

Analyzing Students' Self-Confidence and Participation in Class Discussions

Megan D. Mallon, Manhattan-Ogden Public Schools

Nicole Meritt, Kansas State University

Suzanne Porath, Kansas State University

Abstract: This action research project was designed to determine whether teaching explicit discussion strategies to students receiving special education services would lead to an increase in self-confidence and participation during small group and whole class discussions in a general education classroom. Data were collected by two teacher researchers in a fifth grade English Language Arts (ELA) classroom using a pre/post student survey and classroom observation. Findings of the study suggest that explicitly teaching social skills focused on discussion allows special education students to self-identify situations where they struggle, rehearse new skills and receive feedback, and self-monitor their progress, sometimes with the desired end result of generalization to other settings.

KEYWORDS: *action research, special education, English language arts (ELA), class discussion, self-confidence, co-researchers*

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1. A comprehensive mission that is broader in its outreach and scope than the mission of any partner and that furthers the education profession and its responsibility to advance equity within schools and, by potential extension, the broader community
4. A shared commitment to innovative and reflective practice by all participants
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Imagine a fifth-grade classroom where a lively class discussion ensues over themes found in the novel *Hatchet* by Gary Paulsen. Around the room, many eager hands are up in the air, belonging to students anxious to share their thoughts and conclusions. However, there are a few students whose hands are not raised. Chances are, these may include the students who have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). This is not uncommon; many students in special education may feel hesitant to participate in class discussions when surrounded by their general education peers. As Tanner (2013) states, simply calling on a student to answer a question in class can be “deeply uncomfortable to many students” (p. 325). Stefiel, Shiferaw, Schwartz, and Gottfried (2018) suggest that students with special needs may be unlikely to participate, leading them to feel singled out compared to their general education peers, and a lack of self-confidence may be partly to blame. Studies have shown that inclusion in the general education classroom provides multiple positive opportunities for students with disabilities, including exposure to grade level content and opportunities to engage in academic dialogue with grade level peers (Karlsudd, 2017; Sigstad, 2017). However, to fully benefit from learning in the general education classroom there are some hurdles to overcome for these students.

Karlsudd (2017) asserts that inclusion is necessary for providing students in special education with quality instruction and access to the same experiences that are offered to their typically performing peers. However, we (the first and second authors) noticed in our own fifth grade English/language arts (ELA) classrooms that there was a disconnect in classroom participation between general education students and special education students. We observed that when students receiving special education services were in small groups with general education peers of similar academic abilities, they demonstrated more self-confidence and willingness to participate, whereas during whole-class activities within the general education classroom, students with disabilities participated less often and appeared less confident. We also noticed, as Vasileiadis and Doikou-Avliidou (2018) observe, that many students with disabilities may feel “loneliness and rejection from their typically performing peers” (p. 268). This provided an opportunity for us, as teacher researchers, to examine this identified problem from a more systemic perspective. This action research project was designed to determine whether teaching explicit discussion strategies to students receiving special education services would lead to an increase in self-confidence and participation during small group and whole class discussions in a general education classroom.

Research Setting

This study was conducted throughout the 2018-2019 school year via a collaborative action research project between a general education fifth-grade teacher leader (first author) and a special education teacher leader providing services to students in a resource setting (second author). An assistant professor from Kansas State University’s (KSU) Department of Curriculum and Instruction (third author) served as the facilitator of the districtwide action research group of which the teacher researchers participated. In addition to acting as facilitator, the assistant professor was on hand to provide feedback and assistance as needed for the duration of the action research project.

The study was conducted at Bluemont Elementary School, one of nine elementary schools in Manhattan-Ogden Public Schools, which supports approximately 320 students in grades K-6 (kindergarten through sixth grade). The district services approximately 6,500 students in Manhattan, Kansas. Bluemont Elementary School is a professional development school (PDS) that partners with KSU. As a PDS location, Bluemont hosts both undergraduate and graduate students from KSU’s College of Education who are working through their pre-service practicum placements. The school is an accredited Title 1 school with 55% of the student population classified as economically disadvantaged. During the time of the study, the fifth grade class at Bluemont had 41 students, 20 of whom were male, and 21 of whom were female. The fifth grade was divided into two sections, or classes; one with 22 students and the other with 19 students. The students attended all core subjects in their homeroom classroom with the exception of ELA and math. These classes were departmentalized, meaning that one fifth grade teacher taught ELA to both classes while the other taught math to both classes. The study focused on three special education students.

Literature Review/Theoretical Framework

Class discussion is a vital part of any ELA classroom. While there are many instructional methods a teacher may use, such as lecturing and assigning projects for students, one of the most critical methods of instruction is grade level discussion (Witherspoon, Sykes, & Bell, 2016). Shaughnessy and Forzani (2012) explain that class discussion incorporates a combination of curricular content and student talk that is both high quality and high quantity (as cited in Witherspoon et al., 2016, p. 6). Additionally, a positive relationship must be established between the students and the teacher leading the discussion (Breeman et al., 2015). Teachers commonly play a role in connecting multiple students' input by asking one student to expand on another's ideas, or to restate an answer given by another student (Ghousseini, 2015). Although there have been several studies exploring the social relationships between teachers and students and the effect of teacher experience on discussions (Ghousseini, 2015; Nelson, 2018), there is little research examining how student self-confidence affects willingness to participate in class discussion in an ELA classroom.

While there are many benefits to engaging in class discussion, students don't always participate equally (Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2004). Specifically, more research is needed to study the participation of students who receive special education services while learning in a general education ELA classroom. Due to the fact that special education students may already have negative perceptions about social interactions (Stiefel et al., 2018), they may interact differently in various classroom processes (Breeman et al., 2015). For example, negative perceptions may play a factor in students' willingness to participate. If a special education student has concerns about certain situations, such as sharing an answer or idea in front of their general education peers, a physiological arousal may lead to avoidant behaviors resulting in lack of participation (Nelson, 2018). Feeling included or experiencing a sense of fellowship with peers is a social benefit of inclusion (Sigstad, 2017), but this can be hindered if a student with special needs feels uncomfortable participating in discussions in the general classroom.

Useful and thoughtful class discussion does not come naturally for some students, so social skills may need to be taught (Dallimore et al., 2004). This is especially true for students with special needs, as they often need explicit instruction in social skills and discussion behaviors to gain self-confidence and proficiency (Swenson, 2003). Providing students with explicit instruction on strategies to call upon when faced with stressful social situations, such as a class discussion, can positively influence students' willingness to participate in those situations. It is often the role of the teacher to help build students' self-confidence (Tanner, 2013). There are not always strategies and organizational structures in place in an inclusive classroom, and this is where the teaching of explicit strategies comes into play (Sigstad, 2017). Sigstad (2017) found that the best inclusive lessons are ones where students have an option for social interaction. Learning strategies for participating in a class discussion gives special education students opportunities to interact with their general education peers on an equal footing. Instruction can be individualized or part of a social skills curriculum.

Skillstreaming, a research-based social skills curriculum, was developed by Dr. Arnold P. Goldstein and Dr. Ellen McGinnis in 1973, and is currently on its third edition (McGinnis, 2012). The curriculum is designed for use with students from early childhood through adolescence in both general education and special education settings. Within Skillstreaming, social skills are

clustered into five main domains, including classroom survival skills, friendship making skills, dealing with feelings, alternatives to aggression, and dealing with stress (McGinnis, 2012). Each social skill lesson follows a four-part framework. First, the targeted skill is briefly defined, then modeled by the teacher using situations that are relevant to students' lives. The modeling is done through a think-aloud, and the skill steps are clearly identified. Following the think-aloud model, students brainstorm situations where they feel the skill would be useful. The second part of the framework is role-playing. Each student takes turns role-playing the behavioral steps with a co-actor through a think-aloud in a situation of their choosing. The other students serve as observers, watching explicitly for each social skill step in action. Providing performance feedback, the third component of the framework, occurs next, first by the co-actor, then the observers, then the teacher, and finally the main actor. The process continues while each student takes the role of lead actor. The fourth step of the framework, generalization, occurs with the use of skills homework. Students are asked to try the social skill steps in real-life, then complete a homework report that addresses the social situation, implementation of the necessary steps, and a self-evaluation of performance.

Once students have received explicit instruction, guided practice, and opportunities for feedback, they are ready to begin the steps for self-regulation and generalization of their newfound skills through goal setting and self-monitoring. Research has found that the practice of student goal setting and self-monitoring leads to positive student outcomes, including higher self-confidence, increased participation, and decreased stress (Lee, Palmer, & Wehmeyer, 2009).

Research Methods

Stringer (2014) notes that an action research project allows teachers to feel ownership in the research activities in which they engage and is essential in facilitating active participation in their classroom. The action research process begins with a plan for the research process, then provides an opportunity for teacher researchers to gather data, analyze and reflect on the data, and identify an action plan for moving forward (Stringer, 2014). For this action research project, two teacher researchers set out to determine whether teaching explicit discussion strategies to students receiving special education services would lead to an increase in self-confidence and participation during small group and whole class discussions in a general education classroom. They collected data on three fifth grade students; two males and one female. All three students were on the caseload of the special education teacher. All three students received pull-out services in both ELA and math, which took place in the resource (i.e., special education) classroom, but spent approximately 85% of their day in the general education classroom since they all attended core ELA instruction in the general education classroom by the general education teacher.

Data were collected through quantitative self-assessment surveys and classroom observations, which serve as the basis for discussion in this article. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted by the school district, and parental permission was collected through an informed consent form for each student. To begin, students completed a survey to self-identify their self-confidence and participation in class activities and discussions. Students in the general education population were given the pre-survey as well for the purposes of comparing their answers to those of the target students. Following the pre-survey, over a period of three months, the three target students received explicit instruction by the two teacher researchers on two different social skills strategies focused on discussion.

Skillstreaming Curriculum

The first strategy implemented was Skillstreaming: Contributing to Discussions (McGinnis, 2012). Student participants received specific skill instruction in a small group in the resource classroom by the special education teacher. Instruction was implemented over 30-minute sessions one time per week for one month. Students received initial instruction, including definitions and teacher modeling, during the first week. During the next two weeks, students role-played and provided feedback to one another. At the conclusion of the second and third sessions, students were assigned skill homework, or application, which took the form of goal setting and self-monitoring.

Goal setting and Self-monitoring

After a one-month period of Skillstreaming, the second strategy was implemented, which included a combination of goal setting and self-monitoring. This strategy, based on a plan designed by Sprick and Howard (2012), is intended to help students using the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, & Martin, 2000). First, the exact behavior needing growth was identified and defined in a conference between the teacher and each student. Next, students were given the opportunity for guided practice. The teacher provided discussion topics in advance and privately prompted the student before asking them to participate. For each attempt, students were positively reinforced with specific feedback. Following this, students were given a self-monitoring card. They self-identified a goal for the number of times they would attempt to participate in a discussion. They tracked each participation attempt as well as how they felt while participating by selecting a frowning face, neutral face, or smiling face. Over the course of one month, progress toward each student's participation goals and their self-confidence related to participating in small group and whole class discussions were discussed, and new goals set as needed.

The teacher researchers observed the three target students during general classroom instruction, both before and after learning about the participation strategies. Observational notes were taken, and a rubric was used to determine the quality and quantity of student participation small group and whole class discussions. Finally, the three target students took a post-survey, which had the same questions as the pre-survey.

Results and Discussion

As Stringer (2014) notes, data analysis is an important part of the action research process. In this study, data analysis revealed several interesting findings.

Pre-Survey

The pre-survey, written by the teacher researchers, had three main goals. The first aimed to judge the comfort level the target students felt when participating in both a whole class discussion and discussion in a small group setting, with either the general education or special education teacher. On the Likert-style pre-survey, students rated their comfort level with whole

class discussion on a scale of feeling comfortable: never, sometimes, often, or always. Two of the target students shared that they often felt comfortable participating in a whole class discussion in the ELA general education classroom, while one reported only feeling comfortable sometimes. This is in comparison to two students who often felt comfortable in small group discussions and one student who always felt comfortable in small group discussions.

These findings were unsurprising to the teacher researchers, as normally students are placed into small groups with peers of similar academic ability. This preference was further evident throughout the rest of the pre-survey, when students were asked about their feelings while participating in class discussions, and the factors behind those feelings. In all cases, the target students were more comfortable and willing to participate in small group discussions rather than in whole class discussions.

Additionally, the teacher researchers asked students to identify feelings associated with joining in on a class discussion in both a whole class environment and in a small group environment. The target students expressed feeling “scared” and “shy” when included in a discussion with the entire class. Factors mentioned by all three of the target students that led to these feelings included the number of people in the class, consideration of who was around them, and concern over what other students thought of them. On the other hand, students described feelings in small group discussions as “good,” “great, because I know them [students],” and “Okay. I don’t really care.” Only one student was worried about what other students would think, sharing that s/he sometimes had trouble thinking of an answer. As previously mentioned, this is further proof that students tend to feel more comfortable when surrounded by peers of a similar academic ability. Having closer contact and feeling comfortable with the teacher may also be a consideration; none of the students said that they were concerned over what their teacher thought of their answers as a factor in their comfort level.

Finally, the pre-survey intended to see what, if any, skills or strategies students self-identified for helping themselves to feel more comfortable participating in small group and class discussions. As expected, the special education students were unable to determine which strategies to use. One did not respond to this question, while the other two students responded, “no clue” and “I try to think.” This lack of articulated strategies was made even more evident when compared to the answers from their general education peers who were able to identify strategies such as “just think about if my answer makes sense,” “pretend I’m talking with my parents or brother,” and “I count in my head and pretend no one is around.” These responses show that, while an awareness of others does affect typically performing students, they are able to use a variety of strategies to overcome any uncomfortable feelings or anxiety. Because the typically performing students were already able to self-identify participation techniques, they did not show a need for additional instruction and were not a part of the remainder of the action research study.

Classroom Observation

The teacher researchers observed the target students in whole class and small group discussions three different times: before any strategies were taught and after the explicit teaching of the two strategies. Observations included how often students participated in a discussion and whether-or-not their responses were basic or advanced. The teacher researchers defined a basic response as nodding, a one-word answer, an incorrect answer, or simply saying “I agree with

[another student].” An advanced response was defined as expanding on a peer response, initiating conversation/discussion, or sharing a unique thought. Additionally, the teacher researchers kept track of whether-or-not the targeted students’ answers were prompted or unprompted. An answer was considered prompted if the teacher called on a student without their hand raised, and unprompted if a student had their hand raised to participate.

No strategies used. The first observation of the three target students occurred prior to teaching any specific strategies. During whole class discussions, all students either had zero participation in discussion or responded with only a basic response. None of the students gave an advanced response, although 75% of the basic responses were unprompted, versus 25% that were prompted. In small group discussions, the students showed a higher participation rate. Even without employing any strategies, the students were considered non-participating only 18% of the time. The majority of student responses during small group discussions were unprompted. One of the three students was observed giving advanced responses.

Skillstreaming: Contributing to discussion. After students were taught the strategy of Skillstreaming: Contributing to Discussion (McGinnis, 2012), they proved to be more willing to participate in whole class discussions; however, most answers were still considered basic responses. Sixty-three percent of the responses given, while unprompted, were considered either no participation or a basic response. Student participants were occasionally provided with a Contributing to Discussion reminder page (McGinnis, 2012), which may have had an effect on whether-or-not they applied these strategies. Similarly, in small group discussions, the three students were likelier to participate. Only 5% of their answers fell into the category of no participation, and 52% of their answers were considered basic responses.

Goal setting and self-monitoring. Student responses to the goal setting and self-monitoring strategy (Sprick & Howard, 2012; Lee, Palmer, & Wehmeyer, 2009) were even more encouraging. After setting their goals, 100% of student responses during whole class discussion were unprompted, and 71% of those were considered advanced responses. This was a dramatic increase from previous observations. Only one instance was observed where a target student did not have an answer when called on. Notably, as opposed to previous observations, students did not respond as well during small group discussion when taught using the goal setting and self-monitoring strategy. This may be because the target students felt self-conscious having their goal sheet visible to the peers at their small group table. While 63% of answers were considered advanced responses, only 37% of answers were unprompted.

Post-Survey

While some areas of the post-survey showed little change from the pre-survey, there were some areas of distinct improvement shown by the three target students. Despite some of the data collected while observing small group discussion after the goal setting and self-monitoring strategy was taught (Sprick & Howard, 2012; Lee, Palmer, & Wehmeyer, 2009), the target students continued to express comfort in participating in small group discussion with their similar-ability general education peers. Students shared that during small group discussion, they were “really ok with it,” and that they considered small group discussion “great and good and fun.” As with the pre-survey, one student said s/he always felt comfortable in small group discussions, with the other two students sharing that they often felt comfortable. One interesting point is when asked what

factors contributed to these feelings, two of the students took into consideration what the teacher thought. No students had chosen this as a factor on the pre-survey. This change is likely because the students had become aware of the teacher doing observations during class discussions throughout the research timeframe.

The post-survey showed an increased comfort level for the target students when participating in whole class discussion. One student always felt comfortable, one student often felt comfortable, and one student sometimes felt comfortable participating in discussion with their typically performing peers. Additionally, in the post-survey, students described their feelings as “good” and said [they were] “fine with it, I like it.” Factors contributing to these feelings were the number of people in the class, the students who were around, and being able to think of an answer. This third factor was not mentioned in the pre-survey, indicating that students had learned to spend more time considering an answer before sharing it with the class during a discussion. This finding was further evidenced by the fact that the target students were able to share strategies they used to support their involvement in class discussions. Prior to instruction of the two strategies, the three students were not able to articulate any strategies, but on the post-survey one student shared, “I think of the answer before or read it before the teacher speaks.” Students also mentioned “paying attention in class” as a helpful strategy.

It is important to note that while observations were only done in an ELA classroom, there was evidence that students were beginning to transfer these strategies to other content areas as well. One student proudly and excitedly expressed to the teachers, “I raised my hand in math today!”

Future Implications

There are many opportunities to extend this action research project. The teacher researchers recommend continued research to include a larger sample size. This would provide more data to analyze and offer continued validation to support this research. Additionally, since observations were done only in a general education ELA classroom, further research is needed to determine whether students can transfer these strategies across different subject areas. While one of the students verbally demonstrated the transfer of skills, observations were not collected in different content areas.

The teacher researchers also recommend a longer observation period. It would be worth doing follow up observations after explicit instruction of the strategies has concluded. This could be done during the following school year to address whether-or-not the students internalized the strategies they were taught. In addition, this action research study only included observations of students’ responses when they were called on. A further research study might seek to include the number of times students raise their hands to participate but are not called on.

Something that must also be considered is the nature of the students’ personalities and their relationship with the teachers. During this action research study, the teacher researchers were the ones who taught the strategies and completed the observations. The students had prior relationships with the teacher researchers since this was their second year working with the special education teacher, and they had been with their general classroom teacher for over half of the school year at the time of the study. Due to this prior relationship, students may have been more comfortable than they would have been with an outside observer. One of the target students was very shy and

withdrawn, particularly with unknown adults. Another student was very outgoing and loved attention from all adults. It would be worth investigating whether-or-not student personalities and student-teacher relationships play a part in the effectiveness of this type of study, and how these factors affect students' comfort in participating in discussions.

This action research study only addressed two strategies for increasing students' self-confidence in participation during class discussions. There are other strategies to consider, and it would be worth including these in a future research study. By expanding the study in this way, a future researcher could study the effect of each strategy in isolation to determine the most effective strategies for students.

Limitations

There are some limitations to this action research study. The sample size was only three students. This makes it hard to know if these results would carry over to a larger group. Additionally, the teacher researchers were directly involved with the students prior to the study, which may have influenced students' responses. Another potential limitation was the level of understanding the target students had when taking the pre- and post-survey. The teacher read the survey questions aloud, but the students did not ask for any clarification on what the questions meant, which may have caused some questions to be skipped since students were not required to answer every question. Finally, it is worth noting that the post-survey was given after both strategies were taught. This makes it difficult to determine whether one strategy was more effective, or if the changes between the pre- and the post-survey were due to a combination of both strategies.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that explicitly teaching social skills focused on discussion allows special education students to self-identify situations where they struggle, rehearse new skills and receive feedback, and self-monitor their progress, sometimes with the desired end result of generalization to other settings. In this study, target students were found to have increased self-confidence and participation in both small group and whole class discussion after receiving explicit instruction. By studying student participation in this way, the teacher researchers who conducted this action research were able to take on new leadership roles within their own classrooms to ensure active engagement of all students.

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Megan Mallon is a fifth grade teacher at Bluemont Elementary School, Manhattan-Ogden Public Schools, in Manhattan, KS. *Nicole Meritt* is an instructor in the Department of Special Education, Counseling, and Student Affairs at Kansas State University in Manhattan, KS. *Suzanne Porath* is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Kansas State University in Manhattan, KS.