 minutes	Flying Geese	Practise lining up like flying geese and disperse by going back home (back to seats) promptly. Rotate children to be the 'head goose' (group leader)	Gather and disperse, Lining up
5 minutes	Magic Chair	Guide children to be magicians to form an 'Energy Circle' by moving chairs safely with the right posture	Move chairs to form a circle
5 minutes	Happy Fishes Swim	Direct children to move fast from one end of classroom to another end (like fishes). Choose the child who reacts responsively to the 'Pause' body language to lead the game	Move and pause
10 minutes	Smart Drivers	Select children who react promptly to instructions to be the 'bus drivers'. Invite children to 'get on' the bus that they like. Invite the bus drivers to choose a child who obeys the game rules in their 'bus' to succeed as the bus driver – rotate children and repeat activity	Move and pause (with variations)
3 minutes	Rainbow Breathing	Lead children to take deep breathing and enjoy the sweet memory of playing together	Calm down

10 minutes	Closing with reflection (Recognition and appreciation time)	Show appreciation to children who contributed to fun, playing and helping others. Guide children to extend gratitude to peers (e.g., choosing them to be leaders, offering help). Give a sticker to reward individuals. Count the number of stars on the whiteboard gained by each group for good performance along the games	Encourage participation and reinforce social learning
2 minutes	Recap and connect	Introduce theme of the next game session 'Captain of Eye' and say - *"Let's go to the Kingdom of Eye next week and be a Captain of Eye. Keep your eyes wide open and look at the people and things around you before we meet next time!"*	Extend learning to daily life
At the end of the game session, children thank parent-volunteers and bid goodbye.			

Source: Hong Kong Education Bureau. (2006). *Quality Education Fund: Pillars of Society Project.*

APPENDIX 2

Game Activities and Main Intended Learning Outcomes

Themes of Each Session	Game Activities	Learning Outcomes
(1) **Game Order**: Learn the rhythms and routines of playing group-games	Ground rules, build group slogan, magic feet, magic chair, body language (nonverbal social clues to indicate appreciation to positive behaviours such as "good" with thumb up).	Able to respond to instructions such as 'gather' and 'disperse', sit properly, move and stop so as to engage in social group settings.
(2) **Captain of Eye**: Learn how to pay attention to signals and follow directions	Play games with eye contact: When the *leader* looks at individual player's eyes, he/ she will react by clapping hands; players take turns to be the leader and set a different reaction.	Able to give instructions through eye contact and be observant to changes in reactions among peers.
(3) **Captain of Emotions**: Learn how to express and understand each other	Play games to practise control of emotions: Players take turn to express their favourite sports, patience, and recap peers' choices. The speed of taking turns to sit and stand will increase over time; players calm down by taking deep breaths.	Able to take turn to express views patiently; and cool down after playing exciting games.
(4) **Captain of Ear**: Learn how to listen and follow instructions in circle games	Play games to practise focus of attention: Players follow instructions to form circle, run, jump, kneel and so on, from simple to multiple combination; players walk on heel and toe forward and backward to stimulate focus of attention.	Able to sit/ stand/ walk to watch and follow interactive instructions with focus of attention.
(5) **Captain of Cooperation**: Learn how to cooperate within small and big teams with hand and feet coordination	Play games to practise teamwork and motivate team spirit: Players hold hand-in-hand to walk to the destination in a straight line in every step; players hold hands to form a circle and transport a hula-hoop for a loop without breaking the circle (practise in a small group before combining into a big team); players give appreciation to peers for their contribution to achieve the goal of the game.	Able to accomplish group tasks after adjusting individual perspectives with overall goal and demonstrate appreciation to team members.
(6) **Captain of Empathy**: Learn to be aware of others' like, dislikes and feelings	Play games to make children more aware of each others' situations. Players practise memorising peers' likes and dislikes; players take turn to act as comforters and provokers in different embarrassing situations such as being teased for having an unsatisfactory hair cut or being blamed for late for picnic; players mix and match new friends by searching partners according to various combinations such as wearing watch/ glasses, long/ short hair	Able to express and understand each other's preferences, share the experiences and feelings with peers as well as meet new friends.

	and so on.	
(7) Variations of games *(Examples are shown in Appendix 3)*	Play games to reinforce the social learning needs of participants in the group: Players follow similar steps to play a new game by using an alternative prop in another storyline.	Able to play well with peers after adding variations to the initial games.
(8) Progressive level of games *(Examples are shown in Appendix 3)*	Play games to stimulate the social learning through creating social and imaginary games: Players follow a different game procedure to form a new game.	Able to play interactively with peers after increasing the complexity of the initial version to induce social interactions with more sensory integrations.
The game activities of each session were linked by a story to induce social and imaginative play.		

APPENDIX 3

Case Illustration of Group-Games with Variations and Progressive levels

Name and Theme of the Game)	Prop (Storyline)	Game Activities
Happy camp: Give appreciation to the player(s) who contribute to the fun and smoothness of playing (A game played by at the end of **Session 5**).	No Prop (The story is to take a walk together in a camp.)	**Simple game steps**: 1. Players sit in a circle. 2. Players come out one by one and walk in a line along the circle of chairs. 3. Players pay attention to a signal given by the *leader* (e.g., a watchword "Back to home") and go back to their seats immediately.
Order a dish: Learn to be aware of others' like and dislikes **(Session 7)**	No Prop (The story is to organise a birthday party: What would you like to eat?)	*Variations* **of games**: 1. Players sit in a circle and take turn to suggest a dish. 2. A *leader* who memorise peers' favourite dishes will call them to come out one after one by naming their respective dishes, and then walk in a line along the circle of chairs. 3. Players pay attention to a signal given by the *leader* (e.g., a watchword "Let's enjoy our party") and go back to their seats immediately.
Make a dish/ Buy a gift: Reinforce the above target social skills **(Session 7)**	Prop: spatula/ gift box/ a shopping bag (The story is to share a daily life experience: What do we prepare for the party? Buying candies or looking for gifts.)	*Variations* **of games** (follow the above steps): - The *leader* carries a spatula to lead the game, and hands it over to the next player. - Players take turn to suggest an ingredient for a dish (e.g., a pizza). - Players use a different prop (e.g., gift box/ a shopping bag) for another round of game; each take a turn to suggest a kind of candy or gift instead. - The leader may choose a different signal for each round (e.g., another watchword "Let's have fun" or a motion like "eating candies delicately").
Make a dish/ Buy a gift: Reinforce the above	No prop (Players contribute to the story by	*Progressive levels* **of games** - Depending on the intellectual abilities of the players, the complexities of the same game could

target social skills with increasing complexities to induce social interactions with more sensory integrations **(Session 7)**	creating a new story in each round of game.)	be increased by deploying more sensory integrations. - Players take turn to state the steps in making an ice-cream cone, one by one with actions. - Or players take a turn to add a line to the story with motions or expressions (e.g., open a gift box, put aside the wrapping paper and so on).
Make a dish/ Buy a gift: Reinforce another target social skills – empathy and emotions **(Session 8)**	With or without props (Players contribute to the story in a new round of game showing empathy in different embarrassing situations.)	*Progressive levels* **of games** - Players start with taking turn to suggest and demonstrate an expression of emotion (e.g., happy with a smiling face, sad with a crying gesture). - Players take turn to add a line to create a story script with respective motions and expressions. For example, Mummy is making an ice-cream cone (expression: anxiously waiting), open the lid of ice-cream can (mouth-watery) … eat the ice-cream (happy), my best friend calls (astonished), the ice-cream drops and melt (sad). - Adult intervention to scaffold the social learning is required at the beginning.

APPENDIX 4

Illustration on Adult Intervention in the Social Programme

Actions	Scaffolding Social Learning	Adult Intervention	Social Behaviours*
Set	Set the scene and draw children's attention to instructions (e.g., eye contact, an agreed signal) before start playing	When one volunteer leads the game, the other partner will help maintain game order.	Follow direction; watch or listen
Show	Demonstrate the game and show the procedures of the game	Help draw children attention to the demo	Follow rules
Rapport	Make the game attractive and exciting for children	Encourage and build involvement	Seems happy
Rotate	The child nominates a peer to take his/ her turn to lead the same game; all playmates learn to pay respect to the leader. Children rotate to be leader.	Guide children to be aware of playmates' positive behaviours to rationalize their choice (Catch the moments of doing right)	Seems proud of what he/ she does; meet new people; gets along well with other children
Select (group)	Select a child who exhibits positive behaviour to lead the game	'Amplify' the positive attributes by verbal recognition/ body language	Is a leader in groups
Select (class)	'Reward' a group with cooperative behaviours to play/ demo the game first (e.g., follow instructions to complete the game cooperatively; wait patiently at group before other groups to finish their round). Draw a star on the whiteboard to give recognition to the group.	Practise the game within group before the whole class play the game together. Instruct children to help moving chairs to set up a circle or a straight line as required by the game.	Plays well with other children; helps with tasks
Stop	Pause the game when chaos arise (e.g., children display unsafe or discourteous acts). Time out the child to watch others how to play	Guide children to be alert of consequences of disturbing/ unwelcome	Accepts correction or criticism; aware of

	properly (only when necessary).	behaviours at groups.	others' feelings
Stay	Keep the child stay within the game circle even if he/she does not participate	Allow the child to observe and invite the child to play when he/she wants to	Watch or listen
Share	Encourage children to share props/ materials (e.g., playing balloon game) or even the 'chance' with peers who are not selected to lead the game	Guide children to share and show appreciation to the child who shares	Share toys or materials
Reflect	Calm down and reflect happy moments in playing games: -Think about what we have enjoyed today. -Appreciate who have done something good to make the game smooth -Suggest what we can do next time so as to make our game happier -Say thank you to your teammates and parent-volunteers	Encourage children enjoy social interactions Facilitate communication among children and take the chance to know about the children	Seems happy
Reward	Give a star sticker as a credit to children with stable performance (individual award – e.g., redeemable for a balloon with accumulated credits)	Encourage children to gain credits by contributing to smoothness of playing games (e.g., be responsive to instructions)	Seems proud of what he/ she does
Succeed	Celebrate the success	Add up the stars earned by each group on the wyteboard and give recognition to the group.	Team spirit

The focus is to engage children to participate in group activities.

* *Derived from Early School Behavior Rating Scale (ESBS, Caldwell & Pianta, 1991)*

TABLE 1

Social Status at Commencement of Intervention

	Rejected	Neglected	Controversial	Average	Popular	Total
Boys	11	9	7	30	6	63
Girls	2	11	1	31	11	56
Total	13	20	8	61	17	119
Percentage	10.9%	16.8%	6.7%	51.3%	14.3%	100.0%

TABLE 2

Cross Tabulation of Changes in Social Status of Inferior Group-Games Players by Gender

		Post Intervention Social Status					Total
		Rejected	Neglected	Controversial	Average	Popular	
Before Intervention Social Status	Rejected	9	0	1	2	0	12
		7 boys			1 boy	2 boys	
		2 girls					
	Neglected	1	2	0	3	0	6
		1 boy	1 boy			1 boy	
			1 girl			2 girls	
	Controversial	2	0	3	3	0	8
		1 boy			3 boys	3 boys	
		1 girl					
	Average	1	0	1	5	0	7
		1 boy			1 boy	5 boys	
	Popular	0	0	0	0	1	1
						1 boy	
Total		13	2	5	13	1	34