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## BRIEF REPORT

## Social Validity of the Social Skills Improvement System—Classwide Intervention Program (SSIS-CIP) in the Primary Grades

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The purpose of this study was to examine the social validity of the Social Skills Improvement System-Classwide Intervention Program (SSIS-CIP) for teachers in the primary grades. Participants included 45 first and second grade teachers who completed a 16-item social validity questionnaire during each year of the SSIS-CIP efficacy trial. Findings indicated that teachers generally perceived the SSIS-CIP as a socially valid and feasible intervention for primary grades; however, teachers' ratings regarding *ease of implementation* and *relevance and sequence* demonstrated differences across grade levels in the second year of implementation.

### ***Impact and Implications***

The purpose of this study was to examine the social validity of the Social Skills Improvement System-Classwide Intervention Program (SSIS-CIP) for teachers in the primary grades. Participants included 45 first and second grade teachers who completed a 16-item questionnaire after implementing the SSIS-CIP in their classroom. Findings indicated that teachers perceived the SSIS-CIP as a socially valid and feasible intervention for primary grades; however, the program's *ease of implementation* and *relevance and sequence* were rated differently across grade levels after teachers' second year of implementation.

**Keywords:** social emotional learning interventions, social validity

During the past two decades, research has indicated that there is a strong link between students' social-emotional skills and their academic outcomes (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Unfortunately, many young children enter school

without important social-emotional skills needed to successfully navigate their initial school experiences (Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta, & Cox, 2000). Moreover, fostering these skills in the early years of schooling is particularly essential, given that children with behavioral and

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emotional issues may be less receptive to intervention by the end of second grade (Eron, 1990). One promising way to promote social-emotional skills in the primary grades is through the use of classwide social-emotional learning (SEL) programs.

A number of SEL programs have been developed for use in the elementary grades, and many of these programs tend to have common features including explicit skill instruction and opportunities to practice social and emotional skills (Collaborative for Academic & Social Emotional Learning, 2013). For these programs to produce positive outcomes, however, they must be implemented effectively (Berkel, Mauricio, Schoenfelder, & Sandler, 2011). Indeed, a growing body of research indicates that effective implementation, or implementation fidelity, is critical for intervention outcomes (Durlak & DuPre, 2008; Kam, Greenberg, & Walls, 2003). Yet some large-scale SEL interventions have shown less-than-optimal levels of implementation fidelity (Elias, Zins, Graczyk, & Weissberg, 2003), and it is possible that this lack of uptake is due to teachers' perceptions of the social validity (i.e., usefulness, acceptability, & feasibility) of these interventions (Sanetti & Kratochwill, 2009).

Forman et al. (2013) specifically examined implementation science within the field of school psychology and concluded that the commitment to intervention implementation was dependent on perceptions of acceptability, efficacy, and organizational resources. Given these findings, social validity appears to play a pivotal role in the effectiveness of school-based interventions and should be considered as part of the evidence base for an intervention program. However, less is known about factors beyond the specific intervention components that influence teachers' ratings of social validity, such as previous experience implementing the intervention and developmental level. For instance, when teachers experience the efficacy of an intervention after implementing it with fidelity, this is likely to lead to continued implementation (Forman et al., 2013). Additionally, as with any intervention, teachers may perceive some aspects of the program as working better with certain grade/age levels of students than others. Thus, it is important to understand teachers' perceived social validity of an intervention, as well as factors that potentially contribute to

these perceptions such as additional opportunities to implement the intervention and developmental context.

### Social Validity of SEL Programs

Social validity reflects the importance of having intervention methods and outcomes that are relevant and useful to the individuals enacting and/or experiencing the intervention (Kazdin, 2005). Some researchers have studied social validity in terms of teachers' overall perceptions of the ease of program implementation. For example, Buchanan, Gueldner, and Oanh (2009) examined acceptability of SEL programs by asking teachers how realistic it was for them to devote time to preparing and implementing SEL lessons. One third of participants indicated that one lesson a week was possible, but any more than that would become more difficult. Teachers also identified potential barriers to implementation such as preparation time, level of training, and difficulty teaching nonacademic activities in class. As another example, Wanless, Patton, Rimm-Kaufman, and Deutsch (2013) conducted focus groups with teachers to identify supports and barriers to the implementation of a specific SEL approach, Responsive Classroom. Teachers' reported that certain factors, such as being able to conduct the intervention at their own pace, would make the intervention more acceptable.

In addition to the social validity of entire SEL interventions, some researchers also have examined the acceptability, feasibility, and relevance of specific components of such interventions. For example, Schick and Cierpka (2005), asked teachers to complete a final social validity survey after implementation of the Faustlos program, a German language version of the Second Step (Beland, 1988) program. The questionnaire assessed program attributes such as clarity of the manual, suitability and user friendliness of the instruction booklet, correspondence of instructional scenarios to real-life situations, student opinions of the intervention, and perceived effectiveness of the intervention. Participating teachers rated all items as quite or very good, and 77% of teachers reported they would continue to implement the program.

Social validity of specific intervention components also was examined by Webster-Stratton, Reid, and Stoolmiller (2008) who had

teachers complete satisfaction inventories during training and after implementation of the Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management and Child Social and Emotional curriculum (Dinosaur School). The inventory assessed the usefulness and appropriateness of intervention components and materials (e.g., role plays, behavior plans), as well as their ability to integrate the program into the general curriculum. Results indicated that a large percentage of teachers were satisfied with the intervention components and felt they were able to integrate them into the general curriculum effectively. High ratings of social validity also paralleled a high degree of implementation fidelity, lending support for the link between social validity and implementation fidelity.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study was to examine the social validity of a universal SEL program, the Social Skills Improvement System Classwide Intervention Program (SSIS-CIP; Elliott & Gresham, 2007) for primary teachers in first and second grade. Although the SSIS-CIP is commercially available for use in primary grades and has been shown to improve student social skills (DiPerna, Lei, Bellinger, & Cheng, 2015; DiPerna, Lei, Cheng, Hart, & Bellinger, in press), no research has been published to date regarding the social validity of this universal program. In addition, few of the aforementioned SEL studies examined grade level differences in social validity, and none examined if social validity ratings changed over time as teachers gained experience with the program. Thus, a secondary goal was to examine if social validity ratings varied across grade level and years of program implementation.

### Method

#### Participants

Data for the current study were collected from all 45 first ( $n = 14$ ) and second ( $n = 31$ ) grade teachers who implemented the SSIS-CIP Lower Elementary Version (K-2; Elliott & Gresham, 2007) as part of a larger study focused on program outcomes. Teachers were employed in seven elementary schools in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Five of the

elementary schools were from an urban district, and two were from a small rural school district. The majority of participating teachers were female (84.4%), Caucasian (95.6%), and held a Master's degree (68.9%). The demographics of the participating sample were similar to those of U.S. teachers (81.9% White, 76% female, and 56% with at least a Master's degree; National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2012, 2014). There were no significant differences between teachers in Grades 1 and 2 based on gender, race, or education level.

Across the participating schools, 69.9% of students received free or reduced price lunch, and the racial/ethnic composition of the student population was approximately 65.8% Caucasian, 18.1% African American, 8.6% Hispanic, and 7.5% Other (i.e., Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American). Participating classrooms enrolled a range of 20–25 students. The study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

#### Measure

At the end of each year, participating teachers completed a social validity questionnaire in which they were asked to rate their experience implementing the SSIS-CIP. Similar to the aforementioned approach of Schick and Cierpka (2005), the social validity questionnaire was developed to assess instructional strategies, components, and materials specific to the SSIS-CIP. The questionnaire included 16 items with a response format rated as 1 (*poor*), 2 (*fair*), 3 (*acceptable*), 4 (*very good*), and 5 (*excellent*). Items (see Table 1) inquired about teachers' perceptions of the appropriateness and usefulness of activities and materials (e.g., usefulness of student booklets as a teaching aid for lessons), as well as the clarity, feasibility, and effectiveness of the intervention (e.g., From your perspective, how effective is the SSIS-CIP in promoting pro-social behavior?). The social validity questionnaire yields scores in six domains: *ease of implementation*, *relevance and sequence*, *student behavior outcomes*, *booklets*, *role play*, and *videos*. Across years, domains displayed high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .81-.96$ ; Table 1). The social validity domains also exhibited statistically significant moderate-positive correlations with observer ratings of implementation fidelity,  $r = .35-.49$ ,  $p < .05$ .

Table 1  
*Item Content and Internal Consistency for Social Validity Questionnaire Domains*

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Ease of implementation ( $\alpha = .81-.88$ )
Amount of preparation required to implement the SSIS-CIP
Clarity of the lesson plans provided in the SSIS-CIP teacher manual
Feasibility of implementing the SSIS-CIP lessons in your classroom
Relevance and sequence ( $\alpha = .92-.90$ )
Relevance/importance of the 10 key skills taught within the SSIS-CIP Early Elementary Curriculum
Sequence of the 10 units within the SSIS-CIP
Student Behavior Outcomes ( $\alpha = .89-.95$ )
From your perspective, how effective is the SSIS-CIP in promoting students' prosocial behaviors (e.g., sharing work materials, helping a peer with their work, complimenting a peer)?
From your perspective, how effective is SSIS-CIP in reducing students' inappropriate classroom behaviors (acting out, off-task, etc.)?
Booklets ( $\alpha = .84-.85$ )
Clarity of the student booklets
Usefulness of the student booklets as a teaching aid for the lessons
Appropriateness of language and activities in the student booklets for students in second grade
Role play ( $\alpha = .93-.96$ )
Extent to which the required role-plays correspond to real-life situations
Students level of understanding of the role-play situations
Effectiveness of the role-plays in promoting learning objectives
Videos ( $\alpha = .95-.94$ )
Extent to which the video examples correspond to real-life situations
Students level of understanding of the situations presented in the videos
Effectiveness of the videos in promoting learning objectives

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*Note.* SSIS-CIP = Social Skills Improvement System-Classwide Intervention Program. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  range is reported for Years 1 and 2.

## Procedure

Data from the present study were collected as part of a multiyear efficacy trial of the SSIS-CIP. First and second grade teachers were recruited to participate in the trial after approval had been obtained by district superintendents and principals. Participating teachers were then randomized into SSIS-CIP implementation or business as usual conditions within schools. Intervention teachers were formally trained in the implementation of the SSIS-CIP, and then they taught the curriculum to their students over a 12-week period.

The SSIS-CIP is comprised of 10 instructional units that focus on 10 key classroom behaviors: following directions, listening to others, following classroom rules, asking for help, taking turns in conversations, cooperating with others, acting responsibly with others, showing kindness to others, ignoring peer distractions, and controlling temper in conflict situations. Each unit consists of three scripted lessons that focus on one of the key classroom behaviors. Each lesson requires approximately 20–25 min, and teachers use six instructional strategies (de-

scribe, model, role-play, do, practice, monitor progress, generalize) to help students learn the specific target skill. In addition, each lesson has at least one brief (30s–90s) video vignette demonstrating the target skill within a classroom context. Other instructional resources, such as student instructional booklets and practice activities, are used to help facilitate the lesson.

The social validity questionnaires were completed in the spring of each academic year after all lessons had been administered. The questionnaire was completed online, and teachers received \$10 compensation for completion. Social validity data were analyzed across 2 years of intervention implementation.

## Data Analysis

A two-way ( $2 \times 2$ ) mixed factorial analysis of variance (ANOVA) with repeated measures was run using SPSS version 24. In each analysis, grade level (Grade 1 or 2) was entered as the between-subjects variable and social validity rating by implementation year (Year 1 or 2) was entered as the within-subjects variable. A between-within subjects interaction (i.e., Grade

Table 2  
*Descriptive Statistics for Social Validity Domains by Grade Level and Year of Implementation*

	Grade 1				Grade 2			
	Year 1		Year 2		Year 1		Year 2	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Ease of implementation	3.51	.65	3.30	.68	3.81	.81	4.31	.60
Relevance and sequence	3.88	.71	3.50	.91	3.94	.72	4.41	.52
Student behavior	3.04	1.05	3.30	1.09	3.50	.86	3.94	.77
Booklets	3.40	.71	3.59	.97	3.73	.89	4.15	.64
Role play	3.83	.89	3.83	1.17	4.08	.80	4.42	.69
Videos	3.67	1.28	3.73	1.15	4.18	.90	4.24	.78

Level  $\times$  Implementation Year) was also examined. Correlational analyses indicated that there were no significant associations between the six social validity domains and the teachers' education level, race, and the school in which they taught ( $p > .05$ ).

## Results

The distribution of the data approximated normality with acceptable ranges for skew ( $-1.11$  to  $-.04$ ) and kurtosis ( $-.90$  to  $.61$ ). Descriptive statistics for social validity domains are reported in Table 2. Overall ratings of social validity fell in the *acceptable* to *excellent* ranges ranged (3.04 to 4.41) across domains, grade levels, and year of implementation. The consistency of teachers' item ratings across years fell in the moderate to high ranges (ICCs = .44–.82). Similarly, social validity domains exhibited moderate to high correlations (.53–.80) across years of implementation.

A two-way mixed factorial ANOVA was run for each of the six social validity domains. Levene's test of homogeneity of variance indicated equal variances for each social validity domain across grade levels and time points, with the exception of the *relevance and sequence* domain at Time 2,  $F(1, 23) = 4.79$ ,  $p = .04$ . Given this finding, two extreme outliers ( $2.5 SDs < \text{mean}$ ) were identified and removed from the sample. Removal of these outliers resulted in a nonsignificant Levene's test; however, results of the primary analyses yielded the same overall findings when the outliers were included in the sample. As such, the reported results reflect the complete sam-

ple with outliers retained. For teachers' ratings of the *ease of implementation* domain, there was a grade-level main effect,  $F(1, 22) = 7.81$ ,  $p = .011$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .26$ . This main effect was qualified by a statistically significant interaction between grade level and implementation year,  $F(1, 22) = 12.00$ ,  $p = .002$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .35$ . Specifically, first grade teachers' *ease of implementation* ratings decreased slightly from the first to second year of implementation; whereas second grade teachers' ratings increased slightly from the first to the second year (see Figure 1). For the *relevance and sequence* items, there also was an interaction between grade level and implementation year,  $F(1, 23) =$

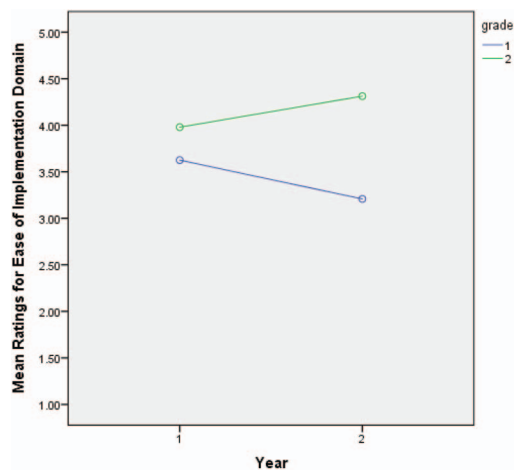


Figure 1. Interaction between grade level and year on teachers' ratings of ease of implementation. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

11.16,  $p = .003$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .33$ . Again, this interaction revealed that first grade teachers' *relevance and sequence* domain ratings decreased between the first and second year of implementation, while second grade teachers' scores increased between the two years (see Figure 2). No main effects ( $p = .10-.96$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = .00-.12$ ) or interaction effects ( $p = .18-.82$ ; partial  $\eta^2 = .00-.08$ ) were found for the *booklets*, *student behavior*, *role play*, or *videos* domains.

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the social validity of the SSIS-CIP Lower Elementary Version in first and second grade classrooms. Overall, teachers viewed the program positively. Social validity ratings in the various domains fell in the *acceptable to very good* range, with most falling above or approaching a rating of *very good*. These ratings are similar to ratings of social validity reported for other social emotional learning programs. For example, teachers' social validity ratings of the Strong Start Program (Gunter, Caldarella, Korth, & Young, 2012) ranged from 3.59–4.20 on a 5-point agreement scale (higher values indicated stronger agreement). Similarly, Webster-Stratton et al. (2008) reported mean social validity ratings ranging from 3.45–3.91 on a scale from 1 (*unhelpful*) to 4 (*very helpful*).

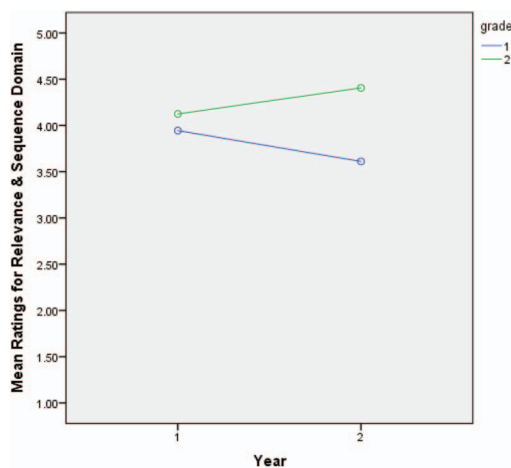


Figure 2. Interaction between grade level and year on teachers' ratings of relevance and sequence. See the online article for the color version of this figure.

While social validity ratings remained high across grade and amount of experience with the intervention, there was an interaction between year of implementation and grade level for two domains, *ease of implementation* and *relevance and sequence*. For both domains, social validity scores were slightly higher for second grade teachers during the second year of implementation, but they were lower in the second year of implementation for the first grade teachers. This finding parallels the results of SSIS-CIP intervention efficacy trial in that the social skills outcomes (effect sizes) for first grade students were smaller than those of the second-grade students (DiPerna, Lei, Bellinger, & Cheng, 2015; DiPerna, Lei, Cheng, Hart, & Bellinger, in press).

Given the documented differences in student outcomes across grades and the link between perceived efficacy and acceptability of an intervention (e.g., Forman et al., 2013), it is perhaps not surprising that some differences exist across teachers' ratings of social validity in multiple domains. Specifically, items in the *ease of implementation* domain assess clarity, feasibility of implementation, and amount of preparation required to implement, and items in the *relevance and sequence* domain assess the importance of the skills targeted by the intervention and the appropriateness of their sequence. The observed differences over time across grade levels may reflect developmental differences across classrooms. While familiarity of the intervention appears to help with facilitation and understanding for second grade students, it may further highlight aspects of the SSIS-CIP that are perceived by teachers to be less useful for younger students.

### Implications for Practice

There are several potential implications of the current study for practice. Regarding the SSIS-CIP, it is generally perceived by teachers as being useful, effective, and well organized for students in first and second grade. Nonetheless, second grade teachers appear to view the program slightly more socially valid than their first grade counterparts. In addition, there are several practical considerations for schools implementing SEL programs. For example, it is important to consider grade-level variability in teachers' perspectives regarding the social va-

lidity of universal SEL programs given the key role that teachers often play in implementing such programs. It is also important and potentially informative to assess the social validity of individual components of SEL programs to determine if some features of a program are perceived as less useful than others by key stakeholders. Such information can be used to potentially guide revision and future intervention development efforts.

### Limitations and Directions for Further Research

There are several directions for future research based on the findings and limitations of the current study. First, although the current sample size was sufficient to detect large effects, it provided insufficient power to detect small to moderate effects. Future studies of the SSIS-CIP should include larger and more diverse samples of teachers and students to examine its social validity across grade levels and years of implementation. Second, as the number of studies examining social validity have increased, it has been conceptualized and measured in different ways. As such, another important line of research is identifying the critical components of social validity that are associated with implementation fidelity for SEL programs. This, in turn, will facilitate the development of measures that are efficient, informative, and useful for program planning and evaluation. Finally, future research should identify strategies for increasing social validity and maximizing teacher buy-in for SEL programs. Examining teacher comments and ratings about existing SEL programs, as well as developing questionnaires to help teachers identify what intervention components they think are most important in an SEL program, will help further inform future development efforts.

### Conclusion

Ultimately, professionals tasked with choosing and implementing interventions are more likely to implement them with fidelity if they believe the intervention is acceptable, will work, and have the necessary resources for effective implementation (Forman et al., 2013). Collecting information about how to enhance social validity of SEL programs is critical to

their successful implementation, and thus the positive impact they can have on student outcomes. Results of the current study demonstrate that the SSIS-CIP appears to be a socially valid and feasible universal program for students in first and second grades. Though there were some observed differences in social validity ratings across grade level and years of implementation, these differences require further investigation to determine if they are replicable and represent meaningful differences in social validity across the primary grades. Given the growing interest in universal SEL programs for schools, social validity should continue to be explored for these programs to inform implementation efforts, improve fidelity, and maximize effectiveness.

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