

The Itinerant Teacher Hits the Road

A Map for Instruction in Young Children's Social Skills

Faith Haertig Sadler

Early childhood special educators will be expected to adopt new roles with respect to indirect service delivery models (e.g., collaboration, consultation, technical assistance, and training). . . . The impetus for new professional roles comes primarily from legislation supporting community inclusion of infants and preschoolers with disabilities and their families. (Buysse & Wesley, 1993, p. 418-420)

The approaching identity crisis is here. For many teachers, "the former teaching role—working and interacting with individual children and their parents—takes a back seat to the themes of logistics, consulting, and relationship issues" (Gallagher, 1997, p. 384). This article is written by one of these new itinerant special education teachers.

What Do Itinerant Teachers Do?

In many large metropolitan school districts, families of young children are offered a continuum of inclusion options, ranging from classes with a few peer models; to blended team-taught classes; and, finally, to full inclusion in community early childhood programs. Frequently children with milder delays receive their early intervention services at the most inclusive end of this continuum. They remain in the general preschools or day-care settings that their parents have chosen for them.

The diversity of these settings reflects the diversity of families in the community, thus providing intervention settings likely to be culturally and linguistically appropriate. Members of an early childhood itinerant team typically travel weekly to these settings to facilitate the delivery of appropriate special education services. Itinerant staff might provide direct services; consultation; or, in most cases, a combination of the two.

What Do Itinerant Teachers Need?

One of the biggest frustrations for many itinerant teachers has been the lack of resources available to guide them in this new role. Not only do itinerant teachers need an actual map of the city; they also need a theoretical "map" to provide a framework for stepping into this new job description. Many materials are being developed for training child care

personnel to include children with disabilities in their programs, as well as materials for training new special education teachers to function in consulting roles. The latter typically focus on relating issues such as active listening, team building, and problem-solving at meetings (see box, "Online Resources" for examples of the materials available).

Little is available, however, in the way of practical tools to help itinerant teachers organize and implement their job. These materials could provide insight into the nuts and bolts of choosing and embedding interventions into natural environments or could provide tips for dealing with the logistics of scheduling both time to consult and time to provide direct services.

Gallagher's (1997) findings support this. Gallagher followed a group of teachers during their first year in the itinerant role and noted: "Although the importance of the consulting role for teachers moving into new roles is often addressed, the specifics needed for day-to-day implementation of the lofty goals of inclusion are seldom discussed in the literature" (p. 384).

School staff often call on itinerant teachers to address one important area of child development—social skills. It is disconcerting to note, however, that many teachers report discomfort with this new consulting role, especially in supporting children displaying poor social skills (Wesley, Buysse, & Keyes, 2000). The purpose of this article is to suggest a nuts-and-bolts type of frame-

"The former teaching role—working and interacting with individual children and their parents—[now] takes a back seat to the themes of logistics, consulting, and relationship issues."



What Do Itinerant Teachers Need to Know and Do to Provide Social-Skills Instruction?

When addressing delays in students' social skills, itinerant teachers need to

- Understand the continuum of social-skills interventions identified in the literature.
- Have a collection of resources reflecting this continuum.
- Match types of interventions to children, given their social settings, and organize these into a schedule.
- Understand the special challenges of this model.

work for addressing social skills instruction within the itinerant model. This article discusses in less detail the relationship issues of this model and instead provides practical information that is currently missing from the literature. I hope these ideas will help teachers who are uncomfortable in this new role and spark a trend in the development of resource materials addressing the day-to-day implementation of this model. The first thing itinerant teachers need to do is build their understanding (see box, "What Do Itinerant Teachers Need to Know and Do?").

Understand the Continuum of Social-Skills Interventions

First, as the itinerant teacher, you need to have a knowledge base of the continuum of interventions identified within the research literature for addressing

delays in social skills. One book that provides a concise summary of this is *Integrating Young Children with Disabilities into Community Programs*. In the chapter "Social Interaction Skills Interventions for Young Children with Disabilities in Integrated Settings," Odom and Brown (1993) ranked interventions from low intensity (which usually require low consultation time) to high intensity (which usually require high consultation time). Following is a discussion of four levels of their continuum as each might apply to the itinerant model.

Level A: Activity-Based Intervention. This is a naturalistic approach and the least intensive level of instruction. It also requires the least amount of preparation time for the itinerant teacher. Bricker (1998) noted: "Activity-based intervention is a child-directed, transac-

tional approach that embeds children's individual goals and objectives in routine, planned, or child-initiated activities and uses logically occurring antecedents and consequences to develop functional and generative skills" (p. 11). When using this model to teach social skills, look for naturally occurring social situations where the child's objectives can be purposely taught and practiced. When this strategy is applied only to situations that are child initiated, it is referred to as "incidental teaching." According to Brown, McEvoy, and Bishop (1991), "Incidental teaching is different from more structured instruction in that it is conducted during unstructured activities for brief periods of time and typically when children show an interest in or are involved with materials, activities or other children" (p. 36).

When providing direct services at this level, you should remain in the vicinity of the student as he or she moves through classroom activities. This way, you can spontaneously embed instruction on social skills into the natural course of the child's participation. "During an incidental teaching episode, a teacher can provide an adult model or encourage a peer to model appropriate social behavior, as well as prompt and shape appropriate social responding" (Brown et al., 1991, p. 36). When acting in a consulting role, you

Online Resources for Early Childhood Inclusion

Circle of Inclusion at <http://www.circleofinclusion.org>

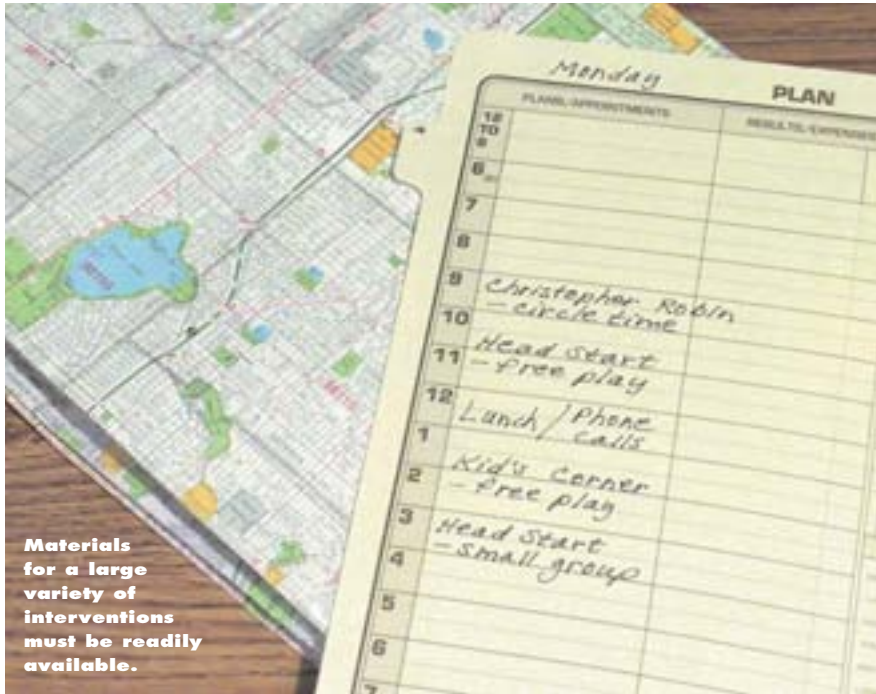
Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services at <http://clas.uiuc.edu>

Early Childhood Research Institute on Inclusion at

<http://www.fpg.unc.edu/~ECRII>

National Early Childhood Technical Assistance System at

<http://www.nectas.unc.edu/inclusion>



help the classroom staff examine a typical schedule, looking for opportunities to coach social interactions and then train staff in a few prompting techniques.

Because this intervention is so natural and easy to implement, it is likely to be embraced positively by classroom staff. This is a good intervention to start with while you get better acquainted with the child and the preschool program. It also works well in combination with other more intensive approaches. When using this intervention, you should schedule weekly sessions during free-choice time. The disadvantage to this approach is that instruction may be too sparse and indirect for some children.

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Level B: Affection Training. This approach provides mildly intensive instruction and does not require much preparation time. It involves collecting or creating songs and games for opening “circle time” that require children to interact affectionately (usually nonverbally) with one another. These signs of affection might include giving a high-five, hugging, or shaking hands and are included as part of traditional childhood songs or games, such as the song “If You’re Happy and You Know It” or the game “Duck, Duck, Goose” (Cooper & McEvoy, 1996).

When providing direct services, you lead the “affection” activities at opening circle time. Cooper and McEvoy (1996) recommended:

Before the activities begin, discuss the importance of being friends. . . . Then ask the children to demonstrate ways to show friendship, such as shaking hands, smiling, or telling people that you like them. Explain to the children that they are giving each other signs of friendship. (p. 67)

When consulting with staff, you support site staff in creating and leading affection activities themselves. Because this type of intervention is fairly simple and introduces only minor changes into the classroom, classroom staff will prob-

ably welcome it. The interactions are basic and thus work well when classmates vary greatly in their developmental skills. These activities raise the comfort level among classmates and thus facilitate an increased number of peer interactions during the rest of the school day.

Level C: Structured Social-Skills Groups. DeKlyen and Odom (1989) found that rates of peer interaction between preschool children with and without disabilities were related to the level of activity structure employed by teachers. In structured social-skills groups, you manipulate the social environment of the classroom by providing specially designed social integration activities for brief periods of time during the day (Odom & Brown, 1993). These activities are structured in ways that require either social interaction (on a more complex level than the affection activities) or social cooperation. These activities could include simple board games, dramatic play themes with specific interactive roles, group art projects, assembly line cooking, or cooperative games.

Activities that apply concepts and structures from cooperative learning (Curran, 1990; Johnson, Johnson, & Holubec, 1988) would fall into this category. As Fad, Ross, and Boston, (1995) stated:

Cooperative learning has been proven to be an effective way to bring children with disabilities and their peers into an inclusive classroom structure. . . . Even very young children can learn social skills through cooperative learning—beginning with pairs of children playing different roles: blower and popper with bubbles, hider and seeker in the sand with hidden toys, filler and dumper with buckets and assorted materials, and chooser and gluer with art supplies and glue. (p. 28)

Adding a structured, peer-interaction play center as an option during free play is another way to apply this level of intervention. For example, a classroom may have a block center, home center, book center, art center, and the P.A.L.S. center. In the P.A.L.S. center, the staff

Cooperative learning games could include "pairs of children playing different roles: blower and popper with bubbles, hider and seeker in the sand with hidden toys, filler and dumper with buckets and assorted materials, and chooser and gluer with art supplies and glue."

"Pair children, Arrange adult behavior, Limit materials, and Structure the activity" (Chandler, 1998, p. 15).

This type of intervention is particularly useful for students who are fairly verbal and of normal intelligence but are outcasts from the group. These children may be affected by attention deficit disorder, a learning disability, Asperger's syndrome, or sensory integration disorder. They may be withdrawn, socially clumsy, or aggressive. If the preschool already has some structured instructional times in their program, then this type of intervention is usually accepted by the daily teaching staff. There are quite a few activity books on the market for this type of intervention. Searching an online bookstore with search words such as "preschool" plus "friendship," "social skills," or "cooperation" will lead teachers to current titles.

This type of intervention involves a fair amount of time sifting through materials and hand picking those that match the child's needs and the program's style. When using a direct-service approach, you lead these activities. When in a consulting role, you encourage and train site staff to plan and lead the activities themselves. When using this approach, you should schedule the weekly visit during free-choice, small-

group, or circle time, depending on the nature of the activities chosen.

Level D: Direct Social-Interaction Interventions. These activities are the most direct type of instructional approach to teaching social skills. They are also the least naturalistic requiring more direct changes to the typical early childhood classroom. They usually come as kits or instructional manuals and outline a step-by-step format for teaching play skills or problem-solving skills (conflict resolution). In addition to the costs of purchasing the curriculum, there is usually training required. As the itinerant teacher, you should implement this level of intervention directly. Because the instruction is systematic, it involves a lot of preparation time—at least during the first year while learning to use the curriculum. Once learned, however, it can be a great resource for many years.

This type of intervention can be lengthy or, if necessary, shortened to a few lessons on specific target skills. One way to do this is outlined in "Come and Play: Developing Children's Social Skills in an Inclusive Preschool" by Collins, Ault, Hemmeter, and Doyle (1996). They recommend collecting a baseline, targeting specific skills, and teaching the skills using role-plays during group instruction. Following group instruction, the teacher observes skills and prompts the children in the skills during free play. This is followed then by collecting more data, evaluating, and making modifications. Skills that might be taught this way include inviting a friend to play, sharing toys, asking for a turn, and responding to friends.

Curriculum kits that teach problem-solving may be designed to cover an entire school year. Many preschools do not want to take this much time away from their general curriculum. In this situation it is helpful to teach just the basic problem-solving steps. These self-interrogation strategies are also referred to as "metacognitive strategies." In the article "Stop and Think!" Rosenthal-Malek (1997) described one way to do this. The self-interrogation strategies are taught in a group format just before free play. Then, the strategies taught at group are immediately prompted and

practiced in free-play situations. *The Second Step Curriculum* (Committee for Children, 1991) teaches children to ask themselves: "What's the problem?" "What can I do?" "What would happen if . . . ?" "What should I try first?" and "Is it working?"

For this intervention, you should schedule the weekly visit during either a large- or small-group instructional time. This type of intervention works best if the classroom teacher remains with the group during the lessons and reinforces the concepts during the rest of the week.

Gather Resources

The second thing an itinerant teacher must do is collect resources reflecting this continuum. Because you will have little time to spend preparing or hunting down materials, the resources must be kept right at hand. A typical day could include visiting three or four students at different schools, with the time in between spent in your car: driving or doing paperwork, making calls on a cell phone, and eating lunch to avoid an additional drive to the office.

One good resource would be professional books that review and summarize the research literature. These can be helpful because the itinerant teacher must be able to articulate what he or she does and, in most cases, train others to do it. If you have been in the self-contained classroom for a long time, much of your decision making has become intuitive. Sometimes terminology or the rationale behind certain techniques has gotten buried, along with the class notes from graduate school. Professional books can help you review the language of current best practices. One book that provides a brief overview of the research is: *Including Children with*

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Special Needs in Early Childhood Programs edited by Mark Wolery and Jan S. Wilbers (1994). This book is published by NAEYC and is very reasonably priced.

Activity books are also helpful for generating ideas for lessons, especially because planning time is so limited. Kits are another good resource; however, they are expensive and usually lengthy to implement. Teacher-made handouts are nice because they can be tailored to each situation; but they are time-consuming to create.

Articles from back issues of *TEACHING Exceptional Children* are a great resource. These articles were created for teachers; they are concise, easy to locate by topic, and inexpensive to obtain. It is particularly helpful that these articles may be copied up to 100 times for non-profit use. Articles such as these can be used to help you quickly organize ideas before meetings; when appropriate, they can be left behind for classroom staff to read (for helpful materials, see box, “Resources for Social Skills Interventions”).

Match Types of Interventions to Children and Settings

Third, as the itinerant teacher, you must know how to match interventions to children, given their individual situations. This is where you need strong skills in observing and relating to others. Start by asking the parents what they value about this setting and what their expectations and hopes are for how their child will do here socially. Next, you observe the child in the natu-

ral environment, study the child’s assessment results, and ask the classroom staff about their concerns. As an itinerant teacher, you must

- Become familiar with the program’s philosophy and curriculum.
- Notice the program’s cultural and linguistic characteristics.
- Look at the daily schedule, the number of students in the class, and the number of teachers and their skill level.

This information gathering helps you get a feel for this particular social “climate.” You need to understand how the child is currently functioning within this environment, how peers and teachers feel about him or her, and how the staff feel about the presence of a special education itinerant teacher.

Obviously, you can’t just assess all these things and then tell the parents plus site staff what you have “decided” to do. At this point, you must draw on your knowledge of collaboration and teaming models. One resource on this topic is *Partnership in Family-Centered Care: A Guide to Collaborative Early Intervention* (Rosin et al., 1996).

To meet legal timelines, you need to move fairly quickly to facilitate a meeting where the individualized education program (IEP) can be developed with the classroom staff and parents. At the end of the IEP meeting, you can propose that you could come and “float” during several weekly visits, after which a meeting can be held to plan how the team will teach the IEP objectives. This keeps you within the legal timelines for conducting the meeting but allows more time for assessing the situation and building rapport before recommending any specific level or type of intervention.

To prepare for the second meeting, consider one more piece of information: your weekly schedule. In some systems a full-time itinerant special education teacher sees each student 1 hour per week (plus often additional time spent meeting with staff) and 16-20 students in a week. That means some students are seen during circle time, some during free-choice time, some during small-group time, and so on. Teachers must implement some interventions, howev-

er, within certain types of activities. Thus, before recommending a particular type of intervention, ask yourself these questions:

- What level of intervention will meet the child’s objectives as described on the IEP?
- Will this level be embraced by parents and by classroom staff?
- How can I fit this type of intervention into my schedule?

Understand the Special Challenges of This Model

Finally, as the itinerant teacher, you must understand the challenges you will face. You will be working in someone else’s classroom, a classroom most likely chosen by the parents. That classroom’s teaching staff, plus the parents, have much more contact time with the student than you do. For interventions to be really effective, classroom staff and parents must embrace them.

How can you motivate staff and parents to work with you?

- Start your work with the student at the low end of the continuum by modeling the incidental teaching techniques in the classroom. Odom, McConnell, and Chandler (1994) found that teachers are more inclined to use naturalistic interventions to teach social interaction, instead of intensive individual interventions. You can also suggest that parents use these incidental teaching techniques at home during play-dates with classmates or relatives. Starting on the lowest level of the continuum shows the classroom teachers and parents that specialized instruction doesn’t have to severely change the way they interact with the child. This can help establish trust.
- Be familiar with the continuum of interventions and be able to articulate it in everyday terms. This capability will help parents and classroom staff view you as a useful resource.
- Encourage families and site staff to plan activities that reflect their own character at any level of intervention.
- Keep in mind that this model is primarily an indirect one when planning ways to monitor progress. Even if you are providing direct services once a

Social skills for young children might include signs of affection, such as giving a high-five, hugging, or shaking hands—which can be incorporated in traditional childhood songs or games.

week, you are also hoping to facilitate change in the daily behavior of classroom staff and parents.

- Measure student progress by collecting data on IEP objectives; but also be watching for signs that the classroom staff and parents are addressing the objectives. One tool for such communication is a traveling notebook that goes everywhere with the child in a backpack. Classroom teachers, parents, therapists, and the itinerant teacher all use this notebook to jot down their anecdotal notes about the child's activities; and they read one another's entries.

Final Thoughts

Because weekly instruction by the itinerant teacher is sparse and because it takes time to effect change in classroom staff and parents, the impact of this service delivery model is slow at first. The continuous modeling provided by a classroom of peers without disabilities, however, can be powerful for many children. It is also an enabling experience to have early childhood teachers and special education teachers working side by side. This coteaching experience slowly increases the capacity of the community to meet the needs of children with disabilities.

This article has provided a map to assist the itinerant teacher in addressing student delays in social skills. As more teachers become familiar with this new role, they may draw even more maps providing practical information for the itinerant teacher. Some day we will no longer be in an identity crisis, but be confidently navigating our way in early childhood settings everywhere.

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