Comparing Student and Teacher Perceptions of the Importance of Social Skills in a Self-Contained Setting

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Abstract

Implementation of social skills deemed appropriate for use in school is important for student success. Students with emotional and behavioral disorders often fail to use these social skills, requiring intervention to facilitate their use. Results related to social skills interventions have been mixed; one suggested reason for this is the lack of cultural relevance these social skills have to the lives of students. This study was designed to determine (a) the perceptions of students and teachers in a self-contained school setting of the importance of commonly taught social skills and (b) if there were any differences between age, ethnicity, gender, or role (teacher or student) related to perceptions of importance. Although some differences were found among the categories of skills, results of this study indicated that, overall, students and teachers in a self-contained school setting felt social skills were important. Implications for research and practice related to social skills interventions are discussed.

Comparing Student and Teacher Perceptions of the Importance of Social Skills in a Self-Contained Setting

The use of effective and appropriate social skills is essential for academic success in school, during post-secondary transition (e.g., employment, higher education), and for independent living as an adult (Cumming et al., 2008; Herbert-Myers, Guttentag, Swank, Smith, & Landry, 2006; Konold, Jamison, Stanton-Chapman, & Rimm-Kaufman, 2010; Segrin & Taylor, 2007). Students who use social skills appropriately at school are perceived more positively by teachers and peers, which is correlated with higher achievement and more positive feelings about school (Konold et al.; McClelland, Morrison, & Holmes, 2000; Meier, DiPerna, & Oster, 2006; Segrin & Taylor; Warnes, Sheridan, Geske, & Warnes, 2005). Students who fail to use social skills appropriately are often linked to a variety of negative school outcomes, including rejection by peers and teachers, academic deficits in academic instruction, and higher rates of problematic

behaviors (Gresham, Elliott, Cook, Vance, & Kettler, 2010; Lane, Barton-Arwood, Nelson, & Wehby, 2008; Mikami, Huang-Pollock, McBurnett, & Hagnai, 2007).

Social skills are defined as those that are exhibited by students to access a particular social task within a particular environment (Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001; Gresham et al., 2010). The social skills needed for access vary greatly depending on the context in which students interact (e.g., collaborating during a group activity, collaborating on the playground to play basketball). Social competence is defined as a student's ability to interact within varying social environments in a positive manner that maintains strong interpersonal relationships (Gresham et al., 2001; Gresham et al., 2010; Warnes et al., 2005). Mastery of these individual social skills in a variety of environments assists in the development of social competence (Grehsam et al., 2001).

The research defines a variety of social skills deemed appropriate and effective for use in school (Herbert-Myers et al., 2006; Konold et al., 2010; Lane, Pierson, & Givner, 2004; McClelland, Morrison, & Holmes, 2006; Rutherford, DuPaul, & Jitendra, 2008). These skills include (a) teacher-pleasing behaviors (e.g., raising hands, waiting quietly for instructions), (b) assertion of opinion and needs in an appropriate manner, (c) self-control of emotions, (d) cooperation, and (e) peer-pleasing skills (e.g., communicating with peers appropriately, following rules) (Lane, Pierson, & Givner; Herbert-Meyers et al.; Meier et al.). Implementation of these social skills in a manner deemed appropriate by teachers and administrators in the school environment leads to positive outcomes; students who fail to do so are often at-risk for rejection by teachers and peers (Murray & Greenberg, 2006; Rutherford et al.).

This rejection can lead to deleterious effects on student engagement and achievement (Herbert-Meyers et al., 2006; Konold et al., 2010; Rutherford et al., 2008). Students who are socially rejected at school often feel less connected to their peers and the school environment, causing them to have issues with attendance and engagement (Panacek & Dunlap, 2003). Additionally, as communication and collaboration have been identified as the most important skill needed for postsecondary employment, rejection by peers can limit these students opportunities to practice communication and collaboration with others which in turn impacts postsecondary outcomes (Cumming et al., 2008; Elksnin & Elksnin, 2006; Lane et al., 2006).

Students with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) often utilize social skills that are not appropriate within school contexts; in fact, one of the identifying characteristics of EBD is the inability to interact appropriately with peers and teachers (IDEA, 2004). Students with EBD may display verbal and physical aggression, impulsivity, and deficits in communication that impact their ability to maintain relationships (Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001; Hill & Coufal, 2005; Johns, Crowley, & Guetzloe, 2005). Therefore, it is important for educators working with these students to address their social interactions with others through individualized intervention.

When considering social skills interventions for students with EBD, it is important for educators to remember that social skills are very closely aligned with culture and context (Cartledge, Kea, & Simmons-Reed, 2002; Cartledge & Loe, 2001; Hart, Cramer, Harry, Klingner, & Sturges, 2009). The expectations for social skills and behaviors exhibited in the home or community may be very different than those expected at school (Hart et al.; Siperstein, Wiley, & Forness, 2011). Social skills used with peers may vary drastically from those used with adults in a school setting.

Additionally, social skills and behaviors may vary by student characteristics within the school environment (e.g., socioeconomic status, demographics) (Siperstein et al., 2011). Interventions for students with EBD should consider these cultural and contextual variations in order to increase their effectiveness (Hart et al.; Siperstein et al.).

Social Skills Interventions in the School Environment
In order to address the development of school social skills, teachers in the general education environment often embed learning opportunities for these social skills as a part of the natural school day (Elksnin & Elksnin, 2006; Korinek & Popp, 1997). These experiences occur within group activities (e.g., participation in games, directions related to working in groups), incorporation of social skills as a part of the curricula (e.g., reading a story about a character who uses or does not use appropriate social skills), and through conversations with teachers (Elksnin & Elksnin, 2006). Little direct instruction of social skills happens, as teachers report a lack of training concerning social skills instruction in general education (Dobbins et al., 2010).

Students with disabilities often struggle with the mastery of social skills embedded in the general education curricula, simply because modeling and explanation are not explicit (Maag, 2005). Specifically for students with EBD, the appropriate approach to teach social skills is through direct and explicit instruction of the targeted skills (Barton-Arwood et al., 2005; Bullis, Walker, & Sprague, 2001; Johns et al., 2005; Goldstein & McGinnis, 1997; Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001; Lane et al., 2006; Maag, 2005; Rotheram-Borus et al., 2001; Rutherford, DuPaul, & Jitendra, 2008). Direct instruction of social skills includes (a) discussion of inappropriate examples of the social skills, (b) direct instruction of implementation of appropriate examples of the skill, (c) modeling of the skill, (d) role-play of the skill with immediate corrective feedback by the teacher and peers, and (e) practice with the generalization of the skill to other people or environments (Johns et al; Goldstein & McGinnis; Gresham, Sugai, & Horner; Maag, 2005).

Effectiveness of Typical Social Skills Instructional Techniques
Although direct instruction of social skills is the accepted intervention for students with EBD, researchers have reported mixed results of its effectiveness (Bullis, Walker, & Sprague, 2001; Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001; Lane et al., 2006; Maag, 2005). Several conclusions and recommendations for practice relative to these mixed results have been suggested. First, social skills interventions often are universally applied to students with EBD without consideration of (a) whether the instruction is needed (e.g., pretest of student skills, observations of student) or, (b) the reason behind the skill deficit (e.g., knowledge related to the implementation of steps in the social skill, fluency in implementation of the skill, motivation to implement the skill) (Bullis, Walker, & Sprague; Gresham, Sugai, & Horner; Maag, 2005).

Another suggestion concerning social skill intervention effectiveness maintains that most direct instruction of social skills occurs in environments unrelated to natural implementation of the skill, which limits generalization into other situations (Johns, Crowley, & Guetzloe, 2005). Additionally, the skills being targeted for instruction may not be an appropriate or relevant replacement for the skills that students exhibit (Barton-Arwood et al., 2005; Maag, 2005). This may be because the replacement skill being taught does not provide the same reinforcement to the student as the skill being exhibited or the replacement skill is not culturally relevant to the

student, thereby limiting a student's motivation to use the skill (Cartledge, Kea, & Simmons-Reed, 2002; Cartledge & Loe, 2001; Hart et al., 2009).

Impact of Cultural and Linguistic Diversity on Social Skills Instruction
The literature related to interventions for teaching social skills in the school environment to students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is limited in scope (Cartledge, Singh, & Gibson, 2008). However, researchers agree that it is important to understand the culturally-based social skills that students are taught in the home and how they might be discrepant from the skills appropriate for school (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; Cartledge, Singh, & Gibson, 2008). It is important for educators to make these differences and discrepancies noticeable to students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and to support the development of skills appropriate for school while honoring the home cultures of the students by building skill development on skills that students' view as important for them to learn and relevant to their personal interactions.

Direct and explicit instruction of social skills to students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is an effective method for increasing understanding of targeted social skills (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; Cartledge & Loe, 2001; Cartledge, Singh, & Gibson, 2008; Chamberlain, 2005; Lo, Mustian, Brophy, & White, 2011). During this direct instruction, educators must make it obvious to students that learning school-appropriate social skills does not mean that the culturally-based social skills learned at home are inappropriate, rather they may not be the most effective skills to implement in the school environment (Cartledge & Loe, 2001); additionally, educators can make it clear that social skills being targeted for instruction are often closely related to the skills students' view as important within their home environments. Critical conversations about social skills used within different environments are important to show students that different sets of social skills, or varied nuanced implementations, operate at different times. One way to engage students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in this conversation is to include peer models from a similar background in the intervention (Lo et al., 2011).

When implementing social skills interventions for students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, research indicates it is important to consider the students' experiences and how they understand appropriate social interaction (Cartledge, Singh, & Gibson, 2008). To increase the effectiveness of the intervention, materials used during instruction should reflect the language and communication style of students as well as experiences relevant to their natural environment (Cartledge & Loe, 2001; Chamberlain, 2005). Interventions should reflect the cultural values of the home and community and should consider student perceptions of a skill's importance and relevance to their lives (Cartledge, Singh, & Gibson, 2008). Students who view a skill being learned as relevant and important are more likely to be engaged with the intervention process (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; Cartledge & Loe, 2001; Chamberlain, 2005).

To this end, the purpose of the present study was: (a) to identify perspectives of teachers and students with EBD in a self-contained school setting related to their perceptions of the importance of school-appropriate social skills and (b) to explore differences that may exist in these perceptions across gender, age, and ethnicity of students. Specifically, the following research questions were addressed: (a) What perspectives do teachers and students with EBD in a

self-contained school setting have related to the importance of school-appropriate social skills? (b) Are there any differences in the perceptions of students with EBD placed in a self-contained school setting related to the importance of social skills appropriate for use in the school environment among students of different genders, ages, and ethnicities? (c) Are there any differences in the perceptions of importance of social skills among teachers and students with EBD in a self-contained school setting?

Method

In order to answer the research questions, a survey research design was used to collect information about the perceptions of teachers and students with EBD in a self-contained school setting related to the importance of social skills. Participants were recruited from a self-contained school for students with EBD in a large urban school district located in the Southwest. Respondent data were analyzed both descriptively and using an analysis of variance to determine if there were any significant differences between groups of students based on age, ethnicity, or gender, and also if there were any differences between students and teachers.

Participants

The participants in this study were 50 students identified as having an emotional or behavioral disorder by a multidisciplinary team and who were receiving their educational services in a self-contained school setting; this setting was chosen as social skills interactions are important for this population to learn to move into lesser restrictive environments. All grade levels (e.g., elementary, middle, and high school) were reflected in student participants. Additionally, 18 teachers who worked at this self-contained school participated. Parent consent forms and a letter describing the study were discussed and sent home with students at the school by the principal and teaching staff. One week after the initial distribution of these consent materials, a second round of letters and consent forms were sent to parents. Once consent forms were signed and returned to the school, the teaching staff reviewed assent forms with the students and they were signed on the school site. Teacher consent forms were discussed and distributed by the research team at a faculty meeting after school. Only licensed special education teachers were included in this study. Demographic information for all participants is located in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Information for Student Participants

Demographic Characteristic	Number of Participants
Student Demographics (n = 50)	
Sex	
Male	42
Female	8
Ethnicity	
White	16
Non-white	34
Age	
9-14	29
15-22	21
Teacher Demographics (n = 18)	
Sex	
Male	3
Female	15
Ethnicity	
White	13
Non-white	5
Number of Years Teaching	
1-3	1
4-7	4
8-11	3
12 or more	10

The school in which the study was conducted is a self-contained school for students with emotional and behavioral problems. The school provides instruction for grades kindergarten through 12th grade. A special education teacher and an instructional assistant are assigned to each classroom, and a variety of intervention and behavior specialists also work at the school to support the emotional and behavioral needs of the students. The focus of instruction is on the emotional and behavioral needs of the students through academic, standards-based instruction. All students at the school are placed through an IEP team decision.

Instrumentation
To answer the research questions posed in this study, an adapted version of the adolescent and elementary *Modified Teacher/Staff Skillstreaming Questionnaire* (Dobbins et al., 2010; Goldstein & McGinnis, 1997) was used by teacher and student participants to determine their perceptions of the importance of social skills commonly taught through direct instruction curricula. Dobbins et al. (2010) granted permission to adapt the *Modified Teacher/Staff Skillstreaming Questionnaire* for use in this study. The modified questionnaire was developed from the original *Teacher/Staff Skillstreaming Questionnaires* from the elementary and adolescent versions of the *Skillstreaming* curricula (Goldstein & McGinnis, 1997; McGinnis & Goldstein, 1997). The modified questionnaire combined skills from the two versions of *Skillstreaming* and contained questions related to 87 social skills found in the curricula (Goldstein & McGinnis, 1997; McGinnis & Goldstein, 1997). The teachers were asked to rank the type and level of instruction they received in their preservice or inservice training related to these social skills. The statements were categorized into six categories, following the schema developed by the authors of *Skillstreaming* (Dobbins et al.). These categories were: (a) Classroom Survival Skills/Beginning Social Skills, (b) Friendship-Making Skills/Advanced Social Skills, (c) Skills for Dealing with Feelings, (d) Skill Alternatives to Aggression, (e) Skills for Dealing with Stress, and (f) Planning Skills.

The *Modified Teacher/Staff Skillstreaming Questionnaire* was revised to shorten and streamline the survey, which resulted in the *Perceptions of the Importance of Social Skills Questionnaire* used in this study. The final version of the revised questionnaire contained 47 statements (see Appendix A for the final version of the instrument); the categories used in the original questionnaire were maintained. Two versions of this questionnaire were developed (one for students and one for teachers), but both versions followed the same structure. Participants were provided with a stem at the beginning of each group; for students, the statement read "I think it is important for me to learn how to…" and for teachers it read "I think it is important for students to learn how to…". The stem was followed by a statement of the different social skills commonly taught to students with EBD (e.g., "I think it is important for me to learn how to make a complaint against someone else."). Participants were asked to rank their agreement with each statement on a 5-point Likert scale.

Since the participants in this study represented a wide grade-level span (e.g., elementary, middle, high), skills from the elementary and adolescent versions of the *Skillstreaming* curricula were analyzed. Specific statements that were found in both versions of the curricula were selected for inclusion in this study to ensure that the skills being analyzed were appropriate for the different age groups represented. Statements that were included in only the elementary or secondary versions were eliminated. Most of the skills addressed at the two different levels were similar in

structure. All statements were written at a 3rd-grade reading level to ensure access to the written material for all students participating.

In addition to the questions on the survey, students were asked to self-identify their ethnicity from a series of eight categories (e.g., African American, Asian American, Caucasian American, Latino/a American, Middle Eastern American, Native American, Pacific Islander, or Other); for age, students were asked to identify with one of four age categories (e.g., 9-11, 12-14, 15-18, 18-22). After data collection, it was found that there was not a large enough n in all categories of ethnicity for analysis, and some categories had an $n = 1$ (e.g., Latino/a American, Native American, Pacific Islander). For age, there were only 9 respondents in the 12-14 category and 5 respondents in the 18-22. Therefore, these categories were collapsed for analysis purposes. Students were given an identity code of White or Non-White based on their original identification, and were given an age code of 9-14 or 15-18.

Procedures
At this self-contained school, social skills instruction is a component of the daily schedule. With the assistance of the principal, teachers who taught social skills in grades 3-12 were recruited to conduct the survey during social skills instructional time. Only responses from students who had returned signed parental consent and student assent forms were included in the data analysis. Participating students were assigned an anonymous identification number that was used to deidentify their responses to the survey.

Paper versions of the surveys were distributed to students during their social skills instruction time during one instructional day; students who were not in attendance on that day were given the survey to complete on a make-up day later in the week. Teachers were given a protocol to read to students that stressed the voluntary nature of this survey and provided directions for its completion. Following the directions, the teachers read each statement aloud to support the comprehension of students who had reading difficulties; students could request the teacher reread statements for clarification. The research team was on campus during data collection to ensure the protocols were being followed and to address any concerns. Following the completion of the survey, teachers placed the student surveys in an envelope that was delivered to the research team for analysis. Teachers maintained a checklist of all students who returned consent and assent forms and ensured that all students completed the survey.

Results

Demographic information and responses from teachers and students to the *Perceptions of the Importance of Social Skills Questionnaire* were collected using the procedures described. The responses were entered into a database for descriptive and statistical analysis. A member of the research team verified 25% of the entered responses in the database to ensure the research team typed results correctly with a reliability of 100%.

The first research question focused on the perceptions of teachers and students with EBD related to the importance of the skills. Descriptive data were analyzed to determine the range and mean of scores of both groups of participants for each of the six categories of social skills; individual questions were not analyzed (see Table 2). Although there was a wide range in the mean

response score for each category of social skill, it is important to note that both students and teachers reported that they believed each of the social skills were important to know. Overall, respondents indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that the skills within the category were important to learn (student average of 3.87 or higher for each category; teacher average of 4.27 or higher for each category).

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of Student and Teacher Responses for Social Skills Categories

	Classroom Survival or Beginning Social Skills	Friendship-Making or Advanced Social Skills	Skills for Dealing with Feelings	Skill Alternatives to Aggression	Skills for Dealing with Stress	Planning Skills
Student						
Range	1.00 – 5.00	2.17 – 5.00	1.00 – 5.00	1.18 – 5.00	1.07 – 5.00	1.50 – 3.50
Mean	4.22	4.08	3.90	4.28	3.87	4.23
Teacher						
Range	4.00 – 5.00	3.60 – 5.00	3.00 – 5.00	3.60 – 5.00	2.79 – 5.00	3.50 – 5.00
Mean	4.62	4.45	4.54	4.54	4.27	4.58

Note. The range reports the mean low-and high scores related to the importance of social skills found in each of the six categories.

To determine if there was a statistically significant difference of overall student perceived importance of social skills across categories, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted (see Table 3). The results indicated there was a significant difference between reported perceptions of the importance of social skills across categories [$F(1,5) = 7.481$, $p < .001$]. Follow-up pairwise comparison tests indicated that there was a significant difference in respondents' perceptions of the importance of category 1 (Beginning Social Skills) and category 3 (Skills for Dealing with Feelings) ($p < .01$), as well as between category 1 and category 5 (Skills for Dealing with Stress) ($p < .01$) (see Table 4). This indicates that respondents felt that skills related to beginning social skills were more important than skills related to dealing with feelings and dealing with stress.

Table 3

Tests of Within-Subject Effects for Student Perceptions of the Importance of Social Skills

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Category	8.77	5	1.75	7.48	.000*
Error	49.22	210	.234		

Note. *$p < .05$.

Table 4

Pairwise Comparison Between Categories of Social Skills

Social Skills Categories	Mean Difference	Standard Error	Significance
Category 1 (Beginning Social Skills) and Category 3 (Skills for Dealing with Feelings)	0.36	0.84	.002*
Category 1 (Beginning Social Skills) and Category 5 (Skills for Dealing with Stress)	0.39	0.11	0.01*

Note. *$p > .05$.

The second research question attempted to ascertain if there were differences in the perceived importance of social skills across ages, genders, and ethnicities of students. Following data collection and analysis of student demographic data, it was determined there was not a large enough n across age and ethnicity groups to conduct an analysis. Therefore, the data were recoded within these two categories. For ethnicity, students were coded as either White or Non-white; for age, students were coded as either 9-14 or 15-21. To determine if there was a significant difference related to the perceived importance of social skills across age groups, a 6 (categories) x 2 (age) ANOVA was conducted (see Table 5). The results indicated that there was no significant difference between age groups [$F(1,1) = 1.00$, $p = .321$].

To determine if there was a significant difference related to the perceived importance of social skills across ethnicity groups, a 6 (categories) x 2 (ethnicity) ANOVA was conducted (see Table 6). The results indicated that there was no significant difference between students from different ethnic groups related to their perceived importance of social skills [$F(1,1) = 2.73$, $p = .105$]. Finally, to determine if there was a significant difference related to the perceived importance of social skills across genders, a 6 (categories) x 2 (gender) ANOVA was conducted (see Table 5). The results indicated that there was no significant difference between students of different genders related to their perceived importance of social skills [$F(1,1) = 1.210$, $p = .277$).

Table 5

Tests of Between-Subject Effects for Student Perceptions of the Importance of Social Skills

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Age	17.32	1	5.77	1.00	0.32
Error	151.54	48	3.16		
Ethnicity	0.94	1	0.94	2.73	0.11
Error	16.56	48	.0.35		
Gender	3.80	1	3.80	1.21	0.28
Error	150.91	48	3.14		

Note. p > .05.

The final research question dealt with any differences between students and teachers related to their perceived importance of social skills. To determine if there was a significant difference between the roles of participants related to their perceived importance of targeted social skills, a 6 (categories) x 2 (role) ANOVA was conducted (see Table 6). The results indicated that there was a significant difference between students and teachers in their reported perception of social skills [$F(1,1) = 5.054, p < .03$)]. This indicates that teachers felt that the social skills were more important to learn than students.

Table 6

Tests of Between-Subject Effects for Student and Teacher Perceptions of the Importance of Social Skills

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Social Skills x Role	5867.46	1	13.06	5.05	0.03*
Error	170.52	66	2.58		

Note.$*p > .05$.

Discussion

This study provides introductory evidence about the perceived importance of social skills that are commonly taught to students with EBD from both the student and teacher perspective. All participants felt that the social skills targeted for instruction were important, although teachers felt the skills were more important than students. There was some significant difference in perceived importance of specific categories of social skills, but students felt similarly about these social skills regardless of varied demographic variables. The findings from this study provide evidence that students with EBD find social skills to be important, thereby suggesting that motivation to learn these skills may not be a factor that is inhibiting mastery of the skills.

Overall Perceived Importance of Social Skills
The first research question explored the overall perceived importance of social skills that commonly targeted for instruction for students with EBD from both the perspective of the students and teachers who work with this population. Among students, there was a wide range of responses (2.83 to 4.00 point differences) across the six categories of social skills. For teachers, the range of responses was less drastic (1.00 to 2.21 point differences) across the categories. However, the average response for each category for both participant groups (e.g., students, teachers) was quite high (3.87 to 4.28 for students; 4.27 to 4.62 for teachers). These numbers indicate that both students and teachers felt that the commonly taught social skills were important to learn. Previous research suggests that one reason that the social skills interventions lack overall effectiveness could be that students have a lack of motivation to learn the skill or that the skill may not be culturally relevant to the student (Cartledge, Kea, & Simmons-Reed, 2002; Cartledge & Loe, 2001; Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001; Hart et al., 2009). Although this may be true for specific skills or based on the way the skill is taught to students, it appears that students think it is important to learn the social skills that have been identified by social skills curricula (e.g., Goldstein & McGinnis, 1997). This is important for teachers, as they may be able

to determine previous knowledge or experience with a particular social skill and make real-life connections for students when implementing social skills interventions.

Because the analysis of descriptive statistics suggested a larger range of means for student responses, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in student perceptions of the importance of specific categories of social skills. This analysis indicated that students felt that the skills within the category of Beginning Social Skills were significantly more important to learn than skills within the categories of Skills for Dealing with Feelings and Skills for Dealing with Stress. These findings support research that suggests that specific skills may not be as important or culturally relevant to students with EBD (Carledge, Kea, & Simmons-Reed, 2002; Cartledge & Loe, 2001; Hart et al., 2009). It is important to compare the findings from this ANOVA with the overall rankings of the perceived importance of social skills. Although students feel that the overall concept of social skills is important to learn, there may be specific skills that are targeted for intervention that are not relevant to students for a variety of reasons. This is important to consider when targeting social skills for instruction. It may be that the gathering of background information or discussion prior to instruction is necessary so that students understand why a specific skill is being targeted to increase the effectiveness of the overall intervention. Students who understand the reason behind the social skill instruction may be more likely to incorporate the prosocial skill into their overall interactions within their natural environment.

Perceived Importance of Social Skills across Demographic Categories
The second research question focused on determining whether or not there were any differences among the students with EBD of different ages, ethnicities, or genders in their perceptions of the importance of targeted social skills. Findings from the analysis of the student responses indicated that there was no significant difference in the perceived importance of social skills among students of different ethnicities, ages, or genders. In fact, the mean scores of students from different ethnic groups and ages were all within 0.2 points of each other in all categories except for the category of Advanced Social Skills, where there was a 0.5 point difference between the age categories. Although there was no significant difference between genders in the perceived importance of social skills, the mean score of female respondents was higher than that of male respondents by a range of 0.25 to 0.60 points in all categories except for the category of Planning Skills, in which male respondents had a higher perception of its importance than did female respondents. The lack of significance could be related to the small sample of female students who participated in the study ($n = 8$).

These findings are important as they provide further evidence that students with EBD appear to believe the targeted social skills commonly taught are important for them to learn, regardless of their demographic variables. Although the specific methods or steps in teaching these social skills were not analyzed in this study, students with EBD appear to feel that the overall social skills were of high importance for them to learn and master. All categories of social skills for all demographic groups had a mean of 3.70 or higher. Knowing that students with EBD, with a variety of demographic backgrounds, find social skills important to learn in the school environment, should provide educators with motivation to identify common ways that students use the social skills in natural environments.

Perceived Importance of Social Skills Among Teachers and Students
The final research question focused on determining whether or not there were differences between the importance of social skills as perceived by students with EBD and their teachers. The analysis indicated that the teachers felt that the social skills, overall, were more important for students to learn than the students did. The teachers indicated that the social skills within the category of Beginning Social Skills were more important for students to learn than social skills within the category of Skills for Dealing with Stress. When planning for social skills interventions, teachers should ensure that they develop a rationale for learning the targeted social skill, why it is important to learn, and where the social skill can be used within the students' everyday lives. Showing the overall connection of social skills and social competence, allows teachers to develop student understanding of the skills and how the skills will assist students in their natural environments. These findings also indicate that teachers may need to spend additional time developing the rationale and relevance behind social skills.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, the sample size was small ($n = 50$ for students, $n = 18$ for teachers) and was not balanced relative to demographic variables compared. In particular, the number of male students far outnumbered female students ($n = 42$ and $n = 8$, respectively). The sample was chosen from a population of students with EBD who attended a self-contained school and their teachers. Although return rates for students and teachers were both high (67% for students; 80% for teachers), the sample sizes were still low.

Second, the generalizability of findings is limited as the sample used in this study was students with EBD in a self-contained school setting. However, McLeskey, Landers, Williamson, and Hoppey (2010) found that students with EBD are much more likely to be educated in the general education or resource environment than segregated settings. Therefore, the perceptions of the importance of social skills of students in a separate school environment may not be reflective of the overall population. Future research should focus on the perceptions of importance of students with EBD from a variety of placement settings. This group of students was chosen for participation because they have been identified by IEP teams as having such severe emotional and behavioral problems that they cannot be educated on a regular school campus and their responses may provide important information about teaching students with EBD in self-contained settings. As such, the research team felt that the information provided by this sample would be reflective of the perceived importance of an extreme subsection of the population of students with EBD and would provide a baseline for further analysis of the perceived importance of commonly taught social skills. Future research should focus on a larger sample of students with EBD and should balance the demographic variables of respondents.

Conclusions and Implications for Research

To be academically and socially successful in school, it is important for students with emotional and behavioral disorders to understand and use social skills that are appropriate within these environments (Cumming et al., 2008; Konold et al., 2010). Interventions designed to address the social skills of students with EBD should focus on skills educators believe are appropriate for the school environment, but must consider the cultural and linguistic background of students in order

to determine if there is conflict between the implementation of the skill in school and at home (Cartledge et al., 2002; Hart et al., 2009; Siperstein et al., 2011). When planning for social skills interventions, a good starting point is to discuss the skills with students with EBD to determine their thoughts on the skill and the relevance of the skill to their lives.

This study is a beginning in understanding the perceived importance of social skills commonly deemed important to use within the school environments from the perspective of students with EBD and the teachers who work with them. Additionally, this study was designed to determine if there were any significant differences between students of different ethnicities, ages, and genders related to the perceived importance of the skills. The results of this study indicate that the students with EBD perceived certain social skills as being more important for them to learn than others (e.g., Beginning Social Skills are deemed as more important than Skills for Dealing with Stress). However, overwhelmingly, the students felt that all social skills were important for them to learn. This was true for all students regardless of their ethnicity, age, or gender. Therefore, the relevance of the skills themselves to the targeted student population may not be of issue. Findings from this study seem to indicate that commonly targeted social skills are relevant and important to students from a variety of different backgrounds.

Future research should continue to explore not only student perceptions of the importance of commonly targeted social skills, but also explore student perceptions of the way the social skills are taught within the school environment. Although the general skills discussed in this study were considered important by the student population, there was no information related to the methods used to teach the skills or the content of skill implementation within the natural environment. In order to increase the effectiveness of social skill intervention for students with EBD, it is important that the content of the skill be clearly linked to the cultural and natural environments in which students commonly engage (e.g., school, home, community) (Cartledge & Kourea, 2008; Chamberlain, 2005; Maag, 2005). While students might feel the skill is important, the topography of the skill being addressed should mirror the interactions that students have with individuals in their environments to allow for generalization of that skill. Future research should consider the divergence between social skills deemed appropriate for interaction in the school environment and the manners in which the skills are used in everyday life. Identification of these patterns can help target social skill interventions for the particular natural environment in which students interact, and, work towards increasing the likelihood that students will use the skills to impact the academic, social, and transition outcomes for this population.

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Appendix A.

Perceptions of the Importance of Social Skills Questionnaire

Directions. Read each statement. Rate your level of agreement with that statement based on the following scale:
- Circle 1 if you strongly disagree with the statement.
- Circle 2 if you somewhat disagree with the statement.
- Circle 3 if you are unsure of how you feel about the statement.
- Circle 4 if you somewhat agree with the statement.
- Circle 5 if you strong agree with the statement.

Group 1: Beginning Social Skills					
I think it is important for me to learn how to:	*Strongly Disagree*	*Somewhat Disagree*	*Unsure*	*Somewhat Agree*	*Strongly Agree*
1. Listen to others.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Start a conversation.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Have a conversation that is of interest to both people.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Ask an appropriate question.	1	2	3	4	5
5. Say thank you.	1	2	3	4	5
6. Introduce myself.	1	2	3	4	5
7. Introduce other people.	1	2	3	4	5
8. Give a compliment.	1	2	3	4	5

Group 2: Advanced Social Skills					
I think it is important for me to learn how to:	*Strongly Disagree*	*Somewhat Disagree*	*Unsure*	*Somewhat Agree*	*Strongly Agree*
9. Ask for help.	1	2	3	4	5
10. Join in on a desired activity.	1	2	3	4	5
11. Give instructions to others.	1	2	3	4	5
12. Follow instructions.	1	2	3	4	5
13. Apologize after doing something wrong.	1	2	3	4	5
14. Convince others that my idea is the best.	1	2	3	4	5

Group 3: Skills for Dealing with Feelings					
I think it is important for me to learn how to:	*Strongly Disagree*	*Somewhat Disagree*	*Unsure*	*Somewhat Agree*	*Strongly Agree*
15. Know and understand my feelings.	1	2	3	4	5
16. Express my feelings to someone else.	1	2	3	4	5
17. Understand the feelings of others.	1	2	3	4	5
18. Deal with someone else's anger.	1	2	3	4	5
19. Appropriately express affection.	1	2	3	4	5
20. Deal with fear.	1	2	3	4	5
21. Reward myself.	1	2	3	4	5

Group 4: Skill Alternatives to Aggression					
I think it is important for me to learn how to:	*Strongly Disagree*	*Somewhat Disagree*	*Unsure*	*Somewhat Agree*	*Strongly Agree*
22. Ask for permission.	1	2	3	4	5
23. Share things with other people.	1	2	3	4	5
24. Help others.	1	2	3	4	5
25. Negotiate ideas when I have a disagreement.	1	2	3	4	5
26. Use self-control when I am upset.	1	2	3	4	5
27. Stand up for my rights.	1	2	3	4	5
28. Respond to teasing.	1	2	3	4	5
29. Avoid trouble with others.	1	2	3	4	5
30. Keep out of fights.	1	2	3	4	5
31. Problem solve.	1	2	3	4	5
32. Accept the consequences of my behavior.	1	2	3	4	5

Group 5: Skills for Dealing with Stress					
I think it is important for me to learn how to:	*Strongly Disagree*	*Somewhat Disagree*	*Unsure*	*Somewhat Agree*	*Strongly Agree*
33. Make a complaint against someone else.	1	2	3	4	5
34. Answer a complaint against me.	1	2	3	4	5
35. Be a good sport during games or competitions.	1	2	3	4	5
36. Deal with embarrassment.	1	2	3	4	5
37. Deal with being left out.	1	2	3	4	5
37. Stand up for a friend.	1	2	3	4	5
38. Respond to persuasion from someone else.	1	2	3	4	5
39. Respond to failure.	1	2	3	4	5
40. Deal with contradictory messages or confusion.	1	2	3	4	5
41. Deal with an accusation.	1	2	3	4	5
42. Get ready for a difficult conversation.	1	2	3	4	5
43. Deal with group pressure.	1	2	3	4	5

44. Deal with boredom.	1	2	3	4	5
45. Decide on the cause of a problem.	1	2	3	4	5

Group 6: Planning Skills					
I think it is important for me to learn how to:	*Strongly Disagree*	*Somewhat Disagree*	*Unsure*	*Somewhat Agree*	*Strongly Agree*
46. Arrange problems by their importance.	1	2	3	4	5
47. Make a decision.	1	2	3	4	5