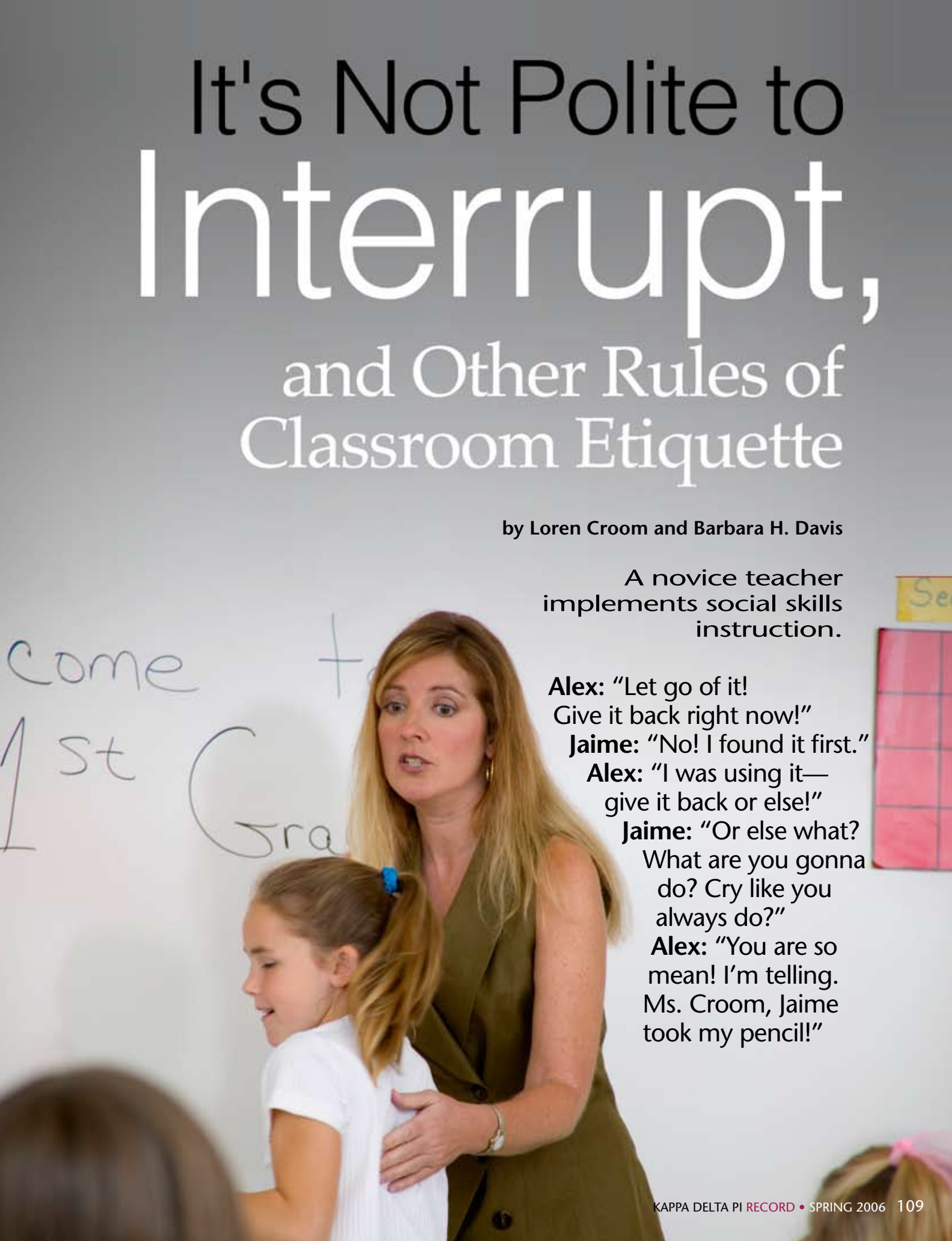
It's Not Polite to Interrupt, and Other Rules of Classroom Etiquette

by Loren Croom and Barbara H. Davis

A novice teacher implements social skills instruction.



Alex: "Let go of it! Give it back right now!"
Jaime: "No! I found it first."
Alex: "I was using it—give it back or else!"
Jaime: "Or else what? What are you gonna do? Cry like you always do?"
Alex: "You are so mean! I'm telling. Ms. Croom, Jaime took my pencil!"

As Alex rushed over to me, I (Loren Croom) thought, "Here comes another tattletale." I wondered, "Why are my students constantly turning to me with every single problem? How can I get them to handle these problems independently?"

Every day, the problems were the same. My students continually interrupted whole-class and small-group instruction with their complaints. I tried to help them solve their problems by telling them either to share with one another or to follow the Golden Rule ("Treat others as you would have them treat you"). That seemed simple enough.

As Alex ranted on about his problem, I realized that my students did not grasp the concept of sharing or the Golden Rule. I decided right then that I either could continue the rest of the school year listening to the students' complaints, or I could try to fix the dilemma by teaching important social skills they would be able to use throughout life. I chose the second option for my first-grade classroom.

In fact, social skills became the focus of a classroom-based inquiry project I conducted as a participant in a graduate mentoring and induction program for beginning teachers (Davis et al. 2001). My inquiry project addressed the following questions: (1) How will implementing social skills into my first-grade classroom affect our classroom environment? (2) How will teaching social skills affect our classroom interruptions? and (3) How will implementing social skills affect my students' problem-solving skills?

Social Skills Teaching

Social skills instruction has its roots in the field of group dynamics. Lewin (1948), one of the first psychologists to focus on group dynamics, believed that social relationships could be improved by studying how groups function. His experiments with the social climates in boys' clubs demonstrated the importance of democratic leadership in building positive social skills.

Building on Lewin's work, Dreikurs (1968) applied the basic principles of group dynamics to the classroom setting. He emphasized the importance of the teacher in promoting a democratic classroom. In particular, he recommended (in Dreikurs, Grunwald, and Pepper 1998) the use of group discussions (i.e., class meetings) to help build a positive classroom environment.

Integrating social skills into the school curriculum has become increasingly important. Johnson and Johnson (1990, 30) asserted, "People do not know instinctively how to interact effectively with others." They argued that students must be taught effective social skills and be motivated to use them. Kagan (1994, 22) submitted, "Students today generally do not come to school with the same prosocial values once common; they are not as respectful, caring, helpful, or cooperative as they were twenty years ago."

Numerous classroom-based research projects have examined the important role social skills play in an elementary classroom (Browning, Davis, and Resta 2000; Burns 2003; Palmer and Wehmeyer 2003; Stone 2001). As Stone (2001, 18) suggested, "Teachers have an enormous influence on children's behavior by speaking directly and honestly to them, modeling with words and manner how people deal with each other with respect, just as they would like to be dealt with." Social skills need to be taught, as well as modeled, for children to truly understand them. In addition, students need opportunities to practice problem-solving strategies in a safe environment. Class meetings, a strategy mentioned frequently in the literature, can provide this opportunity (Angell 2004; Edwards and Mullis 2003; Leachman and Victor 2003; Potter and Davis 2000). Ultimately, the goal of class meetings is to help students learn social skills they can use throughout their lives.

Burns (2003, 546) summed it up: "Like it or not, the roles of the family and those of the school are merging." For a variety of reasons, many children come to school today lacking appropriate behaviors. "We must acknowledge," Burns concluded, "we are being negligent as a society if we do not strive to develop more appropriate social behaviors in these children."

Context of the Study

This inquiry project was conducted in my first-grade classroom at Bagdad Elementary School in the Leander Independent School District (LISD), located five miles northwest of Austin, Texas. The demographics of the

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student population are 5.4 percent African American, 17.7 percent Hispanic, 73 percent European American, and 3.9 percent Other. Approximately 20.3 percent of the district's students are designated economically disadvantaged. At Bagdad Elementary, 52.5 percent of the students are economically disadvantaged; therefore, it is designated a Title I school. My class consisted of 21 students—9 boys and 12 girls. The class demographics reflected those of the district with 6 Hispanic, 2 African American, and 13 European American.

As part of it's mission, LISD maintains a focus on teaching and modeling ethical behaviors. In particular, the district targets the following ten principles: honesty, integrity, promise-keeping, loyalty, concern for others, law-abidance/civic duty, respect for others, fairness, pursuit of excellence, and accountability. In addition, Bagdad Elementary uses resources from Boys Town Press (Hensley et al. 2005) to teach other important social skills. Each week throughout the school year, teachers focus on a different social skill and ethical principle.

What I **Did**

Starting in January, I began systematically to examine the effects of teaching social skills in my classroom. Instead of spending only a few minutes at the beginning of each day talking about the weekly social skill, I started each day with a class meeting that lasted about 30 minutes.

During each meeting, we focused on one skill, one on which the students and I agreed we needed to work. These included: making an apology; using an anger-control strategy; listening to others; getting the teacher's attention; sharing with others; and avoiding a fight.

To focus on each skill, I followed the lesson plan procedures outlined in *Tools for Teaching Social Skills in School* (Hensley et al. 2005). First, I introduced the skill by asking students to share examples when they had used it. Then, I described the appropriate behavior by reviewing each behavioral step for the skill. I posted the steps using handouts provided in the text (see Figure 1). We further elaborated on the steps by creating a T-chart in which the students brainstormed what the skill *looks like* and *sounds like* (see Figure 2).

Listening to Others

1. **Look at the person who is talking and remain quiet.**
2. **Wait until the person is through talking before you speak.**
3. **Show that you heard the person by nodding your head, saying "Okay" or "That's interesting."**

Figure 1. Sample Skills Poster

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Looks Like	Sounds Like
• Sitting still • Looking at the speaker • Voices are off • Bodies still	• Quiet when others are talking • Not hearing voices

Figure 2. T-Chart

Next, I asked students to think about why using these steps might be important. To help students think of reasons, I frequently shared a children's book that related to the skill. For instance, when talking about using anger-control strategies, I read *When I Feel Angry* (Spelman 2000). We then talked about the strategies the main character used when he was angry.

To practice the skill, I gave the class a problematic scenario. Students worked in four- to five-person teams to create a positive solution. Each group shared ideas; then I chose one group to role-play the situation. Following the role-play, group members explained how they decided on their solution to the conflict. Afterward, we remained in our circle and talked about the social skills used.

During the six-week inquiry project, I collected data using a variety of methods. These included reviewing student goal journals, tallying daily interruptions, writing in a teacher research journal, and videotaping.

Student Goal Journals

In a daily goal journal, each of my students selected a skill that was problematic ("My social skill goal for today is . . . .") and wrote about it ("I chose this skill because . . . ."). Five minutes at the end of each day were allotted for students to review their journal entries and indicate whether or not they had (partially or fully) met their goal. Then we met in a circle to review the social skills posted on the wall.

Though several journals provided useful information on student progress in using the social skills, these student goal journals were not as helpful as I had hoped. Examples of effective journal entries included, "My goal for today is saying I'm sorry" and "I walked away and chose something new to do instead of becoming angry." Most of the students, however, did not take the time to write legibly or in complete sentences, nor did they evaluate their behavior. Next year, I plan to do things differently to ensure that students are on task and that they view the task as valuable. I will check for understanding by conferring with two or three different children each day about their journal entries. I also will focus on one specific skill each week in the journals rather than having students reflect on several.

Interruptions Run Chart

To help decrease the number of interruptions during instructional time, I created a run chart (Langford 1998), which is a tool for monitoring progress over time. Interruptions included such things as students blurting out, getting up and walking around without permission, and coming up to me while I was working with a small group of students. Each day, I graphed our interruptions using tally marks. I kept these marks on the chalkboard so that students would be reminded visually of the number of interruptions.

At the end of the day, I marked the total on a sticky note and posted it on the run chart. During our afternoon meetings, we discussed the number of interruptions that had occurred that day. We talked about how we could decrease the amount (for example, appropriate ways to get the teacher's attention). As a group, we decided on a goal that everyone would work on the following day. The chart for week two of the study is shown in Figure 3. The number of interruptions decreased considerably—from 33 per day to 13—over the six-week period.

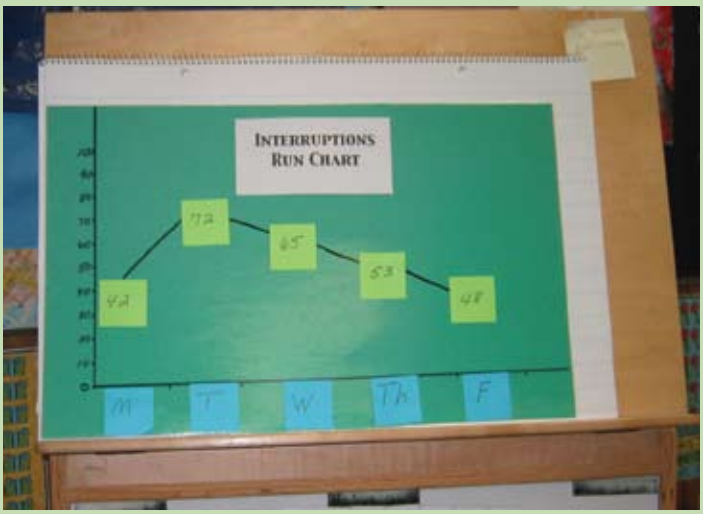

Figure 3. Interruptions Run Chart

Teacher Research Journal

Writing daily in a teacher-research journal was another method I used to collect data during the inquiry project. After our morning lesson on social skills, I wrote for five minutes about the behavior we discussed. I noted my students' body language, their comments, and the situation that was role-played. Throughout the day, I recorded incidents I noticed that were related to our lessons.

I used colored dots to track patterns of incidences: blue—student comments, incidents, or role-plays during our class meeting; yellow—incidents throughout the day; green—students working out a problem on their own; and red—students not following any of the social skills. As I looked back over my journal notes, I realized that certain students continually were not following directions or using their social skills to solve problems. Therefore, I

began focusing my attention on these children—involving them more in the morning meetings and the role-playing. As time passed, I noted improvement in the behavior of these students. They began relying on themselves and others to solve problems instead of immediately turning to me.

Videotaping

I videotaped class meetings at the beginning and end of the project. The videos showed the students practicing the social skills and role-playing various scenarios.

The first video showed students talking out, rolling around on the carpet, and not paying attention. Viewing the video, I realized that my students needed to learn how to be active listeners. I also had my class watch the video so that they could witness their behavior. Afterward, we made a Plus/Delta chart (see Figure 4), in which the students identified what went well during the meeting and what could be changed to make our class meetings more effective (Langford 1998).

goal is a classroom in which children come to know and care about each other and develop mutual regard and concern, the teacher purposefully leads children over time from the world of *me* to the world of *us*."

I was pleased to discover that not only were students practicing their skills in my classroom, but they also were implementing them in other teachers' classrooms. Instead of dreading my students, the Specials teachers (e.g., music, art, physical education) began looking forward to them. One of my brightest moments came when a substitute teacher left a note saying that my class was the most well-behaved she had ever taught!

Next year, I plan to continue teaching social skills. Through this inquiry project, I have learned what works well and what needs improvement. My hope is that sharing my experiences as a novice teacher will provide encouragement to other beginning teachers who might be struggling with some of the same issues in their classrooms. Though it takes time and patience, teaching social skills is well worth the effort.

+	△
What went well?	**How could we improve?**
We kept our bodies still. **Most of us were listening.**	**Do not interrupt the speaker.** **Keep eyes on the speaker.** **Take turns.**

Figure 4. Plus/Delta Chart

At the end of the project, I videotaped another class meeting. This video revealed a noticeable improvement in student behavior. For example, my students were making eye contact with the speaker, listening attentively, and volunteering to role-play and share their ideas. The video also showed my students taking turns. During one segment, I observed Billy interrupting another student and then immediately correcting himself, apologizing, and patiently waiting for his turn. The video provided evidence that my students were practicing the specific social skills we had been studying.

What I **Learned**

Conducting this inquiry project allowed me to see the positive effects of teaching social skills in my classroom. I found that spending the extra time to help my students develop appropriate behaviors enabled our classroom to become a more peaceful, and less chaotic, environment. As a first-year teacher, I was delighted to experience firsthand what Stone (2001, 17) suggested, "When the

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