

PEACEFUL PEOPLE PROGRAM LOOKS TO DEVELOP SOCIAL SKILLS, CURB AGGRESSION

INTRODUCTION

Violence in US schools has received high levels of attention in recent years. High profile tragedies such as what occurred at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in 1999 where 13 people were killed, and Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas in 1998, where two middle school students opened fire on their classmates after pulling a fire alarm, have drawn needed attention to the acts of violence that are being committed by our children. Concerns also arise daily with less tragic forms of youth aggression, such as physical and verbal conflicts and negative social interaction. The need for prevention is unquestioned, but there is uncertainty with regard to the most effective means of youth violence prevention.

While there is no one solution to this issue, there is a program in place in Central New York that has developed an innovative youth violence prevention curriculum for elementary school children. The Peaceful People Program seeks not only to prevent acts of youth violence, but also to develop character and social values in young children in an educational setting. The positive relationship between social skills and academic competence is well-established in the literature (Bursuck & Asher, 1986; Coie & Krehbiel, 1984). Research also indicates that problem behaviors prevent people from behaving in socially competent ways (Asher & Hymel, 1981; Cartledge & Milburn, 1986; Foster & Ritchey, 1979; Gresham & Reschly, 1988; Walker & McConnell, 1988). The Peaceful People Program focuses on curbing problem behaviors and developing social skills in order to prevent violence and improve academic importance among elementary school youth.

This article takes a more in-depth look at the Peaceful People Program as a potentially promising program for youth violence and problem behavior prevention.



THE PEACEFUL PEOPLE PROGRAM

The Peaceful People program, developed by PRL Associates (Peaceful Resolutions for Living) is a series of activity-based prevention programs focused on character development, social competencies development, conflict resolution, communication and problem solving skills, community building and violence prevention. Peaceful People components include, but are not limited to: understanding conflict, community building, cooperation strategies, celebrating diversity, communication skills, including reflective listening and I-messages, anger management, barriers to communication, decision making, choices and consequences.

PRL Associates, with developmental guidance from the Utica and Syracuse City School Districts, the Peace Education Foundation and Educators for Social Responsibility, offers Peaceful People Program for students and teachers. Peaceful People is a unique classroom program designed to address youth violence by teaching conflict resolution, communication and community building strategies to teachers and students. The program is targeted to elementary and middle school students. It is generally presented as a 9-hour, 12-session program that is operated within the classroom with the classroom teacher present. Designed and administered by PRL Associates, the program was presented in over 150 kindergarten through sixth grade classrooms in Central New York during the 1999-2000 school year.

Given the growing interest in this program, an evaluation was conducted during the 1999-2000 program year in order to take a first step to measure program impact. Two 4th grade classrooms in one school in the Syracuse City School District were selected as the target of this initial evaluation. This article presents the findings of this effort, which indicate promising program results.



METHODOLOGY

As a first step evaluation, a pre-post testing methodology was selected to measure change. Since the Peaceful People program focuses on the development of social skills in order to develop character and social competence along with conflict resolution skills, a standardized measurement of social skills change was selected to test program impact. Specifically, the Social Skills Rating System published by the American Guidance Service (AGS) was selected as an appropriate measure of social skills development. That test is unique in that it measures change in three domains: social skills, problem behaviors and academic competence. The system includes instruments that can be administered with students, teachers and parents. For purposes of this evaluation, the Elementary Level Teacher Form and Elementary Level Student Form (Grades 3-6) were administered.

This first step evaluation was conducted in two separate fourth grade classes in one elementary school in the city of Syracuse during the 1999-2000 school year involving a total of 47 4th grade students.

The pre-test was administered in early December, prior to the first Peaceful People program class. The test was administered to students, during classroom time by the classroom teacher. Teachers were asked to complete forms on each student in their classrooms, prior to the beginning of the program. The post-test was administered to students in the classroom during the last Peaceful People class in May. Teachers were asked to complete forms on each student in their classrooms, during the last two weeks of May. In addition to the standardized tests, teachers and students were asked to complete a brief evaluative questionnaire, which provided their qualitative reaction to the program. Completed pre-tests, post-tests and evaluative questionnaires were data entered and analyzed by Knowledge Systems & Research, Inc., a local research firm.

Teachers evaluated 47 students in both the pre- and post-tests. Thirty-seven students from these



fourth grade classrooms completed both the pre-test and post-test. Seventy-five percent of the students were Black, 13% were white, and 6% each were Hispanic or Indian. Of the 47 students, 64 percent were males and 36 percent were females.

The AGS Social Skills Rating System measures changes in social skills across four subdomains:

- Cooperation: behaviors such as helping others, sharing materials, and complying with rules and regulations;
- Assertion: initiating behaviors, such as asking others for information, introducing oneself, and responding to the actions of others, such as peer pressure or insults;
- Empathy: behaviors that show concern and respect for others' feelings and viewpoints. Found in the student evaluation form only;
- Self-Control: behaviors that emerge in conflict situations, such as responding appropriately to teasing, and in non-conflict situations that require taking turns and compromising.

Additionally, teachers are asked to report on the level of problem behaviors for each of their students. Problem behaviors are measured in three subdomains:

- Externalizing: inappropriate behaviors involving verbal or physical aggression toward others, poor control of temper, and arguing;
- Internalizing: behaviors indicating anxiety, sadness, loneliness, and poor self-esteem; and
- Hyperactivity: behaviors involving excessive movement, fidgeting, and impulsive reactions.

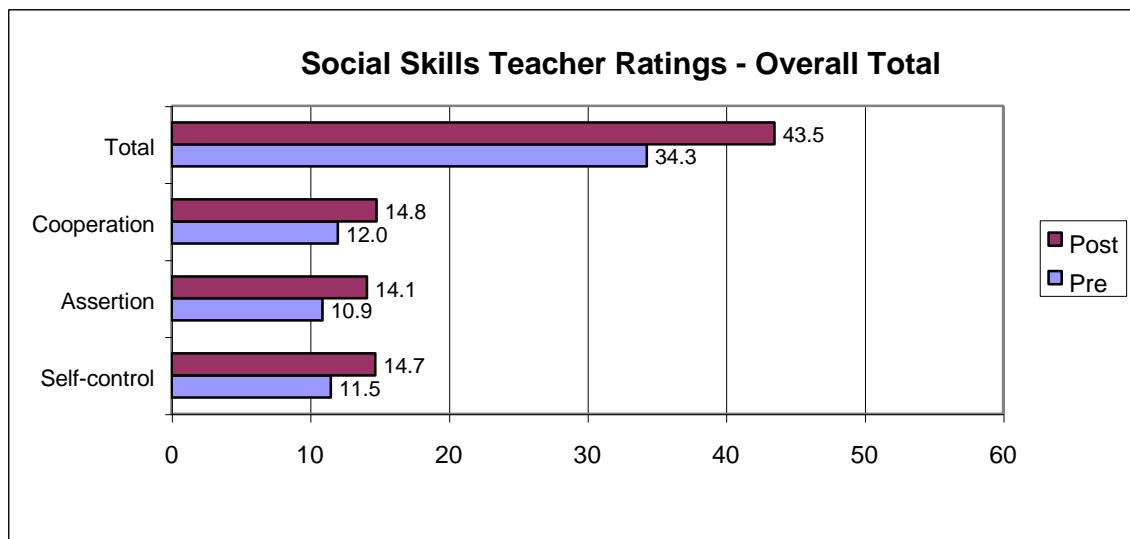


FINDINGS

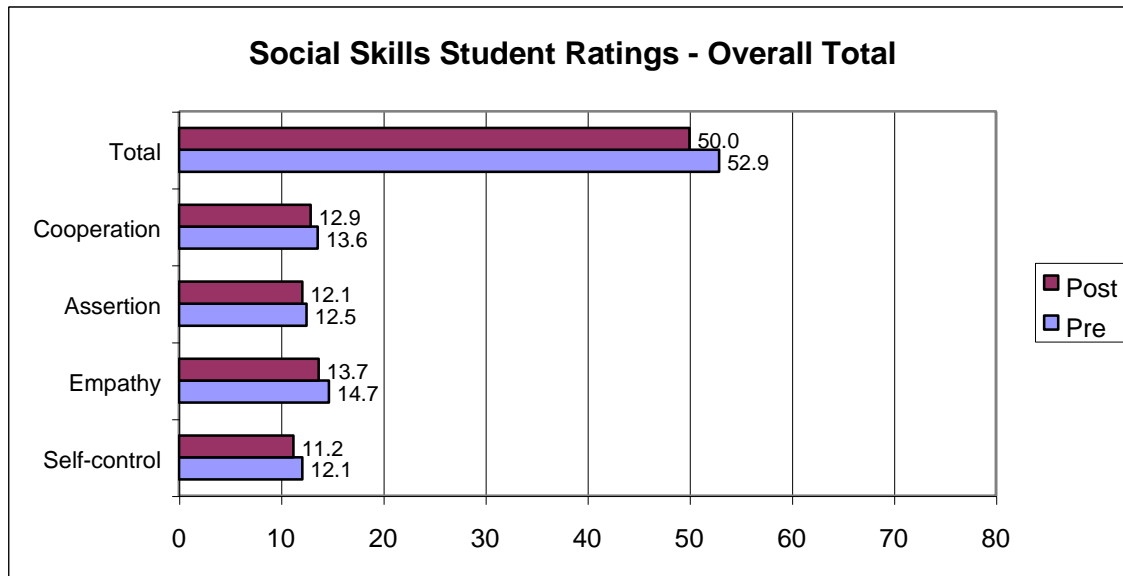
Pre/post Peaceful People program testing suggests the programming is very promising in its impact. This is particularly so for teachers' perceptions of change in students skills and behavior.

Social Skills Change

When looking at mean scores by category, teachers recognize notable improvements from pre-test to post-test in each category, with approximately 25 percent improvement in mean scores. T-tests indicate these measured improvements are all statistically significant at the .05 level. (Interestingly, teachers also give substantially greater importance to assertion skills on the post-test compared to the pre-test.)



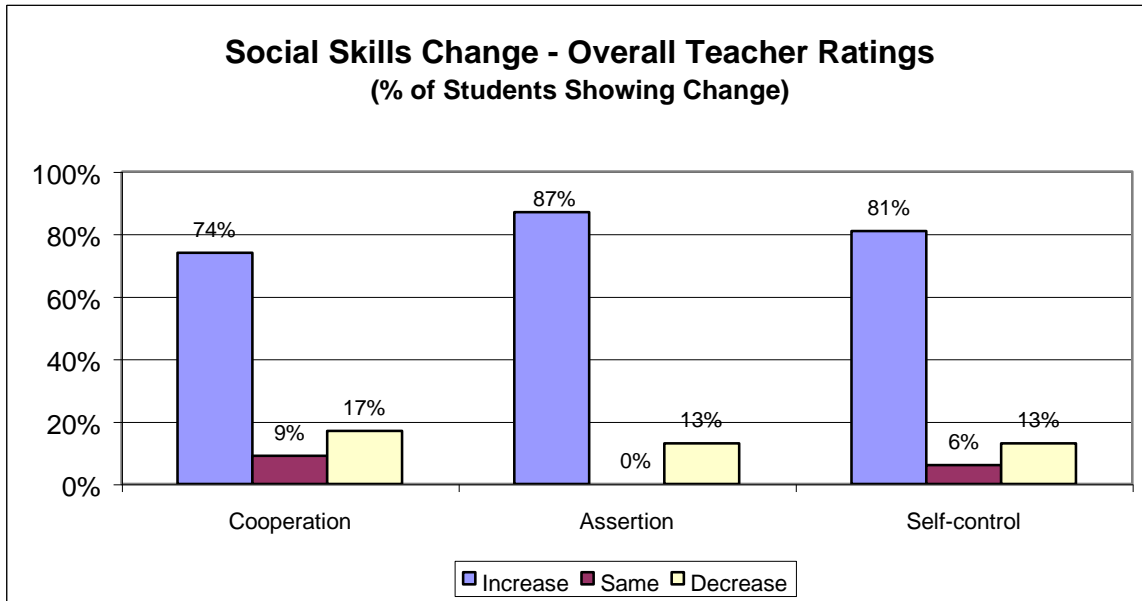
Given the findings from teachers, student scores are somewhat puzzling. Student mean scores do not change noticeably (generally about 5 percent) and the small change that is measured is not statistically significant at the .05 level. Findings are illustrated in the following charts.



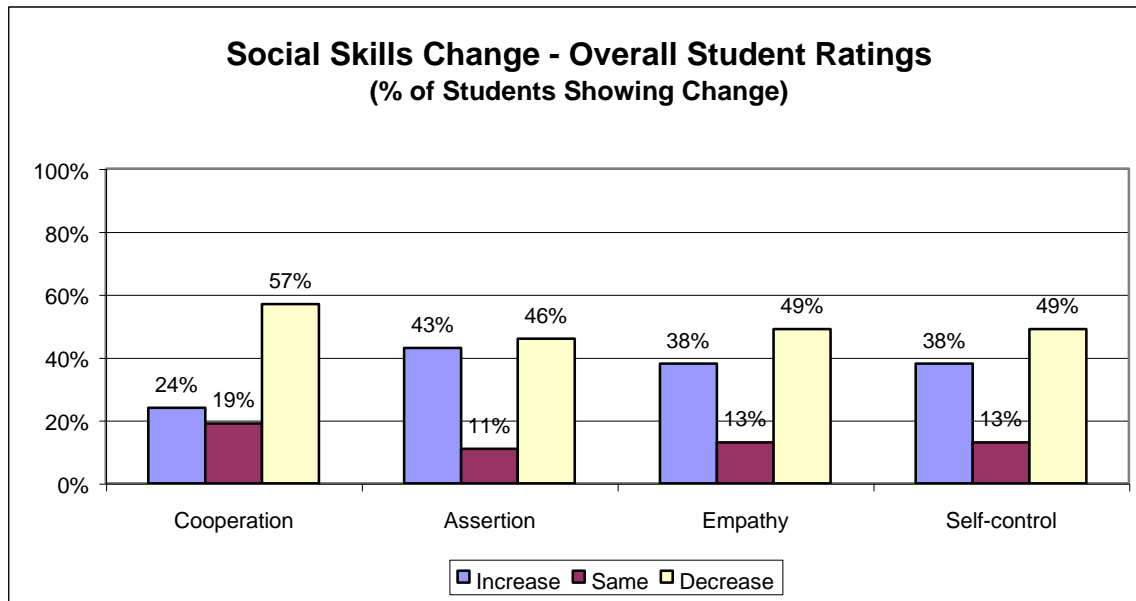
Findings were also analyzed by gender, with similar patterns of pre/post change for males and females. Again, changes in scores were not found to be statistically significant at the .05 level.



In addition to reviewing mean scores for each subdomain, pre/post test findings were also reviewed by percentages of students whose scores had improved, lowered, or stayed the same. Pre/post findings from teachers are dramatic, indicating improvement in scores for each skills category among at least seven-out-of-ten students.

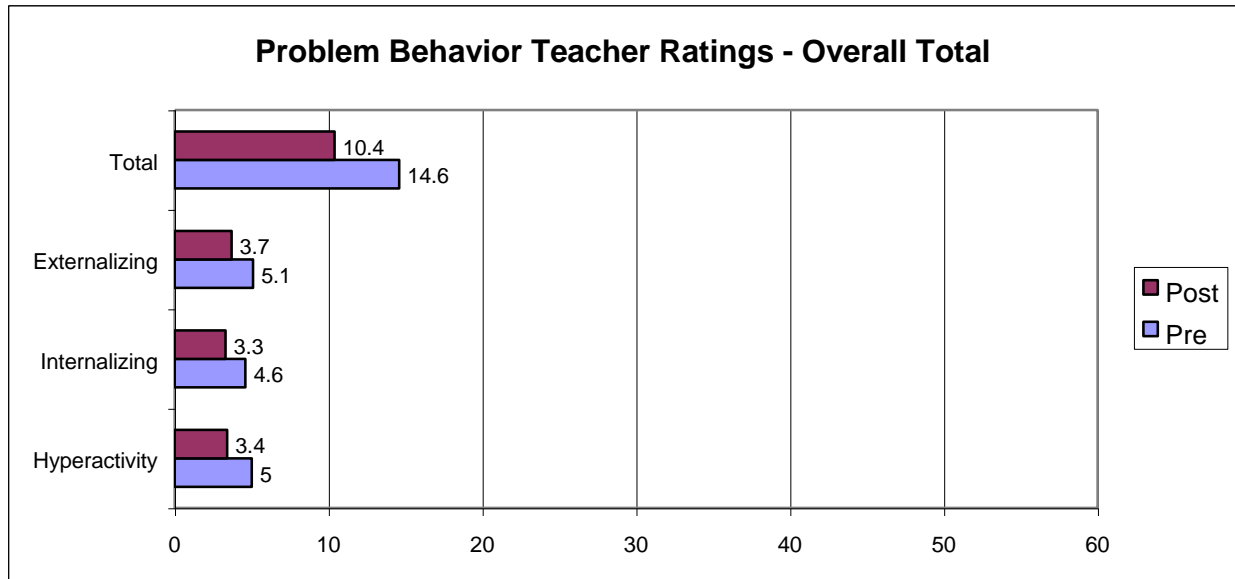


Student pre/post findings are not as dramatic as those of the teachers, but promising nonetheless. With the exception of Cooperation skills, four-out-of-ten students show improvement in skills categories based on student pre/post tests.



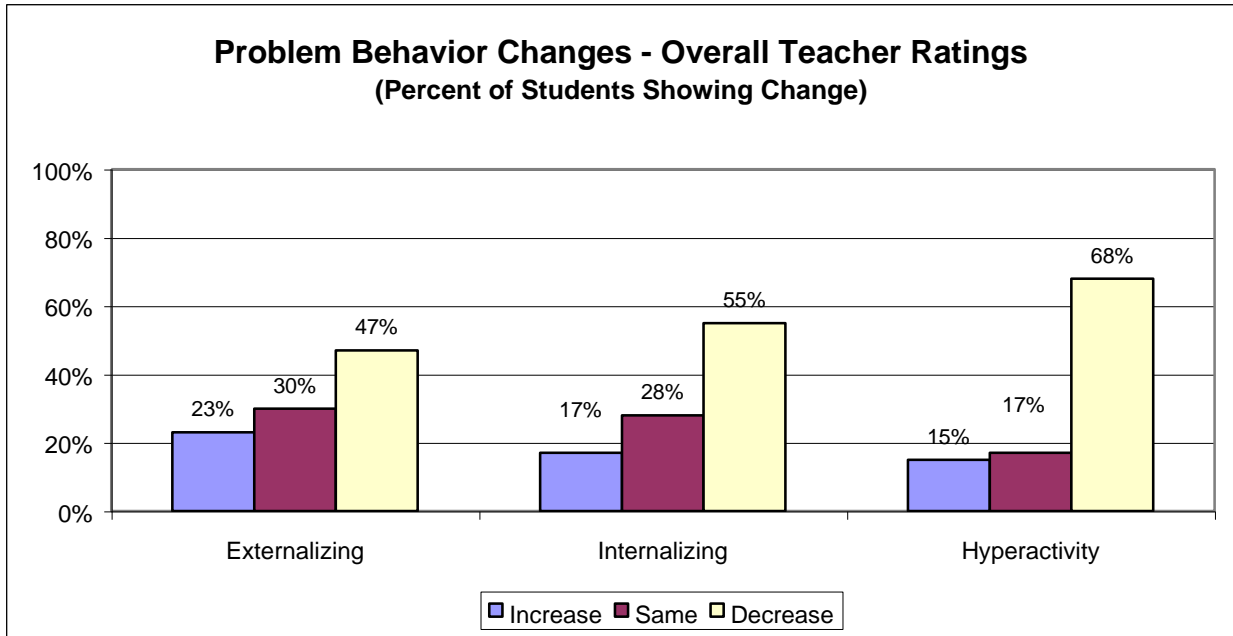
Problem Behaviors

Another measure of program impact is teacher reported problem behaviors. Again, pre/post findings are dramatic: student overall problem behavior ratings decreased by 29 percent. As noted earlier, problem behaviors are measured across three subdomains: externalizing, internalizing and hyperactivity. Teacher-reported problem behaviors improved nearly equally across all three behavior categories, with all improvements statistically significant at the .05 level. Findings are illustrated in the next chart.



Noting the percentage of students that were reported to have increased levels of problem behavior, it is also insightful to recognize those with the same levels or decreased levels of problem behaviors. Teacher ratings indicate that two-thirds of students showed decreased levels of Hyperactivity problem behaviors and one-half improved Internalizing and Externalizing problem behaviors.



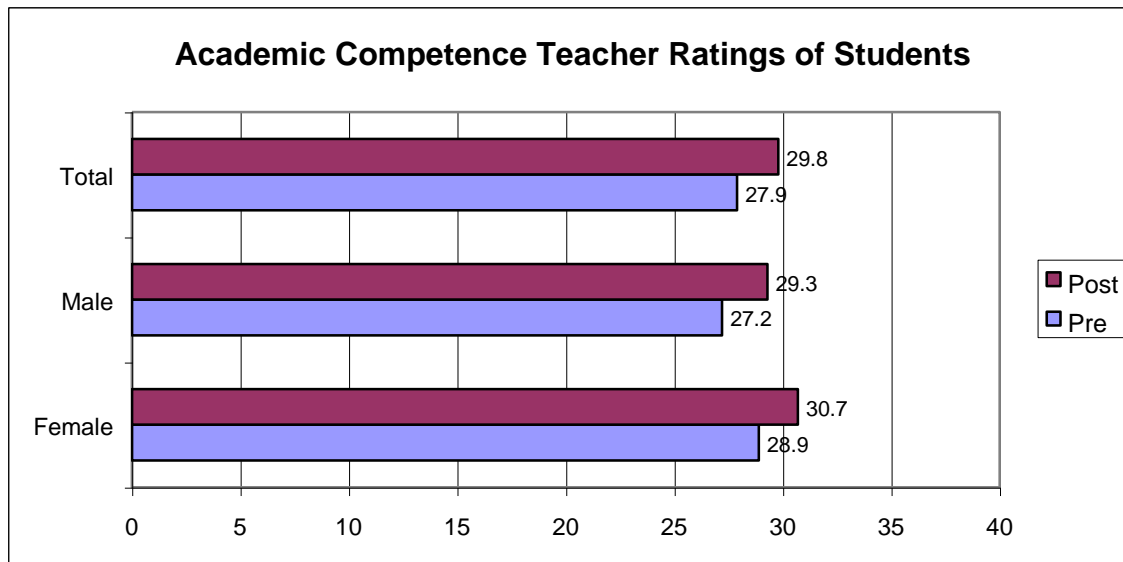


Male students were more likely than female students to show a statistically significant decrease in Hyperactivity behaviors (77 percent vs. 53 percent), with a higher level of these types of problem behaviors reported for males in the pre-test.



Academic Competence

Academic competence was gauged by measuring behaviors relevant to student academic functioning, including reading and mathematics performance, motivation, parental support, and general cognitive functioning, as compared to the students' classroom peers. Pre/post program tests indicate statistically significant improvements in academic competence ratings for students involved in the program. On average, approximately 7 percent improvement in mean scores was measured pre/post, with somewhat higher improvements for males than females.



QUALITATIVE EXIT SURVEY FINDINGS

Findings of the qualitative exit survey indicate that nearly all (97%) students felt that the Peaceful People Program helped them in becoming more peaceful, and 60 percent felt it helped them a great deal. Over four-fifths indicated they would like to continue having the Program in their classroom.



Similarly, both teachers felt the program complemented their existing curriculums very well, and they were able to support or supplement the presentations. Both indicated they would consider the Peaceful People Program presentations for students entering their classrooms in the future, and would be interested in Peaceful People training.

NEXT STEPS

This first step evaluation suggests promising results for the Peaceful People program. Findings of teacher pre/post ratings are particularly promising and worthy of additional follow-up. Further exploration may be necessary to determine why student mean scores did not change noticeably pre/post ratings, while teacher ratings showed substantial improvements.

Given the results of this first step evaluation, further evaluation activities are planned for the 2000-2001 school year. This enhanced evaluation will include students in two schools and will include control groups to allow comparison of findings between experimental and control groups. This more comprehensive evaluation will provide further insights into the potential of the Peaceful People program to enhance the safety and well being of children in our schools.

