Wii Social Skills Group and Inter-School Tournament

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Abstract

Two schools in separate cities used the Nintendo Wii gaming system to assist selected boys in developing social skills. Using Skype and Twitter, the two groups collaborated at different stages of the project. The pilot project investigated the benefits of incorporating video games into traditional social skills programming, as well as the benefits of online collaboration between teachers in different school boards and students from different communities.

Keywords

elementary school boys; special education; social skills programming; video games; games based learning (GBL); Nintendo Wii; collaboration
Goodfellow Public School’s Story

This project grew from a casual conversation between two Special Education Resource Teachers (SERTs), Julie Johnson and Juanita Germaine, in early Spring of 2011. Mrs. Johnson had, at that point, started a Wii math and literacy project funded by a MISA grant that aimed to improve engagement and work outcomes in boys in grades two through five. Mrs. Germaine meanwhile, had been struggling with several boys in junior classes who had difficulties with task avoidance, low self-esteem, anger management and self-regulation. Together, they wondered if the Wii could be used as an incentive to support improved social and learning behaviour…and from that the Goodfellow Wii Social Skills Club was born.

Project Goals

The overall goal of this club was to help students learn to regulate their emotions and express them in a positive manner. Students attended weekly meetings with SERTs to role play different emotional scenarios, their positive and negative consequences and possible strategies and solutions, within the context of Wii Mario Kart game play and practice. They also gained reward privileges according to their in-class behaviour plans, allowing for free play on the Mario Kart Wii during selected time periods. Additionally, to encourage good sportsmanship and a collegial environment (and to provide a fun culminating activity), students participated in a Wii Inter-School Tournament with Agnes Macphail P.S. in Toronto via Skype.

Project Details

The weekly meetings occurred during first recess and lasted about twenty minutes. The main focus was on playing the Mario Kart Wii game while role playing with an assigned emotion/behaviour, followed by a discussion. The roles were first game player, second game player and then two to three “observers”. The players played the game. The observers watched the players. Everyone, either player or observer, had a specified role to play.

Role-play was determined by cards, which each participant chose in secret.

The Wii game players picked a card that had one of these behaviour/emotion options: “normal”/calm, angry, bossy, disruptive, disrespectful, sad, gloating, not trying, restless or distracted. When the game play commenced, they assumed this particular role. Discussion with SERT in private beforehand helped give the students ideas on how to display/portray the particular behaviour.

Observers also had an assigned role on a card. Their cards included: Replay (relay what happened during game play, what behaviours were observed); Result & Consequences (relate how the behaviour affected the game play or game results); or Feelings (explain how what they observed made them feel).
The Mario Kart game then commenced with everyone acting in his or her assigned roles. For example, the “angry” game player demonstrated anger during the game play, perhaps by shouting, pacing, hitting his palm on the desk, etc. The other game player, who perhaps chose the “normal/calm” card, tried to complete the game in that state of mind. The observers watched the events unfold and prepared to either recount what they saw, relate how the players’ behaviour affected the game play, or describe how watching the behaviour made them feel. They also had to try to guess what the exhibited behaviours were, based on the cues given to them by the role playing. Students really enjoyed the role play and guessing what each other’s assigned behaviour was. It became a ‘game within a game’ as they dramatically portrayed their behaviour/emotion and everyone made guesses and responded.

Then the discussion of the role-play began. The discussion involved hearing the observers’ viewpoints and also asking the game players the following questions: How did you feel in this role? How did the other person’s behaviour affect you? How did you choose to act? What other choices could you make?

Using a “menu of options”, the SERTs helped the students map out the positive and negative consequences that arose from choosing different behaviours in different emotional states. The “menu of options” was provided in poster format and listed positive approaches to dealing with the behaviour evidenced during role-play. These included such strategies as: contingency mapping with a graphic organizer, using a break card to take a walk/step away, deep pressure activities, 4 square breathing, asking for help, noise reduction (headphones/music/quiet space), quietly communicating needs to the teacher, using 3-2-1 stop, “switching heads” (seeing alternate view points), checking in with the 5-point scale, etc.

Time permitting, the role-play took place again with the same roles; only this time the game players implemented the positive, pro-active strategy chosen.

In the regular classroom, teachers and the participating students were provided with copies of the resources used in the Wii sessions. These included: copies of the strategies menu, contingency maps to help map out issues that occurred in class, and 5-point scales. Reward plans in the class also tied into the program, as students earned free play-time on the Wii for demonstrating positive behaviours.

Initially, students were also expected to fill out a quick self-assessment rating scale based on their ability to identify negative emotional states (of themselves and others) and their methods of dealing with those states (i.e., self-regulation). This ‘ticket out the door’ was also to include the statement: “I will choose these 2 strategies to practice this week” and a list of the strategies to check off. It was hoped that the ratings of their emotional awareness/self-regulation would increase over time as students learned about and practiced the skills and would thus provide significant feedback as to how well the program was impacting student behaviour. Time constraints, however, made this checklist difficult to complete. The project didn’t start until April; thus, most of the
sessions until June were spent on building up the ‘basics’, establishing the routine and structure and supporting group cohesion.

**Project Results**

Teacher observation (in the regular classroom and in the sessions run by SERTs) and in-class reward plan checklists were used to document students’ progress.

Participants were students who would normally not ‘buy into’ regular role playing and behaviour management discussions, especially during coveted recess time. However, with the inclusion of the Wii game play, students were much more motivated to attend and engage in the role playing activities. Students were, in fact, as eager to take their ‘role play’ card as they were to play the video game! They were also eager to participate in the discussions afterward, to recount the game play, to ‘guess’ at the emotions/behaviour being enacted and to brainstorm more positive solutions. In some cases, discussion occurred organically amongst the students without prompts from the SERTs. Regular classroom teachers were very supportive of the program, noting that students were interested and eager to attend the recess group.

It is important to note however, that regular classroom teachers did not notice significant changes in overall behaviour. Skills taught and discussed in the Wii group did not necessarily transfer to other areas of school life. In addition, it took a while for the group to ‘gel’. Some participants who started with the group chose not to continue attending, either because their interest waned or they were not a good ‘fit’. Once the group ‘gelled’ however, with a core group of five participants, they steadily attended, seemed interested in attending and showed the benefits listed above.

The program would benefit from starting earlier in the year. It took time for the basic structure and routine to become established, and for the group to ‘gel’. With more time, the ‘I can’ checklists could be implemented, as mentioned above. This would provide even more specific feedback on how well students transferred the skills learned to other areas of school life. Starting earlier in the year would also provide more opportunities for inter-school contact and for a stronger sense of community and connection to develop among school participants.

**Agnes Macphail Public School’s Story**

Agnes Macphail Public School has owned a Nintendo Wii system since 2008. The teacher-librarian and special education resource teacher (SERT) had used it in 2010 to help grade one students learn appropriate social skills, such as turn-taking and encouraging teammates. Results from this informal experiment were mixed and mostly unrecorded. After hearing about Julie Johnson’s project via Twitter, the two educators contacted each other and planned to coordinate efforts. The four teachers involved in the project held a meeting via Skype to get acquainted and decide how to merge the
two separate projects. The team chose to arrange an inter-school tournament between the two groups of students.

**Project Goals**

The SERT and teacher-librarian chose to focus on two distinct groups of boys for this project. The first group consisted of two grade 5 boys who were being ostracized by their peers. The objective for this group was to teach them appropriate social skills when playing with others and to encourage their class peers to interact with them through the mutually enjoyed venue of video gaming. The second group consisted of five grade 3 boys who received regular attention from the SERT. These boys needed help with social skills such as impulse control and positive talk. At times, their inopportune socializing with each other prevented them from finishing their class work. By providing a positive environment which allowed them to socialize with each other in “nice ways”, the project lead teachers at Agnes Macphail hoped that these boys would transfer their skills to the class and yard settings.

**Project Details and Results – Grade 5 Group**

Other programs were already in place to assist both these junior division boys with their social development. “K” had a “Circle of Friends” group, organized by the English as a Second Language teacher, consisting of three grade 8 volunteers who played checkers with him one afternoon recess per week and kept an eye on him in the yard. “M” had a similar support team, set up by his classroom teacher with meetings once a week at lunch. The Wii Social Skills group built on these existing structures by inviting the grade 8 helpers to come and play Mario Kart with the boys. The intent was to begin with the grade 8 helpers and the targeted boys and then allow “M” and “K” to choose to invite a boy from their class to play during our Wii time at lunch one day a week. Like the project at Goodfellow P.S., the Agnes Macphail team found that we ran out of time and needed more practice with using encouraging words and being patient. We found however, that using the grade 8 volunteers was very beneficial, as they provided peer modeling for the behaviour we hoped to see in the boys. Our male grade 8 student in particular was wonderful at demonstrating how to show someone what to do without invading personal space or insulting the person he wished to help.

**Project Details and Results – Grade 3 Group**

The SERT met with the grade 3 boys to describe the project and collaboratively determine the list of behaviours we all wished to improve. One of the boys was so uncooperative that he had to be removed even at this initial stage. The rest of the boys were so incredibly flattered that they were part of a privileged group that the SERT and teacher-librarian had new social tics that had to be addressed – we had to remind the boys to stop asking their classroom teachers over and over about when they would have their Wii time. The group met every other Monday at lunch, but there were some disruptions to the schedule which made them eager but uncertain about when we would
meet. After this obstacle was overcome, the boys relished their play time. A typical meeting was very informal. The SERT and teacher-librarian would remind the boys about the list they had made as a group about what we were trying to do, and then we would play Mario Kart. Usually one or two boys would play at a time while the other two boys watched, cheered on the players and waited their turn. As issues arose during game play, such as yelling instructions at the players, one of the teachers would pause the game and suggest other approaches. The boys became very good at encouraging each other and complimenting their game play. The positive behaviour did not transfer over to class time but the boys considered themselves quite improved. The group even organized themselves enough to write the two project lead teachers a letter thanking them for the chance to play.

**The Inter-School Tournament**

The project lead teachers decided in their Skype planning session that the groups should meet prior to the tournament. The first session in April involved introducing the expectations and building a ‘team’ atmosphere. Neither school wanted the competition to lead to “trash-talking” or any negative social conduct. The plan was to use a Tribes TLC® activity called “Every and Only” to build community. Students were asked to determine one thing that was unique about them and consider one thing they had in common with the other participants in both schools. Preparing their responses in advance was meant to alleviate any anxiety about meeting new people and make everyone comfortable.

Since the schools were in separate cities (Toronto and Alcona, Innisfil) students from each school met each other via Skype in April 2011. Each participant stated his name and grade, and together they collaboratively discussed their similarities and differences. This created a collegial atmosphere and set a positive tone for the tournament.

The students then spent the next twelve weeks at their individual schools, playing Mario Kart and developing their social skills. After the twelve weeks, as a way to celebrate the end of the project, participants at Goodfellow P.S. played a Wii Mario Kart tournament within the group to determine ranking. This decided who would go first, second, third, etc., when it came time to play Agnes Macphail P.S. live, via Skype.

The second Skype session involved each group setting up their Wii and screen so that the other team could see it via Skype on the Smartboard. Each racer from each school chose the same character, kart and race track so that the results would be on equal footing. Again, a collegial atmosphere was promoted, with each participant greeting the other and saying a positive statement such as “great race!”

**Conclusions – The Importance of Partnering and Popular Culture**

This program was collaboratively designed and implemented, a result of “the meeting of minds” between professionals who each added her own unique perspective and abilities
to the project. It would not have come about without the partnering between educators.

Partnering between schools added a special, extra dimension to the support group, gave a goal for the group to work towards and a sense of fun. It promoted a larger sense of community beyond the group or regular classroom and promoted the need to demonstrate positive social skills in other areas beyond those typical to school.

Much of the success for both schools was directly linked to the use of video games. Embracing popular culture in the classroom and using tools known and admired by boys in particular will help students become engaged and interested in what goes on at school. For example, the Ontario Ministry of Education document, *Me Read? No Way! A Practical Guide to Improving Boy’s Literacy Skills* (2004) suggests an "openness" to popular culture in the classroom as a means of engaging boys in learning, quoting such things as rock videos, TV shows, cartoons, etc. Additionally, organizations such as The Consolarium for Learning and Teaching in Scotland have proven the benefits of using a wide variety of video games in numerous curriculum areas.

Certainly, it was felt by all educators involved that these students would not be as receptive to ‘social skills’ interventions if the Wii had not been included in the program.

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1 The MISA (Managing Information for Student Achievement) grant is a provincial initiative (Ontario) that supports school based action research projects aimed at improving student achievement. Administered through the Simcoe Country District School Board, it was awarded to Julie Johnson of Goodfellow Public School during the 2009-2010 school year for her project entitled “Games Based Learning Initiative: Bringing the Nintendo Wii and Mario Kart Wii Into Grade 2-5 Literacy/Numeracy Contexts to Support Struggling Students (in Particular, Boys)”.

2 Tribes Learning Communities, often referred to as Tribes TLC®, is a research-based process that creates a culture that maximizes learning and human development. According to Center Source Systems, the organization that manages Tribes trainings, Tribes TLC® “offers collaborative skills, community agreements, meaningful participation, strategies for integrating curriculum, and professional development in elementary, middle and high school, leadership, afterschool youth development.