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New Heights AISI Project Synopsis: Cycle 3

Project ID:30159 - Self-Regulation in Students with Autism

School Authority: 0077- New Heights School and Learning Services Society

Scope:
 53 Students, Grades preK to 12, 1 School

PROJECT PLAN

Project Description:

Students with autism have significant difficulties with self-regulation, a critical executive function necessary for effective, independent lifelong learning. By helping students with autism assume greater control of their regulation of behaviour, cognitive functions and emotions, their ability to become self-directed learners and participate meaningfully in learning and social settings will be enhanced. Self-regulation will be taught to the students using carefully-planned activities following a continuum of physical to behavioural to cognitive to emotional self-regulation and metacognitive strategies.

Improvement Goals:

Student Learning Goals	Strategies	Measures
Students will learn to have voluntary control of their body and body parts.	Students will be helped to learn how to move each major body part and their whole bodies at different intensities, manners, speeds, and in different locations. This will be presented through direct instruction, imitation of adults and peers, imitation of pictured postures, and as self-directed activities.	Pre-assessment will be done to determine at what frequency each student performs each act during direct instruction, imitation, and in self-regulation activities. Then formative assessments will be done on an ongoing basis and summative assessment at the end of each IPP period.
Students will increase their self-regulation of their cognitive processes.	Students will be helped to learn rules for 'good listening' and then be exposed to a variety of controlled variables to assist them in improving self awareness.	School defined rubric.

Evaluation Methods:

There will be pre-assessment plus formative and summative evaluations of our project and of the rubrics used in evaluating student learning. Feedback from parents, teachers, and aids will inform the assessment of the project.

PROJECT RESULTS

Student Learning Outcomes

We work with students who have an array of special learning needs, including Autism Spectrum Disorder. Our goal simply was to assist students in developing internal control and motivation to allow them to attend to learning. In addressing pre-learning conditions, we hope to make an improvement in all areas of student learning.

We still need to use visuals to introduce concepts but no longer rely on these aids for continuation. More use of role playing and reflection often generated by the children themselves. Increased self regulation or self restraint allowed for a deeper analysis of inappropriate behaviors. With reference to non-verbal children we explored strategies to expand emotionally expressive non-verbal communication and choice making; increased pragmatic communication that is child to child instead of always adult to child.

Effective/Promising Practices

Instructional Strategy

In an attempt to move skill acquisition away from explicit and situational specific learning that is highly dependent on the structured environment of the classroom; this year we employed several devices that were very successful at facilitating generalization of a variety of skills. We took advantage of two well established factors: (1) a literature curriculum which promotes a high degree of familiarity with certain motivating themes, and (2) the natural inclination of children on the ASD spectrum to like to have data organized and presented visually. Building on this foundation we were able to set the stage for some remarkable improvement in social communication for some of the children. From the beginning of the year we had fostered the interest of the children in assuming responsibility for a variety of classroom chores. A favorite weekly job was the attendance taker, who asked each child in turn. "Billy are you here today/". After months of practice with the basic skills of social reciprocity (asking and answering questions, using a person's name and eye contact to get their attention) we were ready to up the ante. For our last story theme of the year, *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, we replaced the attendance chart with a comprehensive chart including all the children and each type of food named in the story. The attendance taker now had to pick several foods, ask each of their classmates if they liked it, and then mark the chart accordingly. They loved this, and we knew how successful a strategy it was on one particular day when M. was having his turn. This is a child who at the beginning of the year had plenty of scripts but virtually no functionally appropriate social communication. Pronoun reversals were the norm in his speech, with no eye contact or any other device to get and maintain another's attention. As he stood at the chart in front of the circle with his back to the group he quickly assessed the lay out of the chart and began to ask a peer if he liked plums. He waited for a response, but the peer was only nodding his head. He made two unsuccessful attempts to obtain the information without first engaging his speech partner. Then, without any adult prompting he turned around, made full eye contact, repeated the whole question using the personal name and correct pronoun, took the information given to him and accurately filled in the chart, before going on to the next child. The strength of his desire to complete that chart helped him to overcome his inclination to avoid social communication!

Instructional Strategy

With a larger non-verbal group beginning every circle time with a bin of highly motivating toys. Once seated, children are allowed to choose a toy and play with it while being encouraged to notice what their peers are playing with and to indicate a desire to trade

toys through the use of simple assistive technology devices, hand signals and visuals. Emphasis is on peer to peer relations and meaningful communication.

Professional Development

Home support workers came into the school to watch teachers use new resources and a variety of teaching strategies including visual cards to encourage communication. The support workers then used the resources and strategies at home with the students and parents. In this way we developed a community of practice around the new resources. This process was very cost efficient, as our own teachers assumed the lead in providing the PD. We did not rely on external experts to provide PD.

Support workers came into the school when they thought appropriate, depending upon the needs of the individual student, and as new resources became available. Scheduling of sessions between teachers and home support workers was left up to the individuals and was completely based on the needs of the individual students.

Project Management

Managing this project was somewhat of a challenge, as the original AISI coordinator left the school. She had worked extensively on the project, but due to our staff size, had worked almost completely alone. With her leaving, we did not have anyone ready to step into the project; we simply carried on as we saw fit. For the rest of the project, a two teachers will assume responsibility for working with the AISCA-AISI personnel to manage the project and adapt it as needed.

Summary and Reflections

What worked well

- non-verbal resources to support appropriate behavior.
- home-school communication
- home support workers learning from the teachers to use the same resources and processes to encourage student self-regulation

What worked well

- the tried and true approach to learning through literature curriculum combined with an increased sense of the importance of social pragmatics
- providing the enriched content but working it in a way that reinforces underlying social and cognitive deficits.
- generalization of skills that go beyond the classroom

What worked well

- continued emphasis on pragmatics of social and communication skills which are meaningful and functional to and amongst the children

What did not work well

- Staff turn over made it difficult to have continuity in our project.

What did not work well

- overall organization of project still suffered because of upper level staff changes
- we are only now fully comprehending who and what the AISI project is about. The fact that it carried on anyway is a testament to the importance of the project to our instructional approach and the consistency of our instructional team.
- social and cognitive gains made were mostly reflected in the children with higher verbal capacity

What did not work well

- would have seen greater productivity with the assistive technology devices if we had had a higher ratio of adult partners with knowledge of using assistive devices effectively

Project adjustments

We will continue to address self-regulation, and will use a variety of resources and strategies.

We will have two teachers collaborate about how to most effectively manage the project.

Project adjustments

- we have begun to explore more creative ways to improve social, cognitive and

communication skills for the low verbal and non verbal children by using assistive technology. Much more needs to be done in this area next year.

Project adjustments

-we purchased additional touch talkers which proved to be very effective in one on one instruction but less so in group settings.

-in group settings the simpler assistive devices (one message/one action) were more versatile and therefore, more effective.

Sharing and celebration of success

We had several school-based celebrations, including a Halloween Party, and our monthly parent days.

We prepare our students for these events in a very structured way by scaffolding learning opportunities and practicing appropriate behaviors. In this way students become familiar with what they will see and experience, and are able to attend to the activities without anxiety. Through practice and repetition, the events become less frightening and the students learn to tolerate a variety of learning opportunities and social settings.

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-we continue to offer monthly parent days at the end of each storybook theme

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Now that we have more concerted input into the project by the people who are doing the work, we are re-energized and excited about moving forward with it next year, and hopefully benefiting from opportunities to network with other agencies.

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