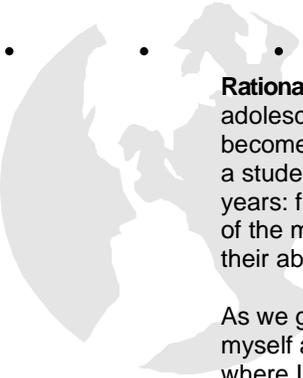


research report

How to teach adolescents social skills and facilitate good peer relationships to the current generation attending high schools



Rationale: To set the scene for my research paper I reflect on my own time as an adolescent and what the world was like then and how it has changed. Further, to become a teacher it is clear that my perspective has changed greatly from that of being a student. Dilemmas facing adolescents today have changed greatly in the last 15 years: for example increased media exposure, both video games and TV, are just one of the many factors putting pressure on the teenager's development of self-esteem and their ability to learn in a classroom environment.

As we grow up we still spend less and less time with adults and prefer our peers. For myself adolescence was a constant up hill battle to find myself and come to a point where I was confident about who I was. It was also a time to develop cognitively, socially and emotionally. "Parental influence gives ground to peer influence; adolescents seek support and security in other associations" (Kunzman. 2002). This means that it is a student's peers who will have a large impact on how social skills develop in the classroom and later in life.

With each new generation society changes: this is a given. Consequently a new society and environment has an impact on the classroom and school in each new generation. The new challenge that teachers face each time is how to tap into this new generation. Teachers need to continuously research, survey, find out what makes the current generation tick. School is there to teach the curriculum. But if adolescents do not feel a sense of belonging, despite possessing essential cognitive skills they are more likely to fail because they feel "detached, alienated, and isolated from others and from the educational process" (Beck & Malley. 1998, p.133). So for me as a future qualified educator this issue is of grave importance. How can I teach social skills and foster the positive social development of my students? How can I help students be more accepted by their peers?

The buzz word these days that I hear from my children of primary school age is "sharing is caring". I feel adolescents need something more attention grabbing than this simple motto. I need to relate to them. But how? As I am faced with a myriad of challenges relating to my topic I reviewed the current literature. I may have my answer....

Literature Review:

1. Peer acceptance: the questions we face are who, what and where and are we as educators even capable of moulding it in our students?

Initially we need to gain an understanding that boys have different ways to socialise than that of girls. And that depending on gender, expectations on acceptance or rejection tend to vary. Ray and Cohen (1996) carried out an examination of students in a classroom that investigated children's ideas on what a best friend really was and the expectations of a best friend that the children had. Their survey of 207 boys and girls showed that "males valued characteristics such as companionship, loyalty, and common interests/beliefs more than females" (p.213). Their theory states that characteristics girls favoured in a best friend were not confined to the expectations that boys had. Rather girls seemed to possess an appreciation of their friends' differences, something that develops over time and reflects a higher level of maturity.

As the research was confined to the class where a child without a mutual best friend may have had social interactions with friends from another grade or year level in the school. Ray and Cohen suggest there is a need for further studies on children's friendships generally or friendships between girls and boys.

2. Acceptance linked to school, curriculum and classroom.

Most research shows children who are unpopular at school tend to do worse academically than their popular counterparts. This could even be said to be common knowledge, and not unique to any one generation in particular. Ladd, Kochenderfer & Coleman (1997) suggest that there is a direct link between peer relationships and how students adjust to school.

Wortham (2003) goes further to say it is not only how children adjust to school but is through learning the curriculum in the classroom environment where students form their social identity. He draws a direct link to this from the curriculum stating "students can both learn about the curriculum and develop identities simultaneously" (p.231). Where students learn, review and discuss the curriculum in the classroom environment they are developing their social identity influenced by the group. Wortham uses one example in the curriculum. "The question is one all societies face. Do we looking after ourselves first or sacrifice our desires for the greater good? Here the "social identities of particular students and the discussion of certain curricular themes came together through a pedagogical strategy –one certainly not unique to these teachers- in which they drew analogies between students' experiences and the curriculum". Wortham suggests a classroom "society" must determine how collectivist or individualist it will be. Wortham's theory seems a little weak though as there is no suggestion as to what extent the betterment of group would win out or what may influence the result.

For instance, influencing factors may be cultural where a cross section of ethnicity in a classroom may see students developing a very different social identity compared to one where all its members were from a classroom of predominantly the same culture. A clear comparison can be made between classrooms in the U.S. and those in Japan. Japanese classrooms for example where an educator from the West experiencing schooling in Japan quickly sees the deep seeded implications a group society has on the classroom. Cooney (1989) implores that Americans should learn from the Japanese culture where "social harmony is all that counts". He says school children in the U.S. are very likely to drop out, many are illiterate and in referring to universities he calls it "soft curricula".

So we can learn from the Japanese culture and instil in our class a sense of group identity. Yes, well, easier said than done. How do we do that? Is it possible? Cooney points out that because of the strong focus on individualism in American culture the idea of being a team player is quite unnatural to Americans (p.61).



He goes further to say that "to the Japanese teamwork is as natural as breathing". His comparison between the corporate world in the U.S. and that in Japan not only reveals how Japanese company employees are so devoted to the team and will sacrifice their own wants and needs for it.

So the key may be to combine the development of social identity and learning of the curriculum. This is the idea behind Wortham's theory. He suggests that we should look more closely at the links between social identity and curriculum and their implications. "Instead of trying to avoid topics that may lead to identification, we must pay closer attention to the interdependence of academic learning and social identity development, Then perhaps we can reflect more deeply on the kinds of people our students are becoming" (2003).

3. The new generation: teaching team identity to facilitate greater learning in the class.

Let's return to the question of this new or current generation that is a central theme in my research and review of literature. Who are our students? What of their identity? By understanding that we may be able to enhance the sense of team spirit in the classroom and teach social skills at the same time of learning the curricula. Beck & Wade (2004) tells us that "video games are central to understanding the generation". Provocative new data show that video games have created a new generation of students, employees and executives--bigger than the baby boom--that will dramatically transform the schoolroom and the workplace.

This is a convincing argument where many of today's children own either one of a Play Station, X box, Game Cube, game boy advance, Nintendo and so on or one or more of the above. I look around my house and somehow find a collection including a PS-2, a game cube, gameboys, gameboy advances and numerous gamely gadgets that only my children and their peers know how to play.

In fact, it is indeed arguable to say that this generation of high school students are the first that have been brought up with video and computer games insidious from childhood.

Video games while instilling instant gratification and promotion of "cheats" also enable players a feeling of mastery over the game, thereby enhancing the player's self-esteem.

So how to bridge this virtual monopoly? How to use it to the benefit of in-class room learning?

In their research Polglase, Jeffrey & Sheahan (2003) focus on how laser skirmish (a new sport which is similar to a live video game) enhances "team building, leadership development and motivation" (p.3). They explain how laser skirmish as a "military simulator requires and fosters cooperation and communication among team members and the social aspect could facilitate a sense of group identity" (p.3). Their key finding was that Laser Skirmish has the capacity to provide team building in the areas of goal setting and procedures. "Games (missions) enable teams to set goals and make decisions on strategies and action to achieve the desired outcome. The key potential of team building with Laser Skirmish is in the areas of relationship development through group cooperation, cohesion and communication" (p.6).

How wonderful if students and teachers alike could learn the necessary skills to develop their classroom into more of a group identity. But this is only one application or benefit of utilising laser skirmish to achieve an educational objective while having lots of fun. There are more benefits. Kunzman (2002) in his paper on extracurricular activities



points out students involved in these activities are motivated, connected and dedicated not only to their activity but to their school work also. His paper sums it up perfectly where he makes a parallel between a coach of a team and a teacher of a class. The extracurricular activity gives them a sense of belonging in where they can learn effectively.

The current research supports the idea that the classroom is a place where, if social skill and peer acceptance is prevalent, students can feel a sense of belonging. How can teachers recognise when or how positive social development of their students is and can occur? The classroom needs to be a team. Robyn (2000) suggests not a team but call it a tribe. But the same idea is the same. Overcoming challenges through cooperation.

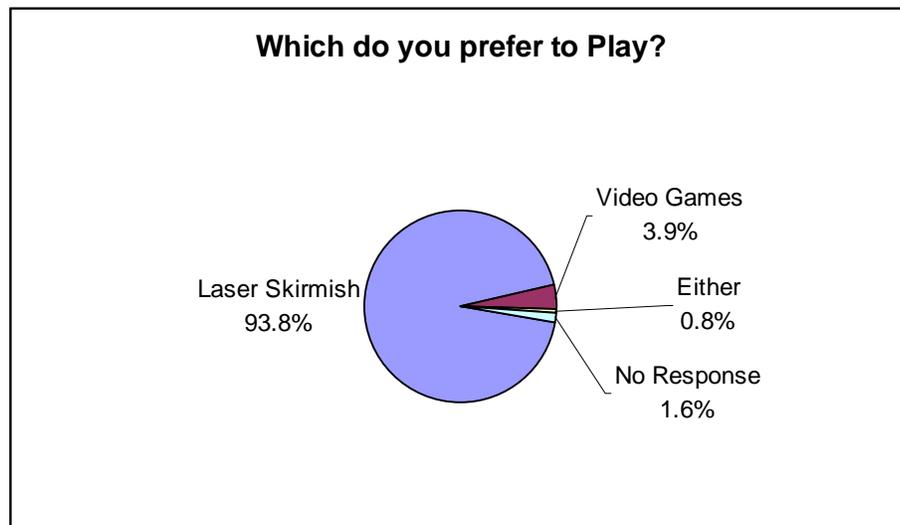
Educational Applications:

Good team building skills learnt in school will help children make friends and feel accepted. This is ultimately beneficial as when these students become members of society they can have positive interaction with coworkers and will be a more productive employee. Schools and Companies are starting to recognise the huge benefits of a new game called Laser Skirmish. Through its basic to complex missions players learn to support each other to attain a goal or achieve a mission objective.

The term team building isn't new. But perhaps what is emerging in the literature is a more practical side to what the term actually means and its true application in schools which means ultimately in society. There is a shift towards team building.

Laser Skirmish is played in Australia, Europe, Canada and the U.S. We are lucky that our schools to have access to Laser Skirmish with several a battlefields in South-East Queensland. Schools are starting to catch on to the benefits of laser skirmish. Schools, which have utilised Laser Skirmish, include Marist Brothers, Ashgrove, Lourdes Hill College, Nudgee College, St. Peters Lutheran College, Everton Park High School and Canungra Vacation Care.

I have been involved with Laser Skirmish for almost 2 years and a vast majority of children when asked if they would prefer playing X-Box or participating in laser skirmish the answer is almost always unanimous. My primary research shows that Laser skirmish is cool. In a survey of 129 players, more than 93% preferred playing Laser Skirmish to video games.



The corporate sector can see the benefits of laser skirmish combining team building with fun. A number of companies have tried laser skirmish. These include Cisco Systems, Masterfoods Australia/New Zealand Petcare, KFC, Harvey Norman and the National Bank of Australia. Certainly the use of combat simulation games in schools and companies is cutting edge and will be the topic of much upcoming research and review.

I suggest that in a new generation of game literate adolescents my knowledge and experience of Laser Skirmish is what may give me the edge into recognising what makes this generation of learners tick. As Kunzman (2002) proposes the teacher becomes the coach, the squad leader who can interact with the students to create a team environment. In turn this will assist me in the challenges that I face in the classroom in facilitating a positive team environment where each member of the class works together to achieve the common goals of both peer acceptance and good social skills, while learning the curriculum.

After all children in schools need to learn social skills to function in their adult life. With each new generation brings new insights and input into the same challenges the generation before faced. I remember back to my own high school days. I had teachers that I loved and those that I couldn't stand. I tended to get excellent grades in the subjects of the teacher that I liked. I do not think this phenomenon was unique or exclusive to myself. So the question is how can I as a teacher show my students that I am their educator but at the same time I can relate and facilitate their sense of belonging to the class and school. I need to recognise the signs of acceptance of peers, and sometimes lack thereof. The idea of real team work demonstrated and experienced in combat simulations like laser skirmish can facilitate a sense of belonging, peer acceptance which is an essential part of developing our social identity and is linked to learning the content of curricula.

If a solution for a happier classroom would be to foster the classroom as a place for all students develop a sense of belonging by positive reinforcement of cooperation and caring. The teacher can be the best role model for this behaviour and can coach students who are less adept at social skills.

reference list

- Beck, J. & Wade, M. (2004). Got game. Retrieved April 10, 2005, from <http://www.battlefieldsports.com>
- Beck, M. & Malley, J. (1998) A pedagogy of belonging. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 7(3), 133-137.
- Cooney, B. (1989). Japan and America: Culture Counts. *Training & Development Journal*, 43(8), 58-61.
- Kim, Y. (2003). Necessary social skills related to peer acceptance. *Childhood Education*, 79(4), 234-238.
- Kunzman, R. (2002). Extracurricular Activities. *Knowledge Quest*, 30(5), 22-25.
- Ladd, G., Kochenderfer, B. & Coleman, C. (1997). Classroom peer acceptance, friendship, and victimisation: Distinct relation systems that contribute uniquely to children's school adjustment. *Child Development*, 68(6), 1181-1197
- Polglase, I., Jeffry, H. & Sgheahan, V. (2003). Laser skirmish as a corporate tool. Retrieved April 10, 2005 from <http://www.battlefieldsports.com>
- Ray, G., Cohern, Robert. (1996). Children's friendships: Expectations for prototypical versus actual best friends. *Child Study Journal*, 26(3), 209-227.
- Robyn, E. (2000). Creating Tribes. *College Teaching*, 48(2), 65-68.
- Strom, P. & Strom, R. (2003). Uniting adolescent support systems for safe learning environments. *The Educational Forum*, 67(2), 164-173.
- Wortham, S. (2003). Curriculum as a resource for the development of social identity. *Sociology of Education*, 76(3), 228-246.