Hammill Institute on Disabilities

Intervention in School and Clinic 2016, Vol. 52(2) 67–76

DOI: 10.1177/1053451216636073
isc.sagepub.com
SAGE

Supporting Teachers' Management of Middle School Social Dynamics: The Scouting Report Process

Thomas W. Farmer, PhD[1], Chin-Chih Chen, PhD[1], Jill V. Hamm, PhD[2], Meredith M. Moates, MT[1], Meera Mehtaji, MEd[1], David Lee, PhD[3], and Michelle R. Huneke, BA[1]

Abstract

This describes the *scouting report* as an approach that social and behavior intervention specialists can use to help middle-level teachers create social contexts that support productive social roles and relationships of students with disabilities. Building from research on early adolescent social dynamics and context-based interventions to support students' adjustment in middle-level classrooms, this manuscript describes the scouting report approach as an information collection process that can be used to (a) guide the selection and tailoring of evidence-based interventions to address the social difficulties and support needs of students with disabilities and (b) manage general social dynamics in ways that promote a positive peer culture across the classroom. A step-by-step description of the scouting report process is presented along with sample scenarios to help guide intervention specialists as they provide consultation support to middle-level general education teachers who serve students with disabilities in their classes.

Keywords

context-based interventions, disabilities, bullying, social dynamics, peer relations

Students with disabilities are at increased risk for relationship problems, including low peer acceptance and involvement in victimization (Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001; Rose & Monda-Amaya, 2012). The social difficulties of students with disabilities may become pronounced in early adolescence when youth transition from supportive elementary classrooms to a complex and dynamic social system that often involves the shuffling of students' positions in the peer ecology (Chen, Hamm, Farmer, Lambert, & Mehtaji, 2015). This does not mean all students with disabilities will experience relationship problems or become involved in peer victimization. However, because of the increased potential for social difficulties, teachers need supports to help them identify and intervene with the interpersonal risks of students with disabilities who are included in general education classrooms (Meadan & Monda-Ayama, 2008).

Social interventions tend to focus on improving students' social skills or reducing their use of behaviors that contribute to involvement in peer victimization (Gresham et al., 2001; Rose & Monda-Amaya, 2012). Although such approaches are important, classroom social dynamics may also play a key role in students' peer relations and corresponding school adjustment (Gest, Madill, Zadzora, Miller, & Rodkin, 2014; Rodkin, 2011). The efficacy of individually focused interventions depends, in part, on whether stimuli in the social environment elicit and reinforce established problem behaviors that compete with students' generalization of new social skills (Gresham et al., 2001; Shores & Wehby, 1999). On this front, intervention researchers have emphasized the need to tailor strategies to individual students in relation to contextual factors that support and maintain productive rather than problematic

[1]Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, USA
[2]University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA
[3]Pennsylvania State University, State College, USA

Corresponding Author:
Thomas W. Farmer, PhD, VCU School of Education, 1015 W. Main St., P.O. Box 842020, Richmond, VA 23284-2020, USA.
Email: tfarmer@vcu.edu

behaviors (Reinke et al., 2014; Ross & Horner, 2014; Wehby & Kern, 2014).

To effectively manage classrooms while supporting individual students who experience significant peer difficulties, teachers often need the support of an expert (i.e., an intervention specialist) who can provide actionable data about classroom social dynamics that impact the peer experiences of socially vulnerable students and link this information to potential intervention strategies (Farmer, Wike, Alexander, Rodkin, & Mehtaji, 2015; Rodkin, 2011). Such support requires a consultation framework to assess how the class typically operates in relation to the focal student's social behavior and to identify various factors or processes in the ecology and the day-to-day activities that can be changed to elicit and reinforce more productive patterns (Motoca et al., 2014; Reinke et al., 2014). To do this, an intervention specialist needs to have a strong background in classroom management, consultation skills, and knowledge about classroom social dynamics. Most intervention specialists will be veteran master's-level teachers, special educators, school psychologists, guidance counselors, or behavior analysts who have significant classroom and consultation experience.

This article focuses on the role of intervention specialists in helping teachers create contexts to foster the positive social integration of students with disabilities. Two aims guide this discussion. First, middle school social dynamics are briefly reviewed. Second, the *scouting report* is described as a process to collect data to guide classroom social dynamics management. Consistent with emerging work on intensifying interventions, it is necessary to tailor strategies to the characteristics of the focal student, the competencies and proclivities of the teacher, and key context factors (Farmer, Reinke, & Brooks, 2014; Wehby & Kern, 2014). Thus, the scouting report is designed to identify potential intervention leverage points to guide the intensification and adaptation of strategies to enhance the focal student's social functioning in the classroom while promoting a social ecology that reinforces and sustains the student's positive patterns of social behaviors.

Middle School Social Dynamics

As children approach early adolescence, peers become increasingly important in the development of values, goals, and behaviors (Chen et al., 2015). During this time, students tend to develop a peer culture within the classroom that is co-constructed and negotiated as a part of their daily interactions (Farmer, 2000). This process involves the synchronization of their behaviors and beliefs with classmates who are similar to them or who complement them on key social characteristics (Farmer et al., 2014). An offshoot of students' creation of classroom peer cultures and the coordination of their social interactions is that they tend to establish distinct peer groups, social networks, and social roles that may consolidate and sustain their patterns of behavior and level of adjustment in the classroom (Chen et al., 2015).

Many classrooms become hierarchically organized around key social characteristics, including academic achievement, perceived popularity, and social dominance (Farmer, 2000; Norwalk, Hamm, & Farmer, 2015). Students often take on specific identities that reflect the peer groups they are in, and the maintenance of distinct peer cliques and crowds may consolidate and sustain students' specific behavior patterns (Chen et al., 2015; Farmer et al., 2014). In this context, students view some peers as being the popular or "cool" kids who take on nuclear roles in which they are highly central or influential in the peer system. Other peers are viewed as having secondary roles where they are followers who support and complement nuclear leaders, while still others are viewed by their classmates as outsiders who are on the periphery and do not have a clear role in their peer group, and a few are isolated and are not members of peer groups (Farmer, 2000). When classrooms are hierarchically organized and the pursuit of popularity is viewed as an important social goal, students may engage in a broad range of socially aggressive and bullying behaviors to protect the boundaries of their peer group, to enhance their own social power, and to promote or maintain their status within the peer system (Rodkin, 2011). It is important for teachers to be attuned to these social dynamics and to know the identity of popular leaders and groups as well as students and groups who are socially marginalized and involved in bullying as a victim or perpetrator (Farmer et al., 2015). When teachers use this knowledge to guide their management of the instructional and social context of the classroom, students are more likely to perceive the peer culture as being protective against bullying, supportive of academic engagement and achievement, and promotive of a classroom climate where they feel they belong (Chen et al., 2015; Farmer & Hamm, 2015; Norwalk et al., 2015).

Students with disabilities may be vulnerable to involvement in peer victimization when they are in classrooms in which social dynamics center on the pursuit of popularity and involve the use of antisocial and bullying behaviors to promote students' social status and to exclude peers with unfavorable social characteristics from peer groups (Farmer et al., 2015). Consistent with this view, many students with disabilities are likely to develop social roles and affiliations that may contribute to their risk of being a victim and/or perpetrator of bullying (Chen et al., 2015; Rose & Monda-Amaya, 2012). Teachers' management of classroom social dynamics during early adolescence may be one of many important components to reduce the involvement of students with disabilities in the peer victimization process (Farmer et al., 2015).

Teachers need information to address the needs of struggling students or to recalibrate a classroom that is not

functioning productively. They need actionable information in near real time to provide insight into a problem while also pointing them to potential solutions. Screening and diagnostic instruments generally do not serve this purpose. To address this need, the scouting report was developed to generate data about problems in the classroom and to provide solution-oriented feedback to teachers. The scouting report has been used in cluster randomized trials to guide the selection and adaptation of evidence-based strategies to promote productive classroom peer ecologies, the enhancement of teachers' awareness of classroom social networks, the reduction of peer support for problem behavior, teachers' attunement to socially at-risk students, and a decrease in the perception among students with disabilities that peers will encourage others to bully them (Chen et al., 2015; Farmer & Hamm, 2015; Motoca et al., 2014; Norwalk et al., 2015).

The Scouting Report Approach

Unlike instructional strategies that can often follow a prescribed sequence and scope, the management of classrooms is a dynamic, process-oriented activity that involves an ever-changing ecological context that depends on the composition of students, the characteristics of the teacher, and other variables both within and outside of the classroom (Farmer et al., 2014). Although the management of classroom social dynamics can be guided by evidence-based practices, it is also necessary to tailor interventions to the particular context and to address leverage points that are most likely to be amenable to specific strategies that can be implemented effectively by the teacher (Gest et al., 2014; Motoca et al., 2014).

The scouting report approach typically occurs within the context of an intervention delivery framework called *directed consultation*. The goal of directed consultation is to integrate evidence-based interventions into the daily activities and culture of the school, while providing teachers with information and support to help them tailor strategies to the specific characteristics and circumstances of their classrooms (Motoca et al., 2014). There are four components of the directed-consultation process: (a) preintervention and ongoing intervention observations and interviews, (b) workshops, (c) online modules, and (d) implementation meetings. Within the directed-consultation process, these activities are typically conducted by an intervention specialist with advanced training and experience in special education, school psychology, or educational counseling. The scouting report is primarily situated within the preintervention and ongoing intervention observations and interviews, but it helps guide all directed-consultation activities of the intervention specialist.

When the scouting report is used to enhance the social adjustment of students with disabilities, the goals are to (a) provide social-dynamics information teachers would typically not see or be aware of but that is of high value in making adjustments in the instructional and/or classroom management process as it pertains to students with disabilities, (b) identify effective strategies to foster productive changes in the functioning of specific students with disabilities, and (c) manage the general classroom context and climate so that it is supportive of all students. Scouting report assessments may be made because the teacher indicates he or she wants help to better understand a concern with a student or a classroom, to follow up on routine screening assessments that indicate specific students are experiencing difficulties, or as a general check-in by the intervention specialist to see how a class is functioning.

The scouting report approach follows a general seven-step sequence, with the intervention specialist conducting a variety of interviews, observations, and assessments that depend on what is found at each step. The process moves to consultation with the teacher to adapt and implement strategies to address leverage points identified by the intervention specialist that are likely to have a productive impact on the focal student's social behavior and peer relations and the classroom social dynamics that contribute to these experiences. The focus is on understanding a concern of interest in relation to the specific circumstances and resources that are available to address it, determining primary points of leverage that are most likely to result in a successful outcome, identifying problems that could arise while addressing the concern, and establishing a strategy that is solution oriented and can be implemented with available resources.

Preobservation Interviews

As reflected in the preobservation data collection form (Figure 1, Part a), the purpose of preobservation interviews is to gain stakeholders' perspectives about a key issue, why it is a concern, when it occurs, the circumstances around its occurrence, what happens after the problem occurs, and what is viewed as a desired and successful outcome of interventions to address the concern. The specific aims are twofold. The first aim is to clarify what the concern or problem is in ways that will help guide observations. The second aim is to gain a better sense of stakeholders' mind-set about the issue that may impact the intervention process. This includes clarifying the degree to which various stakeholders view the issue in consistent or divergent ways and their malleability or willingness to make specific changes that may be necessary in the implementation of potential intervention strategies. As suggested by the examples in Figure 1, questions can be open and conversational. While it is helpful to get clear details at this stage, the intent is not to generate quantifiable data but to understand the involved parties' views of the overall issue and their desire and willingness to make changes to address it.

a. Pre-observation Interviews

Teacher:

Tell me about the student, how well do you think the student gets along with others?
What seems to go well for the student?
When does the student have problems?

Student:

Tell me about the class, do you think you get along well with others?
When do things go well?
When do you think you seem to have problems with others?

Other Stakeholders: Indicate person

What information do you think is important for understanding how the student is doing socially in the class?

b. Post-observation Interviews:

The purpose of the post-observation interview is to clarify what was observed in the classroom. Therefore, there are no specific questions that guide this interview. Rather, the intervention specialist will generate these questions from the observations. Likely points of clarification and explication are listed below:

- What is the purpose of a specific activity or classroom management strategy?
- Does a specific activity typically look like or result in what was observed?
- Does the focal student typically work well with a particular set of students?
- What happens when the student is moved or working in another area?
- Is the teacher aware of apparent productive leaders in the classroom?
- Is the teacher aware of apparent problematic leaders in the classroom?
- Is the teacher aware of productive interchanges between focal student and others?
- Is the teacher aware of coercive interchanges between focal student and others?
- How does the teacher see (or does the teacher see) an apparent problem?
- Is the teacher aware of how her (his) behavior impacts the student?
- Does the teacher agree with potential intervention leverage points?

Figure 1. Pre- and post-observation scouting report interview data collection form.

The Observation Process

The observation process depends on the nature of the problem, the information generated from key stakeholders, and the extent to which the problem is viewed across settings or contexts. Figure 2 provides a form to guide this process and record observation data. Some information may be available in one or two brief visits to the setting with simple checks about focal constructs, such as the impact of the seating arrangement, opportunities to engage in productive activities, the teacher's management of social dynamics, and the identity of peers who impact the student's social experiences. The concepts of proximity and propinquity are important for this aspect of the observation. *Proximity* refers to spatial distance while *propinquity* is more broadly defined to include opportunities for encounters and may reflect groupings and the ability of the student to move about the room to interact with specific peers.

Also, much of the information will involve general impressions that will make it possible to narrow the focus down to key areas of concern or potential intervention targets. Once focal points are identified, it may be necessary to collect quantifiable data on the student's interactions with individual peers, groups of peers, or the teacher. This may include identifying the sequence of specific recurring social interactions and how such interactions are synchronized with specific classmates or adults. The key point is to clarify how the student engages and is engaged by the social system and whether there is a need to change her or his interactions with specific peers, the teacher or other adults, one or more groups of peers, or the entire classroom in general. Clarifying the student's peer affiliations and social roles in the classroom is an important step in this process. In some instances, this information may be discernable during observations. In other cases, it may be possible to ascertain this information in follow-up interviews, or it may be necessary to conduct assessments of the classroom social ecology (Farmer, 2000).

Identifying Leverage Points

In many cases, it is easy to identify leverage points that may have a quick and meaningful impact on a student's adjustment in the classroom. This may include changing the student's seating arrangement, enhancing the teacher's awareness and monitoring of the behavior of influential students, creating supportive peer opportunities that are contingent on productive behavior, and reframing how the teacher engages the student in public ways that impact how peers see her or him. However, problems can also be ingrained into the social system. Thus, although some changes may have an immediate desired impact, it is often

Directions- Use this sheet to collect information regarding the social context and dynamics of each component.

Component	Focal Point	Activity	Description of the Social Context and Dynamics
A. Placement in social ecology			
Seating arrangement and social encounters of focal student	Propinquity to productive peers/ encounters and opportunities to interact		
	Propinquity to peers who engage student's problem behavior		
	Proximity to teacher—physical spacing, distance, monitoring		
	Visibility to peers		
	Opportunities to engage in productive academic activities		
	Opportunities to engage in social activities		
	Opportunities to engage in leadership or socially favored roles		
B. Frequency and Valence of Interactions with Others			
	Frequency/valence of interactions from teacher		
	Frequency/valence of interactions toward teacher		
	Frequency/valence of interactions from productively engaged peers		
	Frequency/valence of interaction toward productively engaged peers		
	Frequency/valence of interactions from unproductive peers		
	Frequency/valence of interaction toward unproductive peers		
C. Teacher's management of social system			
	Social Structure: egalitarian/hierarchical		
	Peer groupings		
	Teacher awareness of students' social roles		
	Teacher's awareness of naturally occurring peer groups		
	Teacher's efforts to intervene with peer ecology		
D. Identity of key social actors for student			
	Classmates who support student's productive engagement		
	Peer groups who support student's productive engagement		
	Classmates who detract from students' productive engagement		
	Peer groups who detract from student's productive engagement		
E. General impressions of social processes impacting student			
	Social synchrony		
	Peer affiliations		
	Social role/reputation		

Note: activity is the content and instruction method (*e.g., reading- independent work, social studies- whole group instruction*)

Figure 2. Observation process and focal points.

necessary to carefully coordinate multiple changes at the level of the student's behavior, her or his general role in the social system, the types of relationship opportunities and supports with key peers, and interactional patterns with teachers and other adults. The goal is to identify one or two leverage points that are highly malleable and to consider one or two additional leverage points or changes that may require more intensive and chronic supports to alter the student's placement in the peer system that will likely have a positive and sustained impact once they are successfully accomplished.

Post-observation Interviews

Potential issues of clarification and elaboration are listed on the post-observation interview form (Figure 1, Part b). The

purpose of post-observation interviews is to check back with stakeholders to clarify questions that arose from the observations and further situate the totality of the information collected within the perspective of their understanding of the issue of concern. The aims are to reconcile divergent information and to consider stakeholders' views of potential leverage points. On this latter point, it is helpful to consider how the relevant parties (i.e., the student, teacher) view these potential intervention targets, whether they think they are amenable to change, and whether there are concerns that such targets and related intervention strategies could result in additional problems or other unforeseen difficulties.

Additional Assessments

In some cases, observations alone may not provide a complete picture of the classroom social dynamics or how the behavior patterns and social roles of the student of interest are supported by the peer ecology. Based on the data from interviews and observations, it is possible to generate more direct questions for the teacher, the student, or other stakeholders that can help clarify classroom social dynamics, the students who can protect against or support problems of the target student, and other relevant information, such as the identity of class leaders, bullies, and victims, as well as the social role of the student and the identity of her or his associates and their social characteristics (Farmer, Lane, Lee, Hamm, & Lambert, 2012). This information can then be embedded into daily classroom management strategies to use natural peer dynamic processes to help elicit and reinforce desired productive social behaviors, roles, and relationships (Farmer, 2000; Rose & Monda-Amaya, 2012).

The scouting report process moves from data collection to consultation with the teacher to adapt and implement strategies to address leverage points that are judged to be likely to have a productive impact on the focal student's social behavior, her or his peer relationships, and the classroom social dynamics that contribute to these experiences. However, in some cases, even with observations and more detailed questions with key stakeholders about the social ecology, it is not possible to generate a complete picture of the social processes that are maintaining the student's problem behavior or the problematic behaviors of peers that are directed toward her or him. In such situations, it may be helpful to conduct more rigorous assessments with a range of instruments, depending on the issue and the elusive information. This can include (a) teacher, parent, or self-ratings or checklists; (b) peer and/or teacher nominations of classmates' social characteristics, peer groups, and the classroom social structure; and (c) applied behavior analysis to clarify the antecedents and consequences of the behavior of concern, including experimental manipulation to determine functional relations. The overarching goal across this process to identify the relationship between the student's social role and affiliations, how the student fits into the social structure in relation to the peers that they interact with in problematic ways, and how these interactions are synchronized with others in the social system in ways that support the stability of the behavior or the problematic social role (Farmer, 2000; Farmer et al., 2012).

Selection and Implementation

This step of the scouting report approach will depend on the information generated from the prior steps. Several authors have outlined considerations in the intervention selection and implementation process as well as descriptions of strategies that are effective for particular issues in supporting students' social success and growth (Farmer, 2000; Gresham et al., 2001; Meadan & Monda-Ayama, 2008; Rodkin, 2011; Rose & Monda-Amaya, 2012; Ross & Horner, 2014). Although it is not possible to review these strategies here, these and other articles can serve as resources to help guide the interpretation of data and the selection of intervention approaches.

The selection and implementation of potential intervention strategies should be considered at four levels. Further, parallel consideration of how these levels interact with each other is necessary. As the intervention specialist works with teachers to implement strategies for specific cases, it is important to avoid trying to achieve the ideal. Instead, the focus should be on what can work for this student, in this classroom, with the skills and resources that are available to the teacher. By keeping a solution-oriented approach that is aimed at shared views of success by the various stakeholders, the intervention specialist can help the student, the teacher, and the general classroom context move toward a positive equilibrium where each functions in productive and supportive ways that can help sustain the success of the others.

Level 1

The first level involves interventions that focus on the student's behavior. Do specific behaviors of the student contribute to the concern and can these behaviors be readily changed? There are numerous social skills interventions aimed at enhancing student's social competence. Individually focused interventions have been developed to train students with social difficulties in new skills to replace problematic social behaviors. Although the need and importance of such interventions is clear, that is not the focus here. General education teachers are not expected to explicitly teach new social skills to students with disabilities or to lead the establishment of social skills training-support plans to promote their generalization. Instead, with the guidance of the scouting report approach and related assessments, the intervention specialist can identify the social functions of the problem

behavior and clarify how the student's placement in the peer ecology operates to evoke and reinforce the problematic social behavior (Farmer, 2000; Farmer et al., 2012). This is somewhat different from a typical functional behavior analysis, where the focus is on determining whether a specific behavior serves to obtain (i.e., positive reinforcement) or escape (i.e., negative reinforcement) attention, activities or tangibles, or sensory conditions. Social behavior in the classroom is generally more complex than this (Shores & Wehby, 1999) and is often supported by students' perceived social roles, positions in the social hierarchy, peer group affiliations, and corresponding social interaction patterns that tend to be consolidated and maintained by students' placement in the peer ecology.

From a social-dynamics management perspective, it is important for the intervention specialist to view the student's problematic social behavior through the lens of her or his social roles, position in the social hierarchy, and peer affiliations. Further, it is necessary to individualize interventions by looking beyond the topography of the behavior to clarify how general day-to-day activities or processes in the environment work to elicit and maintain the focal behavior (Gresham et al., 2001; Wehby & Kern, 2014).

To illustrate the use of the scouting report approach, two common social relationship profiles of distinct subtypes of aggressive boys (i.e., perceived-popular aggressive; perceived-unpopular aggressive) follow (Farmer, 2000; Farmer et al., 2012; Rodkin, 2011). These profiles are often evident during the scouting report approach, and the vignettes follow common scenarios teachers face in the intervention process.

Both students are depicted as aggressive toward peers and tend to be involved in disagreements and fights. One student, Paul, is viewed by peers as a popular athlete who is a bully and a leader. He is not viewed by classmates or teachers as being a victim of bullying. Many classmates do not like Paul (i.e., he is identified as having rejected sociometric status), and they are afraid of him. Yet, they do what he wants to avoid becoming a target of his teasing and aggression. Further, Paul hangs around with the popular crowd and is viewed by his classmates as being a dominant leader of the cool clique of athletic boys, who are viewed by classmates as being bullies who get their way in the classroom. The other student, Ralph, is viewed by peers as an unpopular bully who is always seeking help, distracts others, and is frequently victimized by peers. Ralph is also highly disliked by classmates, but they are not afraid of him. Rather, they are constantly teasing and picking on him, and he often becomes the scapegoat for problems that occur in the classroom even if he did not cause them. Ralph tends to vacillate between being peripheral and isolated in the peer ecology because he sometimes hangs around with another student whom no one else likes. They are not really friends, and they tend to argue and get into fights with each other (see Note 1).

Although Paul and Ralph are both aggressive students who have rejected sociometric status and are considered to be bullies, the aggressive behavior of the two students is different in terms of its social function and how it is elicited and maintained by the peer ecology. Paul is a disliked but popular and dominant leader who uses aggression to influence peers and to get his way in the social system. He and the peer clique he leads may be viewed as bullies by classmates, but they are powerful and influential. Thus, Paul's aggressive behavior is evoked by peers who challenge and/or are deferent to him, and it is reinforced by peers' acquiescence as well as the high social position it affords him along with the social approval from close associates and the broader crowd of popular students in the middle school. In contrast, Ralph is both sociometrically rejected and socially marginalized in the peer system. This means he is not only highly disliked; he also has no peers who approve or acquiesce to his behavior, and he has a social position that makes him highly vulnerable to frequent taunts and provocations by peers. Further, as suggested by his bully-victim status, he is likely to engage in aggressive behavior as a way to preempt or defend against the perceived social transgressions of his classmates.

Interventions for these two students at the individual behavior level should be quite different in terms of focus and content. The critical issue is to identify which aspects of the student's social behavior can be readily changed that will likely promote more productive or positive experiences in the peer system and whether the strategy can be easily implemented by the teacher or other student support personnel and reinforced by teachers during the student's daily activities. For Paul, the focus should be on his leadership and influence in the peer system. His high status, his peers' acquiescence to his aggression, and the direct peer support of his clique are all reinforcing his bullying and aggressive behaviors. The content of intervention for Paul should center on providing him with strategies and opportunities to use prosocial leadership skills and to reinforce his use of these skills with more leadership responsibilities. However, his opportunities for leadership and support from his peer group should be contingent on his use of positive behaviors, and there should be very clear natural consequences that involve the reduction of leadership responsibilities and opportunities when he uses aggression to influence peers. For Ralph, the focus of intervention should center on reducing his reactivity to peers and providing him with strategies for avoiding taunts and conflict situations with peers. Further, when he does perceive that a peer has bullied him, he needs a clear plan for disengaging from the situation and being viewed in a positive way by others. This may or may not involve direct reinforcement and attention for his positive behavior. This will depend on how peers respond and whether such attention may only trigger more covert attempts by peers to taunt him. Thus, this will be a judgment

call that the teacher will need to make depending on both Level 2 and Level 3 strategies.

Level 2

The second level involves the student's social interactions with peers, including how these interactions are synchronized with specific classmates and how such patterns of interaction are supported by the classroom environment. To address this level, it may be necessary for teachers to rearrange the physical placement of the student in the classroom; to carefully select the student's grouping and pairing with classmates for instructional activities based on information about social dynamic processes; and to provide careful monitoring, contingencies, and reinforcement of opportunities to engage productively with desired peers.

For Paul, Level 2 interventions will include a focus on clarifying how peers synchronize their behaviors with him in ways that evoke and reinforce his aggression and should center on processes of encouragement/approval for bullying from peer group associates and acquiescence and deference from other classmates. Intervention strategies may include management of their seating arrangements and social opportunities (i.e., propinquity) with other popular peers and making such opportunities contingent on prosocial and productive behaviors. It may also be fruitful to help Paul develop positive relationships with a broader range of classmates to promote his sense of connection and productive leadership for all peers and not just those who are viewed as being popular. The natural reinforcement of being liked rather than feared may help sustain more productive and prosocial behaviors. However, this approach can be risky, as influential peers who are perceived to be cool can be behavioral contagions who evoke and reinforce problem behavior in otherwise compliant and productive students. Thus, this approach should be monitored carefully, and contingencies about behavioral expectations should be clearly communicated and unwaveringly enforced whenever problems occur but, more importantly, should be reinforced with new opportunities and responsibilities that further enhance each student's status and skills.

For Ralph, understanding which students are most likely to elicit and engage him in problematic social interactions is critical. With this information, it is possible for teachers to use seating, grouping, and general classroom management approaches to avoid the student's direct contact and propinquity to peers who elicit and sustain his problematic social behavior patterns. But of greater importance, it is necessary to identify a low-visibility area in the classroom where the student can be placed and surrounded by peers who are least likely to become engaged in his problems and who can provide supports and help him feel like he belongs in the classroom. This should be monitored carefully, and for students who have high levels of activity and management needs, it is often helpful to vary peers around them at a fairly high frequency to prevent coercive patterns from developing. A primary issue here is to help the student develop neutral relations with more peers and to eventually establish positive social interactions with a few peers who are productively engaged in school and who have positive roles and relationships in the peer system. This will likely not be the most popular peers in the classroom but rather is likely to be students whom others respect and get along with well. It is critical to not force such interactions but to simply manage Ralph's social opportunities and help him move to more productive relationships.

Level 3

The third level involves the student's placement in the social structure. This includes the student's social role and peer affiliations. In some ways this is related to Level 2, but it goes beyond with whom the student is in close proximity or with whom the student interacts most frequently. Rather, this involves understanding how the student is perceived by peers in general and what types of social opportunities the student is typically afforded by others. For this level, it is necessary to identify neutral opportunities where the student can be viewed in a favorable light by classmates who do not know the student well or who may not typically have a positive view of the student and her or his skills and characteristics. In other words, this level involves helping the teacher identify ways that the student can take on more positive roles in the classroom and have the opportunity to develop positive relationships with productive peers.

As described in Levels 1 and 2, for Paul this is primarily an issue of managing and monitoring his social opportunities with his peer group and then the broader community of peers in the classroom. This should involve providing supports and contingencies to foster positive leadership behaviors, roles, and relationships, but it should also include clear expectations and natural consequences that reduce leadership and preferred social opportunities when bullying and aggression are used to influence peers. The goal for Paul is to turn his natural leadership abilities into productive relationships with a broad range of peers who reinforce his positive behaviors by their approval rather than their fear. For Ralph, this will involve helping him establish a role in the classroom that reduces provocations while promoting his ability to control his behavior and not respond to perceived taunts in reactive ways that reinforce and sustain negative interactions. This probably should not be a role that has a high frequency of visibility, but when he is being socially productive, it will be helpful for peers to see him in this positive light. As his interactions with peers become more neutral, efforts should be made to provide additional social opportunities, with monitoring, to foster such relationships into friendships and productive peer affiliations.

Level 4

The fourth level involves the interactions of the teacher with the student. How the teacher responds to the student sends clear messages to the class about her or him. Teachers are often unaware that their public reprimands, their visible annoyance with the student, and their general relationship with the student can all influence how classmates relate to a student. This is sensitive but important ground to cover with teachers; it is critical to help teachers identify ways the student gets under their skin or how they respond to the student in ways that send negative messages to peers (e.g., treating the student in less mature ways, not allowing the student to try things that others do, allowing the student to get away with things other students are not allowed to do). Once teachers are comfortable talking about these situations, it is helpful to identify problematic interactions or circumstances that can be reframed to reduce tensions or problematic teacher-student relations and to promote the student's more positive social image.

In using the scouting report, it is fairly common to see students with Paul's characteristics who are in charge of the classroom and stay right at the edge of noncompliance with the teacher. In such cases, the teacher may not be aware that rules no longer apply to Paul, but the students do. When the teacher gives instructions about an activity, Paul will follow some expectations but do other things that go against or beyond the teacher's stated rules while acting as an enforcer telling other students to follow the directions. Consistent with the concept of the coercive process in teacher-student relationships (Shores & Wehby, 1999), teachers will avoid using redirection with Paul, and as though by tacit agreement, Paul will comply with expectations only when he senses the teacher is being pushed past her or his limits. In this situation, it is important to help the teacher understand this dynamic and to establish a plan to reframe this interaction pattern. This may include a clear set of contingencies for both positive and negative behaviors, and it may require supports of other adults, including special education teachers or administrators. If this is done, it will be necessary to be careful that it is clear the classroom teacher and only this teacher will make decisions about the contingencies. Otherwise, a rescue situation may be established where the student will comply only when other adults are brought into the situation.

For Ralph, a very different but equally problematic dynamic may be occurring. It is fairly common to see instances where students in the classroom will use the teacher as an unwitting accomplice to attack or get the student in trouble. In the case of Ralph, classmates are highly aware of his high reactivity and his likely response of getting angry and crying when the teacher reprimands him and sends him out of the room or to the office. They are also aware that the teacher is very frustrated with him and will not listen to his protests or efforts to explain his behavior. Further, this situation has become a sport to the class, and everyone giggles as they see what is about to happen. Peers who were not initially aware of the plan may become involved and provide additional descriptions to the teacher to support the case against Ralph. In this situation, the teacher needs to be aware that her or his attention cannot be turned away from the class for even short periods of time. Further, the teacher needs to be careful not to react quickly and to reframe the situation so it is not a problem and to focus on getting all students, including Ralph, back on task when such incidences occur. By managing one's own frustration and reactivity and by stepping Ralph through the desired behavior during times of conflict, the teacher can teach Ralph a new skill while reducing the stimuli and reinforcement for classmates to set Ralph up for problems.

Feedback to Promote Positive Dynamics

Beyond intervening with the social difficulties of specific students with disabilities, teachers can operate as an invisible hand to manage the social dynamics of the classroom and guide the general peer culture toward a positive climate that is supportive of all students. To do this, it is important for teachers to be attuned to the social dynamics of the classroom (Norwalk et al., 2015). This involves promoting teachers' knowledge and awareness of classroom leaders, bullies, socially vulnerable students, and the peer groups that make up the social system. It is also helpful for teachers to know whether the class is hierarchically organized and whether aggression and bullying are associated with being perceived as popular by classmates (Farmer, 2000; Rodkin, 2011).

When teachers are aware of these dynamics, they can carefully structure the social opportunities, roles, and contact among students in ways that enhance a peer culture in which there is a collective sense of identity and responsibility for each other. This includes using natural leaders and class-level contingencies to support a positive social climate, providing opportunities for all students to take part in favorable and socially visible activities, and supporting students' sense that it is okay to tell adults about their concerns about bullying and that they can feel comfortable looking out for each other (Farmer, 2000). However, on the other side of the coin, it is critical teachers do not use discipline in ways that create negative identities for students or, of even greater concern, support a student's image of being a popular "outlaw" by publicly challenging her or him in ways that reinforce defiant behavior with peer admiration. The broader point here is that it is often necessary to help teachers see the early adolescent peer culture from students' point of view and to manage the social system from this knowledge base while maintaining their role as adults who are there to support students' growth.

Conclusion

The social relations of students with disabilities are complex phenomena. They are more than the consequences of students' social behavior, the reflection of their social competence, or the perceptions and responses of others to someone who has a disability. The social relations of students with disabilities are a multifactored construct that involves the cumulative and layered contributions of the characteristics and social behaviors of the student, the social roles and peer affiliations they develop in the classroom ecology, the patterns of interactions they develop with specific peers and teachers, and the general classroom social dynamics. When considered across these variable levels, this is a tremendous amount of information for a teacher to monitor and respond to in systematic or impactful ways. With the scouting report, special education teachers, counselors, or school psychologists can serve as social intervention specialists who synthesize information across these various levels in ways that may not be readily apparent to the teacher but that may be critical for promoting sustained positive peer relationships for students with disabilities. In this way, the scouting report may help to move beyond the temporary impact of many social interventions and serve as a critical component in the development of individualized interventions programs for students with intensive social needs.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was supported by grants from the Institute of Education Sciences (R305A120812; R305A140434). The views expressed in this article are those of the authors' and do not necessarily reflect the views of the granting agencies.

Note

1. The student vignettes are based on accounts drawn from the research literature and are not based on actual people or events observed by the authors.

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