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An Evaluation of Evidenced-Based Practice in a Separate Day School for Students with Emotional Disabilities

Sara Pritchard-Mitchell

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AN EVALUATION OF EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE IN A SEPARATE DAY
SCHOOL FOR STUDENTS WITH EMOTIONAL DISABILITIES

A Dissertation

Presented to the

The Faculty of the School of Education

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

By

Sara P. Mitchell

AN EVALUATION OF EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE IN A SEPARATE DAY
SCHOOL FOR STUDENTS WITH EMOTIONAL DISABILITIES

By

Sara P. Mitchell

Approved March 4, 2019 by

Michael DiPaola, Ed.D.
Committee Member

Jennifer Parish, Ed.D.
Committee Member

Margaret Constantino, Ph.D.
Chairperson of Doctoral Committee

Dedication

To my daughter, Evelyn. May you grow to understand the value of a strong work ethic and the satisfaction that lies in pursuing your goals. To my husband, Chris. Your unwavering support ensures me we can achieve anything we desire in this world. Thank you for always being there. To my parents, any success I've had is a result of the endless love and commitment embodied by you both. Thank you for giving me all the tools I needed—and then some. This is dedicated to you.

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Abstract

This program evaluation is focused on the social skills instructional processes of a separate day school for students with emotional disabilities (ED) in Upstate New York. The CIPP model of program evaluation was used to highlight the processes involved with the school's program, specifically teacher led social skills instruction. To determine the program's quality of social skills instruction multiple forms of qualitative data were collected. Teacher interviews and multiple classroom observations allowed for a humanistic approach to understanding teacher's perceptions, practices, and beliefs regarding social skills instruction. This constructivist research design allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the current programming and instructional strategies for students requiring the highest level of academic and behavioral supports, while providing increased practicality in implementing potential recommendations. The data indicated four themes impacting New Horizon's ability to successfully meet the needs of their students: teachers feel unprepared to implement and assess social skills; teachers are not receiving targeted professional development on social skills strategies; teachers are utilizing some evidence-based instructional strategies during social skills lessons; and teachers do not have access to the necessary resources to implement and assess social skills for students with ED. A delegation of roles and responsibilities, facilitated collaboration opportunities, and professional development opportunities could potentially mitigate teacher misconceptions, motivation, and fidelity of implementation of evidence based instructional social skills strategies for students with ED.

AN EVALUATION OF EVIDENCED-BASED PRACTICE IN A SEPARATE DAY
SCHOOL FOR STUDENTS WITH EMOTIONAL DISABILITIES

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) students with emotional disabilities (ED) exhibit at least one of the following characteristics: “learning problems that cannot be explained by health, intellectual or sensory factors; behavioral challenges that prevent the creation and maintenance of satisfactory relationships with peers and teachers; and/or depressed and unhappy mood” (Cullinan, 2004, p. 156). To be classified as a student with ED, the above stated conditions must also negatively impact the child’s education (Kaya, Blake, & Chan, 2015). Students with ED lack the necessary social skills to function in the academic and real-world environment. As this inability becomes magnified, students require extensive academic supports in addition to facility and staffing modifications to meet their educational needs (Maggin, Wehby, Partin, Robertson, & Oliver, 2011).

When a child is deemed no longer capable of participating with his or her peers, a recommendation for a separate day-school environment can be made. Under section 612(a)(5) of IDEA, students with disabilities must be served alongside their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent possible (Musgrove, 2012). If the nature of the child’s disability does not allow for a satisfactory education, removal from the regular education setting may occur. To protect students from unsubstantiated

placement in special classes or separate schools, the stay-put provision of IDEA requires the right of due process for issues involving a free and appropriate public education (Marshall, 2014). These separate schools, designed to serve the unique needs of children with ED, require an extensive compilation of supports to ensure academic progress and improved emotional well-being. However, a fundamental question remains: Are separate day schools for students with ED effective in terms of meeting their academic and emotional well-being needs? As high school drop-out and incarceration rates continue to stifle the success of this population of students the need to evaluate programs targeted toward meeting their social-emotional needs is detrimental to improved outcomes (Karpur Clark, Caproni, & Sterner, 2005). To ensure these programs are capable and worthy of the resources allocated to these costly, consuming efforts an un-biased evaluation of the quality of instruction as well as the embedded instructional supports is critical to the ultimate success of these students.

Program Description

New Horizons, a day school for students with ED in upstate New York, provides comprehensive academic and emotional support for students in Grades K-12. This collaborative effort between nine neighboring school districts and a community health agency provides a comprehensive education for students requiring the highest level of behavioral support including counseling services, medication management, and small class sizes to adequately meet their unique needs.

Context. The New Horizons program serves students from nine surrounding school districts. Each school district allocates annual budgetary spending based on

their number of students enrolled in the program. Providing special education services in the most restrictive environment is costly, requiring rural localities to merge their resources to provide a sustainable alternate education setting for students exhibiting the highest degree of emotional distress and poor academic performance. A study of special education placement costs in Massachusetts determined districts allocated approximately 6% of their operating expenditures and 33% of their special education budget on separate school placements for students requiring the highest level of intervention (Deninger & O'Donnell, 2009). A collaborative day-school setting in Massachusetts like that of New Horizons costs approximately \$39,574 per pupil (Deninger & O'Donnell, 2009). This investment is reserved for the most challenging students who have repeatedly been unsuccessful in their home school (Maggin et al., 2011). As with other special day schools, New Horizons admittance is examined on an individual basis with student academic performance, behavioral referrals, student observations, and teacher and staff questionnaires being the primary data presented to the committee on special education. This school-based team, consisting of a school psychologist, special education teacher, general education teacher, the Director of Special Education, and the child's parent or guardian, meets with the New Horizon's principal, social worker, and any other individuals charged with making the initial referral to the New Horizon's program. A committee decision approved by the child's home district completes the referral process, placing the student in the New Horizons program. As a legal requirement, the child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) must be updated to reflect the change in placement and its impact on the child's

ability to be served with their non-disabled peers in the Least Restrictive Environment.

Description of the program. Low staff-to-student ratios and strict adherence to federal regulations under IDEA (2004) create an atmosphere where the needs of the most challenged students can be met. Students are provided an education in multi-grade level classrooms consisting of one classroom for 1st-3rd grade, one for 4th and 5th grade, one for 6th-8th grade, and two for 9th-12th grade. All classes allow for a maximum of eight students, with a minimum of one teacher and full-time teacher assistant assigned to each class. Small class sizes, embedded support via counselors, availability of a social worker and a school psychologist, as well as medication management are services offered within the New Horizons program in an effort to build the competencies necessary for the child to move to a less restrictive school environment, or home school.

Overview of the Evaluation Approach

The evaluation utilizes Stufflebeam's Content Input Process Product (CIPP) Evaluation Model checklist (Figure 1) to ensure the thorough, precise development of sustained program improvements (Mertens & Wilson, 2012; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). This specifically outlines contractual agreements, the context of the evaluation, the inputs, and processes of the evaluation (i.e., evaluator activities vs. stakeholder activities). It also provides thorough guidance on establishing the evaluation's impact and effectiveness, as well as its ability to be adopted and sustained (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). This checklist allows for increased

transparency, credibility, utility, and feasibility as discussed further in the evaluation design section.

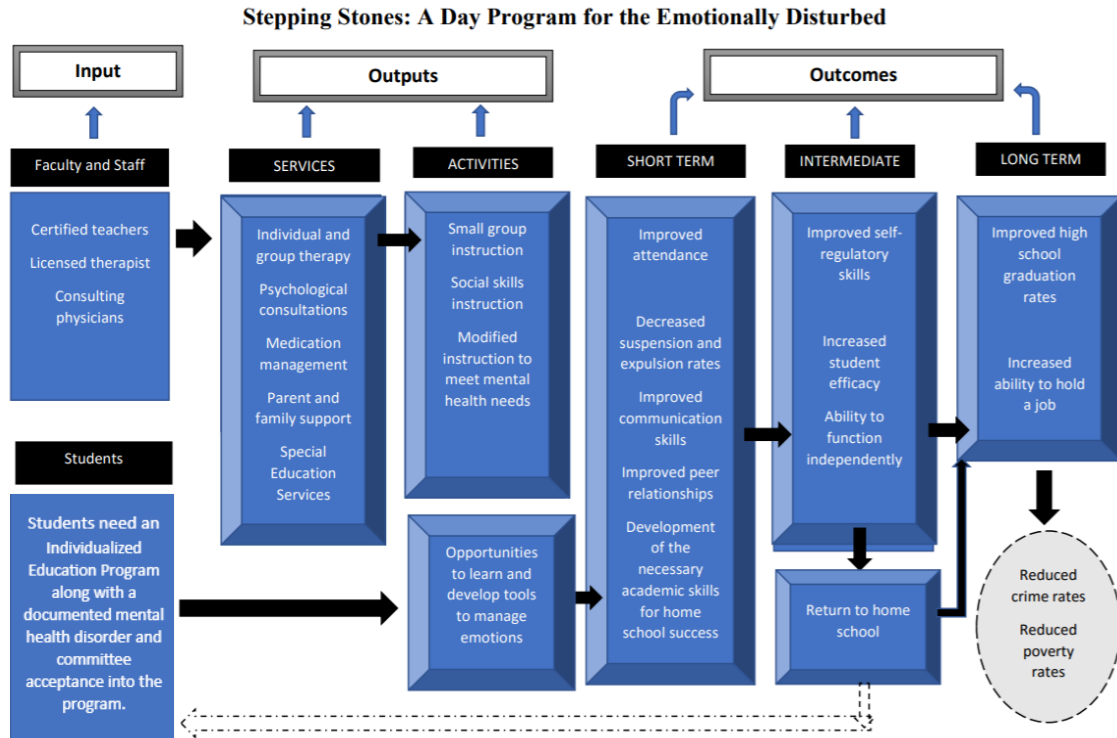


Figure 1. The logic model of the New Horizon’s Day School outlining the program’s inputs, outputs, and outcomes.

Logic model. The model (Figure 1) is designed in a horizontal flow chart fashion incorporating the context of the inputs (e.g., students and staff), through value added services and activities that will create short-term, intermediate and long-term desirable outcomes. The model hosts a series of interdependent components including the inputs, processes, and outcomes.

Inputs. Faculty and staff, certified teachers, licensed therapists, and consulting physicians make up the staff input component. In a separate input box, students are

clearly defined as those with an IEP along with a documented mental health disorder. It also states the need for committee acceptance into the program. The input section was purposefully explicit to accurately depict the intent of the program. It is understood that the scope of stakeholders could exceed more than these two; however, for this program evaluation students and staff as the sole inputs provided a clearer view and ultimate understanding of the program.

Outputs. Moving to the right within the model, faculty and staff are linked only to services, whereas students are not. Students are linked to the activities including the short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes demonstrated via solid black arrows. Within the intermediate outcome column, it is noted that students could exit the program and potentially require the need for re-admittance. A dashed arrow looping back to the student input section depicts this potential occurrence.

Within the output component of the logic model are services and activities. The use of two separate rectangles in the model aims to clarify program offerings. Small group instruction, social skills instruction, and opportunities to learn and develop tools to manage emotions were focused on students and therefore linked together under activities.

Outcomes. The outcomes focus on student benefits and travel from left to right with increasing magnitude. Short-term outcomes include improved attendance, decreased suspension/ expulsion rates, improved communication skills, improved peer relationships and the development of the academic skills necessary for home-school success. This is linked to intermediate outcomes including improved self-regulatory skills, increased student efficacy, and the ability to function independently.

An additional box below the initial intermediate outcome section depicts the possibility of a student returning to their home school. A solid arrow was used to demonstrate this path and a dashed line, open arrow was used to show the potential for the child to loop back into the program should they require re-entry.

Purpose of the evaluation. The purpose of the evaluation aligns with Mertens and Wilson's (2012) Values branch, and the corresponding constructivist paradigm. This approach gains a qualitative understanding of the problem through engagement with the participants (Creswell, 2014; Mertens & Wilson, 2012). Under this paradigm a qualitative approach is necessary to exhaust the root of the research question. To accomplish this, interviews and observation data can be used to gain a thorough understanding of the problem. Constructivists design their research with an aim of building understanding through multiple interactions to create meaning through an evaluation of multiple realities presented on behalf of the participants and their surroundings (Creswell, 2014). Constructivists understand the importance of reflection and spend most of their time dissecting their interactions to determine the root cause of a problem.

This formative evaluation utilized a strictly qualitative approach with the aim of gaining a deep understanding of the perceptions and skills of teachers of students with ED in the most restrictive educational placement. It was intended that through this enhanced level of understanding areas for improvement within the program's social skills offerings could be made. The results were intended for an administrative audience, specifically for the future planning of professional development opportunities to perpetuate the knowledge and subsequent use of evidence based

instructional practices targeted at improving self-regulatory and relationship-building social skills of students with ED.

Focus of the evaluation. The evaluation focused on one process of the CIPP model, specifically the activities involved in delivering social skills instruction. It is understood that the scope of stakeholders could exceed more than teachers; however, for the purpose of this program evaluation their understanding, use, and effectiveness of social skills instruction was the intended purpose.

Evaluation questions. The program evaluation focused solely on the social skills instructional processes of the New Horizons program. To determine the program's quality of social skills instruction the following questions will guide data collection initiatives:

1. What evidence-based social skills instruction is being implemented in the classrooms?
2. Which evidence-based instructional practices are being utilized during social skills lessons?
3. To what degree do teachers believe they are prepared to implement evidence-based social skills instruction in the classroom?
4. What are the perceptions of teachers regarding the effectiveness of the current social skills instructional strategies that are designed to decrease inappropriate classroom behavior?
5. How are teachers supported in the acquisition, delivery, and assessment of social skills for students with ED?

Definition of Terms

Emotional disturbance: According to Knoblouch and Sorenson (1998), IDEA refers to the term emotional disturbance as:

A condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics, displayed over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance:

- An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors
- An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers or teachers
- Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances
- A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression
- A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems. (p. 12)

Least restrictive environment (LRE) refers to the academic setting where students with disabilities are educated “with their peers without disabilities to the maximum extent possible” (Collins, 2003, p. 450). A child’s home school is the district-mandated school based on the student’s place of residence. This is known as the LRE for students with emotional disabilities. Program teachers is a term used for the active New Horizons classroom teachers.

LRE teachers is a term used to describe the classroom and/or special education teachers in the child’s home school.

Evidence-based practices in education refer to scientifically supported educational practices (Odom et al., 2005). These strategies have been deemed effective from multiple, repeated studies. Explicit criteria regarding quality indicators varies across fields of practice. Both professional and governmental organizations have created standards to assess an article's quality. In education the general quality indicators include a match between research questions and methodology, sound methodological features, and the ability to implement recommendations effectively in the classroom (Odom et al., 2005).

Individualized education program (IEP) is a legal document stating the child's disability and the effects their disability has on their academic performance. Within this document, annual goals are established, and student performance is monitored on a consistent basis. For students with behavioral challenges, individual target behaviors are aligned with at least one of their goals or objectives (Harajusola-Webb, Parke Hubbell, & Bedesem, 2012). The IEP lists all necessary accommodations, modifications, and supports deemed necessary for the student to be successful in the academic setting. Once the child is 14 years of age transition planning for life after high school is included in the IEP.

Social skills are a set of competencies that "(1) facilitate initiating and maintaining positive social relationships, (2) contribute to peer acceptance and friendship development, (3) result in satisfactory school adjustment, and (4) allow students to cope with and adapt to the demands of the school environment" (Gresham, Van, & Cook, 2006, p. 364).

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Extensive research has indicated a need for the implementation of evidence-based practices centered on fostering increased awareness and use of specific strategies to overcome oppositional and defiant behaviors (Hutchins, Burke, Hatton, & Bowman-Perrott, 2017). Due to the nature of the educational placements for these students, specific strategies that can be implemented in the self-contained, or most restrictive setting, are critical to immediate and lifelong success (Maggin et al., 2011)

Characteristics of Students with ED

The determination that a child has ED is a subjective process, burdened with the stigma of mental illness and the inconspicuous traits such disorders present (Sullivan, 2009). The lack of consensus governing criteria for ED determination is perpetuated by a vague federal definition of the disability and cultural and economic disparities amongst practitioners and students (Cloth, Evans, Becker, & Paternite, 2014). Due to the contextual nature of this disability, an over-representation of African American and Hispanic males has emerged throughout the nation (Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002; Yeh, Forness, Ho, McCabe, & Hough, 2004).

Students with ED exhibit “cyclical patterns of functional impairment across a range of variables that impact academic, social/communicative and vocational outcomes” (Kaya et al., 2015, p. 120). These characteristics dictate a need for explicit teaching of social skills aimed at improving student success in both the educational,

vocational, and real-world setting. Not only do students with ED require intense instruction in areas where these deficits are seen, students require the opportunity to generalize these foreign skills in different environments, and with different groups of people (Lane, Wehby, & Barton-Artwood, 2005; Wenz-Gross & Upshur, 2012).

Students with ED experience higher dropout rates (Bowman-Perrott, 2009), lower enrollment rates in post-secondary education, and increased risk for incarceration (Karpur Clark et al., 2005). According to the U.S. Department of Education, “44.1% of students with emotional and behavioral disorders spend more than 80% of their day in the general education classroom” (Haydon et al., 2017, p. 154). Aggressive behaviors, portraying as both verbal and physical altercations with peers and authority figures can result in the inability to form positive relationships with peers, teacher, and authority figures (Cumming et al., 2008; Haydon et al., 2017). These behaviors result in the student typically achieving at a level spanning from one to two grade levels below their peers in the elementary grades, to upwards of three grade levels below once in high school (Kaya et al., 2015). Target behaviors for students with ED include, “noncompliance, temper tantrums, and property destruction...negative verbal interactions and class disruptions” (Hutchins et al., 2017, p. 13). In addition to performing below grade level, students with ED have increased difficulty reading (Cumming et al., 2008).

Due to the frequency and magnitude of behaviors, students with ED are most commonly placed in a self-contained setting, allowing for increased academic and behavioral support (Maggin et al., 2011). These classrooms typically have a lower student to teacher ratio, with at least one additional para-professional support, and

increased space to reduce potential peer conflicts (Maggin et al., 2011). Despite greater staffing support, behaviors still interfere with the teacher's ability to provide quality lessons (Haydon et al., 2017). The lack of targeted feedback and fewer opportunities for practice creates an atmosphere where students have the potential to fall further behind their same age peers (Maggin et al., 2011). Locke and Fuchs reported "36% of students with ED graduate from high school compared with 54% of students with other disabilities and 71% of non-disabled students" (as cited in Kaya et al., 2015, p. 121).

Needs of Students with ED

Many students with ED do not receive the necessary skills to be successful in the inclusive education setting, or the real world (Cumming, 2010; Smith & Giles, 2003). Research has indicated that when students with ED receive purposeful social skills training, a "positive effect is seen in employment maintenance, personal relationships, and encounters with law enforcement" (Cumming et al., 2008, p. 20). More specifically, social skills interventions conducted with students with ED yielded a 64% improvement (Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001). Furthermore, according to three meta-analyses assessing student academic performance, decreased disruptive behaviors had an effect size ranging from 0.29 to 0.91, with an average 0.34 degree of correlation (Hattie, 2009).

Over the past decade, much of the social skills research has been focused on students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) or intellectual disabilities (ID). Research on students' overall social emotional health has alluded to the need for improved programming to meet the needs of the whole child (Kaya et al., 2015;

Wenz-Gross & Upshur, 2012). Lacking in the research are repeated studies on the effects of specific, evidenced-based practices proven to positively impact the use and transfer of socially acceptable skills for students with emotional disabilities. An additional concern on the overall deficient body of research centered on teacher fidelity of social skills instruction reveals the need for future research efforts (Gresham, 2015).

Outcomes for Students with ED

Post-secondary education. Students with ED have one of the lowest high school graduation rates of all students (Cooper & Pruitt, 2005; Kaya et al., 2015). The supports that were embedded throughout the schooling of a child with ED, such as one-to-one supports and small class sizes, coupled with difficulties forging interpersonal relationships, set many up for failure at the post-secondary level (Smith & Giles, 2003). Due to increased efforts in the child's transition planning more students with ED are enrolling in higher education programs, however; decreased academic and behavioral supports at the post-secondary level result in dismal graduation rates (Cooper & Pruitt, 2005). Purposeful transition planning done by the student's IEP team, coupled with communication on behalf of the child's high school and college is necessary to help alleviate the effects these hurdles have presented for this student population (Zigmond, 2006).

Employment. The second National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS2) indicated approximately 30% of individuals with ED were employed (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005). Zigmond's (2006) study following 96 students with ED from their time of high school exit through 24 months determined

there was no significant difference in a drop-out or a graduate's ability to hold a job. Those employed after exiting high school held jobs in industries such as food preparation, stocking, and maintenance working approximately 25-30 hours per week. High instability rates perpetuated lack of access to quality healthcare and means to earn wages conducive to living independently (Zigmond, 2006). Poor social skills may be the most prominent factor impacting poor employment outcomes for individuals with ED (Zigmond, 2006), as this is the most prominent characteristic of this population (Bullis & Cheney, 1999).

Justice system. A student with ED is three times more likely to be involved in criminal activity when compared to their non-disabled peers (Vander Stoep et al., 2000). According to Wagner et al. (2005), the NLTS2 study reported an arrest rate of 58% for youth with emotional disabilities. Additionally, a national survey of juvenile correctional systems found that 47.7% of the incarcerated youths with disabilities were identified as emotionally disturbed (Quinn, Rutherford, Leone, Osher, & Poirier, 2005). Further research has indicated if a child's parent is incarcerated, the child has a higher likelihood of developing emotional disabilities (Brookes & Baille, 2011; Haydon et al., 2017). This perpetuates cyclical poverty and racial stigmas due to the overrepresentation of African American and Hispanic males receiving ED services (Harris-Murri, King, & Rostenberg, 2006).

Inhibiting Factors

A meta-analysis of the literature surrounding social skill interventions for students with, or at risk of emotional disorders indicated "more than half of studies identified failed to meet minimum design standards with or without reservations"

(Hutchins et al., 2017, p. 22). With an already limited pool of research supporting social skills instruction specifically for students with ED, passive research design does not allow for results that are reliable and valid. Additional weaknesses found within these methods caused concern for the “fidelity of implementation and experimental control” (Hutchins et al., 2017, p. 22). There has been a growing need for the current research base for social skills instruction for students with disabilities to be evaluated to assess the quality of the research when aligned to current standards (Hutchins et al., 2017; Gable, Tonelson, Sheth, Wilson, & Park, 2012).

An overall lack of support, knowledge, and motivation contribute to inconsistencies in the implementation of evidence-based practices focusing on social skills instruction (Cumming, 2010). Research suggests that “even with adequate organizational support and training, the quality and quantity of curriculum implementation varies widely across classrooms, particularly for school-based interventions” (Wenz-Gross & Upshur, 2012, p. 428). To gain both support and motivation, the recommended strategy needs to be adapted from the research to fit the needs of the local stakeholders. This coupled with the focus on instilling a sense of enthusiasm can help improve teacher fidelity (McCall, 2009).

Evidence-Based Social Skill Instruction

Students with ED require explicit instruction, as well as opportunities for practice and in some instances, teach the skills necessary to be accepted by their peers, authority figures, and community members (Cumming, 2010). Most research aimed at addressing social skills was originally for students with ASD or ID. Among these populations of students, the need for explicit instruction of strategies aimed at

responding appropriately and coping in a variety of social settings impacts many students with disabilities. A growing evidence base for students with ED has provided evidence-based instructional strategies to address social skills (Harjusola-Webb et al., 2012). The following strategies have been determined to be effective for this specific population of students: integrating technology, individualized curriculum sequence model, peer-mediated intervention, and social narratives.

Integrated technology. Embedding the use of technology throughout the instructional process has resulted in “improved academic achievement, engagement, motivation, and study skills for students with and without disabilities” (Boon, Fore, Blankenship, & Chalk, 2007, p. 41). Video self-monitoring is one means of incorporating technology into the social skills instruction of students with ED. Under this strategy, students are recorded exhibiting the stated behavior. This exemplar model is then edited for distractions ensuring the final product is succinct and targeted specifically at addressing the needed skill (Cumming, 2010). This strategy is most effective when designed to help the student transfer adaptive behaviors from one setting to another (Dorwick, 1999).

Alternatively, video modeling, or the practice of recording other individuals exhibiting exemplar skills, can also have a positive impact on the student’s ability to understand differing perspectives and appropriate social language (Cumming, 2010). This user-friendly platform allows for easy recording and editing opportunities on behalf of either the teacher or the student (Haydon et al., 2017). It also gives the student the ability to repeatedly watch the appropriate replacement behavior, furthering reinforcement efforts across settings and increasing student independence.

Student generated multimedia presentations can also help with the development and transfer of desired skills through increased “motivation, retention, and generalization” (Cumming, 2010, p. 244). This strategy allows students to work in a small group to design a presentation, which they will record in the format of a movie. This movie is then presented to other students, allowing opportunities for the class to practice and debrief (Cumming, 2010). Using portable devices, such as iPads, laptops, or cell phones to record and store these movies can be beneficial due to the ease of access and frequency of use (Haydon et al., 2017). Furthermore, Morgan et al. (2016) found that an online lesson format delivering social skills instruction in an interactive computer-based environment had greater effects on the student’s ability to identify problems in social environments.

Individualized curriculum sequence (ICS) model. The ICS model is another evidenced-based practice that allows for a greater transfer of newly acquired skills given the design for multiple opportunities for learners to respond to natural cues and consequences (Smith & Giles, 2003). The necessary skill being taught is purposefully embedded throughout natural settings using different materials, resources, and reinforcers (Smith & Giles, 2003). The setting in which the skill is taught must be reflective of a school environment or a setting naturally conducive to the teaching of social skills (Westling & Fox, 2000). Throughout these settings, behavior checks are scheduled to observe the student successfully exhibiting the learned skill. A record of the exhibited behavior is kept via a schedule or matrix in which all teachers who interact with the student are trained on completing. These check-ins are particularly critical in helping the student become more aware of their

actions, as well as beneficial in reinforcing the desired behavior (Smith & Giles, 2003).

Although the ICS model was created to meet the needs of students with intellectual disabilities, it has “been applied to a broad range of students with a variety of disabilities” (Smith & Giles, 2003, p. 32). This strategy works best when implemented in the general education setting within a content related activity. When addressing social skills deficits, it is necessary to have role models who exhibit the appropriate target behavior (Westling & Fox, 2000).

Peer Mediated Intervention (PMI). This evidence-based practice focuses on the student’s ability to successfully adapt the role of instructor to help influence their peers’ ability to learn and implement new social strategies (Blake, Wang, Cartledge, & Gardner, 2000; Harjusola-Webb et al., 2012). Under this strategy students learn a specific skill selected by the teacher to target an area of need and then teach this skill to identified students. Incorporating a role-model into the instruction of skills that are sometimes difficult for students with emotional disabilities to comprehend helps to improve the “quality and quantity of social behaviors in natural settings” (Harjusola-Webb et al., 2012, p. 30). Similarities in social status and age also allow for inherent relationships and zones of influence spanning outside of the typical student-teacher relationship (Kaya et al., 2015).

Peer proximity, peer prompting and reinforcement, and peer initiation are the three components of PMI (Harjusola-Webb et al., 2012; Kaya et al., 2015). Peer proximity allows opportunities for the targeted student to learn through observation of the peer role model. From there the role model engages the student via verbal

prompting, allowing for an opportunity to practice the skill in the student's natural environment (Harjusola-Webb et al., 2012). Reinforcing of the appropriate behavior is done by the role model student, and further initiation for engagement in activities that reinforce the skill helps to improve the student's ability to transfer the stated strategy or skill.

Sutherland and Snyder (2007) investigated the effectiveness of PMI in a middle school self-contained setting. Students were trained as role models, then purposefully grouped to address specific social skills. The results indicated a decrease in disruptive behaviors as well as an increase in active response and reading skills (Kaya et al., 2015). It is noted, however, that older students may not be as likely to respond favorably due to complicated peer--teacher relationships, close peer proximity, and social structures inherent in the high school setting (Kaya et al., 2015).

Social narratives. Using stories to address appropriate social skill instruction is one research-supported strategy that can be implemented with relative ease on behalf of the classroom teacher (Harjusola-Webb et al., 2012). The use of social stories has one of the highest effect sizes ($d = 3.94$) on students' social skills (Gresham, 2015), with the greatest effects seen in students between the ages of 5 and 9 (Delano & Stone, 2008). Social narratives are designed to be specific to the student's individual needs and should read similar to a story, following a logical sequence of events. They can be written in a format conducive to readers and non-readers alike with the use of visuals, symbols, and teacher read-alouds (Delano & Stone, 2008). The narratives must be precise, and focus on the operational definition

of the problem behavior (Leaf, Mitchell, & Townley-Cochran, 2016). Once the problem is operationalized, it is beneficial to explicitly include step-by-step directions on what is required to successfully demonstrate this behavior (Harjusola-Webb et al., 2012; Leaf et al., 2016). Incorporating visuals, including photographs of the child can also help to personalize and reinforce the necessary skill (Harjusola-Webb et al., 2012).

When developing a social story, it is necessary to know the child's age, interests, and reading and writing skills. Once this is established collecting information pertaining to the disruptive behavior, such as the context in which it is occurring is required (White, Caniglia, McLaughlin, & Bianco, 2018). Gathering this information allows for the development of a functional hypothesis to help the teacher determine a potential behavior support plan (Delano & Stone, 2008). Gray (2000) developed a systematic approach to write a social story; however, Delano and Stone (2008) altered this process for students with ED by solely focusing on changing the student's behavior. Once the student is introduced to the story it is critical the student thoroughly understands every component being addressed, including the replacement behavior (White et al., 2018). After it is apparent the student understands the story and its purpose, a schedule indicating when the story will be reviewed and a system to collect data for progress monitoring purposes must be established (Gray, 2000). This approach can be easily transferred to the parent for further reinforcement at home.

Evidence-Based Instructional Practices

Activating prior knowledge. Before introducing a topic to students, it is important to captivate the student learning process by creating a purpose for learning.

Drawing parallels between student's existing knowledge and that of the lesson's objective is necessary to achieve this purpose (Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2009). When a student's mind is activated through the discussion of past experiences and existing knowledge their ability to store new information improves providing deeper, more meaningful connections with the material (Kostons & Van der Werf, 2015). This instructional strategy could present as a simple discussion bridging individual student interests, knowledge, or lived experiences to the lesson objective. According to Hattie (2009) when a teacher embeds these activities into their instruction a .60 effect size is seen on student learning, making it a highly effective instructional strategy.

Direct instruction. For explicit direct instruction to occur the teacher must establish the lesson objectives, design, delivery, and assessment to indicate student learning (Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2009). Lesson objectives are clearly stated, and new concepts are explicitly taught by the teacher. This form of instruction yields a .59 effect size, making it a highly effective instructional strategy that allows opportunities for the teacher to explain, model, and demonstrate then relinquish more responsibility onto the students through guided practice and independent practice (Hattie, 2009). Guided practice allows for teacher feedback and clarification during student activities providing an opportunity for students to test out their newly formed knowledge. Independent practice presents an opportunity for students to continue practicing the skill through homework, individual, or small group work (Hattie, 2009). Frequent checks for understanding throughout this model is necessary for informed teaching practices via ongoing formative assessment of student understanding (Hollingsworth & Ybarra, 2009). Providing closure in lessons is also critical component of direct

instruction (Stockard, Wood, Coughlin, & Khoury, 2018). This allows for the synthesis of the learning that has taken place, reviewing the key components of the lesson, and encouraging student application of the new skill.

Teachers of Students with ED

Some research has indicated teachers of students with ED are not implementing evidence-based social skills instruction with fidelity (Cumming, 2010; Hutchins et al., 2017; McCall, 2009). Although a growing body of research outlines specific evidence-based practices claiming to have success for students with ED, one detrimental aspect contributing to the lack of success of these students is the disconnect between research and practice. Kaya et al. (2015) study on the effect of PMI on the development and use of appropriate behavioral responses indicated that although the instructional strategies were rooted in “developmental psychology and supported by research, they are infrequently implemented” (p. 122). This suggests that students with ED are not receiving evidence-based instruction due to poor teacher preparation and lack of knowledge on behalf of both special educators and general educators working with this specific population (Gable et al., 2012). Because of this and other factors such as paperwork, special education teachers have the highest attrition rates of all educators, with one out of three leaving the field within three years (Cancio, Albrecht, & John, 2013). Of these educators, those teaching students with ED are most likely to exit the field (Billinglsey, 2004). To help mitigate these statistics, administrative support through encouragement and information sharing has been proven to be especially beneficial for teachers of students with ED (Cancio et al., 2013).

Overall lack of support, knowledge and motivation contribute to inconsistency in implementation of evidence-based practices focusing on social skills instruction (Cumming, 2010). However, research suggests that “even with adequate organizational support and training, the quality and quantity of curriculum implementation varies widely across classrooms, particularly for school-based interventions” (Wenz-Gross & Upshur, 2012, p. 428). To gain both support and motivation, the recommended strategy needs to be adapted from the research to fit the needs of the local stakeholders. This coupled with the focus on instilling a sense of enthusiasm can help improve teacher fidelity (McCall, 2009).

Summary

The literature provides a variety of strategies focused on systemic introduction, feedback, and repeated practice of targeted behavioral modification strategies. Although these evidence-based practices have been successful in theory, further research on the fidelity of implementation of such strategies is required to fully understand the ever-present need for students with emotional disabilities and their ability to overcome daily social-emotional challenges. Targeted administrator observation and professional development opportunities could potentially mitigate misconceptions, lagging motivation, and the ultimate fidelity of implementation of such strategies.

In addition to the lack of teacher implementation of evidence-based social skills instruction, the research itself is inconclusive. A meta-analysis of the literature surrounding social skill interventions for students with, or at risk of emotional behavioral disorders indicated “more than half of studies identified failed to meet

minimum design standards with or without reservations” (Hutchins et al., 2017, p. 22). With an already limited pool of research supporting social skills instruction specifically for students with ED, passive research design does not allow for results that are reliable and valid. Additional weaknesses found within these methods caused concern for the “fidelity of implementation and experimental control” (Hutchins et al., 2017, p. 22). There has been a growing need for the current research base for social skills instruction for students with disabilities to be evaluated to assess the quality of the research when aligned to current standards (Hutchins et al., 2017).

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

A qualitative research approach was used to gain an in-depth understanding of the New Horizon's current social skills instruction as well as teachers' perceptions of implementing evidence-based practices in their classroom. This formative program evaluation utilized a checklist built upon Stufflebeam's Content Input Process Product (CIPP) Evaluation Model to ensure the thorough, precise development of sustained program improvements (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). This checklist, located in Appendix A, specifically outlined contractual agreements, the context of the evaluation, as well as the inputs and processes of the evaluation (i.e., evaluator activities vs. stakeholder activities). It also provided thorough guidance on establishing the evaluation's impact and effectiveness, as well as its ability to be adopted and sustained (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007). This checklist allowed for increased transparency, credibility, utility, and feasibility as discussed further in the evaluation design section. Additionally, participant consent forms (Appendix B) outlined the terms of the teacher's involvement in the evaluation.

The use of selected research techniques provided insight and potential opportunities for further inquiry of what constitutes effective social skills instructions for students with ED, and what teachers require to effectively plan, prepare, and deliver quality instruction informed by research. Teacher interviews and classroom

observations were used to address what students need to successfully learn and exhibit appropriate social responses.

Participants

Participants for this evaluation were voluntary and included 4 of the 5 classroom teachers at New Horizons. Teachers are assigned to multiple grades with one teacher in 1st-3rd grade, one for 4th and 5th grade, one for 6th-8th grade, and two for 9th-12th grade. All teachers asked to participate held New York state teacher certification in Special Education Grades 1-6, or Grades 7-12 depending on their teacher assignment. The collection of teacher demographics pertaining to their education, certification level, and years of experience during teacher interviews allowed for a better understanding of their qualifications.

Data Sources

Focusing solely on the perceptions of the teacher participants, data collection relied on in-depth interactions with the individuals being studied. This humanistic focus was conveyed through qualitative data collection intended to enhance meaning through inquiry (Creswell, 2014). Multiple forms of data were used to improve the validity of the research. All data were collected in the participants' natural setting at the New Horizons Day School reinforcing the qualitative nature of the study (Creswell, 2014).

The use of standard recording forms for all interviews and observations were used to improve the qualitative reliability of the research (Creswell, 2014). All attempts to ensure that recorded information was informative, professional and free of bias were made. To help improve the data's accuracy, member checking was used to

ensure the recorded information conveyed the participant's intentions (Craig, 2009). A thorough read-back of the interviewee's responses upon completion of the interview allowed for any misconceptions or recording errors to be addressed. Additionally, field notes captured during the interviews helped ensure important, accurate information was captured.

Teacher interviews. Semi-structured interviews provided a qualitative understanding of the teachers' perception of effective social skills strategies and what is necessary to implement those strategies. Individual face-to-face interviews were conducted with 4 of the 5 program teachers. These took place in each teacher's classroom at a mutually beneficial time for the evaluator and the teacher. For the purpose of the interview, each participant was assigned a number to maintain anonymity. To improve standardization, interview recording sheets (Appendix C) were equipped with the date, the research question being addressed, and the pre-determined questions (Creswell, 2014). Time was allocated between questions for note-taking in the provided spaces on the recording form. To enhance credibility, all interview questions were pilot tested with three special education teachers working in a separate elementary school in upstate New York. Results indicated the questions adequately addressed what they were intended to. Additionally, the individuals participating in the pilot interviews were engaged and thoroughly answered each question, with the interview durations lasting between 15 and 22 minutes.

Open-ended interview questions were included in the interview to allow for a deeper understanding of the level of teacher perceived preparedness in implementing social skills instruction. The questions listed below focused on the teacher's thoughts

on their students' needs, how they could ideally meet those needs, and what they are currently implementing in the classroom.

1. What is needed to help your students thrive in social settings?
2. What does an ideal social skills lesson look like?
3. What resources are necessary to achieve meaningful social skills instruction in the classroom?
4. How do you currently incorporate social skills instruction into the student's day?
5. Have you implemented peer modeling or video-self-monitoring for social skills instruction? If so, what have been your successes and challenges associated with peer modeling and/ or video-self-monitoring?
6. What professional development opportunities have you attended aimed at improving your knowledge of social skills instructional strategies?
7. How have professional development opportunities supported your knowledge of effective social skills instructional strategies?
8. What training or resources have you received on assessing the social skills of students with ED?

Classroom observations. To gain a better understanding of the quality and means of delivery of social skills instruction evaluator immersion into the teacher's natural setting was necessary. To gain this perspective, classroom observations were conducted twice in each of the four classes during a designated time in which social skills instruction was taking place. The duration of each observation was forty minutes in order to gain a comprehensive view of the classroom dynamics,

instructional strategies and presence or absence of evidence-based social skills instruction. The use of the standard recording procedures for all observations improved the qualitative reliability of the research (Creswell, 2014). Descriptive and reflective notes were kept separate to better qualify observable traits from personal impressions (Creswell, 2014). The classroom observation outline found in Appendix D was used to facilitate the recording of consistent measures across each of the four classrooms. All recorded information was informative, professional, and based on observable terms. To help improve the data's accuracy a journal was used to check for evaluator biases, helping to ensure the recorded information conveyed the participant's intentions (Craig, 2009). As an outside evaluator, this information was critical for a thorough depiction of the New Horizons classroom demographics, resources, routines and procedures as well as teacher and student expectations.

Data Analysis

Teacher interview data were transcribed electronically using MS Word for ease of organization. Qualitative analysis measures to improve the reliability and validity of the research were integrated throughout the study. To aide in the systematic evaluation of the multiple data sets, a visual representation of the sources, the research questions being addressed, and the interrelated themes were used to help establish patterns via open, selective and axial coding techniques. If the three sources did not reveal a similar pattern, it would have been necessary to reassess the data sources and instruments, as well as the research questions being addressed (Craig, 2009).

Teacher interviews. Open coding, selective coding, and axial coding were three techniques used to identify common themes and patterns found throughout the interview data (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Teacher responses were chunked by either phrases or concepts and assigned a label. Through a comparison of these labels or topics, a core category was assigned (Craig, 2009). Once a core category was established, axial coding provided meaningful connections among the established themes. To help aide in the organization of these patterns, commonalities were color-coded using highlighters. A chart was used to organize the type of codes and their corresponding category, as well as a justification from the field notes. Careful consideration and attention to the coding process and the allocation of codes based on their determined definitions with an effort to improve reliability was made (Craig, 2009; Creswell, 2014). Analysis of the transcriptions provided a greater understanding of the teachers' knowledge of, and assumptions pertaining to social skills instruction.

Table 1

Research Matrix

| Evaluation Question | Data Source | Analysis Method |
|--|-----------------------|---|
| What evidence is there that social skills instruction is being implemented in classrooms as intended by the program design? | Classroom Observation | Qualitative analysis through open, selective, and axial coding |
| How are evidence- base instructional practices being utilized during social skills lessons? | Classroom observation | Qualitative analysis through open, selective, and axial coding |
| To what degree do teachers believe they are prepared to implement evidence based social skills instruction in the classroom? | Teacher Interviews | Data were electronically transcribed and coded to determine common themes. Member checking was used to determine accuracy of responses. |
| What are the perceptions of teachers regarding the effectiveness of the current social skills instructional strategies that are designed to decrease inappropriate classroom behavior? | Teacher interviews | Data were electronically transcribed and coded to determine common themes. Member checking was used to determine accuracy of responses. |
| How are teachers supported in the acquisition, delivery, and assessment of social skills for students with ED? | Teacher interviews | Data were electronically transcribed and coded to determine common themes. Member checking was used to determine accuracy |

Note. ED = A condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics: An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors. An inability to build and maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers. Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal conditions. A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression (IDEA, 2004).

Classroom observations. To gain an understanding of the quality of instruction and to note the dynamics present within the classroom, all fieldnotes were coded using the same axial, open and selective coding techniques used in the analysis of teacher interview data. This form of qualitative analysis allowed for the identification of common themes that ultimately informed the necessary recommendations for improvement of the program's social skills offerings.

Delimitations, Limitations, Assumptions

Delimitations. A delimitation of the study was the sampling of New Horizon's currently employed teachers as the sole participants. Additional stakeholders such as parents, students and teaching assistants could have provided further insight into the effectiveness of social skills instruction; however, for this evaluation, the teachers' perspectives were the sole source of examination in order to provide pertinent recommendations for immediate implementation, as well as possible areas for future evaluation. This study was further limited in scope by the choice of evaluation questions that focus on only one aspect of program delivery. Although this study was concerned with the needs of a small and specific context which will impede the generalization of findings across settings, the uniqueness of the sample creates the potential for rich, desirable data for those working with the ED population in a similar setting.

Limitations. The strictly voluntary nature of this study was a potential limitation as participation could have altered over the course of the study. Additionally, the sample size of the participants only presents the perceptions and skills of a small group of educators. Other potential limitations such as changes in

staff and leadership could have made an impact on the evaluation's utility and design (Yarbrough, Shulha, Hopson, & Caruthers, 2011). A teacher choosing to no longer participate or vacate their position within the program before data collection ceased would have required the existing data collected on behalf of that individual to be omitted from the study. This study was also limited by time as this formative evaluation generated data that represented a snapshot of the comprehensive program.

Assumptions. Due to the highly contextual nature of the study, it was assumed the New Horizon's teachers had adequate training and knowledge of social skills instruction. It was also assumed students have been properly placed in the program due to their need for targeted social skills instruction to help them find success in the least restrictive environment. It was assumed that during classroom observations and teacher interviews, participants responded in a truthful and accurate manner that reflected their actual practices. There was an overlying assumption that programs that serve marginalized populations are important to stakeholders in educational organizations and the results of program evaluations will be useful to decision-makers. Lastly, it was assumed teachers that volunteered to participate in this study were doing so to provide a greater understanding of their social skills instructional practices and had a sincere interest in improving the social skills of their current and future students.

Positionality

As the sole evaluator, my experience as an educator in a variety of Pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade academic settings allowed for greater relatability. My experience with students with emotional disabilities in an urban district provided

further evaluator credibility and contextual viability (Yarbrough et al., 2011). This experience could have presented evaluator biases during classroom observations and teacher interviews. To account for this, an evaluator journal was used to record any internal thoughts, judgments, and assumptions encountered during the data collection and analysis phases of the study.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure a quality evaluation, Yarbrough et al. (2011) program evaluation standards were used to ensure the utility, feasibility, propriety, and accuracy of the evaluation.

Utility. Under the utility standards, a timeline for communication and dissemination of findings was defined to meet the needs of the stakeholders. This program evaluation was conducted to determine the perceived effectiveness of the current social skills instruction at New Horizons. These findings informed stakeholders as to the program's need for change and areas of need regarding teacher preparedness, teacher perceptions, and instructional practices. Stakeholders may use this evaluation as a vehicle for elevating the program's potential (Mertens & Wilson, 2012).

Feasibility. Adhering to Mertens and Wilson's (2012) feasibility standards, the evaluation was practical, cost-effective, and realistic. There were a variety of data sources available to evaluate teacher's perceptions of their knowledge and implementation of evidence-based social skills instruction, as well as their observable effectiveness during these instructional times. Teacher interviews provided rich data

on the level of teacher knowledge in this domain as well as an understanding of the needs of their students.

Propriety. The transparency of my positionality as the evaluator as well as other limitations and delimitations were presented in the report. A formal contract outlining the purpose of the evaluation, the means of achieving this purpose and the proposed timeline was made available upon initial agreement of the evaluation's implementation.

Accuracy. The evaluation ascribed to the constructivist paradigm and the corresponding values branch (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). Information from the evaluation was useful to adequately inform stakeholders on the program's merit in delivering evidence-based practices in social skills instruction. Although the qualitative data were not externally vetted, consistency provided via scripted interview protocols ensured participants were asked the same questions (Yarbrough et al., 2011).

Because the evaluation included human subjects, the proper ethical guidelines established by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) were followed. All intents and purposes of the evaluation were made with the utmost transparency and respect for all stakeholders. Only the measures indicated in the initial request were used to collect data. Recommendations were made based on the evaluation's data, with the removal of any biases and/or conflicting interests.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to develop an understanding of how teachers of students with ED in a separate day-school environment implement social skills instruction. Additionally, this study gained the teacher's perspective on what they feel is necessary for their students to be successful in social settings, as well as the level of preparedness they feel implementing and assessing social skills instruction. All teacher interviews and observations were conducted in November 2018 following the terms outlined in the previous chapter. To maintain the empirical nature of the qualitative data, all recorded data were based on observable terms. Any anecdotal accounts relating to classroom observations included in this chapter were made to enhance the discussion of common themes.

Teacher Interviews

Classroom teacher interviews were conducted with 4 of the 5 program teachers. Due to the voluntary nature of the study, the teacher of Grades 11 and 12 opted not to be included in the research. One-on-one interviews with the other four teachers were conducted in their respective classrooms before school, a time chosen to be most conducive for the participants. Verbatim teacher interview responses were transcribed into MS word to better assist the determination of common themes. These transcripts were analyzed individually and collectively through the use of

corresponding open, axial and selective coding techniques (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). Through open coding techniques important words and phrases were highlighted from each set of responses. These findings were then compared to the collective data resulting in the identification of four common themes: teachers feel unprepared to implement and assess social skills due to a lack of knowledge and resources; teachers are not receiving targeted professional education that enhances their ability to implement effective social skills lesson; teachers are utilizing some evidence based instructional strategies during social skills lessons; and teachers do not have access to the necessary resources to implement and assess social skills for their students with ED. An overview of the participants demographics related to their teaching experience, level of education and career background is listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Teacher Demographics

| Teacher | Years Teaching | Grades Taught | Education Completed | Teacher Preparation | Career Switcher |
|---------|----------------|---------------|---------------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| A | 30 | 9th-10th | Masters | Traditional | No |
| B | 3 | 1st-3rd | Masters | Traditional | Yes |
| C | 2 | 7th-8th | Bachelors | Non-Traditional | Yes |
| D | 1.5 | 5th-6th | Masters | Traditional | No |

Classroom Observations

Two 40-minute observations were conducted in each of the four classrooms to gain a better understanding of teacher practices when delivering social skills instruction. The information from the observations was analyzed and coded to determine central themes. Classroom observation data were used to determine if social skills instruction was being implemented as intended by the program design.

Due to the nature of this highly specialized program, it is intended students are receiving targeted instruction in both academic and non-academic areas of need. Due to lacking social skills, students with ED require explicit instruction and feedback on strategies that promote appropriateness in social settings. Classroom observations were focused on determining whether evidence-based practices such as peer-mediated intervention, video modeling, the ICS Model, student generated multimedia presentations, and social narratives were being implemented during social skills lessons. To provide greater insight into the quality of instruction, observations were also focused on determining which evidence-based instructional strategies such as explicit instruction, opportunities for practice, assessment, and feedback were used during the delivery of social skills lessons.

Evaluation Question 1. What evidence is there that social skills instruction is being implemented in classrooms as intended by the program design?

Two observations in each of the four classrooms allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the social skills instruction taking place at New Horizons. During each of the observations data were recorded on classroom observation forms and electronically transcribed into Microsoft Word following the observation. Each observation was analyzed using open coding techniques highlighting important findings via words or phrases related to evidence-based social skills strategies such as peer-mediated intervention, video modeling, student generated multimedia presentations and social narratives. Axial coding was then used to compare these findings and determine commonalities amongst the observations. All eight lessons were led by the classroom teacher and focused on topics ranging from managing

emotions, following social norms in a school setting, taking turns, appropriate school greetings, accepting differences, and the concept of winning and losing in a game. Most lessons appeared to focus on a demonstrated area of need relative to that classroom.

Classroom observations. Each participant shared a commonality in that they were all certified special educators, but the paths they took to obtain their certification and the amount of time they had invested in the field varied. This led to nominal differences in their stance on social skills instruction and the role of the teacher in delivering this instruction. The participants background also created noticeable differences in their observed social skills instructional delivery. Teacher A, the most seasoned participant had a greater sense of ownership in her instruction. In her interview responses she did not indicate a need for administrative intervention, or a prescribed curriculum, although she agreed on the need for more resources to help students with ED obtain the skills they need to be successful. This translated to a greater sense of control of the social skills lessons observed in her classroom. Teacher D, having worked in the field for only 1.5 years presented as though none of her social skills instruction was adequate because there was little guidance from administration, forcing her to create her own lessons. During one of her observations taking place during the designated social skills block, an explicit social skill was neither taught nor referenced. This omittance was unrelated to any observed extenuating circumstances present in the classroom. Her sense of inadequacy via interview responses translated to the classroom due to a lack of confidence and knowledge.

The most effective lessons were conducted in the 7th-8th and 9th-10th grade classrooms where the lessons' objectives were directly related to a matter that was pertinent and timely to the students. One observation in the 9th-10th grade classroom focused on how to eat breakfast appropriately due to rude behavior during the previous day's lunch period. Taking place first thing in the morning, students were given the school provided breakfast and asked to join as a class at a small table. Students' prior knowledge of the previous day's events during lunch was addressed. The students were probed with questions such as, "How do you think things would have gone differently if you were using your food for its intended purpose?" and "What would you all have rather done with your time instead of serving detention?" The teacher then went on to model the appropriate use of utensils, proper chewing techniques and outlined appropriate topics of conversation when in a school lunch setting. Students were redirected via verbal commands by both the teacher and teaching assistants when they engaged in inappropriate topics of conversation or handled food in inappropriate ways.

The setting allowed for students to come and go from the table at their leisure, with little redirection from staff. Most students used frequent cursing to communicate their points; however, the apparent strong relationships between students and staff allowed for a rather jovial atmosphere. Students in this instance were given an opportunity for independent practice and did receive direct, immediate feedback by either the teacher or teaching assistants. No formal assessment concluded this lesson, yet the teacher had a strong pulse on which students would be successful in the school lunchroom, and which ones may need further instruction and practice, as

demonstrated by teacher proximity and targeted student feedback. Overall, students seemed to be more invested in the lesson when they played an active role in at least one component of the presentation of the necessary skill.

During the first observation in the 5th-6th grade classroom, students were not explicitly taught a social skill. The time observed was spent conducting a morning meeting where students unpacked their belongings, finished homework, and were given an overview of their day. The following observation conducted in the same classroom, during the same time of day, was focused on explicitly teaching how to respond to authority. Small group instruction and verbal lists of appropriate versus inappropriate terms to use were shared. Students were allowed to call out profanities and common derogatory terms increasing their engagement in the lesson. One student stated, “You shouldn’t call the cops ‘pigs,’ but we do it anyway.” The teacher then called on other students who knew of more appropriate titles and made a list of student responses including police officer, lieutenant, and sheriff. The teacher then discussed the gravity of calling a police officer a derogatory name, outlining consequences including being detained. An informal verbal assessment where students were asked to recall why they should use socially acceptable greetings for authority figures was conducted as a lesson closure. The majority of students were engaged in peer conversations the duration of this lesson which hindered student participation, yet no disciplinary or redirection attempts were made by staff. When teachers dominated the lessons with verbal instruction, students seemed to be more likely to engage in off-task behavior.

The use of the ICS Model. In four of the eight classroom observations the teacher embedded opportunities through the ICS Model to revisit the learned skill in other content areas throughout the day. A lesson conducted in the 1st-3rd grade classroom focused on respectfully taking turns in a game. The teacher began the lesson by modeling the necessary skills such as waiting without interrupting, sharing dice, even congratulating a peer if they advanced in the game. The students were closely monitored when it was their turn to play the game and received verbal feedback via praise and redirection. Passive student learning through strict teacher discourse was not as effective as when students were provided props or manipulatives to aide in their learning, especially with the younger students. Phrases such as, “How would you feel if someone took your turn” and “It’s important to let your friends know you’re happy for them when they win” were used throughout the lesson. Students were told they were going to be given opportunities to play different turn-taking games in Math and Recess later in the day. Students were excited to continue to practice this skill, with one stating, “Can’t we just keep doing our social skills now?” Similar small group instruction in which the skill was explicitly taught was present in five out of eight observations with the teacher modeling the desired response, allowing opportunities for guided practice following this modeling. Classroom teaching assistants also had an active role in the lesson, modeling appropriate responses, redirecting off-task behavior, and praising desirable actions. Classes that utilized paraprofessional support while implementing a variety of evidence-based instructional strategies, had increased student engagement in the lesson.

Student worksheets. Teachers C and D incorporated an independent scenario-based worksheet for students to complete at their desk. In Classroom C, the lesson objective “students will be able to identify appropriate responses to negative emotions” was discussed as a group. Teacher C activated prior knowledge by engaging in self-reflection on a time she had an outburst with her friend due to bottled up emotions. She called upon the other staff in the room to share personal experiences, allowing for a dialogue that captivated students’ attention and ultimate involvement in the lesson. Four of the 5 students were quick to describe their experiences, mostly through interjection of statements that resonated with them. The independent worksheet followed as a formative assessment of their knowledge.

Absence of technology. Interactive technology, including the use of computers, iPads, video clips, PowerPoint presentations, or interactive whiteboard activities, was not utilized during most of the observed lessons. In only one of the eight observations were laptops made available for students to journal their thoughts. In one other observation, a smart board was used to host morning meeting, yet no formal videos, presentations or activities via electronic means were utilized. Relying solely on verbal teacher presentations seemed to have a negative impact on student attention spans in the 4th-5th grade classroom as disruptive behaviors including a verbal and physical altercation between two students emerged approximately 15 minutes into the lesson. Table 3 outlines the additional observed methods of social skills instruction.

Table 3

Main Theme, Sub-themes, and Frequencies for Delivery of Social Skills Lessons

| Main Theme | Sub Theme | Frequency |
|---|----------------------------------|-----------|
| Means of social skills instructional delivery | ICS Model | 4 |
| | Interactive games | 2 |
| | Explicit small group instruction | 6 |
| | Guided worksheets | 3 |

Open, axial and selective coding was used to derive meaning from the data resulting in a common theme: teachers do not have the necessary skills and resources to assess and implement evidence-based social skills instruction. This negates the intentions of the New Horizons program and their claim to provide the necessary services for their students with ED. A synthesis of the data that led to the development of this theme is depicted in Figure 2.

| | Open Codes | Axial Codes | Selective Code |
|---------------------|--|--|--|
| Observations | Unstructured activities | Teachers rely on informal instruction designated by the needs of the students at that time | Teachers do not have the necessary skills and resources to implement and assess evidence-based social skills instruction |
| | Formal lesson elements omitted | | |
| | No formal assessment of taught skill | | |
| Interview Responses | Reliance on clinicians for social skill instruction | Teachers do not feel prepared to teach or assess social skills | |
| | Limited to no knowledge of evidence-based social skills strategies | | |
| | Limited access to technology | | |

Figure 2. Analysis of classroom observations and teacher interview responses related to current social skills instruction in the classroom.

Evaluation question 2: Which evidence-based instructional practices are being utilized during social skills lessons?

To better understand the quality of instructional delivery in social skills lessons, classroom observations in which careful attention to the means of instruction were conducted in each of the participating classrooms. Evidence-based instructional strategies such as activating prior knowledge, direct instruction of stated lesson objectives, guided practice, frequent checks for understanding, independent practice of the learned skill and lesson closure were included on the classroom observation form to determine the presence or absences of quality instructional practices.

Classroom observations. Observations focusing on the environment of each classroom, including the room features and classroom management techniques, contributed to a deeper understanding of the New Horizon's program design and each teacher's personal interests. Each of the four classrooms observed presented as inviting atmospheres equipped with individual desks, tables for group work, desks for teachers and/ or teaching assistants and a method for projecting information onto a screen. Classroom B and C had smartboards, although it was stated Classroom B's did not work. Chalk boards were also present in each of the classrooms and the students had access to a central computer lab, with only the teacher's computer being present in the classroom.

Classroom management. Contributing to an overall positive, student-centered environment, classrooms were equipped with flexible seating options, motivational posters, and bulletin boards highlighting student work. The 1st-3rd grade classroom consisted of brightly colored bean bags and colorful rugs in a circular formation

inviting class discussions and student collaboration. This is where most of the day’s instruction took place for these young students. In the 7th-8th and 9th-10th grade classrooms individual desks in rows facing a chalkboard presented as a more traditional classroom environment. A police officer was present during three of the four observations in these rooms, yet it was apparent the classroom teachers tried to make the rooms feel uplifting. Inspirational quotes from athletes, actors, and other famous individuals laced the walls of Classroom C. There was an inherent sense of pride in student work as it was displayed on a large bulletin board for all to see. These highlights and additional components that contributed to the environment of the classrooms can be seen in Table 4.

Table 4

Main Theme, Sub-themes, and Frequencies for Classroom Atmosphere Characteristics

| Main Theme | Sub Theme | Frequency |
|----------------------|---------------------------------|-----------|
| Classroom Atmosphere | Student work show-cased | 3 |
| | Teacher assistant Support | 4 |
| | Police presence | 2 |
| | Motivational posters | 4 |
| | Age appropriate bulletin boards | 4 |

Traditional classroom management techniques were present via posted daily schedules, visual timers, and a behavior management system consisting of a behavior chart in the 1st -3rd and 4th -6th grade classrooms. These tools were posted in these classrooms but were not referenced during either of the two observed lessons. Table 5 outlines the frequencies with which these components were present during the observations.

Table 5

Main Theme, Sub-themes, and Frequencies for Classroom Management Techniques

| Main Theme | Sub Theme | Frequency |
|--|----------------------------|-----------|
| Observed Classroom management techniques | Flexible Seating | 3 |
| | Behavior Chart- Present | 2 |
| | Behavior Chart- Referenced | 0 |
| | Visual Timers | 3 |
| | Posted Schedule | 4 |

Instructional practices. In 7 of the 8 classroom visits lesson objectives were discussed with the class and used to steer the social skills instruction. All but two teachers posted these objectives for the class to see. Teachers activated prior knowledge to help create meaning and purpose for the lesson in 6 out of 8 observations. Each of the lessons were presented in casual terms where students interjected without redirection. Teacher A and C allowed their students to use profanity, as long as it was not directed toward another student or staff member. Informal reminders such as, “Watch it!” and “Is that how you talk in school?” were used as forms of redirection. Instruction took place via classroom discussions without the use of multimedia or technology. Teacher modeling was the main form of instruction and was present throughout the lesson. During observed social skills lessons, all teachers provided opportunities for guided practice where both they and the teaching assistants would assist students as they implemented the taught skill as a whole group. There were two observed opportunities for independent practice involving a student scenario and response worksheet. Informal assessments were

conducted through monitoring student responses and actions. Table 6 outlines the frequencies in which these instructional strategies were observed.

Table 6

Main Theme, Sub-themes, and Frequencies for Delivery of Social Skills Lessons

| Main Theme | Sub Theme | Frequency |
|---|--|-----------|
| Instructional strategies present in social skills lessons | Posted Lesson Objective | 6 |
| | Lesson Objective Discussed | 8 |
| | Activating Prior Knowledge | 6 |
| | Check for Understanding | 8 |
| | Opportunities for Guided Practice | 8 |
| | Opportunities for Independent Practice | 7 |

Through open and axial coding, a common theme emerged, teachers were utilizing some evidence-based instructional strategies when delivering social skills instruction. Figure 3 below depicts these layers of data analysis:

| Open Codes | Axial Codes | Selective Codes |
|--|--|--|
| Flexibility | Teachers exhibit strong knowledge of students' needs Teachers adapt lesson components to meet student needs | Teachers utilize some evidence-based instructional strategies in their social skills lessons |
| Open communication | | |
| Staff support | | |
| Inviting learning environment | | |
| Lesson objective discussed | Teachers use some evidence-based instructional strategies | |
| Teacher modeling | | |
| Check for understanding | | |
| Opportunities for guided practice | | |
| Opportunities for independent practice | | |

Figure 3. Analysis of instructional practices observed during social skills lessons.

Evaluation question 3: To what degree do teachers believe they are prepared to implement evidence-based social skills instruction in the classroom?

Interview Questions 6 through 9 were used to provide insight on the level of preparedness teachers feel regarding social skills implementation. Initial open coding of individual responses allowed for the allocation of important phrases found throughout the responses. Axial coding was used to determine relationships amongst the different data sets. Selective coding of these relationships resulted in two common themes. Based on teacher responses to the questions bulleted below, teachers feel unprepared to implement and assess social skills due to poor formal teacher preparation, and teachers are not receiving targeted professional development opportunities to improve their teaching of social skills.

- What professional development opportunities have you attended aimed at improving your knowledge of social skills instructional strategies?
- How have professional development opportunities supported your knowledge of effective social skills strategies?
- What training or resources have you received on assessing the social skills of students with ED?
- What types of training do you feel would be most beneficial to adequately support the implementation of social skills instruction for students with emotional disabilities?

Teacher interview responses. Individual teacher interview responses indicated none of the participants reported to have received formalized education in

their undergraduate or graduate coursework aimed at teaching or assessing social skills. Despite being responsible for the delivery of social skill instruction, all four teachers stated they had never been presented with an opportunity to attend professional development designed for the teaching and/ or assessment of social skills for students with or without emotional disabilities. Teacher B stated, “You would think this is something we would have access to being in our position, but we never have.” When asked if video-self monitoring had been a strategy used in their classrooms, three of the four teachers indicated they had no access to personal technology devices such as iPads to effectively implement such a strategy. Only one of the teachers had any knowledge pertaining to video self-monitoring and its use as a social skill instructional strategy, yet she had never been given the opportunity to implement this in the classroom due to limited technology access.

Due to the nature of the program, a partnership with a local children’s agency focused on the mental health needs of students including medication management, counseling, and therapy is necessary. Through these interviews it emerged that teachers relied on their partnership with these clinicians and their knowledge of social skills instruction due to a lack of direction by administration and an overall lack of knowledge of social skill instruction and assessment:

- “Clinicians visit twice a week and they handle the social skills; even the data collection.”
- “Nothing I learned in college prepared me for what I do. Even the clinicians struggle with what to teach and how.”
- “Most of what I learned came from watching the classroom clinician.”

- “Our clinician will come in and show bullying videos.

Teacher interviews indicated students received push-in clinician support twice a week. It was reported this instruction is typically focused on the student’s social-emotional health and social skills needs which can vary based on individual students. It is noted that during observations only once was a clinician present during the social skills lesson and she was not participating in an instructional role. Whole group social skills instruction seemed to reflect the needs of the class as a whole. For instance, Teacher A held a lesson on preparing for the holidays due to a meltdown experienced by two of the students the previous day when holiday music was played during an independent work time in an effort to reward the students. Figure 4 outlines the sub-categories and ultimate theme that emerged from interview responses focused on teachers’ level of preparedness in implementing evidence-based social skills lessons.

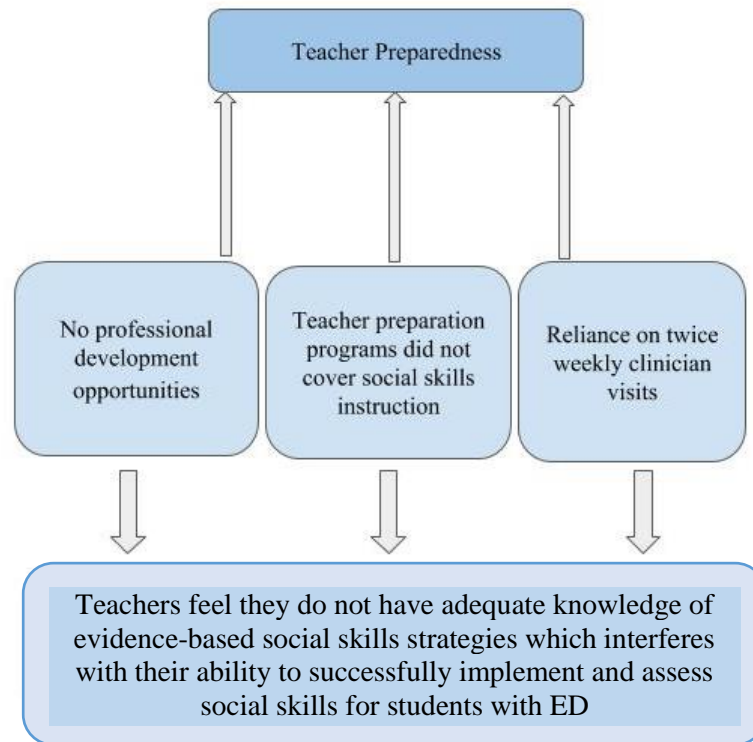


Figure 4. Axial coding relationships between sub-categories related to how prepared teachers feel implementing evidence-based social skills instruction in classrooms for students with ED.

Evaluation question 4: What are the perceptions of teachers regarding the effectiveness of the current social skills instructional strategies that are designed to decrease inappropriate classroom behavior?

Interview Questions 1 through 4, bulleted below, were used to provide feedback on the effectiveness of current social skills instructional strategies. Teachers indicated what they thought was necessary for their students to be successful and how they meet their students’ social skills needs in the classroom. Open and axial coding were used to determine themes derived from these responses and draw relationships amongst the four data-sets.

- What is needed to help your students thrive in social settings?

- What does an ideal social skills lesson look like?
- What resources are necessary to achieve meaningful social skills instruction in the classroom?
- How do you currently incorporate social skills instruction into the student's day?

Teacher interviews. In response to interview questions about the New Horizons program, teachers report that the program does not employ a curriculum to teach social skills, nor has the program provided materials to assist teachers in implementing social skills instruction in the classroom. Although program clinicians visit classrooms twice a week to conduct what some teachers referred to as “personal growth” lessons for the students, there were no additional formal supports in place either mentioned in the interviews or observed in the classrooms. When asked what teachers believe their students need to be successful in social settings three common themes emerged from their responses: students require consistency, structure, and exemplar models. Modeling desirable behaviors was present in most of the classrooms; however, most notably lacking was the structure 2 of the 4 teachers reported as a critical need for these students. The lack of administrative direction and designation of job responsibilities related to the instruction and assessment of social skills was very apparent. Additionally, a lack of structure was present in some of the observed classrooms. In Teacher A's classroom, students were instructed to join the group at a table, yet no redirection was given to those students who left the table to walk in and out of the classroom to engage in conversations with other students or staff members. In Teacher B's classroom, group instructions to join the class on the

carpet before beginning their social skills lesson on using friendly words did not seem to pertain to one of the students who was eating his lunch at his seat and refusing to participate in the lesson. He was not redirected, nor expected to join the group and due to that missed a large portion of the lesson. An overall heavy reliance on classroom discussions and teacher modeling as the main form of instruction, coupled with limited opportunities for independent practice, contributed to this lack of lesson structure. Teacher D described this disconnect was due to the limited resources available to teach social skills. She made a binder with the materials she purchased online to help support an array of social skills, yet she argued “there’s just not a lot out there for these kids and the problems and behaviors they have.” Three of the 4 teachers stated they would greatly benefit from a more structured curriculum that addressed the behavioral and social-emotional needs of their students, as they were left “grasping at straws” to pull together social skills lessons that they weren’t trained on, according to Teacher C. All four participants further indicated they had never experienced a social skills curriculum either in their current or previous settings.

Classroom observations indicated teachers were equipped with a strong knowledge of most evidence-based instructional techniques, yet some of their interview responses portrayed a sense of inadequacy when it came to social skills instruction. Classroom observations identified the use of the ICS Model in two of the classrooms as the only evidence-based strategy utilized by the participants. Continued discussion on the role of clinicians in twice weekly meetings consisting of both whole group lessons and individual student sessions, further indicated three of the four participants seemed to rely heavily on their social skills instruction and assessment

knowledge. Although a varying array of needs was included in teacher responses, when asked what teachers feel are necessary for students with ED, three sub-themes emerged and can be found in Table 7. Two of these three themes, teacher consistency and appropriate modeling, were routinely observed in each of the four classrooms.

Table 7

Main Theme, Sub-themes, and Frequencies for What Teachers Need for Students with ED in Social Settings

| Main Theme | Sub Theme | Frequency |
|--|--------------------|-----------|
| What teachers believe is necessary for students with ED to learn social skills | Consistency | 4 |
| | Structure | 2 |
| | Appropriate models | 3 |

Note. ED = A condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics: An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors. An inability to build and maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers. Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal conditions. A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression (IDEA, 2004).

Implementing social skills instruction. An overwhelming response of fatigue in trying to meet the dynamic needs of multi-grade level classrooms was present throughout all interviews. One teacher stated, “I usually don’t teach social skills formally, it’s just something I try to squeeze in when I can.” Another teacher said, “we are told to build communities and meet their social-emotional needs but there’s never any direction on how we are to do this.” Teachers reiterated the lack of formalized resources designed to support the implementation of social skills instruction with one teacher stating, “I’m forced to go online to Teachers Pay

Teachers and buy packets that address social skills because I don't have anything else.”

Social skills lesson components. All four participants were asked how they currently implement social skills instruction. Each of the four responded with heavy emphasis on teacher modeling and role playing. Through teacher interviews the role of program clinicians in the delivery of some social skills instruction was made apparent. Each participant detailed the personal growth sessions scheduled twice a week where clinicians lead class activities and worked individually with students on their social-emotional needs. Three of the four teachers also noted teachable moments and teacher prompting as frequently used strategies to deliver social skills instruction. A list of the used strategies can be found in Table 8.

Table 8

Main Theme, Sub-themes, and Frequencies for Current Methods of Social Skills Instruction

| Main Theme | Sub Theme | Frequency |
|---|--------------------------------|-----------|
| Current methods used to teach social skills | Teacher Modeling desired skill | 4 |
| | Role-playing | 4 |
| | Teacher Prompting Student | 3 |
| | Clinician led activities | 4 |
| | Teachable moments | 3 |

Analysis of the teaching methods observed was conducted using open, axial and selective coding. Figure 5 below demonstrates the patterns that emerged and ultimately led to one of the common themes: teachers do not have the necessary resources to implement and assess social skills.

| Open Codes | Axial Codes | Selective Codes |
|--|--|--|
| <p>No prescribed curriculum</p> <p>Teachers are not given materials or resources pertaining to social skills instruction</p> <p>Lessons are designed based on students' needs</p> <p>Teachers are unsure how to assess social skills</p> <p>Clinician led activities</p> <p>Informal instruction</p> <p>Teacher prompting</p> <p>Teachable Moments</p> <p>Role Playing</p> | <p>Teachers do not feel adequately prepared to formally assess social skills and rely on clinician support</p> <p>Teachers incorporate a variety of instructional strategies while teaching social skills</p> | <p>Teachers do not have the necessary resources to teach or assess social skills</p> |

Figure 5. Analysis of teachers' perceived effectiveness of current social skills instructional strategies aimed at reducing inappropriate classroom behaviors.

Evaluation Question 5: How are teachers supported in the acquisition, delivery, and assessment of social skills for students with ED?

To gain a better understanding of how teachers are supported in the implementation and assessment of social skills, interview responses from questions six through nine were analyzed using open and axial coding. With the use of selective coding techniques, this data developed two additional common themes: Teachers are not receiving targeted professional development that enhances their ability to

implement effective social skills lesson, and teachers do not have the necessary resources to implement and assess social skills for their students with ED.

- What professional development opportunities have you attended aimed at improving your knowledge of social skills instructional strategies?
- How have professional development opportunities supported your knowledge of effective social skills strategies?
- What training or resources have you received on assessing the social skills of students with ED?
- What types of training do you feel would be most beneficial to adequately support the implementation of social skills instruction for students with emotional disabilities?

Teachers perceptions. When asked what training or resources the teachers had received on social skills instruction for students with ED, three of the four participants indicated they had never received any level of training aimed at this population of students. Teacher B, whom had once worked in a social welfare capacity, indicated she had received social-emotional well-being trainings for adults, but not students. Each teacher was asked what he or she thought an ideal social skills lesson should include. Responses included the use of teacher modeling, role-playing, and student feedback, seen in Table 9.

Table 9

Main Theme, Sub-themes, and Frequencies for What an Ideal Social Skills Lesson Includes

| Main Theme | Sub-Theme | Frequency |
|---|--------------|-----------|
| What teachers think an ideal social skills lessons should include | Modeling | 4 |
| | Role-playing | 4 |
| | Feedback | 3 |

Assessing social skills. Each of the four teachers stated they had never received any level of training directed towards the assessment of social skills. Two of the four teachers further indicated they do not formally assess social skills and therefore could not say with confidence whether their instructional strategies are effective due to their reliance on the clinicians to perform this task. The two other participants stated they assess social skills informally based on how the students are acting in the classroom, with one teacher stating, “I know when we need to revisit a certain skill since [the students] will be fighting or giving us a hard time.”

Table 10

Main Theme, Sub-themes, and Frequencies for Resources Teachers Need for Effective Social Skills Instruction

| Main Theme | Sub Theme | Frequency |
|---|---|-----------|
| What teachers believe to be necessary resources to achieve meaningful social skills instruction | Technology integration | 2 |
| | Community integration | 2 |
| | Training focused on social-emotional health | 4 |
| | Prescribed curriculum | 2 |
| | Professional development focused on social skills | 4 |
| | Collaboration with other educators | 3 |
| | Teacher resources: websites and videos | 2 |
| | Staff training on social-emotional well-being | 4 |
| | College preparation courses | 3 |

Necessary resources. When asked which resources are most beneficial for their teaching of social skills a unanimous response for social-emotional health trainings and professional development focused on social skills instruction emerged. Two of the three participants indicated the need for college preparation courses that addressed social skills instruction for students with disabilities. Additionally, the ability to integrate the students into the community to help generalize these skills and be surrounded by appropriate models was suggested by two of the participants, for they felt this population of students require facilitated opportunities for practice. Figure 6 outlines the analysis used to capture the level of support teachers receive in the acquisition, delivery, and assessment of social skills.

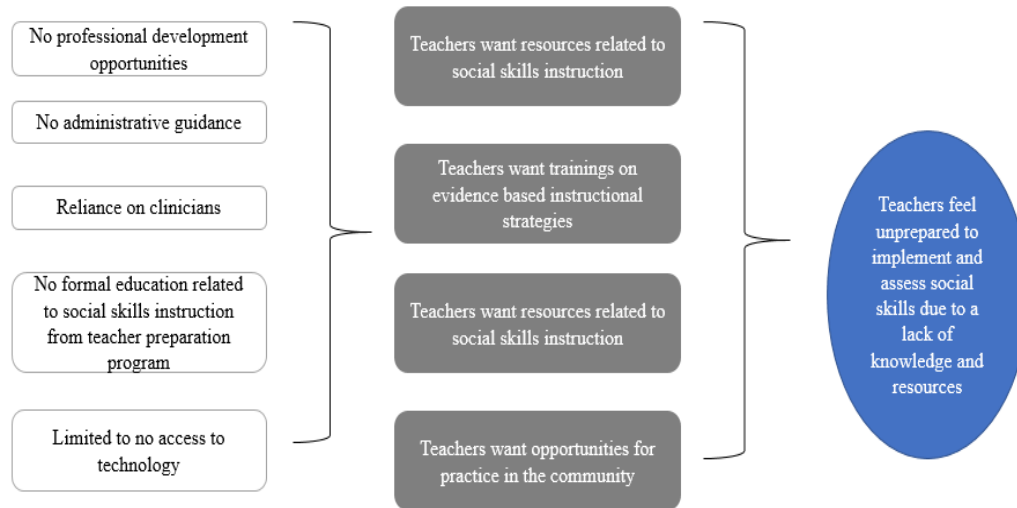


Figure 6. Analysis of the level of support teachers receive in the acquisition, delivery and assessment of social skills.

Summary

Analysis of classroom observations and teacher interviews indicated teachers were not implementing most evidence-based social skills strategies regularly due to an overall lack of knowledge and resources. Novice teachers with limited experience outside of New Horizons did not feel comfortable designing, implementing, or assessing social skills and relied on twice weekly program clinician visits for informal support, as it was not the clinician’s role to train the classroom teacher on how to implement and assess social skills instruction in their classrooms. To improve these practices the teachers stated the need for training focused on social-emotional health, evidence-based social skills strategies, and the assessment of social skills.

Additionally, access to technology, opportunities for collaboration with external teachers, community partnerships facilitating opportunities for students to generalize their skills, and additional resources such as curriculum guides were noted to be necessary for effective social skills instruction with students with ED. A variety of

evidence-based instructional practices were observed in each of the four classrooms indicating teachers were knowledgeable of effective instructional strategies.

CHAPTER 5

RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion of Findings

Research indicates a need for the implementation of evidence-based practices centered on fostering the use of specific strategies to overcome socially inappropriate behaviors (Hutchins et al., 2017). Because students with ED exhibit social and communicative impairments that directly impact their educational and vocational outcomes, there is a need for explicit teaching of social skills aimed at improving student success in both the educational and real-world settings (Maggin et al., 2011). Not only do students with ED require intense instruction in areas where these deficits are seen, they also require the opportunity to generalize these foreign skills in different environments, and with different groups of people (Lane et al., 2005; Wenz-Gross & Upshur, 2012). Due to the nature of the educational placements for these students, specific strategies that can be implemented in the most restrictive setting are critical to immediate and lifelong success.

Classroom observations of the four participating teachers at the New Horizons day school for students with ED revealed evidence-based instructional strategies for social skills were not being utilized regularly, with only the ICS Model being observed in two of the eight classrooms. Social narratives, video modeling, peer modeling, and student led multimedia presentations were never observed. Analysis

of both classroom observation data and teacher interview responses indicated teachers are not receiving targeted professional development that enhances their ability to implement effective social skills lessons, nor do they have the resources necessary to implement and assess social skills for their students with ED. When referring to professional development opportunities one teacher indicated “you would think this is something we would have access to being in our position, but we never have.” When addressing an overall lack of issued another teacher stated she is “forced to go online to Teachers Pay Teachers and buy packets that address social skills because I don’t have anything else.” Additionally, teachers felt it was difficult to determine the effectiveness of their current social skills instruction due to classroom inconsistencies and the clinician’s role in conducting formal assessments, with one participant indicating she “knows when to revisit a skill since [the students] will be fighting or giving us a hard time.” These findings align with the current research base indicating a lack of knowledge and teacher preparation impedes effective social skills instruction in the classroom. Ultimately, teachers’ insufficient knowledge of evidence-based social skills strategies for students with ED has a negative impact on the students’ ability to successfully implement socially appropriate responses in the academic and real-world environment (Cumming, 2010; Hutchins et al., 2017; McCall, 2009).

Where overall strong implementation of research based instructional practices were present in most observations, there was an apparent disconnect between what to teach and how when it came to social skills. Teachers utilized some components of evidence-based instructional practices relying heavily on modeling and group

discussions, yet only 1 of the 5 evidence-based social skills instructional strategies were observed in two of the four classrooms. To best meet the needs of those educators teaching social skills to students with ED a series of recommendations are detailed in Table 11.

Table 11

Findings and Recommendations

| Findings | Related Recommendations |
|---|---|
| 1 of the 5 evidence based social skills instructional strategies were observed in 2 of the 4 classrooms. | Professional development initiatives |
| Teachers utilized some components of evidence-based instructional practices relying heavily on modeling and group discussions. | Professional development initiatives; facilitated collaboration; clinician partnerships |
| Teachers do not believe they are prepared to design and implement social skills instruction for students with ED. | Professional development initiatives; delegated roles and responsibilities |
| Teachers feel it is difficult to determine the effectiveness of their current social skills instruction due to classroom inconsistencies and the clinician’s role in conducting formal assessments. | Facilitated collaboration; delegated roles and responsibilities; clinician partnerships |
| Teachers feel they are not supported in their knowledge, implementation, and assessment of social skills by either teacher preparation programs, the school or district. | Professional development initiatives; community partnerships |

Note. ED = A condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics: An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors. An inability to build and maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers. Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal conditions. A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression (IDEA, 2004).

Implications for Policy and Practice

Professional development initiatives. The New Horizons program is designed specifically to meet the needs of students with ED in the K-12 setting. Due to the highly focused nature of the program, social skills instruction is paramount to students learning core academic content. According to Hattie (2009), professional development has a high effect size (.62) that can bring about systemic changes through targeted learning opportunities. With such a specialty, it is recommended that in-house professional development aimed at designing, implementing and assessing social skills instruction be a priority for future school-based professional developments. During these sessions it is recommended social skills instructional resources be shared with staff, including research articles and video demonstrations that can be reviewed by the teachers. Due to professional development's high effect size on teacher knowledge ($d=1.11$) these initiatives would address the gross disconnect teachers have with current evidence-based research focused on social skills for students with ED (Hattie, 2009).

With these professional development sessions, it is recommended either the principal and/or mental-health clinicians become the expert on evidence-based instructional strategies including video modeling, video self-monitoring, the ICS Model, student generated multimedia presentations and social narratives. This delegation of responsibility will allow for further coaching of the teachers to build upon their current knowledge and enhance through feedback their social skills instructional strategies (Richardson, Tolson, Huang, & Lee, 2009). Once the instructional strategies are shared with the staff, it is necessary that follow-up is made

through non-punitive classroom observations to stress the need for teacher implementation of these evidence-based strategies.

Facilitated collaboration. County-wide collaboration of special educators, counselors, and school psychologists aimed at facilitating group thinking on how to implement and assess evidence-based practices for social skills instruction for students with ED is another recommendation aimed at closing the research to practice gap. Collaboration amongst educators and providers is crucial to addressing the social skill deficits experienced by many students with ED (Richardson et al., 2009). Most of the teachers indicated a sense of isolation related to their knowledge and implementation of social skills. Facilitating opportunities for teachers to collaboratively discuss what to teach and how could help alleviate this sense of seclusion while fostering continued learning of evidence-based social skills strategies. Allowing New Horizons' teachers, the opportunity to collaborate with other educators and professionals outside of their school will help to gain new perspectives and approaches that can ultimately improve student behavioral outcomes (Karpur Clark et al., 2005).

Clinician partnerships. Within the New Horizons program, it is also recommended that opportunities for clinicians and special education teachers to collaboratively plan be made available. This will help generalize the lesson taught by the clinician into the everyday classroom resulting in an increased ability for students to perform the desired skill(s). It is necessary for the student's teacher to have working knowledge of how to implement and assess social skills instruction to accurately address behavior intervention plans and student IEP goals (Walker &

Barry, 2018). Purposeful planning and collaboration can assist in teachers' ability to assess the desired skill, as most teachers indicated assessment was typically conducted by the clinicians.

Community partnerships. To foster generalization of socially acceptable responses it is recommended the New Horizons program establish community partnerships with local agencies, be it retail, law enforcement, or non-profit. These partnerships could help improve student attendance rates and academic performance while providing a mutually beneficial relationship for both parties (Gross et al., 2015). Creating opportunities to extend the classroom increases exposure and understanding of community systems and social expectations (Hands, 2005). Forging these relationships also allows for increased awareness of emotional disabilities, helping to reduce the sometimes-negative stigma associated with this category of disability.

Delegated roles and responsibilities. To address the heavy teacher reliance on clinicians to instruct and assess social skills, it is critical that administration creates a unified plan appointing responsibility for both parties. Social skills instruction and assessment should be ongoing (Walker & Barry, 2018). Due to the rather limited interaction clinicians have with these students, it is recommended teachers play a more integral role in assessing and delivering social skills for students at New Horizons. A lack of clarity on behalf of all participants regarding the teacher's role in delivering and assessing social skills indicates a potential need to revisit job descriptions to ensure teachers are aware of their legal responsibilities related to implementing student IEPs (IDEA, 2004). If it is the program's desire to instill this

responsibility solely onto the clinicians, it is urged you consider the level of interaction clinicians have with the students to determine whether it is adequate. To gain a more accurate understanding, both formal and informal assessments of student's social skills should be conducted across multiple settings (Gresham et al., 2001; Walker & Barry, 2018). Clarifying the expectations for both parties can help align both the teaching and assessing of social skills resulting in more informed practices and likely student gains.

Additional Recommendations

To help address the underpinning inequities found within this audit, further recommendations to be addressed at the school, state and institutional level can help mitigate the lack of teacher knowledge and resources.

Equity audit. Due to the involvement of technology in two of the evidence-based social skills strategies, video modeling and student generated multimedia presentations, greater access to technology would enhance teacher efficacy in delivering effective social skills instruction. During teacher interviews two of the four teachers stated they had no access to personal student devices (e.g., laptops, iPads), with only one observation incorporating technology in an interactive manner. It was observed in one classroom the teacher used a large sheet of white paper for her projector screen. In each of the four classrooms observed there were no desktop computers for students to utilize, other than the teachers. It was noted a common computer lab could be reserved for classes. In an era relying heavily on technology and the skills associated with its use, students require exposure to these varying platforms (Cumming, 2010; Gresham, 2015). An additional recommendation to

conduct an equity audit focused on technology access for students in a more restrictive environment could help to ensure students at the New Horizons program are given equal opportunities as their non-disabled peers (Skrla, McKenzie, & Scheurich, 2009). Due to the isolation of these students from their general education peers, it is essential administrators at the school and county level ensure equal opportunities and equal access are given to the New Horizons program. If inconsistencies arise between meaningful learning experiences for students in an alternative setting compared to those of their non-disabled peers, issues of equity must be addressed (Hemmer, Madsen, & Torres, 2013). Greater access to technology could help mitigate lacking social skills by presenting an instructional medium that is relevant and enticing to students, while providing critical exposure to the platforms relied upon by society.

Policy initiatives. Outside the scope of the New Horizons program, additional initiatives at the state and institution level can help alleviate the frustration experienced by teachers of students with ED. Knowledgeable teachers given streamlined expectations can translate to better instruction of the whole child.

State policy. State level policy initiatives for social skills curriculum and assessment emphasizing the social emotional well-being of children could benefit both student with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. The emphasis on student academic performance with the passage of No Child Left Behind (2001) resulted in the neglect of students' overall well-being (Haydon et al., 2017). The recent shift from this model allows for a more holistic education for our youth; yet, most directives from the state continue to rest on core academic initiatives. Until social-

emotional health and the subsequent acquisition and use of appropriate social skills becomes a priority at the state level, localities will be challenged to make it a priority for their students. A state-designed initiative for social skills instruction as well as training and implementation assistance designed to familiarize teachers and staff members with the content is necessary to continue to stress the importance of social-emotional competence for all students.

Higher education policy. At the university level, a move to include social skills instruction and assessment content into all teacher preparation programs is necessary. All four participating teachers indicated they had never received higher education instruction on teaching or assessing social skills. To best meet the growing social-emotional needs of our students, it is ideal to include courses designed specifically to include how to assess and monitor social skills, how to deliver social skills instruction, and the evidence-based strategies teachers and students can use to be successful both in the classroom and the real-world setting (Lane et al., 2005). This exposure should be mandatory for those enrolled in special education teacher preparation programs, yet all teacher candidates could benefit from this level of knowledge and exposure.

Recommendations for Future Research

To gain a more exhaustive understanding of social skills instruction for students with ED it is necessary for continued research on the varying means of social skills instructional delivery. An additional recommendation to analyze the role clinicians play in delivering and assessing social skills for students in a separate day school environment would be beneficial to the continued understanding of how to

best meet the needs of students with ED. Additionally, further research on varying social skills curriculums and their levels of student effectiveness would help educators and administrators in their planning and implementation of social skills instructional expectations. Finally, further research garnering the administrator's perspective on social skills instruction and assessment, including how valuable they feel it is to their students, and the emphasis they place on their teachers to implement evidence-based strategies in their social skills lessons is necessary.

Summary

This formative evaluation of the New Horizon's school for students with ED used qualitative data to determine whether evidence-based social skills instructional strategies were being implemented in their classrooms. Four of the 5 program teachers were participants in this study, allowing for a better view of the teachers' perspectives of how they teach social skills and their level of training associated with social skills instruction for ED students. Two observations in each of the participating classrooms and one-on-one teacher interview responses indicated most evidence-based social skill instructional strategies were not being implemented in the classroom due to an overall lack of knowledge and resources. Teachers had not received training on any of the evidence-based social skills strategies and therefore did not feel comfortable designing, implementing, or assessing social skills, relying heavily on program mental health clinicians for support in these areas.

Recommendations to help improve teacher practices and ultimate student success include: a delegation of roles and responsibilities for teachers and clinicians, professional development opportunities focused on social skills instruction, improved

district-wide collaboration opportunities, and forging community partnerships with agencies allowing for the generalization of students newly formed skills. It is necessary we address these systemic flaws in order to better prepare our students with ED to be successful in a multitude of ways.

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APPENDIX A

Stufflebeam's (1999) Evaluation Checklist

EVALUATION CONTRACTS CHECKLIST

Daniel L. Stufflebeam, 1999

This checklist designed to help evaluators and clients to identify key contractual issues and make and record their agreements for conducting an evaluation. Advance agreements on these matters can mean the difference between an evaluation's success and failure. Without such agreements the evaluation process is constantly subject to misunderstanding, disputes, efforts to compromise the findings, attack, and/or withdrawal--by the client--of cooperation and funds.

Mark each item as important and incorporated or not applicable or leave it blank , indicating not agreed to though important.

Basic Considerations

- Object of the evaluation
Purpose of the evaluation
Client
Other right-to-know audiences
Authorized evaluator(s)
Guiding values and criteria
Standards for judging the evaluation
Contractual questions

Information

- Required information
Data collection procedures
Data collection instruments and protocols
Information sources
Participant selection
Provisions to obtain needed permissions to collect data
Follow-up procedures to assure adequate information
Provisions for assuring the quality of obtained information
Provisions to store and maintain security of collected information

Analysis

- Procedures for analyzing quantitative information
Procedures for analyzing qualitative information

Reports

- Deliverables and due dates
Interim report formats, contents, lengths, audiences, and methods of delivery
Final report format, contents, length, audiences, and methods of delivery
Restrictions/permissions to report via diskettes, web site, etc.
Restrictions/permissions to publish information from or based on the evaluation

Reporting Safeguards

- Anonymity/confidentiality
Prerelease review of reports
Rebuttal by evaluatees
Editorial authority
Final authority to release reports

Protocol

- Contact persons
Rules for contacting program personnel
Communication channels and assistance

Evaluation Management

- Time line for evaluation work of both clients and evaluators
Assignment of evaluation responsibilities

Client Responsibilities

- Access to information
Services
Personnel
Information
Facilities
Equipment
Materials
Transportation assistance
Work space

Evaluation Budget

- Payment amounts and dates
Conditions for payment, including delivery of required reports
Budget limits/restrictions
Agreed-upon indirect/overhead rates
Contracts for budgetary matters

Review and Control of the Evaluation

- Contract amendment and cancellation provisions
Provisions for periodic review, modification, and renegotiation of the evaluation design as needed
Provision for evaluating the evaluation against professional standards of sound evaluation

Preparer _____ Date _____

APPENDIX B

Participant Consent Form

I, _____, agree to participate in a research study involving effective social skill instructional strategies for teachers of students with emotional disabilities in a separate day-school setting. The purpose of this study is to describe what social skills strategies you’ve found to be effective in the classroom. It will also explore the level of support necessary to implement effective social skills instruction in the classroom. This study will also observe the strategies you implement when teaching social skills to your students.

As a participant, I understand that my participation in the study is purposeful in that the teachers volunteered and were selected with the intention of providing a representation of special education teachers in a separate day school environment for students with emotional disabilities. I understand that I will be expected to participate in one (1) interview related to my knowledge, skills, and dispositions concerning social skills instruction for students with emotional disabilities. I will also allow one (1) observation of the classroom I teach. I also understand that I will participate in one (1) focus group aimed at developing a better understanding of the supports provided to teachers regarding social skills instruction for ED students.

I understand that the interviewer has been trained in the research of human subjects, my responses will be confidential, and that my name will not be associated with any results of this study. I understand there is no personal risk or discomfort directly involved with this research and that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation at any time. I agree that should I choose to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in the study that I will notify the researcher listed below, in writing. A decision not to participate in the study or to withdraw from the study will not affect my relationship with the researcher, the College of William and Mary generally or the School of Education, specifically.

If I have any questions or problems that may arise as a result of my participation in the study, I understand that I should contact Sara P. Mitchell, the researcher at 315-592-1550 or sepritchard@email.wm.edu, or Dr. Margaret Constantino, her dissertation chair at 757-221-2323 or meconstantino@wm.edu or Dr. Tom Ward, chair of EDIRC, at 757-221-2358 or EDIRC-L@wm.edu.

My signature below signifies that I am at least 18 years of age, that I have received a copy of this consent form, and that I consent to participating in this research study.

DATE _____
Participant _____

Signature of

DATE _____
Researcher _____

Signature of

THIS PROJECT WAS FOUND TO COMPLY WITH APPROPRIATE ETHICAL STANDARDS AND WAS EXEMPTED FROM THE NEED FOR FORMAL REVIEW BY THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS COMMITTEE (Phone 757-221-3966) ON 10/24/2018 AND EXPIRES ON 10/24/2019.

APPENDIX C

Teacher Interview Protocol

Interviewee: _____ Date: _____ Interviewer: _____

1. What is needed to help your students thrive in social settings?
2. What does an ideal social skills lesson look like?
3. What resources are necessary to achieve meaningful social skills instruction in the classroom?
4. How do you currently incorporate social skills instruction into the student's day?
5. Have you implemented peer modeling or video-self-monitoring for social skills instruction? If so, what have been your successes and challenges associated with peer modeling and/ or video-self monitoring?
6. What professional development opportunities have you attended aimed at improving your knowledge of social skills instructional strategies?
7. How have professional development opportunities supported your knowledge of effective social skills strategies?
8. What training or resources have you received on assessing the social skills of students with ED?
9. What types of training do you feel would be most beneficial to adequately support the implementation of social skills instruction for students with emotional disabilities?

APPENDIX D

Classroom Observation Recording Form

Teacher: _____ Classroom: _____

Start Time: _____ End Time: _____ Date: _____

Observer: _____

Classroom atmosphere observations:

Classroom management observations:

Instructional Delivery

-Was the lesson objective posted? Yes / No

-Was the lesson objective discussed? Yes/ No

Notes on Lesson Introduction:

-Did the teacher activate prior knowledge? Yes/ No

-Method used to activate prior knowledge: _____

| |
|---|
| Additional notes: |
|---|

Notes on Instructional Practices:

Did the teacher check for understanding? Yes/ No

Explain: _____

Were there opportunities for guided practice? Yes/ No

Explain: _____

Were there opportunities for independent practice? Yes/No

Explain: _____

Notes on Social Skills Strategies:

Which mode of presentation was used during the lesson?

How were the students involved in the lesson?

Indicate which evidence-based social skills strategies were observed

- Peer mediated intervention
- ICS model
- Video modeling
- Video self-monitoring
- Social stories
- Student generated multi-media presentations
- Other

| |
|---|
| <p><i>Additional Notes on Observed Social Skills Strategies</i></p> |
|---|

Notes on Lesson Closure

How was student learning assessed?

Additional Notes on Lesson Closure

Vita

Sara P. Mitchell

10 Elizabeth St. Oswego, NY 13126 • (315)592-1550 • sara_pritchard@outlook.com

Certifications

Maryland Professional Certificate, Special Education 1-8/6-Adult; Biology

New York Professional Certificate, Students with Disabilities Grades 1-6

Virginia Postgraduate Professional Certificate, Special Education K-12

Academic Achievement

College of William & Mary- Ed.D. May 2019

College of William & Mary- M.A.Ed. General Curriculum K-12, Special Education
Jul. 2012

State University of New York at Albany- B.A. in Biology
Dec. 2009

Professional Experience

Adjunct Professor, SUNY Oswego

Jan. 2019-Present

- Plan and implement activities and assessments fostering student learning of special education law and regulations, evidence-based strategies for students with disabilities, and effective co-teaching models.
- Teach and assess course objectives outlined by both SUNY Oswego and the Department of Curriculum and Instruction while adhering to and enforcing campus-wide policies and initiatives

Special Education Teacher, Oswego City School District

Dec. 2014- Present

- Assume responsibilities for a 6th grade inclusion classroom, managing a caseload of students receiving full-day supports, ensuring accommodations and modifications are embedded into the classroom/ classwork.
- Design, implement and monitor daily behavior contracts and behavior intervention plans.
- Compile data from focused assessments to indicate student achievement of learning standards for nonstandard assessment purposes as well as IEP progress monitoring
- Develop and maintain professional expectations for para-professionals including daily classroom roles, disability awareness and knowledge.

Special Education Teacher, Northwest High School-Montgomery County Public Schools

Aug. 2013-Nov. 2014

- Co-planned and taught Honors Biology, Chemistry, Nutrition Science and Environmental Science, working collaboratively both in and outside of the classroom setting with content area teachers and para-educators to ensure the needs of all students are met.

- Developed and implemented school-wide curriculum, assessments and objectives based on student performance data and essential indicators for a pilot Environmental Science course.
- Managed a caseload of eight students with Emotional Disabilities developing and leading annual IEP meetings, triennial IEP meetings, IEP addendums, Function Behavior Assessments and Behavior Intervention Plans while maintaining consistent home-school communication.

Learning Specialist, Hornsby Middle School: Williamsburg-James City Public School District

Sept. 2012-June 2013

- Developed and implemented Reading, Math, Science, Social Studies and functional living skills curriculum for grades 6-8 based on Virginia's Aligned Standards of Learning for students on track to obtain a non-standardized diploma in a self-contained classroom setting.
- Developed and maintained professional expectations for para-professionals including daily classroom roles, time management, classroom management and disability awareness and knowledge