

Integration of Literacy and a Social/Emotional Learning Program: I Can Problem Solve (ICPS)

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Literacy is lots of things: reading, writing, listening, speaking. Before children can begin to understand what they read, they must already understand the language as it is spoken (Moat & Sedita, 2006). Through oral language, students learn vocabulary, how to make inferences about what might happen next, understanding emotions, story comprehension, sensitivity to others' points of view, drawing conclusions, understanding sequencing of events, and building thinking skills, including reasoning, cause and effect, and problem solving. These are all skills that can also be learned through oral language as early as the preschool years, skills that children will need to be good readers later, and skills that predict success in other areas of academic achievement.

I Can Problem Solve (ICPS) develops oral, and later written, language comprehension skills that are completely compatible with these literacy skills, which set the stage for acquisition of knowledge in school and later in life (Lonigan, Farver, Nakamoto, & Eppe, 2013).

This article will describe ways that literacy and ICPS intersect as used in literature, in real life, and across the curriculum, including how the language of ICPS can help children develop skills in phonological awareness, listening and memory, and other areas important for learning.

What Is I Can Problem Solve (ICPS)?

I Can Problem Solve, or ICPS for short, is an evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) program for preschool through grade 6 that provides a new way to change behavior by teaching children interpersonal cognitive problem solving skills. Applying a carefully chosen set of vocabulary words to help children think the problem-solving way, teachers help children learn how to gather information, avoid coming to false conclusions in interpersonal situations, listen and pay attention to others, and understand and appreciate their own and others' feelings when problems come up. These are all prerequisite to the final problem-solving skills to be learned: alternative solution and consequential thinking and, beginning about age 8, means-ends thinking or sequential planning. The focus is on how children *think* about what they do rather than directly upon behaviors themselves.

Why Is I Can Problem Solve (ICPS) Important?

ICPS offers practical skills for helping children ages 4 through 12 learn to resolve everyday conflicts (Shure, 2000, 2001a, 2001b). Research conducted over a three- to four-month period has shown that ICPS helps youngsters become more sensitive to their own and others' feelings; more aware of potential consequences of their acts; better able to think of alternative solutions to everyday problems; and, beginning at age 8, better able to plan sequenced steps toward interpersonal goals (e.g., Shure, 1982, 1993). As children learn interpersonal cognitive problem solving (ICPS) skills, they display reduced physical, verbal, and relational aggression; inability to wait and cope with frustration; and social withdrawal (Shure & Spivack, 1982). It is also possible to enhance such positive, *prosocial behaviors* as genuine concern for others and healthy peer relationships (e.g., Boyle & Hassett-Walker, 2008). The importance of the reduction of negative behaviors and increase in positive ones

relates to their ability to prevent later, more serious outcomes such as violence, substance abuse, unwanted pregnancy, school dropout, and some forms of psychopathology (e.g., Parker & Asher, 1987). Importantly, research has also shown that ICPS-trained youngsters and those exposed to social and emotional programs like ICPS do better *academically* (e.g., Shure, 1993; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). As Shure often says, “Kids who are failing in math don’t necessarily need more math. They need to relieve the stress they feel to focus on the math they’re getting.” In that enhanced vocabulary makes learning easier and children’s newly acquired problem-solving skills help them better cope with interpersonal stress and therefore focus on the task-oriented demands of the classroom, Shure has found that ICPS-competent children do better academically in school. In addition, Kumpfer and her colleagues found among ICPS-trained first graders that *school bonding* also significantly improved (Kumpfer, Alvarado, Tait, & Turner, 2002). School bonding plays a significant role in preventing the early high-risk problem behaviors and future serious outcomes mentioned previously (e.g., Blum, 2002; Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterle, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004) as well as in promoting academic success (Zins, Graczyk, & Weissberg, 2003), perhaps because bonding provides the kind of supportive environment needed for behavioral adjustment, interpersonal competence, and academic success.

How Are Literacy and ICPS Connected?

Pre-K and Primary Grades (Up to Grades 2 or 3)

Recognizing that vocabulary development plays a critical role in learning to read, Barbara Wasik and Charlene Iannone-Campbell (2012) suggest “to develop children’s vocabulary, teachers need to engage children in purposeful, strategic conversations that focus on the explicit development of vocabulary words and help children construct the meaning of words through multiple activities and experiences” (pp. 321–322).

ICPS in pre-k through grade 2 begins with a set of vocabulary words, called ICPS word pairs, that are used in purposeful, strategic conversations through multiple activities and experiences. These word pairs were carefully chosen because they are judged to be an integral part of the final problem-solving skills to be learned—alternative solution and consequential thinking—and because they set the stage for later ability to solve interpersonal problems that arise between peers and with figures of authority at home and at school. While children may be familiar with these words, as they are taught in the context of problem solving their expression may be unfamiliar to most children. These words are first taught in non-problem situations so children associate them with fun and are familiar when children use them to think of how to solve problems that are interpersonal in nature.

With the exception of the word pair “before/after,” which is first introduced in kindergarten, all ICPS word pairs, as used in non-problem and problem situations, begin in pre-k.

IS/IS NOT; SAME/DIFFERENT

These words will help children later think about what or what NOT to do in solving a problem and how to evaluate whether a solution IS or is NOT a good one.

Non-problem situations

Who *is* painting? Who is *not* painting?

Who is doing the *same* thing as Johnny? Who is doing something *different*?

Who is *not* doing the *same* thing as Johnny?

Problem situations

Is your idea a good idea or *not* a good idea?

If your idea is *not* a good one, can you think of something that *is* a good idea?

Can you think of a *different* way to solve this problem?

Hitting and kicking are kind of the *same* because they can both hurt someone. Can you think of something to do that is *different* from hurting someone?

AND/OR

This word pair helps children think about more than one way to solve a problem (e.g., “I can do this OR I can do that,” as well as “I can do this AND I can do that”).

Non-problem situations

Am I standing up OR am I sitting down?

Is Robin painting OR is she reading?

Jaime is sitting AND he is _____ (e.g., reading).

Is Sally standing AND painting OR is she standing AND walking?

Problem situations

What can you do or say to solve this problem? You can _____ (*name child’s solution*) OR you can _____?

You can _____ AND you can _____.

SOME/ALL

This word pair can help children appreciate that a particular solution may be successful with SOME, but not ALL, people and (incorporating the earlier word *different*), if one solution is not successful, it is possible to try a DIFFERENT way.

Non-problem situations

Are *all* of the children in our class sitting at this table or are *some* of them sitting here?

Are *all* of us wearing sneakers or are *some* of us wearing sneakers?

Problem situations

When the teacher needs the children’s attention: “Are *all* of you listening or are *some* of you listening?”

When a child wants to go outside at an inconvenient time: “Do we play outside *all* of the time or *some* of the time?

BEFORE/AFTER

This word pair prepares children to think of potential consequences of an act and sequencing of events.

Non-problem situations

Do you brush your teeth *before* or *after* you get out of bed in the morning?

Do you do your homework *before* or *after* you have your snack (soccer practice, etc.)?

Problem situations

Did he hit you *before* or *after* you hit him?

What happened *before* you hit him? What happened *after*?

IDENTIFYING EMOTIONS

If people’s feelings are to be considered in problem solving, one must first be able to identify them. In preschool, the words *happy*, *sad*, and *mad (angry)*, are introduced, with more sophisticated feelings concepts added as the children move through the early elementary years (e.g., *proud*, *frustrated*, *afraid*, *disappointed*, *worried*, *relieved*). With the earlier word *and*, children can think about more than one aspect of a person before taking action in a problem situation. They may learn to consider simultaneously, for example, that a teacher is talking to another child AND she is angry. This awareness may help the child to recognize that this would NOT be a good time to ask her for something.

IF-THEN, MIGHT/MAYBE

The phrase *if-then* and the word pair *might/maybe* further prepare children to think of potential consequences of an act (e.g., IF I do this, then that MIGHT happen”).

Non-problem situations

If it is cloudy and dark outside, then it might _____ (let child answer).

If you run inside, then what might happen?

Problem situations

If you hit Ralph, then what might happen next?

If you grab a toy from Sarah, then how might Sarah feel?

WHY/BECAUSE

This word pair helps children understand the effect of one’s behavior on another and of another’s behavior upon oneself. Children think about why a child may feel the way he does (e.g., “He’s mad because I took his toy”). The *why-because* connectives will later aid consequential thinking (e.g.,

“He hit me BECAUSE I took his toy”). Combined with the word pair *might/maybe*, the word pair *why/because* can help children avoid coming to false conclusions.

Non-problem situations

Sally is *not* in school today. *Maybe* it’s because _____ (let child answer). *Maybe* it’s because _____ (let child answer).

Problem situations

Robert didn’t wave at me today. *Maybe* _____ (let child answer) OR *maybe* it’s because _____ (let child answer).

New applications of previously learned concepts help children recognize multiple uses of a word, an outcome that, as noted earlier, Wasik and Iannone-Campbell (2012) embrace. For example, beyond recognizing and finding out about others’ feelings, children begin to think about ways to influence how people feel about things. Considering people’s preferences in one of these ways (e.g., “I like dolls, but he does not”) is a type of perspective-taking. This kind of perspective-taking would help a child who wants something from his friend to think about what would make that friend happy and what would not. Children can come to appreciate that *different* people like *different* things (e.g., some people like dolls and some do not) and can feel *different* ways about the *same* thing (to foster appreciation of another’s point of view) and that there are different ways to find out how people feel (by watching, listening, and asking). If one way to make someone feel happy is not successful, it is possible to try a different way.

ICPS word pairs lend themselves well to being incorporated into open-ended questions when teachers read stories to children. The literacy-enhancing techniques of language and listening comprehension and the techniques of ICPS both include discussing inferences (such as understanding different characters’ points of view and what might happen next), reasoning and analysis to explain cause and effect, and identifying and discussing emotions of the characters. All of these aspects challenge children to think and contribute to story comprehension and critical thinking (e.g., van Kleek, 2008; Zucker, Cabell, Justice, Pentimonti, & Kaderavek, 2012). And as Linda Katz (2014) notes, “When children learn to read and write, the way they think and understand the word affects how they interpret what they read.” ICPS teachers read a story through so children hear the authors’ words from beginning to end. The story is reread, interspersed with questions covering concepts learned to date and using the vocabulary word pairs, labeling of emotions, perspective-taking, and the problem-solving skills of solution and consequential thinking. To strengthen story comprehension and use of ICPS word-pairs, as well as to help children understand feelings from more than one point of view, questions asked at appropriate places within the story include the following:

How do you think _____ felt when_____?

“How can you tell he/she felt that way?

Why do you think _____ felt that way?

BECAUSE_____?

Would you feel the SAME way or a DIFFERENT way as _____ about that? (*If different, let child discuss his/her feelings.*)

To promote understanding of sequencing in preparation for consequential thinking, questions include these:

What happened BEFORE _____?

What happened AFTER _____?

When _____ (*repeat what character did*), what happened next?

To encourage solution and consequential thinking and to stress that DIFFERENT people can feel DIFFERENT ways about the SAME thing, questions include these:

Do _____ and _____ have a problem to solve?

Do they see what happened the SAME way or a DIFFERENT way?

What can one person do or say that MIGHT solve this problem?

Is that a good idea or NOT a good idea?

What MIGHT happen next if he/she does that?" (*If needed, "What can he/she do so that will NOT happen [feel that way]?"*)

These kinds of questions are valuable aids for comprehension because they require thinking beyond one right answer and stretch the child's thinking to accommodate more than one way to solve problems.

A concrete example of how literacy building and ICPS concepts intersect is illustrated in the book *The Berenstain Bears Get into a Fight* (Berenstain & Berenstain, 1982). The same questions that promote interpersonal thinking skills also promote story comprehension skills. In the story, Brother and Sister Bear get into an argument. Children can be asked: "WHY are they arguing?" "BECAUSE _____?" In the bunk bed they share, Sister Bear, in the upper bunk, let her legs dangle over the edge of her bed, right in Brother Bear's face. Not in a good mood, Brother shouts, "Get your dopey feet out of my face!" First, children love to laugh at this. They are then asked:

How do you think Brother felt when he said this?

How MIGHT Sister feel when Brother said this?

Can you think of a DIFFERENT way Brother could tell Sister how he feels?

How would you feel if someone said that to you?

Still angry with each other, Brother and Sister made a line down the middle of their backyard tree house and sit with their backs to each other. After the line "It wasn't much fun sitting up there in the tree house not speaking," questions children are asked include the following:

What can Brother or Sister think of to do or say so they will speak to each other again?

How might (Brother or Sister) feel then?

What MIGHT happen if they do that?

Is that a good idea or NOT a good idea?

Who can think of something DIFFERENT they can do?

Having children evaluate each solution offered can continue as time and interest permit.

In a variety of ways, this kind of dialoguing helps children learn to think and interpret information they hear or read as they move through the early elementary grades. Beyond reading words only, children become able to interpret and comprehend and question what they are hearing in the story or reading. Considering alternative solutions helps children interpret information in more than one way. Considering potential consequences through the question “What might happen next?” helps children understand sequencing and make inferences, important for *comprehension*, “a term used to refer to the situation in which a reader (or listener) goes beyond information that is directly provided in a text” (van Kleek, p. 628). Van Kleek cites research showing that as early as preschool children can infer “a character’s feelings about failing to achieve his or her goal in a particular story episode, or to predict possible things the character might try to do next to achieve her or his goal (p. 628). These skills are completely compatible with identifying emotions and with the solution and consequential thinking of ICPS. Wasik and Iannone-Campbell (2012) also report research compatible with ICPS, suggesting that for the youngest children, open-ended questions in the course of conversations that require children to use more language and vocabulary to promote language development are far superior to teacher-directed questions that require right or wrong answers or simple one-word answers such as yes and no.

Using vocabulary as a foundation for more complex skills, such as how to think the problem-solving way, is the same line of questioning that teachers employ when reading stories. It is also applied to real life through a technique called “ICPS dialoguing.” Dialoguing is a two-way conversation involving the child and guiding him or her to participate in solving a given interpersonal problem. In contrast to telling or explaining to children what and what not to do and why, teachers help children use their newly acquired problem-solving skills so they can tell us (the grown-ups) what and what not to do and why. With ICPS word pairs and empathy-building questions, a dialogue about grabbing toys may include these questions:

What's happening? What's the problem?

How do you think _____ (the other child) feels when you (grab his toy)?

What happened *after* you grabbed his toy?

How did that make *you* feel?

Can you think of a *different* way to solve this problem so that won't happen and you both won't feel that way?

Because children actively participate in the conversation, they learn to listen and are less likely to tune out. Dialoguing helps children learn to associate how they think with what they do and how they behave.

Integration of ICPS Word Pairs Across the Curriculum

Beyond integrating ICPS vocabulary into children's literature, in hypothetical problem-solving situations, and in non-problem and problem situations in real life, the same ICPS word pairs can be used across the curriculum. Teachers can make up their own examples, with the following examples as possibilities.

Phonological Awareness

When children learn early literacy skills such as phonological awareness, the ICPS word-pairs can play a key role in teaching those skills in a fun way.

PICTURE NAMING AND RHYMING

Pictures of a cat, rat, bat, table, chair, dog

Who can tell us which pictures sound the SAME as cat?

Point to ALL the pictures that sound the same as cat.

Point to SOME of the pictures that sound the SAME as cat.

Point to a picture that does NOT sound the SAME as rat.

Point to ALL the pictures that do NOT sound the SAME as rat.

ALLITERATION

Pictures of a sock, table, book, bag, ball, bat

Point to ALL the pictures that start with the SAME sound as book.

Point to SOME of the pictures that start with the SAME sound as book.

Point to SOME pictures that start with a DIFFERENT sound from book.

LETTER NAMING

What letter does the word *cat* start with?

What letter does the word *rat* start with?

Do *cat* and *rat* start with the SAME letter OR a DIFFERENT letter?

What letter does *cat* NOT start with?

Sarah's name starts with the letter S. Does anyone's name start with the SAME letter as Sarah's?

AAAA BBBB DDDD EEEE

(Teacher pointing to the letter A) Is this the letter A OR is this the letter D?

What letter is NOT here?

Point to ALL of the letter As.

Point to SOME of the letter As.

Point to SOME of the letter Bs AND ALL of the letter Es.

Point to the letter B but NOT the letter A.

Point to a letter that is NOT a *B* OR the letter *C*.

Does the letter *A* come BEFORE OR AFTER the letter *B*?

How are an *F* and and *f* the SAME?

How are they DIFFERENT?

LETTER-SOUND CORRESPONDENCE

Letters b, d, f, h, j, l

Say the sound of the letter that I point to.

Say the sound of a letter that I do NOT point to.

Say the sound of a letter that is DIFFERENT from the one I point to.

ONSET PHONEME IDENTIFICATION

I'll tell you a word, and you give me the first sound that you hear. If I say *cat*, you say the first sound that you hear. Now say a sound that is DIFFERENT from /k/.

If I say *ball*, you say the first sound that you hear. Now say a sound that is NOT the same as /b/.

PHONEME SEGMENTATION

I'll tell you a word, and you tell me ALL the sounds you hear in that word. If I say *dog*, you say /d/o/g/.

Possible words: *rat, sat, cot, it, bit.* (*use only two- and three-phoneme words.*)

Math

The teacher writes the numbers 111, 222, and 444 on the board, then asks a child to come up and point to:

ALL of the 1s

SOME of the 1s AND ALL of the 2s but NOT to the 4s.

Show me two numbers that are the SAME.

Show me two numbers that are the SAME and one number that is DIFFERENT.

Shapes and Colors

The teacher uses plastic shapes or draws them on the board. Children can respond in words or by pointing. Examples: One red square, two circles, one red and one blue, and one yellow square.

I am thinking of ALL the shapes that are NOT blue. What am I thinking of?

I am thinking of a square. It is NOT red OR blue. It IS _____ .

Show me a red square AND a red circle but NOT a yellow square.

Social Studies and Science

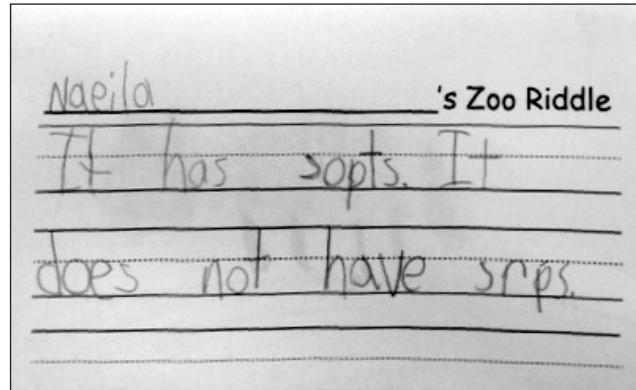
What does a police officer do that a firefighter does NOT do?

What do a dog AND a cat have that you do NOT have?

How are an apple and a strawberry the SAME? How are they DIFFERENT?

Emergent Writing Skills

With varying degrees of scaffolding, some children as early as age four are printing partial sentences using ICPS word pairs. For example, in Lori Raxenberg's pre-k class at the Patterson Park Public Charter in Baltimore, Maryland, a child who returned from a trip to the zoo printed, "It has sopts (spots). It does NOT have srps (stripes)." Missall et al. (2007) note that understanding concepts of print and emergent writing skills all contribute to reading development.



By using the word pairs across the curriculum, children will become more able to understand them when responding to real life situations. Conversely, the critical thinking involved in real life should enhance academic learning.

Intermediate Elementary Grades (Grades 3 or 4 to 6)

Although the ICPS word pairs are not "games" in the older group, as they are introduced in pre-k through the primary grades, the expression of these words in thinking the problem-solving way continues to be an integral part of the dialoguing techniques applied to real-life problem situations in the intermediate elementary grades.

A more sophisticated skill, called *means-ends thinking* or *sequential planning*, is taught to older children. In it, children make up their own stories, mapping out steps toward a goal and obstacles that could interfere with reaching that goal and recognizing that problems are not always solved immediately but involve considering factors such as how long it might take to reach the goal as well as good and not good times to act. The integration into the curriculum includes enriching reading with open-ended questions similar to those employed in the earlier grades, contributing to story comprehension.

Literacy Skills in Real Life

Open-ended questions asked of children about a story being read guide children to apply hypothetical situations to their own lives as a way to improve literacy skills. Does the ability to take another's point of view, listen and pay attention, and make inferences about real-life interpersonal situations also contribute to these literary skills? Lessons from pre-k to grade 6 specifically focus on such abilities. Children at all ages make inferences about how people might feel and what might happen next, both in fictional stories and in real life. With age-appropriate content, children of all

ages think about how different people can like different things and feel different ways about the same thing.

Examples of Lessons in Paying Attention and Memory

In addition to recognizing that different people can feel different ways about the same thing, children learn that sensitivity to the preferences of others is also important in deciding what to do: “I like dolls, but he does not.” This kind of perspective-taking would help a child who wants something from a friend to think about what would make that friend happy and what would not. Ability to pay attention and remember what people like and do not like is helpful in relationships with others.

In preschool, children choose one of three pictures—a dog, a bird, and a rabbit—mounted on poster board. Children take note of the picture each child chooses. They then hold their picture to their chest with the blank side up. A child from the group is asked who has which picture. The children with pictures exchange places so the same picture is not always in the same position.

In another memory game, three children come to the front and say whether they would choose to paint or play with blocks at school. The group is asked who chose which activity. Using an ICPS word pair, children are asked if two of the children chose the SAME thing or something DIFFERENT. The three children are then asked to name what they would NOT like to do, and the group repeats what each child said. The number of children can be increased as time, interest, and ability level permit.

As children move through kindergarten to grade 6, lessons in memory become more sophisticated. Five or more children name things they like for the group to remember: a color, a TV show, and as many other categories as time, interest, and ability level permit. To increase difficulty level, children change positions so children have to remember which child said what, not just that the color red was mentioned by the child on the end.

Examples of Lessons in Listening: Silly Skits

Beginning in kindergarten, children through grade 6 are presented with developmentally appropriate skits in which one child is clearly not listening to the other. For example, one child says, “Tomorrow is my mother’s birthday,” and the other says, “My knee is bleeding.” The skit continues until one child finally responds to what the other child is saying. Children raise their hands when they hear the “not-silly” response, and listening carefully is required to do that.

Older children create their own silly skits, including at least one line where one child responds appropriately to the other. When a child is really not listening in class, the teacher can say, “Tomorrow is my mother’s birthday.” The children laugh and then listen to the teacher or a peer who is talking.

Increasing vocabulary and problem-solving skills helps relieve children’s stress and emotional tension. Developing literacy skills such as memory, listening, and paying attention is also important for learning and gives ICPS-trained youngsters the capacity for improved academic achievement, including achievement in reading.

Integration of Literacy Skills Across the Curriculum

Paying Attention and Memory

Make index cards with content the children are learning and let the class make up their own examples. Tell the group that they will play a card game like Concentration, except now the match on the second card is the answer equal or related to that on the first card.

MATH

Set I	Set II
5 X 5	25
XXIV	24
3 hours	180 minutes

GEOGRAPHY

Pennsylvania—Harrisburg

Illinois—Springfield

Making Inferences

What might have happened if...

SOCIAL STUDIES

George Washington's soldiers did not listen to him during the crossing of the Delaware.

Martin Luther King had not been assassinated.

Columbus had not reached America in 1492.

Automobiles were never invented.

Cities had no government.

Your parents weren't allowed to vote their choice for president.

SCIENCE

You put two cans of fish food in a fish bowl.

You leave meat out of the refrigerator for three days.

People keep throwing garbage into lakes and rivers.

Someone uses drugs.

Note: More examples of literacy concepts as integrated into the curriculum are given in the I Can Problem Solve teacher's manuals for preschool, kindergarten and primary grades, and intermediate elementary grades (Shure, 2000, 2001a, 2001b.)

Final Thoughts

The synergism between ICPS and literacy skills is powerful, beginning at the pre-k level. Helping children learn to think in ways relevant to reading and prereading skills beyond the content of the stories themselves can excite them about books, and successful reading and understanding of written words can give them skills that can be applied to their own lives now and in the future. The reverse is also true: Skills learned in the context of real life can be applied to fictional stories, and these skills will help children both academically and in the workplace. Children exposed to a curriculum integrating literacy skills with ICPS have the potential for optimal success in life.

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