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Perspectives of Students with Emotional/ Behavioral Disorders about their Experiences with Social Stories

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Perspectives of Students with Emotional/Behavioral Disorders about their Experiences with
Social Stories

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

This is to certify that the **Action Research Final Project** of

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has been approved by the Review Committee, and fulfills the requirements for the Masters of Arts in Education degree.

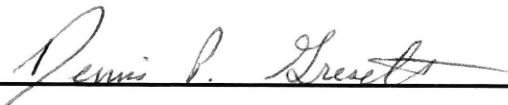
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Abstract

Social stories are defined as a short story that describes social situations in terms of relevant cues and often defines appropriate responses for children diagnosed with Autism (Bradys, Gouvousis, VanLue & Waldron, 2004). Social stories have been used since the early 1990's as a social skills intervention for students with Autism and research has shown that social stories have been very effective as an intervention for students with Autism (Scattone, Tingstrom & Wilczynski, 2006). A review of the research found that very little research has been conducted with students with emotional/behavioral disorders (EBD) and their perspectives with social skills interventions. This research examines the question "what are the perspectives of students with emotional/behavioral disorders about their experiences with social stories. Through this research I conducted interviews with 5 students with EBD who participated in the social stories intervention project. Themes that emerged from the interviews were: (a) ambiguity about social skills instruction, (b) name and behavior recognition provides powerful initial draw, (c) social stories do not sustain student attention, and (d) mixed perspectives with positive outcomes.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As I begin my math lesson, Johnny and Russ are acting up again. Russ struggles with anger problems and misreading social cues. Johnny knows this and purposefully says things to Russ to make him mad and distract the rest of the class from their work. Within 3 minutes, Russ is yelling and screaming at Johnny, causing the whole class to stop and watch. It takes me 5 minutes to settle things down and discuss the appropriate ways to handle the situation with both of the boys. By this time, I have lost almost 15 minutes of precious instructional time. This situation is a common occurrence in classrooms today, especially with students who have the label of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders (EBD). In addition to the academic challenges for these students, they also face challenges with their social behavior. Because teaching social skills is an integral part of the curriculum for students with EBD, finding the most effective methods of teaching these skills is imperative. Research studies and a classroom research project have indicated that the method of using stories whose content is about social skills can offer students success in learning about and applying social skills.

Teachers in today's schools face increasing pressure to make sure their students are making progress. This is primarily an academic focus; however, it is also important for students to make progress socially. Social progress is even more important and difficult to achieve for students with EBD. These students are often looked at as the trouble-makers who disrupt and prevent other students from learning. For students with EBD learning appropriate social skills may be more important than academics for their success in the classroom. In addition, well developed social skills can help youth with disabilities develop strong and

positive peer relationships, succeed in school, and begin to successfully explore adult roles such as employee, coworker/colleague, and community member (Bremer & Smith, 2004).

Due to the increased pressure for students to make academic progress, there is also an increased pressure for special education teachers, especially those working with students who have a diagnosis of EBD, to teach these students the required skills. In today's classroom, many teachers are using cooperative learning techniques to teach the curriculum. However, when social skills are absent, educators cannot fully engage students in a variety of learning experiences, especially those who are uncooperative (Bremer & Smith, 2004). For students labeled with EBD, social skills instruction has typically been done in the special education resource room setting with a small group of other students who struggle with the same skills. Teaching social skills to students with EBD has traditionally required a variety of teaching techniques and strategies to help students learn appropriate social skills. These techniques have included strategies such as discussions, role plays, videos, and workbooks exercises. However, little research has been completed that has considered a student's perspectives about their experiences with these techniques and their effectiveness.

The use of social stories was developed in the early 1990s as an intervention to teach appropriate social skills to children with Autism. Bradys, Gouvousis, VanLue and Waldron (2004) defined a social story as, "a short story that describes social situations in terms of relevant cues and often defines appropriate responses for children diagnosed with Autism" (p. 87). Scattone, Tingstrom, and Wilczynski (2006) study's findings support the effectiveness of social stories increasing desired behaviors. This study conducted with three students with Autism, ages 8 to 13, focused on improving appropriate behaviors during a free play time. Bledsoe, Smith and Simpson (2003) conducted another study that demonstrated the

effectiveness of the use of social stories to decrease target behaviors. This study followed one student with Autism and targeted specific lunch- time behaviors that were inappropriate. The study's findings indicated that the use of social stories reduced the behaviors significantly; however, when the stories were stopped, the behaviors continued until the stories were restarted. Even though there is research to support social stories' effectiveness with students with Autism, there is little research to support social stories as an effective teaching tool for students with EBD. Often the effects of social skills instruction with students who have EBD differ from students with other disabilities or the general education students. Due to their disability, students with EBD have a more difficult time understanding appropriate social skills and need a more direct and intense instruction than general education students. Even with this direct instruction, students with EBD still have a difficult time learning and using the skills being taught. Often these students will work for months to years to learn new skills, which general education students can learn in weeks.

Due to this lack of research, the use of social stories as an effective means of teaching social skills to students with EBD is unknown. There are numerous questions yet to be answered. How will students with EBD view the social stories? How will social stories affect the student with EBD both in and outside the classroom? And lastly, how effective is the use of social stories in teaching social skills to students with EBD?

As an elementary school EBD resource room teacher, I implemented a social stories component into some of my social skills lessons as a test program during the 2009/2010 school year. My study examines the previously stated unanswered questions from the perspective of five elementary aged students with EBD. For this research, five students with EBD participated in the use of social stories component and were interviewed about their

perspectives regarding their experiences with the use of social stories. The results of the interviews will be detailed in the findings section of this research paper.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

There are many reasons why a student's perspective about the effectiveness of social story lessons should be examined, especially one labeled with EBD. First, children with EBD can be some of the most challenging students to work with in the schools. Students with EBD are often disruptive to the learning environment of a classroom, which affects not just their learning but the learning of all the students in the class. With the increased pressure for teachers, including special education teachers working with students with special needs, to raise test scores and to meet state standards, teachers need to be as effective and efficient as possible. When social skills are not effectively taught, academics suffer for four reasons: student behaviors interfere with instruction, students influence teacher behavior, lack of teacher training in teaching children with EBD, and lack of research on effective teaching strategies (Wehby, Lane, & Falk, 2003). Wehby et al. 's (2003) research indicates that behavioral interventions are the first line of defense in addressing both the behavioral and academic deficits in children with EBD. Therefore, finding the most effective means of educating these students is imperative to today's teachers.

Secondly, social stories have been a proven method of teaching social skills to students with Autism. This review will explore multiple studies that detail the effectiveness of social stories with students with Autism. However, there are limited studies done to prove their effectiveness with students with EBD. Wehby et al. (2003) found that the literature often excludes students with EBD and that students with EBD are unique as a result of their ongoing emotional and behavioral challenges. Lastly, most studies found the effectiveness of the teaching methods have been judged by the teachers or the parents: seldom are the students asked how effective they feel the teaching methods were.

The literature reviewed will first examine students with EBD and social skills. The review will also look at the effectiveness of the social story method of social skills intervention with students with Autism. Finally, this review will focus on the literature and the lack of student perspective in research. In most research conducted up to this point, the perspective of the effectiveness has always been taken from the teachers or parents of the students. Rarely has the student's perspective been used to judge the effectiveness of social skills.

The Relationship of students with EBD and Social Skills

Social skills are defined as “effective social problem-solving requiring reading one’s own and other’s feelings, and being able to accurately label and express those feelings” (Bremer & Smith, 2004, p. 1). Many students with EBD have deficits in social skills (Bremer & Smith, 2004). Grescham, Sugai, and Horner (2001) suggest that a deficit in social skills is a key criterion for determining many special education categories including EBD. They define social skills as five dimensions: peer relational skills, self-management skills, academic skills, compliance skills, and assertion skills. Students with EBD are often looked upon as the trouble makers in the schools and are frequent visitors to the principal’s office due to their behavior. The term emotionally disturbed refers to students whose educational achievement is adversely influenced by some type of inappropriate behavior (Wehby et al., 2003). According to the U.S. Department of Education (1998), students with EBD must exhibit one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child’s educational performance:

- a. An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.
- b. An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.
- c. Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.
- d. A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.
- e. A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems (p. 46).

The number of students with EBD has risen from approximately 283,000 in 1977 to 442,000 in 2008 according to the National Center for Education Statistics (“Fast facts”, 2010).

Teachers are responsible for teaching the necessary social skills to these students. Bremer and Smith (2004) stated it is necessary to teach social skills to students with EBD, so that the students can increase positive peer relationships, be successful in school, be successful in a work environment, and be a successful community member. Behavioral intervention is viewed as the first line of defense in addressing both the behavioral and academic deficits of this population of students (Wehby et al., 2003). Wehby et al., (2003) also stated that the prevailing approach in the treatment of students with EBD is that students’ behavior must be controlled before they can be taught. With the demand to raise scores on state tests increasing each year, it is imperative that teachers are able to teach appropriate social skills to students with EBD so they are able to stay in the classroom environment. Hair, Jager, and Garrett (2002) found that adolescents who exhibit strong social skills are more likely to be accepted by peers, develop friendships, maintain stronger relationships with parents and peers, be thought of as effective problem solvers, have greater interest in school, and do better

academically. Bremer and Smith (2004) also stated that well-developed social skills can help youth with disabilities develop strong and positive peer relationships, succeed in school, and begin to successfully explore adult roles, such as employee, coworker/colleague, and community member.

With all the current demands that are being placed on students, effective teaching of social skills are needed to assure that the students with EBD are able to participate in the regular classroom environment. Some of the problems that interfere with the effectiveness of social skills intervention may include oppositional behavior, conduct problems, negative influences from peer groups, substance abuse, family difficulties, and limited cognitive abilities (Hansen, Nangle, & Meyer, 1998). When social skills are absent, educators can't fully engage students in a variety of learning experiences, especially those that are cooperative (Bremer & Smith, 2004). Current social skills instruction for students with EBD often focuses on students practicing their skills in the context of a cooperative learning setting. Cooperative learning is the process of using small student groups to work together to complete a project. In these groups each member of the team is responsible for learning his or her part and teaching it to the others in the group. Teachers instruct the specific social skill, and then the students practice within a monitored, positive classroom environment. Teachers may also implement role playing exercises where students take on roles in a situation where students may have a social skill deficit (Bremer & Smith, 2004).

Even though many studies have proven teaching social skills to be effective, some studies have found social skills training to be ineffective. Through a meta-analysis review of studies focusing on effective teaching of social skills Quinn (1999) found that 58% of children with EBD had acute benefits from the training. Throughout the studies, most of the

participants in this study were boys (67%) whose ages averaged 11.53 years. In 63% of the cases, the social skills training consisted of direct instruction, modeling, role playing, rehearsal, group discussions, and feedback. After the social skills had been taught, parents, teachers, peers, and the students themselves judged the effectiveness. The students rated the effects of the training the highest. Interestingly, it was found the social skills training in general had limited effects on children with 27% of the individual effect sizes being negative. In other words, one fourth of the studies found students not receiving the social skills training to have better outcomes than students receiving the intervention. Quinn also found that the duration of the social skills instruction did not matter in the results. On average, the students received 2.5 hours of instruction each week. This review did not take into account which methods of teaching the social skills the students found the most effective. Further studies need to be done in this area to help streamline teaching of these skills for students. By being able to target the most effective teaching methods for social skills, teacher would be able to more effectively plan groups and present the information, resulting in more positive outcomes.

Maag (2005) when reviewing previous studies also found that the effect size for social skills training is very minimal, largely in part to the implementation of the social skills training. When social skills are presented in a piecemeal fashion they are not effective, Maag also stated that a sound approach to teaching social skills would use modeling, rehearsal, role-playing, and reinforcement. As in the previous study, Maag was unable to ask the students the effectiveness of the different teaching methods used in the studies. More research needs to be conducted using the students' perspective to assure that teachers are being the most effective.

Social Stories

Bradys et al., (2004) defined a social story as “a short story that describes social situations in terms of relevant cues and often defines appropriate responses for children diagnosed with Autism” (p. 87). Social stories may be used to facilitate inclusion of students with Autism into the general education classes, introduce changes and new routines at home and at school, explain reasons for others behaviors and teach new academic and social skills (Adams, 2004).

Many researchers have found that social stories are an effective way of teaching new behaviors in students with Autism. Bradys et al., (2004) found that a “social story intervention was a useful tool in decreasing socially inappropriate behaviors” (p. 93).

The following studies concluded that social stories are an effective way of teaching new behaviors in students with Autism. Scattone et al., (2006) also found that social stories may be used in order to increase appropriate social interactions for some children on the Autism spectrum. Scattone et al. used social stories to increase the appropriate social interactions of children with ASD toward their peers when used without other systematic interventions. The study was conducted with three boys whose ages were 8 to 13. The participants were selected because they did not initiate or respond to peers either appropriately or at all during free-time activities. The effectiveness of the study was based on participants’ appropriate social interactions during a 10 minute observation. Results showed that two of the three participants demonstrated significant increases in appropriate social interactions.

Bledsoe et al., (2003) found in their study that social stories can be an effective means of teaching new behavioral and social difficulties for adolescents with Autism spectrum

disorders. Their study was designed to assess the effectiveness of a social story treatment to improve the lunchtime eating behaviors of an adolescent with Asperger syndrome (p. 290). Their study was conducted with one 13 –year- old male student. The researchers used social stories to target two behaviors related to his lunchtime. As a result, both behaviors decreased during the intervention phases of the study. However, when the intervention was removed, the behaviors returned to baseline. When the social stories were reintroduced during the second intervention phase, the results were even greater than the first phase.

Research supports the use of social stories as an effective way of improving social skills among students with Autism. However, even though the use of social stories produced immediate improvements in behavior, they were most effective the longer they were used as an intervention (Bledsoe et al., 2003). With the supporting data for improving behaviors in students with ASD, social stories may be an effective tool when used in other populations as well.

Although the research supports that social stories are effective means for managing behaviors in students with Autism, the researchers also noted some limitations as well. The social story intervention had limited quantitative and qualitative data supporting its use in decreasing inappropriate behaviors (Adams, 2004). Norris & Dattilo (1999) found social stories effective in reducing inappropriate social behaviors rather than improving appropriate social behaviors. According to these results, when social stories are used as the sole intervention, they may be limited in their effectiveness. Scattone et al. (2006) stated that a population had yet to be found that may benefit best from this intervention for increasing appropriate social skills. This raises the questions, how effective are social stories at increasing appropriate social skills in students with EBD?

Students' perspective

It has been noted that as children grow older, the effectiveness of different teaching models for social skills change as well (Cook, Gresham, Kern, Barreras, Thornton, & Crew, 2008). Cook's findings showed modeling and coaching to have the greatest effect on middle to late adolescent aged children, whereas programs that included social learning strategies were more effective for older students. Because most social skills programs include a variety of teaching techniques it is important to understand the student's point of view to select the most appropriate training method for the students. By using a social skills program found to be ineffective for certain age groups, crucial time to change behaviors of students may be lost. A study that focused on particular teaching methods found that when the researchers failed to utilize a family's perspective on services the services resulted in being ineffective (Nirbhay et al., 2002). Other studies have not been conducted to find students' perceived effectiveness of particular teaching methods of social skills.

In a similar study, Erdley and Asher (1999) linked the effectiveness of social skills training to the social goals of the children. They found that the effectiveness of the interventions might increase if they improved the children's social skills as well as had a positive impact on their social goals. This means that children would be more likely to find a training method effective if it would have a positive impact on what they were trying to achieve socially. He also noted that a child's self-efficacy perception would be directly linked to his or her social goals. That means children would more likely pursue goals in which they felt the most confident in their ability to attain.

After a thorough review of the literature surrounding the effectiveness of social skills training, it is clear that the benefits of the training outweigh doing nothing at all. However, throughout all the research, very little was done looking at the students' perceived effectiveness of the training because earlier effectiveness of the training is from the teacher's or parent's perspective. Because it has been shown that methods of teaching social skills may have a different effect on different ages of students, it is important that the effectiveness of these social skills are looked at from a student's perspective. Thus interventions should directly address children's perceptions of the effectiveness and its relation to their social goals (Erdley & Asher, 1999).

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study will explore the perspectives of students with emotional and behavioral disorders about their experiences with social stories. It used a qualitative action research method to gather data. Action research is systemic inquiry that teacher researchers, principals, school counselors, and other stakeholders in the teaching and learning environment conduct to gather information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach and how well their students learn (Mills, 2003). Data was gathered through in-depth interviews with the student participants to understand their perspectives and form the basis for analysis. This method allowed me to explore further how my students view social skills and social skills interventions as well as examine the reasons behind their views. In addition, this method allowed me to gain the participants' perspectives directly. Moreover, there is little research in the area of social skills and social stories that examines students' direct reflections about what is happening in their classrooms.

In the 2009/2010 school year, there were 550 students attending the southeastern Minnesota elementary school where I teach. Of these 550 students 128 were classified as African American, 65 Hispanic, 65 Asian/Pacific Islander, 2 American Indian and 290 were white (MN Edu, 2010). This school serves students from a wide range of economic levels.

The student participants in this research project were selected based on two factors: (a) they were current students on my case load at the elementary school where I was teaching or (b) the students participated in social skill lessons in which I was the teacher.

The participants ranged in age from 8 to 10 and were in grades second through fifth. All of the participants were identified as having EBD. As a result of their disabilities, the

participants had needs in the area of social skills and were enrolled in a social skills class. Four of the five students were enrolled in the social skills classes the entire 2009/2010 school year. One of the students was newly identified as requiring special education services at the start of this project and was just beginning the social skills program. All of the participants in this study were federal setting I students, which mean they spent less than 20% of their day in the special education classroom. All of the students received their social skills instruction in the same classroom. Additionally, they all had a social skill need identified on their special education individualized education program (IEP), which means the students were working towards a goal on their IEP related to social skills while participating in the social skills class.

The program was for students who were a level I (spending less than 20% of their day in special education classes) or level II (spending 21% – 60% of their day in special education classes). As stated before, the participants were all in a setting level I during this project. The program consisted of 20 students from grades kindergarten through fifth grade. The students in this program consisted mostly of students with EBD but also included students with Other Health Disabilities, Learning Disabilities and Traumatic Brain Injuries, all of which had needs in the area of social skills. All of the students enrolled in this program at the time this project was conducted were boys. Of the 20 students, seven were African American, 10 were white, and three were Asian/Pacific Islander. The program staff consisted of one full time teacher and one full time special education paraprofessional. Additionally, the school also had a behavior paraprofessional who assisted with student behaviors when needed. The program's staff was responsible for teaching social skills, providing academic support, implementing behavioral management strategies, and managing other tasks related to the needs of the students.

Recruitment of the Participants

To determine participants in this study, I first reviewed my active special education case load during the 2009/2010 school year. At the time of this study, it consisted of 18 students with a variety of disabilities. The disabilities ranged from Other Health Disabilities, Traumatic Brain Injuries, Emotional and Behavioral Disorders and Specific Learning Disabilities. For this research project, I was concentrating on students labeled with EBD, so it limited my prospective participants to 13 students. Following Institutional Review Board approval, I explained my research project to my students by discussing what participation entailed and called the parents of the eligible students. Of the 13 students eligible to participate in the study 6 agreed to participate in the study. At the time I began conducting the research and gathering data, one student refused to participate. He expressed that he just didn't want to answer questions or read the social stories with me. During sessions with other students participating in the project in the room, he was always interested but continued to refuse to participate throughout the project.

The project activities consisted of pre-interviews, reading the social stories, and post-interviews. All aspects of the project took place in my resource room during each student's scheduled social skills time. The students were familiar with the setting and knew the expectation of the classroom well. Since they were already participating in social skills during that time, the project was still working towards their IEP goals.

I began each session with the students by reminding them that while they were participating in the project, I was not a teacher, but rather a researcher collecting data and observing the students' behaviors. I encouraged them to be honest about their feelings

towards the social skills program. In an effort to make the students feel more comfortable with the research project I allowed them to sit in my teaching chair while participating in the interviews. I also explained the research process to the students as well as the reason behind doing the research. The students were very interested to learn that I was still taking classes and had many questions. Once I answered them, they were able to focus on the project activities instead of me. Lastly, I reminded the students that they did not have to continue the interview or answer any questions that they did not feel comfortable discussing.

Through the interview process, each participant was asked a series of questions to understand the student's thoughts and feelings about social skills. Before starting the project, the students participated in a pre-interview to gain better insight into their feelings. During the pre-interview process, the students were asked questions regarding why they came to visit me each day and if they understood what social skills were. If they understood what social skills were, the questions turned to how they were practiced and how effective they were. Once these interviews were conducted, the students began reading and discussing the social stories during their following sessions. The discussion questions used during each session varied. This is largely due to the difference of each student participating and his or her individual needs. The questions mostly revolved around comprehension and understanding of the material, as well as their feelings and connectedness to the social stories. After all the sessions had been completed, the students were asked to participate in a follow up final interview. During this final interview, the questions targeted the students' thoughts about their perceived effectiveness of the social stories. The questions also asked what each student felt during the readings and how each connected to the stories.

The Social Story Project

The school in which this project was conducted used a variety of social skills curriculums in the past. The year prior to this project, the primary curriculum used was a research-based curriculum that focused on three areas: empathy training, impulse control, and anger management. Although this curriculum worked for a vast majority of the students, it did not seem to work for all of the students being serviced in that classroom. For the other students for whom this did not work, a combination of activities and curriculums were used to try and meet the needs of those students. Generally, these skills were taught using a variety of methods such as situational discussions, role play, videos, and work books. The current curriculum did not utilize social stories at all as part of their lessons. The skills were first taught by teaching the skills to the students. Secondly, the students practiced the skills through teacher led activities and discussions. Lastly, the students were to carry the skill over to the regular education setting on their own. As stated before, this method of instruction worked for some of the students but with limited and inconsistent results.

For this project, the social stories used were created using a web-based program. They were created from the internet website www.sandbox-learning.com in which social stories could be created for a variety of concerning behaviors. Some of the behaviors were as follows: using nice words, keeping one's hands to one's self, feeling angry, feeling frustrated, and making friends. The website did require a one - year subscription, which the school technology department paid. The stories were created by first identifying the behaviors to target for each student. Secondly, a character was constructed for each student by entering data about them such as their hair color and style, skin color, their size, and any special features such as glasses. The character information also included the names of family,

friends, and teachers as well as where they lived. Next information about the target behaviors was added. This included what the behaviors consisted of and what the new desirable behaviors were. Once all the information was put into the program, it generated a social story with pictures and text based on the character's information.

The Participants

All participants' names have been changed including any possible identifying information. In addition the name of the school they attend has been removed. All the participants were categorized under the EBD category in special education and had a need for social skills instruction identified on their special education evaluation or reevaluation, resulting in their placement in a social skills group.

Tim is an eight - year - old second grade student who has just been identified as having an EBD. Tim is a very bright and academically, an average student. His teachers and parents describe Tim as being very caring and concerned about the people he knows. Tim has been diagnosed with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, Oppositional Defiance Disorder, and Adjustment Disorder. He takes medication daily for the symptoms to these disorders but sometimes misses his doses due to refusal to take them. His parents divorced when he was 3 years of age and his mother had remarried but was recently divorced from her second husband as well. Tim had a younger brother who died of SIDS when he was 3 weeks old. Tim also suffered verbal abuse at home from the time he was 1 year old from his birth father. Tim has had history of social and emotional problems at school and at home. These problems include being easily distracted, refusing to follow directions, not following classroom routines and rules, and wetting himself. Tim also becomes easily frustrated and angry when confronted about his social problems, directed towards both teachers and his peers. In addition to wetting

himself, Tim has also been known to cut his hair and color himself with markers when mad at his peers or adults. Since Tim has just started in the special education program, he was not sure why he attends the resource room or what social skills are.

Scott is a nine-year-old third grade student who has been attending this school since he was in kindergarten. He is very well liked by his peers and teachers. He is also an amazing athlete. He especially loves to play basketball and football. He has even performed jump rope skills in front of the school during assemblies. Scott has been receiving special education services since he was in early childhood. He qualified for services under the EBD category when he was in kindergarten. Scott has been making very good progress in his social skills since he started the program. He was suspended for 3 days in kindergarten for breaking a window and assaulting a teacher. At that time he was in a level II setting spending nearly half his day in the resource room. At the time of his interview, Scott is in a level I setting. In addition to his difficulties at school, Scott's father has been in and out of jail since he has been in school. In addition, his family has moved to many different apartments during his time in school. However, he has always stayed in the school attendance area. Scott has struggled academically in both reading and in math since starting school. He easily becomes frustrated when his school work becomes too hard for him. When this happened, he would typically run from the school, refuse to comply with directions, throw materials, and attack people

Johnny is a nine-year-old fourth grade student who has recently moved back to this school. He is a bright student who typically demonstrates caring behavior towards his friends and family. He loves being outside and enjoys hunting and fishing when not in school. Johnny had been attending a level III setting EBD classroom at a different school in the

district since he was in kindergarten and transitioned back to this school at the start of his fourth grade year. He is currently in a level I setting. He does have a diagnosis of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder and takes medication daily to control the symptoms.

Academically Johnny is a good student when he applies himself. His homework is regularly missing or not completed due to his lack of effort. His parents are divorced, and he has frequently moved between the households in the past, but for the last year he has been living with his mother. He still has regular contact with his father. Socially, he has had numerous incidences of harassing his peers, which has led to physical altercations on some occasions.

Russ is a 10 year-old fourth grader. He is a very intelligent student who has the potential to do very well in school. He loves to be outside working on his grandma's farm or building things. He often talks about growing up to work on the farm. Russ also has a good sense of humor, but it is often misinterpreted by his peers. Russ has been in special education since the end of first grade. He has a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder Combined Type as well as Depression. He does currently take medications at home to help with the symptoms. Due to his medical diagnosis, Russ struggles to maintain attention in the classroom during instruction and to follow directions. He also struggles completing his assignments on time without frequent reminders. Even though he struggles in these areas, his most significant concerns are with his peer relations. Russ often misinterprets comments his peers and teachers make. When this happens, he often becomes very upset and begins to yell at people and verbally attacks them. In the past year, he has experienced several family tragedies that have compounded his struggles to deal with his anger at school as well as at home.

Adam is a 10 year-old fifth grader. He loves computers and wrestling. He likes to spend any free time on the computer reading about his favorite wrestlers. Adam becomes easily frustrated when academics become difficult for him. When this happens, he typically will shut down and refuse to interact or talk with anyone. Sometimes his behaviors escalate, and he has run away from the school when he was upset. This also has happened when he had negative social interactions with his peers. Adam does have a diagnosis of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder and takes medication regularly for his symptoms. He often tries to blame some of his actions on his diagnosis. He was identified with EBD in first grade and was moved to a level III classroom in a different school in the district for his second grade year. He has been able to transition back into the regular classroom since moving back to the current school at the start of his third grade year. Currently he continues to become frustrated easily with both academics and his peers but is able to discuss what is bothering him and avoid shutting down completely. This is partly due to his ADHD and missing instructions or misinterpreting social cues from his peers.

Analysis of the data

As part of my project, I conducted introductory interviews before the project and final interviews at the end. In addition to the interviews, I conducted observations of the students during the project activities. Through the interviews and observations, I recorded, in narrative form, the responses and actions of the students. At the end of the project, I was able to construct more detailed field notes from the interviews and observations. I then coded the information in the field notes and interviews onto note cards to look for themes. Using

grounded theory, a process by which theory is generated based on the data, I was able to interpret “relevant predictions, explanations, interpretations and applications” from the data (Glaser & Struass, 1967, p. 1). Grounded theory is different from hypothesis testing in which the data is used to prove an existing hypothesis. Instead grounded theory is trying to find what theories account for the data. In grounded theory, the data is coded to develop themes, and from the themes, theories are generated.

To start the grounded theory process, I used the field notes generated from the observations and interviews that I had conducted with the students and coded the key information onto note cards and then into common groups. After the data had been grouped, I analyzed the groups to see which groups could be joined into themes. By using grounded theory process for analyzing my data, I was able to identify themes. The themes that emerged from the data were as follows: (a) ambiguity about social skills instruction, (b) name and behavior recognition provides powerful initial draw, (c) social stories do not sustain student attention, and (d) mixed perspectives with positive outcomes.

Chapter 4: Findings

Students labeled with EBD are often some of the most difficult students to work with in school. These students are often taught new social skills using a variety of different methods from discussions, role play, videos, and workbooks, to peer coaching, games and computer programs. However, research states that only 58% of the students find these methods effective (Quinn, Kavale, Mathur, Rutherford Jr. & Forness, 1999). Social stories have long been used as an effective means of teaching appropriate behaviors with students with Autism. They are short stories that describe social situations in terms of relevant cues and the appropriate responses to children.

As a special education teacher, I implemented a social story component into my social skills classes during the 2009/2010 school year. For this research, I enrolled five students with emotional and behavioral disorders into this component and interviewed them about their perspectives and experiences with the social stories. Through the process I attempted to answer the following questions: how effective are social stories at increasing appropriate social skills in students with EBD and what is a student's perspective of the social stories used?

Themes From the Data

Four themes emerged from the data, (a) ambiguity about social skills instruction, (b) name and behavior recognition provides powerful initial draw, (c) social stories do not sustain student attention, and (d) mixed perspectives with positive outcomes. Each theme is important to the understanding of the students' perspectives towards the social stories and their perceived effectiveness.

“To help me with my anger issues.” - Ambiguity About Social Skills Instruction

Students with EBD lack appropriate social skills as compared to their peers. Due to this lack of social skills, the students each attend social skills lessons in a resource room setting. All of the participants with the exception of Tim have participated in many social skills lessons. During the interview process, the participants were asked about their knowledge of social skills and why they attended the resource room setting. Some of the participants knew right away why they needed to come to the social skills lessons. Russ stated, “To help me with my anger issues and energy control, also practicing not beating others up and getting along with others.” Johnny replied, “Because I have problems with behavior, like calling names, being inappropriate, and being mean to others. Sometimes I don’t feel like I need it.” On the other hand, Adam, a fifth grade student who had been attending these classes since he was in kindergarten, could not come up with a reason why he attended the classes. Scott replied, “To see what I am doing and how I am feeling. I am not sure what we work on though.” In addition, Tim who had recently just started the classes did not have an idea other than to get rewards.

Additionally, I asked the students what social skills meant to them. The same confusion about what social skills are was apparent in the students’ answers. Scott was not sure what social skills were. Considering that Russ knew why he came to the class each day, it was surprising that he did not have an answer to what social skills were. Johnny replied, “Being able to talk to others appropriately and helping others with bullies.” Amazingly, Adam stated, “Social skills are helping out with anger. I struggle with social skills.” Since Tim had only been in the program for a couple weeks at the start of the program, it was not surprising that Tim did not have any ideas at this time what social skills were.

Lastly, I asked the students how they were practicing social skills and how effective they thought that was for them. Their answers varied the same as they did to the previous questions. Scott replied, “By helping the new kids. Yes, it is effective because when my friends say to calm down, I listen to them, and when my teacher tells me to turn it around, I listen to her.” Russ shared, “By watching videos, comparing with others, talking and games. They help but don’t do a lot. I have a hard time using them in situations.” Johnny stated, “By coming to school, talking to friends, writing a letter, and going on the computer. They kind of sometimes work. I have gotten better.” Adam answered, “By taking anger out by punching. It is not working well. It hurts my hands and I am not much of a social person. I could be more talkative and make more friends.”

Their responses show that most students are uncertain why they were participating in the classes. Some of the students understood the reasons for the class while other could not answer. That uncertainty was also apparent in their understanding of social skills. Some of the students knew specifically what they need to be working on, such as anger problems, while some struggled to identify what social skills are. This uncertainty and confusion about the class indicated that very few found the current methods of social skills practice to be effective.

“Awe, it has my name in it!” – Name and Behavior Recognition Provides a Powerful Initial Draw.

Through my experiences as a special education teacher of children with EBD, I have often seen the children’s reactions to standard curriculum and lessons. Students typically react with intrigue and excitement at first but that quickly changes to just another lesson about

how they are supposed to make the right choices. Even though the students knew ahead of time what the project consisted of, they all had very similar reactions to their first social story. Each student initially started off by reading and discussing a story based on a generic person with similar behaviors. This would be something commonly found in a standard curriculum. The students discussed the stories only when they were asked questions about it and gave very limited answers to the questions. Next, the students read a story based on them and the specific people in their lives and figures that looked similar to them. In addition, each story included behaviors and coping techniques specific to them.

When introducing and reading the first story, each of the students had very similar reactions to previous styles of presentation of the curriculum. They followed along and answered questions as we went, but with little engagement or effort from the students. However, once I introduced the personalized social stories the second day, the students' reactions were hard to hide. Johnny, Russ, Scott and Tim all had very similar reactions while Adam reacted a bit differently.

When Johnny came in on the second day he sat down and slumped back in his chair. I began to introduce and read his story to him, and he sat right up in his chair and with a huge smile on his face stated, "Awe, it has my name in it." For the remainder of the lesson, Johnny sat up, and was focused and engaged in the story. He eagerly asked questions and gave a lot of thought to his answers. At the end of the lesson he was able to explain in detail the story and the strategies that it discussed. This was the first time he did this without prompting. The most surprising reaction was when he asked if he could miss recess to stay and continue reading other stories that I had made for him.

Similarly, Russ looked at me with a huge smile and pointed at his book and asked, “Am I that guy?” He also was engaged asking questions about the story and lesson, which was something that Russ rarely did.

Because Tim was new to the special education program, he had not been exposed to many other curriculum or social skills programs before. When he read the generic story, he had a very difficult time recalling any facts or strategies from the story. He was also very distracted away from the story as we discussed and read. On the second day, Tim reacted very differently. With a large smile he yelled, “Why is my name in here, and hey, why is my teacher’s name in here?” He continued through the story asking questions and talking about the story. Once we finished the story, he replied, “I always wanted to be in a book and I want everyone to read it. Next time I get angry I am going to think about this book instead of the other book.”

Scott as well did not put effort into discussion and reading the generic story. Like the others, he sat up in his chair and smiled at me once he heard his name in the story about him. From that point on, he was asking questions and relating the topics back to him by saying, “That is how I act when I get angry or frustrated.” Once we finished reading, Scott stated, “I liked this story (his story) better since it was about me, but I also liked the other story.”

Adam on the other hand did not have the same reactions as the other students. His reactions did not change with either story that we were discussing. He replied, “There is nothing different other than the names.” As we read through both stories, he did not want to talk about any parts of the stories nor had any questions about the stories. Even with these reactions, when I asked him which story he would be able to remember better, he stated, “My

story because it is about me.” I also asked Adam which story would be more effective for him and he replied, “My story I guess.” When I asked why his story, he was not able to answer.

Overall, the reactions to their stories showed that the initial recognition of the students’ names and behaviors had a significant and powerful draw to the stories. They asked questions about the stories and discussed the behaviors and strategies in detail compared to listening to me explain the choices they have. Their comments and actions also indicated that they felt more connected to the stories featuring them as the characters.

“Do we have to read another story or can I go back to class” – Social Stories Do Not Sustain Student Attention.

Through this whole process, I paid close attention to the students’ behavior during the lessons involving the social stories. Even though the students have very different needs, all the students had very similar behaviors occurring while participating in the project.

As previously indicated, most of the students had a very positive initial reaction to reading the stories involving them. However, as the project progressed into later sessions, the students’ behaviors changed completely. During his first session, Johnny asked to skip his recess to read additional stories about himself, but during his second session reading his book, he was distracted by everything around him. Johnny was continually checking the time and asking if his time was up to leave. He didn’t want to answer any questions about the story or to discuss any of the strategies. This continued during his third session when he would not attempt to read or look at the book. He again was playing with anything around him and

asking how much longer. These behaviors were similar to when Johnny was reading the stories about the generic character.

Likewise, Tim responded the same way after his initial session in which he was engaged and asking many questions about the stories and strategies. During the second and third sessions involving his story, Tim needed multiple reminders during each page to listen and pay attention to what I was reading. As I was asking questions about the story and the strategies, Tim would not answer any questions, but would try to change to topic of discussion away from the story. At one point during the lessons, Tim was hiding under the table refusing to listen, and the other time the lesson was stopped due to his behaviors and refusing to follow directions. Considering how engaged and excited he was during the first session, these behaviors were shocking. Even though Tim had such a drastic turn around in his behavior, his fourth session was similar to his first. He started trying to avoid the subject, but agreed to participate since the story was about him and did a very good job. As we finished our discussion during the fourth session Tim stated that he felt like the books were helping since he was able to sit down and listen to the stories.

Scott responded very similarly to the other students when reading the first story, his comprehension of the strategies was very good, he asked lots of questions about the strategies, and at the end stated, "I like the book about me better because it is not just my name in it, but it is like me when I get frustrated." However, when we read the second story about him, Scott would not answer any questions about the story and tried to direct the conversation to any other topic. He needed multiple reminders to stay focused on the story until he eventually refused to participate. These behaviors continued throughout the remainder of the project even when reading the stories about the generic characters.

Lastly, Adam was the only student participating in the project whose behaviors didn't change over the course of the project. It didn't matter if the stories were about the generic character or the ones about him, Adam was the same. He followed along through the stories but didn't have much to say about them and only said anything when I was asking him questions about the stories. However, at the end of reading a story about him Adam stated, "I think these books would help me calm down faster." When I questioned him further about this statement, he was unable to think of a reason.

Throughout this project, the students' comments indicated that they felt the stories about them were more effective in learning the new skills; however, the observations of the students do not reflect the same feelings. Students seemed to disengage from the stories and "go through the motions" each day they attended class. This was true for both the generic and the personalized social stories.

"I liked that they have my name in them, but other than that I didn't enjoy reading the stories." -- Mixed Perspectives and Positive Outcomes.

To truly gain the students' perspective on social stories, it is important to examine their thoughts and feelings about the effectiveness of the social stories. The theme that arose from this project was that the overall perspective from the students about the social stories was very positive from some of the students and average for others. Although they had mixed perspectives of the social stories, the students all shared positive outcomes for comprehension of the stories and positive behavior changes outside the resource room. The students shared numerous times their feelings about the stories. Scott stated, "They make me feel safe and give me strategies to use when I am angry." Johnny expressed, "I liked that they

have my name in them, but other than that, I didn't enjoy reading the stories." When given the question about what he liked about the stories, Tim stated, "They helped me be better in class than before I started in this program, all of them helped me." On the other hand, Russ shared, "There isn't anything that I didn't like other than reading the stories."

In addition, all of the students had the same mixed perspective about their feelings and thoughts as they read through each of the stories. Johnny stated, "I was happy to read the stories with my name in them, but it was weird seeing my name in a book. I really didn't think about too much while I was reading the stories." Scott replied, "Both books made me happy. It was really cool to see my teacher's name in the book." Tim said, "I felt like I was famous with my name on the book and I was thinking about being in a book." Finally Adam stated, "I was thinking about calming down and not being so angry. Other than that I was not thinking too much about anything." In general, the students enjoyed reading about themselves and seeing their names in the stories, but they didn't connect to the stories more and it didn't matter to most which book (generic or personalized) they were reading to learn the skills, with the exception of Adam.

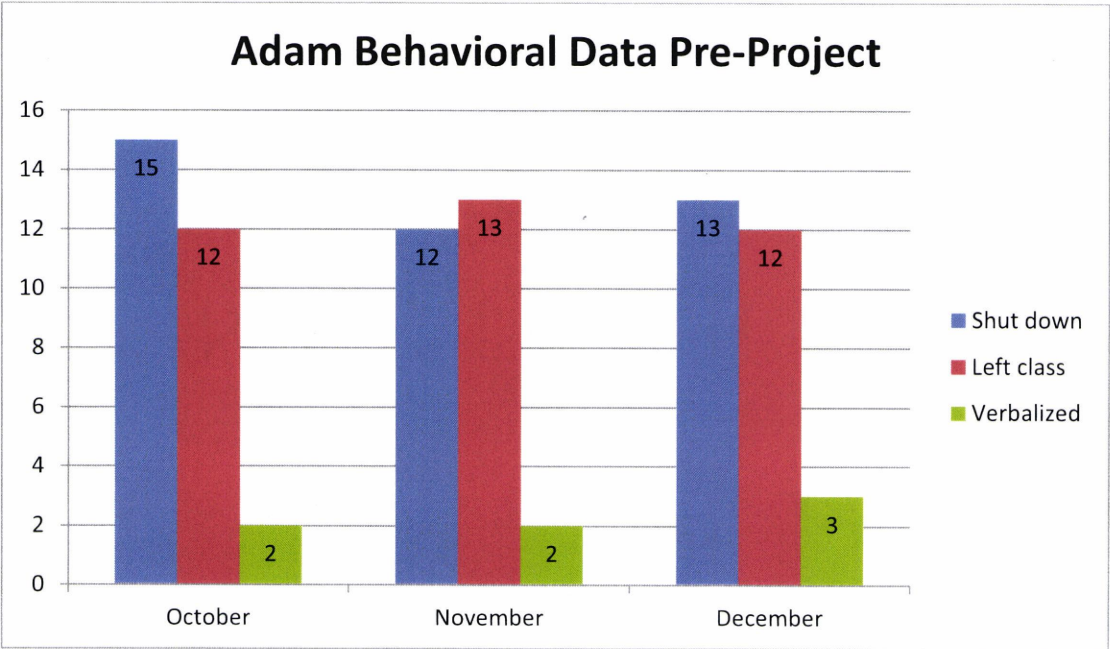
Throughout the project I asked the students' perspective on how effective they thought reading the stories, either the generic or the stories about them were. Their responses to these questions were much like their previous responses, in that it didn't matter what they read or who was in it. Johnny replied, "I am not sure if they worked at all or not, maybe a little bit effective. I didn't like reading them much at all." When I asked him about this, he stated, "I forgot what they said in the stories." Adam shared, "I enjoyed the stories and I think they were effective, but I am still having some problems. I would like to read more of them." I followed up by asking which stories he thought helped the most. He replied, "It doesn't

matter which stories we read, either mine or Tom (the generic story).” On the other hand, Russ stated, “I didn’t feel connected to either of the stories, and I don’t feel like reading them again.” He followed up by stating, “I just thought it was weird to read a story with my name in it that’s all.” While Tim’s response was, “I felt like they (social stories) were helpful, but not one in particular. I remember learning about being responsible.”

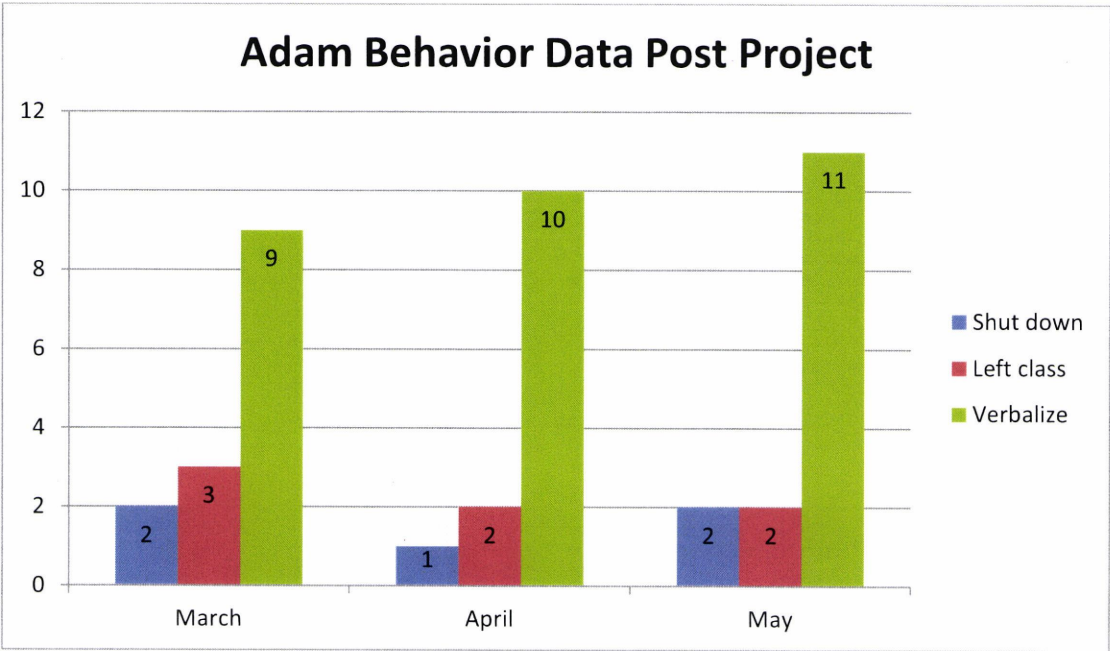
During the project, the students were asked what they could remember about the social stories they had read. The students’ responses showed that they had a very good retention over the 4 week period. Four out of the five students were able to remember the strategies and skills that were discussed in either of the stories. In his final interview, Adam explained, “They (social stories) talked about anger and helped me explain to me what I can do when I get angry like taking deep breathes, counting backwards, and finding a quiet place to go to.” Russ stated, “They were teaching kids to listen to one another, how to deal with their frustrations and how to get along with each other. I also remember reading that anger is an OK feeling to have.” Johnny stated, “They were all about social skills, but I don’t remember any parts to the books.” While Scott replied, “They were both the same books. They had the same behaviors that I do and they taught me how to work things out.” Lastly Tim stated, “I don’t like the Tom books. He was not the same as me and he didn’t have glasses in the pictures.” With the exception of one student they all were able to identify the strategies and skills being taught at the end of the project. At the same time, most shared that had no preference to the type of story (generic or personalized) they were reading. Most of the students thought they were very effective and connected to the messages and strategies presented, while only one didn’t enjoy reading the stories.

In addition to the positive retention responses, the students had positive behavioral responses at the same time. Despite the fact that during the lessons the students had a difficult time with behaviors in the resource room as described earlier, the students did have positive responses for behavior in the regular education classrooms.

The responses in the interviews and behaviors during the project indicated that they felt the social stories were an effective method to learn social skills. This was also reflected in each student's behavior monitoring data in the weeks during and following the lessons for the project. As part of each student's plan he used a behavior monitoring program to track his behaviors throughout the school days. Each of the students involved in the project saw significant reductions in negative behavior at school. For example, Adam had a history of shutting down and refusing to listen to directions or to talk to teachers when he became frustrated or angry. These behaviors could last from minutes to hours depending on the situation. Prior to starting the project, Adam was having two to three shut down episodes each week. During these episodes, Adam would silently sit in either a hallway, under tables, or under desks for extended periods of time, often lasting until it was the end of the school day.



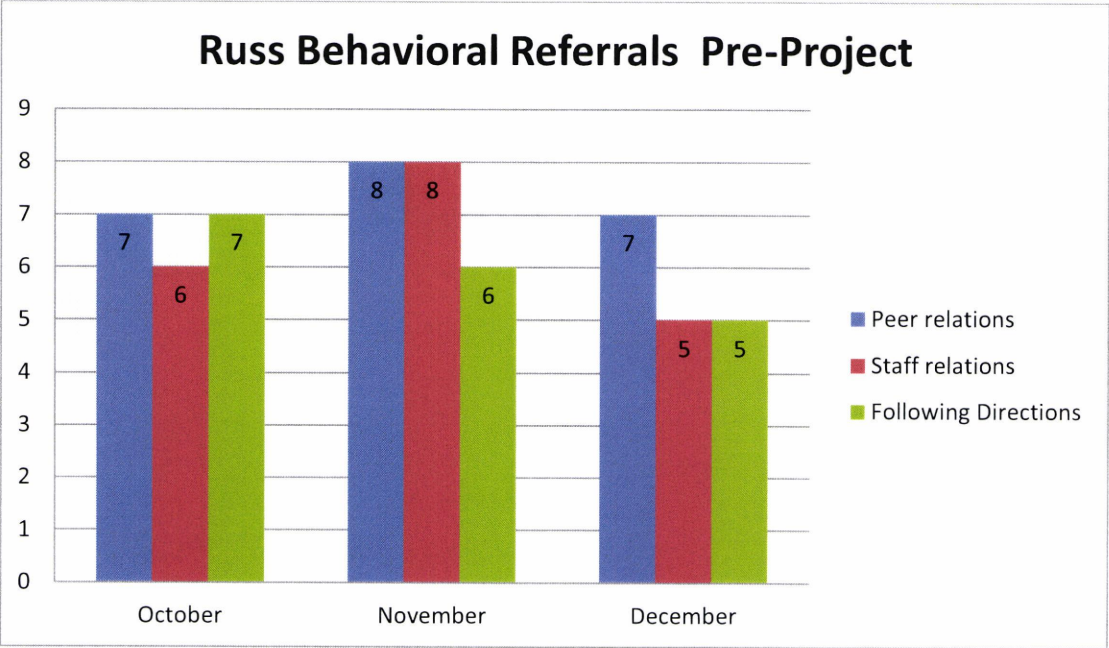
During and after the time spent in the project, Adam reduced his anger shut down behaviors to one to two shut downs a month. Adam referenced the stories when he would be discussing the situations that caused his shut down behaviors. The strategies in his book discussed using words to discuss what was bothering him and to move to a safe place to discuss the issues. Adam used these skills multiple times during the following months of school. Many of his shut downs were avoided when he verbalized his emotions and anger instead of sitting for hours and not talking.



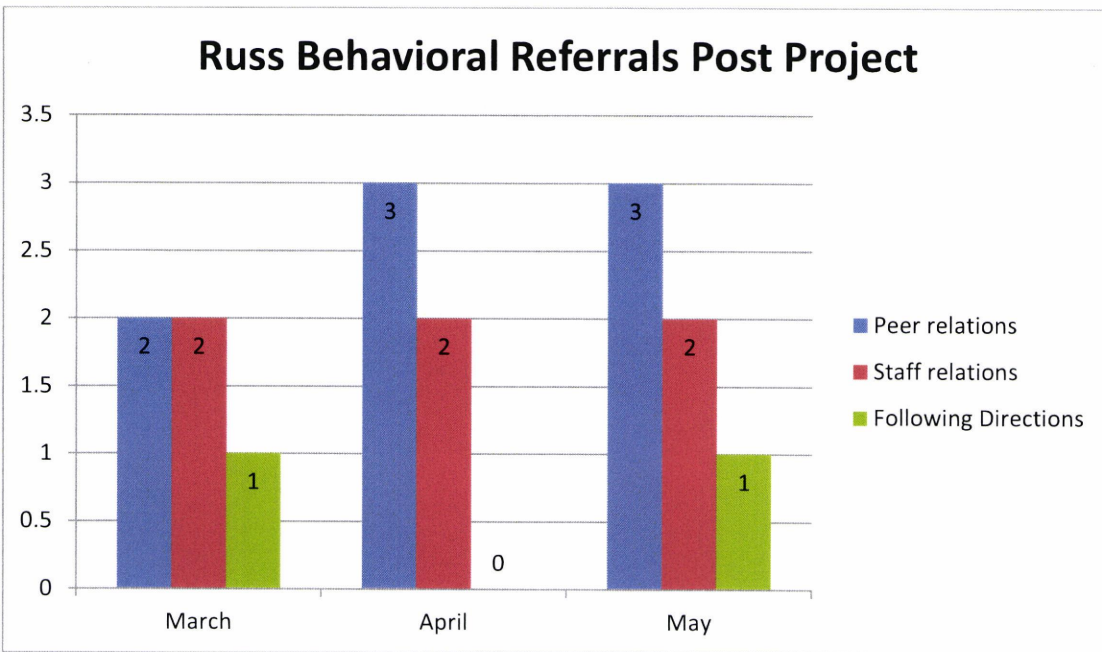
Similarly, Tim was being removed from the classroom because of anger outburst directed at his peers and his teacher one to two times a week. Tim was new to the special education program and had not been exposed to other curriculums or teaching methods like the other students. During the project, his responses indicated that he felt the stories were very effective. He specifically stated that he learned about being responsible for his behaviors from the stories. After participating in the project, Tim continued to use the social stories as part of his regular program. Through his behavior monitoring program, Tim reduced the number of times that he was removed to going an entire month with no behavioral referrals and then continued to keep them at one to two removals a month.

Lastly Russ, who also had multiple peer and staff related anger outbursts each week, made great improvements in his behavior monitoring data. At the beginning of the project, Russ was being removed from class three to four times a week for anger outbursts. Throughout the project, Russ did not seem connected to the stories and stated, “I don’t feel

that either one of the stories were very effective. I would give them a 3 on a scale of 10 for effectiveness.”



However in the months after the project was completed, Russ had decreased the number of times he was having anger outburst to two to three a month.



The other students also saw a decrease in behavioral referrals in the time after completing the social stories project but to a much lesser degree. Overall, the behavior monitoring data confirmed the students' perspective on the social stories as being positive and an effective teaching method.

Summary

Social stories are short stories used to describe skills and concepts to be learned and the appropriate responses and social cues that could be expected during the situations. This research focused on using social stories, both generic and personalized, with students with EBD. The students were able to discuss their perspectives about the stories and the experiences, which gave insight into using social stories as a teaching method for students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Through this project four themes emerged from the observations and the interviews conducted with the students: (a) ambiguity about social skills instruction, (b) name and behavior recognition provides powerful initial draw, (c) social

stories so not sustain student attention, and (d) mixed perspectives with positive outcomes.

These themes were important to understanding how the students viewed the use of social stories and what teachers can expect when using social stories as a teaching method.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

Social stories have long been used to teach new and problem solving skills to students with Autism, and research shows that social stories are an effective teaching method for these students. However, there is a lack of research available to confirm if social stories are as effective for teaching new skills to students with EBD. This research demonstrated that social stories had a positive and lasting effect for students with EBD. The students who participated in this research were elementary students ranging in grades from second to fifth, all having been diagnosed with EBD. These students offered insight into their experiences with social stories. The participants graciously gave their time to participate and were cooperative, well behaved, and honest about their feelings during the interview process.

At the start of the research project, most of the students did not understand the reasons why they attended the social skills lessons each day. In addition to not understanding why they attended social skills class, only one student understood what social skills were and why they were needed. Given that most of the students did not understand what social skills are and why they are important, I think that somewhere in my past instructions the students missed some key points. It is understandable that since they did not understand what social skills were, they did not think that the methods of teaching them were effective as well. However, after using the social stories, all of the students were able to express why they were in the class and what behaviors they were working on. In their responses, they specifically mentioned the behaviors from the social stories even though during the project, the students were involved in situational discussions and sharing about different behavioral needs. This retention of the strategies after such a short time was evident in the student responses during their final interviews. Some of the students were able to describe specific strategies and ideas

from the social stories. This was also evident during the weekly interviews after reading the stories. Students were able to remember the strategies from week to week during their lessons. This allowed me to build on the skills more each week, giving the students a deeper understanding of the strategies instead of going back to re-teach what they had forgotten from the previous week.

Many of the students who participated in this project were also struggling learners in reading and math. They often find themselves being pulled out in small groups to practice skills they are missing in the regular instruction. This often causes the students to become frustrated and easily give up on learning the new skills. However, when the students started to feel that they could understand and remember the strategies, they became very excited about learning. Adam asked, "Can I take this story back with to class to read when I get angry?" Johnny asked if he was able to stay and continue reading the stories. These statements were from students who put forth little effort in the classroom, so finding something that made them want to learn and eager to try the strategies because they felt they were effective was a great feeling. In addition to the students asking to use the stories and put in the extra time with them, when I introduced the personalized stories, the reactions and comments from the students showed engagement and enthusiasm for learning and discussing the new skills.

Although the students showed great enthusiasm towards the stories during the first few days of the project, their behaviors changed during the later portions of the lessons. At some point during the project, all the students experienced a time when they showed little or no interest in the social stories, even when the stories contained their character. This ranged from just needing some extra reminders to stay focused on the story to having to stop the

lesson because the student was refusing to participate and follow directions on a particular day. Because the students were exposed to a variety of teaching methods as part of the regular curriculum, I understood that after using the social stories for 2 to 3 weeks as their main curriculum, the students needed a change in activities to spark their interests again. In addition to only using the social stories for their main curriculum during the project the student sessions were 20 to 30 minutes long. This may have been too long a time period to be spending on one story each day. None of the students experienced the behaviors during the first weeks of the project; however, all the students started experiencing some sort of “lack of engagement” during the second and third weeks. For example, during week 3, Johnny began asking if the stories were about him as we began each lesson. If they were about him, he would follow along with the stories but not put effort into answering any questions about them. Tim stated during week 2, “I would read it again if it had my name in it. I like the book but I want my name in the book.”

Overall the students’ responses indicated that using the social stories to teach social skills was more effective than the standard methods of social skills instruction. The students shared that they liked reading the stories with their names and pictures in, but at the same time, they felt a connection to the generic stories. Their reactions and engagement with the personalized stories indicated the students had a great interest in reading and discussing the stories and the strategies detailed in them. Prior to using the social stories, the student usually did not engage much in the traditional social skills lessons. The students would discuss their behaviors knowing that when they completed each day’s lessons, they would be able to play a game with each other or me. Interestingly, as they read the personalized stories, none of the students mentioned playing a game as part of the lessons. Some of the students voluntarily

wanted to miss recess so they would be able to stay and continue reading the stories. Often at the start of each lesson, the students would ask if the story was about them or if they could read the ones about them instead of the generic versions. At one point with Tim, he would not participate in a lesson unless I used the story about him to discuss that day. Two students, Johnny and Tim asked to make additional stories and add more friends in to the stories. This excitement for the lessons helped carry over to future lessons after the project was completed. Throughout the stories, the students engaged in detailed discussions about their behaviors and the strategies the stories were trying to teach them. These discussions helped build a deeper understanding and a longer lasting memory of the strategies.

Finally, the students' responses indicated that whether they were reading, the personalized or the generic version, they thought they were effective. Because the students thought both version of the stories were effective, and the behavior monitoring data supports these perspectives the extra prep time I spent constructing and writing the personalized stories could have been spent on developing more stories for the students.

Limitations to This Study

A potential limitation of this study is that social stories were not the only behavioral intervention being used. The students participated in discussions about previous and current behaviors as well as had situational discussions and role-plays about different behaviors as part of their regular curriculum during other parts of the school day. Although the behaviors the students talked about during their interviews were the behaviors and strategies discussed in the social stories, it would be interesting to use the social stories as an independent

intervention to gain a better perspective from the students as to the effectiveness of the social stories.

Another aspect to this research to consider is the participants' ages. This research was done almost completely with intermediate age students in an elementary school. The responses indicated that the students felt the social stories were effective; however, little research has been done to gain students' perspectives at the primary age levels of elementary school. Further research needs to be done at younger grade levels with students with EBD and gain their perspectives on the stories. In addition, all but one of the participants had been in special education for a number of years and all were in the intermediate grades. They had used the existing curriculums for years with little progress in the behaviors. This raises the question if the participants would have been more successful using the social stories earlier in their school experience.

Lastly, as part of the project, the students participated in post interviews to gain their perspectives about their experiences with the social stories. These interviews were conducted during the week following the completion of the project. Since the project was completed so recently, the long- term retention of the strategies has not been measured. Additional interviews would need to be completed in the following months and behaviors track to measure the full effects of the social stories.

Recommendations

In conclusion, this research indicates that social stories are beneficial to the success of student with EBD. As teachers, we should see that even though the students had a mixed perspective about the social stories, the research indicates positive outcomes. Throughout the

project and interviews, the students expressed their feeling and perspectives about the social stories. Their perspectives indicated that the use of the social stories as an intervention was a positive experience. The best question now is to ask how teachers can effectively implement and utilize social stories in their daily curriculum to maximize the benefits for children.

As a result of the research conducted, I implemented the social stories into a daily routine for many of the students in my classrooms. As new skills were introduced, the students utilized social stories to read and understand the skills before practicing. At the start of each lesson, the students were able to read the story as an overview of the skills to be discussed and practiced. The social stories were able to target very specific skills that the regular curriculum did not. As the students began to master the skills being taught, they were then able to use the social stories as a review as they were practicing the skills independently.

The social stories also offered a greater amount of flexibility in their design. When a student mastered one skill or a new need arose, I was able to create a new social story specific to the situation. In certain situations, the students even asked if I was able to write additional stories that included new friends. This helped students develop ownership in the stories as well as develop meaning in their stories. As a result, the students' engagement lasted much longer. As the students understood the social stories and the techniques being presented in them, many were allowed and encouraged to keep them with them in their classrooms to read when the particular situation occurred. This allowed them to have immediate access to how to handle the situation and confirmation that they did the right thing.

Another recommendation that developed from this research is promoting the students' ability to make a connection to the behaviors at home. By working with the parents about

behaviors that they were concerned with, I was able to develop stories for each child. The students were able to practice and discuss the stories at school and then able to take the books home to read with their parents and discuss them there. Using the stories both at home and at school made the connections stronger and the strategies consistent across settings. By having students and parents both reading and discussing the same stories and using the same strategies as at school, the parents would be able to reinforce the skills in another setting promoting the generalization of skills in a natural environment.

Chapter 6: Self-reflection

When I first started teaching special education 8 years ago, I began in a level III homeroom setting. This setting consisted of students with EBD with severe needs involved in social skills instruction. As I worked in that setting, I was also beginning work on my master's degree. The students in that program were in such need of social skills, and I saw them struggle with these skills on a daily basis. After years of different social skills instruction through a variety of methods, these students were still struggling to make the connection and progress towards being with their regular education peers. As I was getting closer to deciding on a project to complete my degree, I knew that I wanted to focus on something that would hopefully benefit these students and make an impact on their lives as well as help me grow as a teacher.

The idea of using the social stories came to me when a colleague came to me and asked me about using personalized social stories with my kids for social skills instruction. She had been using them with her students with Autism and was having good success. I had not used them before and was quite unsure if they would work with my students with EBD. As I started to research the background of social stories and the impact they had on students with Autism as well as their versatility, I thought this might be a perfect opportunity for me to learn and grow with my students.

At the start of the year, I was excited and nervous at the same time. I was excited because I was going to be presenting something new to the students that I was hoping they would have a personal connection to. I was also excited to gain an insight into their thoughts and reactions to the social stories as we worked our way through the project and the

interviews. I was nervous about the uncertainty of the students' reactions to the new instructions. Because I had no experience in the use of social stories, I was just unsure of what to expect.

As I began discussing the opportunity with my students and their parents, the students reacted with a bit of intrigue and excitement. They were excited to help me out with my project and my school work for a change. The project also gave them a chance to participate in something without the pressures of school and having me judge them as their teacher. Some of the students were not sure about participating and asked a lot of questions about the process and what they were expected to do. One student even asked if he would have to come to the college to talk about it, hopefully one day he will. He was quite relieved when I told him he would miss out on that part. In addition to the students' excitement, their parents were equally excited to have their students get the experience of participating in something special. With everyone's excitement about being asked, I also grew in excitement to begin and to gain their perspectives.

Since I had been working with these students for a number of years, I had a very good understanding of what their needs were and what direction they needed to go in. As I started writing the stories for each student, I began to gain a deeper understanding for each student as well. I was able to spend time constructing the characters for each student to look like him and to develop situations that were relevant to the students and something they had experienced before. This process was a long and at times a little overwhelming. However, when I reminded myself that it was for the students, it made it all worthwhile.

Once I was able to begin the project itself, a lot of the nervousness disappeared. The students' excitement to participate in the interviews made it easy to keep them going even though they were discussing their behavior problems. The students were very honest and open about their thoughts and concerns during the initial interview process. Their honesty and openness also shocked me. I had expected some hesitation from the younger students about sharing information about them that would be going into a paper later on. Despite working with these students for a number of years, I was shocked by some of their answers about what we had been doing. For example when Scott stated that he was not sure why he came to see me every day I couldn't believe that he didn't know why. Also, I was surprised when Adam knew what social skills were but didn't know why he came to my room. I questioned if what we had been working on over the past few years had been futile since these students couldn't even tell me why they were coming to the resource room each day. I also thought that maybe the social stories would bring a new light onto what they were working on and why they were coming to the resource room in the first place.

After gaining a new perspective from the students about social skills and what they thought about the traditional ways of learning them, it was time to begin the actual social stories project. I was very excited to watch and learn from my students. As I began with the first students, they were interested in the stories even though they were about a generic student who had similar concerns to them. However, when I introduced the personalized stories to them, I was amazed by the reactions. I had thought that they would be a little excited to see their names and characters in the stories but nothing to the extent of how they actually reacted. When the first student couldn't put the story down and wanted to discuss everything about it as well as the strategies in it, I immediately thought that I had finally

found something that students with EBD might learn from and engage in for social skills. As the first couple weeks went on and the reactions to the personalized stories were the same for each student, I was fascinated by watching them talk about themselves in each story, and how they could picture themselves using the strategies back in the classroom, and why they were important. When Adam stated that he wanted to take the book back to his classroom to read when he was getting angry, I began to imagine all the possibilities for using the social stories in the future. I am sure I was smiling as much as the students.

However, as we entered the second half of the project, I had no idea of the changes in the students that were about to happen. The first day that Johnny came in and was totally turned off by the social stories, I was not sure what to think. Just days before he was asking lots of questions and engaged in conversation about the social stories and that day he was completely different. I remember watching and thinking that something must be wrong with him because he was acting so different. I was also thinking about the social stories and what was different that caused him to change. After his session, I can remember reading over the notes I had taken and thought about what I had done differently searching for why he was suddenly turned off from the stories he loved very much just a couple days prior. This change in Johnny made me very anxious to continue with another student. I wondered if this was only one student or if this was going to be happening with everyone. As I started the next lesson with a student, and he also was not engaged as before and did not ask any questions or discuss the lessons in any way, I began to think that maybe the social stories were not as engaging and powerful as I had once thought. Over the next 2 weeks, the students continued to consistently display the same behaviors towards the social stories. I can remember feeling very frustrated with the students and felt as though I had wasted my time and energy on the

stories. At one point when Tim was sitting under the table refusing to participate, even though we were reading the same book he couldn't put down last week, I felt like quitting the stories all together.

Throughout the next 2 weeks of the program, the students continued to struggle with engaging in the social stories. As I watched the students throughout the lessons, I wondered if they were learning anything or remembering any of the strategies that we were discussing. This was similar to other curriculums that I had used in the past where the students would do the least amount of work possible and avoid discussing the issues of their behaviors. However, as I asked questions at the end of the lessons about what the strategies were and how they were used in the stories, the students still were able to explain and analyze how the strategies were effective. Their comprehension of the stories was also evident after the project. I felt encouraged that the students were able to recall and discuss the strategies that were taught to them. I had success in the past with the students retaining skills over a period of time, but it usually came after a great deal more of repetition and practice than with the social stories.

As we were finishing the project and I was scheduling the students to come and participate in their final interview of the project, I found myself again getting very nervous. I am not sure why, but I feel it may have been the uncertainty of their perspectives of the social stories that I was worried about. Because I had not done any interviewing with my students in the past about their perspectives on the social skills curriculum or any other projects we had completed, this was an entirely new experience for me and my students. However, I also think that the interview process was the most enlightening and rewarding part of the whole project. The first aspect of the interviews that I enjoyed was just being able to gain a better

understanding of my students and their feelings about what I do with them. In the past, the students were pretty willing to “go along with” most projects and lessons that I had presented. Because I had not done any interviewing with them, I assumed they enjoyed them. During the interviews, the students were able to express that they did enjoy reading them for the most part and would like to read more with their names in them. This surprised me after their reactions to them over the last part of the project. I was completely ready for them to state that they hated them and didn’t want to read them again. The second aspect of the interviews I felt was very helpful was being able to listen to the students about what they liked. They were able to express that it didn’t matter to them if the stories included their names or not. Some students were able to express that they wanted to read them only if their names were in them. I got the feeling from the students that someone was finally asking them what they wanted to get out of the social skills lessons and time in the resource room. The students were very engaged and willing to discuss what they liked and didn’t like about the project. I felt I had had a good relationship with my students in the past, but I felt from their interviews that for the first time, they had a voice in what we were doing. In the weeks after the project, the students seemed to be more willing to talk about what we were working on and how they felt about it. I continue to interview my students about their perspective on different projects we complete and use the interviews as a way for the students to offer input to the class and provide me with feedback.

I currently continue to use social stories as a part of my daily lessons and curriculum in my classroom. I have learned from this process that social stories alone are not going to work best for the students. However, as a supplement in small daily segments the students stay much more engaged to the stories. I have been able to adapt them into the curriculum

that I had been using in the past to boost the skills the students need to work on. The students also continue to enjoy reading the stories with their names and pictures in them and regularly ask for them. In addition to using the social stories in the resource room setting, I have also introduced the regular education classrooms and students' parents to the social stories. The students have become so familiar with the stories that they review them independently in their classrooms. Students will also take the social stories home to read and discuss with their parents.

Although I probably would have eventually begun to use social stories in my teaching, this project, and particularly the interview process, has opened my mind to another tool that benefits kids and helps them be successful students and citizens. As I think back to the start of the project, I now know there were many things that I could have done differently to make everything go a lot more smoothly. My students were extremely patient with me even when things were going a little rough as I began implementing the program. My administration, support teachers, and paraprofessionals were nothing but helpful to make sure that my other students were being helped as well and that I had everything I needed for my work. I am very thankful to the students for participating and giving me the opportunity to ask questions about their personal problems and concerns. This project may have forced all of us to work a little out of our comfort zones, but it was a wonderful learning experience for everyone. In return, this project and my students have helped me become a better teacher.

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