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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Results of a Survey and Follow-up Interview with Head Start Staff Concerning Social Skills Instruction in Preschool Classrooms

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Failure to promote preschoolers' social competence can lead to significant deficits in social skills development, school readiness, and academic success. While early childhood teachers play an essential role in fostering children's social competence, there is limited research available about the value teachers place on social skill instruction and the instructional strategies they use. This study employed a survey and interviews to investigate the practices used by five Head Start (HS) programs in the Mid-Atlantic region to promote childrens' social competence. Results indicated that respondents: (a) identified peer interaction and friendship skills most often as important social skills to teach; (b) reported using classroomwide and naturalistic interventions to teach these skills; and (c) described challenges to addressing children's social skill needs. Implications of these findings for preschool programs are discussed in terms of professional development to support teachers to implement evidence-based social skill methods.

Social competence is defined as a multidimensional construct that includes: a) peer interactions (e.g., conversation, cooperative play, language skills), b) emotional and behavioral regulation, and c) the use of appropriate behavior in challenging situations (e.g., during conflicts) (Brown, Odom, McConnell, & Rathel, 2008; Raver & Zigler, 1997). The Office of Head Start (HS) in their Head Start Child Outcomes Framework (2010) includes social-emotional development as a curricular focus with domains and indicators reflecting all of these constructs (e.g., social relationships, self-control or self-regulation). Previous research has shown that children from low-income households are at a greater risk for developing problem behaviors and having lower social competence (Qi & Kaiser, 2003); this creates a challenge for programs, such as HS to meet children's needs in all developmental domains including social and emotional development.

Children's level of social competence has been shown to affect school readiness and future academic success (Denham, 2006; Peth-Pierce, 2000). However, many early childhood programs, including HS programs, are not adequately prepared to meet the needs of children with low social competence (Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption, and Dependent Care, 2005; Kaufmann & Wischmann, 1999). Unfortunately, children with social competence difficulties are often removed from programs or are at risk for being removed as a result of their problem behavior (Gilliam, 2005; Raver & Knitzer, 2002). Specifically, in a national study,

Gilliam found that on average 6.7 per 1,000 preschool children were expelled for their challenging behavior. More recently, Quesenberry, Hemmeter & Ostrosky (2011) found that five out of the six HS programs they studied, expelled children with intensive behavioral concerns. Snell and colleagues (2012) found similar practices were reported to be used by administrators and staff they interviewed in some HS programs. Given that HS programs were developed to promote school readiness for low-income preschool-age children, it is important to assess the extent to which teachers value and promote social competence in HS classrooms and to identify ways to support HS staff to address children's social emotional needs to prevent these expulsions.

Limited research has investigated teachers' perceptions of the value of social skills as a curricular focus or how these beliefs affect their observed practices of social skills instruction in the preschool classroom. Research that is available indicates that teachers rate social skills as being highly important in the preschool curriculum (Baumgart, Filler, & Askvig, 1991; West, Brown, Grego, & Johnson, 2007), but social skill instruction receives less emphasis due to the increased pressure to focus on academic skills (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Elkind, 2001; Stipek, 2006). Appl and Spenciner (2008) examined preservice teachers' perceptions of teaching social skills in the preschool classroom. In this study, participants who were close to the completion of their teacher education program believed that teachers should take a more active role in teaching social skills, but newly admitted preservice participants believed that teachers should not become involved. This is troublesome as research has documented that children without adequate social skills are at-risk for: a) experiencing difficulties in interpersonal relationships with adults and peers; b) evoking highly negative responses from others due to their problem behavior; and c) showing a higher incidence of peer rejection (Mize, 2005).

The early childhood (EC) environment provides an important context for the development of children's social competence. The EC teacher, who has been called the "critical factor" in the classroom environment (Hestenes & Carroll, 2000), is uniquely positioned to support children's social skill development in the classroom context. A skilled and observant teacher can select intervention strategies to meet the needs of individual children and the demands of the classroom environment. *Program-wide Positive Behavior Support* (PWPBS), often depicted as a pyramid with three tiers of increasing intervention intensity, provides a conceptual framework for the selection of strategies tailored to children's differing needs (Frey, Young, Gold, & Trevor, 2008). PWPBS is the implementation of behavioral support strategies, along a continuum of intensity, through a process that is focused on social behavior instruction, guided by data-based decision making, and consistently implemented across preschool environments (Stormont, Lewis, Beckner, & Johnson, 2008). Tier 1 or universal PBS intervention involves a comprehensive set of strategies that are implemented with *all* children in a program. These strategies include prevention methods (e.g., teaching behavior expectations, creating developmentally appropriate environments), strategies to support positive teacher-child relationships, and classroomwide social skill interventions (e.g., the use of social competence curricula) (Brown, Odom & Conroy, 2001; Brown, Odom & McConnell, 2008; DEC, 2007, DEC, 2009, Fox et al., 2003; Lewis, Beckner, & Stormont, 2009). The main focus is on the prevention of problem behaviors, providing early intervention for those at-risk, and creating environments that will lead to improved small-group and individual intervention outcomes.

Tier 2 and 3 PBS interventions involve targeted social skills instruction for smaller numbers of children with more extreme problem behavior and social limitations (e.g., Bambara & Kern, 2005; Fox et al., 2003, Fox, Carta, Strain, Dunlap & Hemmeter, 2009). Social skill

instruction methods could include naturalistic interventions (e.g., providing on-the-spot social support during peer interactions, assisting children in peer conflicts) or explicit social skills instruction (e.g., providing prompts to target children, teaching peers to play with target children). Tier 2 PWPBS focuses on the 10% to 15% of students who continue to display problem behaviors even with Tier 1 strategies in place (Sugai, Horner, Lewis, & Cheney, 2002). Through the use of data-decision rules, students are identified before problem behaviors become severe and chronic and receive explicit social skills instruction (Stormont et al., 2008). Tier 3 interventions typically serve 5% to 7% of students who display serious and chronic behavioral challenges (Lewis, Sugai, & Colvin, 1998). PWPBS begins with classroom-wide strategies first and then, if needed, moves to more individualized, higher-intensity strategies.

Surprisingly little is known about the methods preschool teachers use to promote children's social competence (e.g., arranging the environment, encouraging peer interactions for friendship building, or modeling appropriate social behaviors (Buysse, Goldman, & Skinner, 2003). Professional development materials related to social competence training have been developed for early childhood teachers (e.g., Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning, 2011; Center to Mobilize Early Childhood Knowledge, 2011). These professional development materials have well-scripted training sequences and problem-solving activities to assist teachers in social skills training during the everyday classroom routines. Despite the value that teachers place on children's social competence, researchers have reported that the majority of teachers do not extensively employ social skills interventions in the classroom (Brown & Conroy, 2001; McConnell, McEvoy, & Odom, 1992). For example, McConnell and colleagues (1992) used direct observation methods to determine if EC preschool teachers frequently used evidence-based social skills intervention to promote peer interactions in their classrooms. They observed low to moderate intervention implementation and found that teachers were less likely to implement targeted and individualized interventions (e.g., explicit social skills instruction) than more global intervention approaches (e.g., environmental arrangements, discussions of appropriate social behavior). West et al. (2007) asked Division of Early Childhood members to rate the acceptability, feasibility, and use of peer interaction interventions. While the majority of these interventions were rated as acceptable, members' ratings of their actual use of many of the strategies were lower than ratings of their perceived value. Additional research is needed to learn about practices used in early childhood programs to promote children's social skills and to examine whether a tiered model is used to individualize instruction based on children's needs .

In the current study, the researchers used a survey and interviews to investigate the practices used by five Head Start (HS) programs in the Mid-Atlantic region to address children's problem behavior and promote children's social competence. The purpose of collecting this information was to design an intervention and training package based on a PBS framework that would be feasible for use in HS programs. We began by administering a survey that included open-ended questions and classroom scenarios designed to gain an understanding of HS staff's discipline and social skills instruction issues and practices. Surveys are commonly viewed as an effective method to gather information from a large number of people, and, if well-designed, surveys provide constructive program planning information (Snyder & Wolfe, 2008). Interviews were also conducted with forty-five HS staff from the same programs to collect more detailed information about their practices and the challenges they faced in regard to addressing problem behavior and promoting children's social competence. We were interested in knowing whether the follow-up interviews would meaningfully extend and also agree with our survey findings.

This paper focuses on three research aims related to social skill instruction that were part of our larger study. (Refer to Snell, Berlin, Voorhees, Stanton-Chapman, & Hadden 2012 and Snell, Voorhees, Berlin, Stanton-Chapman, Hadden, & McCarty 2012) for study aims related to discipline practices). The first aim was to identify HS staff perceptions regarding the most important social skills to address for young children. The second aim was to identify the strategies HS programs use to teach social skills. The third aim was to identify challenges to providing social skill instruction. With the social-emotional competence focus of HS (Hyson, 2003; Raver & Zigler, 1997; Yoshikawa & Knitzer, 1997), we expected the majority of the respondents to identify important social skills to teach in the classroom. However, with increased focus in early childhood programs on pre-academics we also expected staff to identify challenges or issues regarding social skill instruction. Additionally, while we anticipated staff would identify strategies they used to teach social skills, we did not expect these strategies would utilize the hierarchy recommended for promoting young children's peer interactions (Brown et al., 2001; Brown et al., 2008; Stormont, Lewis, Beckner, & Johnson, 2008). The overall purpose of this study was to obtain information relevant to designing effective professional development activities for the implementation of PWPBS within Head Start programs that would be sensitive to program policies and teacher needs.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 108 EC educators, early childhood special educators (ECSE), assistant teachers, and other program staff (e.g., mental, behavior or family specialists; directors; coordinators) from five HS programs agreed to participate in this study. Seventy-eight of these participants completed the survey; the 30 respondents who did not complete the survey did not differ statistically from the participating sample. We requested participation from teachers, assistant teachers, and other program staff because each of these staff members had the potential to influence the way that social skills were addressed in the program. All participants worked in HS programs with children ages 3-5 years in a mid-Atlantic state. The number of classrooms varied across the five programs (range 9- 26) with an average of 17.6 children in each classroom. Between 8% to 15% of the children enrolled in each program had identified disabilities, most often categorized as speech and language impairments or global developmental delays and less often as autism or physical disabilities. The programs were operated by either the public schools (N = 2) or community organizations (N = 3) and were typically led by a lead teacher and an assistant teacher. Classrooms were located in child care centers, elementary school buildings, and in buildings that only housed preschool classrooms. Approval from an university Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained for both the survey and the interview portions of the study. Survey participation was anonymous. Participants gave consent for participation by agreeing to take the survey but signatures were not collected to protect anonymity. Verbal consent was obtained for the study's interview portion to protect participants due to the sensitivity of their answers.

The survey respondents varied in terms of position, experience, education, and specialized training. Table 1 presents demographic information for survey participants. Thirty-eight of these respondents described themselves as classroom teachers, 25 as assistant teachers,

and the remaining 15 reported that they were in supervisory or consulting positions within the program (e.g., program directors, coaching and mentoring trainers, mental health specialists). The participants were primarily females between 36 and 55 years old with the majority (45%) having from six to over 16 years of experience working with young children. Forty-five participants (58%) described themselves as White/Non-Hispanic, 26 (33%) described themselves as African-American/Black, and 2 (3%) described themselves as Hispanic/Latino/Latina. Forty-five participants from across the five programs were interviewed: administrators (N = 9), teachers (N = 11), teaching assistants (N= 10), behavior specialists (N = 4), mental health specialists (N = 3), family support staff (N = 5), and collaborating partner staff (N = 3). Of the 45 participants, 15 also had completed the survey (1 administrator, 14 other staff members). All of the interview participants were from the same HS sites as the survey participants. Demographic information was not collected for the interview participants due to a request from the university's IRB. The university IRB felt school districts would be able to identify participants if their demographic information was recorded. Given the sensitivity of responses, we agreed to this request.

TABLE 1
Demographic Information for Survey Participants

	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Position		
Classroom Teacher	38	48.7%
Classroom Assistant	25	32.1%
Other Role	15	19.2%
Number of Years in Current Position		
0-2 years	33	42.3%
3-5 years	22	28.2%
6-10 years	13	16.7%
11-15 years	6	7.7%
16+ years	4	5.1%
Number of Years Working with Young Children		
0-2 years	6	7.7%
3-5 years	17	21.8%
6-10 years	22	28.2%
11-15 years	9	11.5%
16+ years	24	30.8%
Highest Level of Education		
High School/GED	20	25.6%
Child Development Associate (CDA)	6	7.7%
Associate's Degree	10	12.8%
Bachelor's Degree	21	26.9%
Master's Degree	15	19.2%
Other	6	7.7%
Gender		
Male	2	2.6%
Female	76	97.4%
Age		
18-25 years	5	6.4%
26-35 years	16	20.5%
36-45 years	24	30.8%
46-55 years	23	29.5%
56-65 years	7	9.0%
65+ years	2	2.6%
Skipped Question	1	1.3%
Race/Ethnicity		
White/Non-Hispanic	45	57.7%
African-American/Black	26	33.3%
Hispanic/Latino/Latina	2	2.6%
Asian/Pacific Islander	1	1.3%
Bi-racial	1	1.3%
Native American	0	0%
Skipped Question	1	1.3%

Procedures

Surveys. Teachers, assistant teachers, and specialists were recruited for survey participation through their program directors. Letters were first sent to program directors requesting their permission to participate in the study. Once permission was obtained from program directors, project staff attended a staff meeting for additional participant recruitment. All participants who agreed to participate in the study completed an anonymous internet-based survey of HS staff beliefs about discipline, social skills, and classroom practices. Those who did not have access to a computer or felt uncomfortable using a computer were given the option of completing a paper-based survey. Most participants (N=69) completed an internet-based form, but a few (N=9) completed a paper-based version of the same survey. Both versions of the survey took about 30 minutes to complete, with a range of 20 to 45 minutes. Completed paper-based surveys were mailed to project staff to protect anonymity. There were no demographic differences between participants who completed the online survey versus those who completed the paper-based survey.

Participants received an incentive for participation. Once they completed the online or paper-based survey, they submitted a stamped postcard with their contact information to the university. We then mailed a $5 gift card to their preferred address. Participants were made aware that they were not obligated to submit a postcard if they were concerned about their anonymity.

Interviews. As previously noted, nine program administrators (directors and coordinators) from each of the five programs were interviewed in order to gain an overview and understanding of their program practices and policies. Next, administrators from each program nominated staff members who were involved in providing support to children or families regarding behavior or social issues to be interviewed; this included teachers (N=11), teaching assistants (N=10, a mental health or behavior specialists (N=7), family service specialists (N=5) and collaborating program staff (N=3). All HS staff who were asked to complete interviews agreed to participate. They received a $100 gift card for their participation.

Interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes. Teachers, assistant teachers, and specialists were interviewed separately with the exception of one classroom team who requested a joint interview. All interviews were audio recorded with participants' consent and were transcribed verbatim by research assistants who were blind to the hypotheses of the study. The interviews were conducted by project staff who held doctoral degrees in education and had extensive ECSE classroom experience or by doctoral students.

Measures

Survey. The Social Competence in Preschool Survey (Berlin, Hadden, & Voorhees, 2008) was developed to gather information on participants' perceptions of discipline and social skills in the classrooms and their responses to these behaviors. The survey was reviewed by a group of experts (e.g., program directors and ECSE professionals not participating in the study; university professors with expertise in ECSE, teacher attitudes and beliefs, positive behavior support, and developmentally appropriate practices) and revised based on their input. The revised survey was then piloted with 17 staff (teachers, assistant teachers, mental health

specialists, and program directors) from two HS programs that were not participating in the current study; final revisions were made based on their input. For more information regarding the survey measure, please refer to Snell, Berlin et al., (2012).

The survey was placed on an internet-based platform (Survey Monkey™) but was made available in paper form. The survey included 10 demographic questions (e.g., gender, age, race, education, years of teaching experience); five open-ended questions (e.g., what are the top three challenging behaviors you face in your classroom?; what strategies are you currently using to teach social skills?); and six classroom scenarios. This paper reports only on survey participants' data from one open-ended question (*give two examples of what you do to encourage positive interactions between children in your classroom)* and two conflict scenarios designed to provide an indication of how staff foster peer interaction and would respond to challenging social skills situations. The *first conflict scenario* was "Lissy is a little girl with significant language delays. One day the teacher notices that she is standing off to the side while the other children play house in the dramatic play area. What should the teacher do?" The *second conflict scenario* was "On the playground, the teacher notices Brenda and Juan arguing over a ball. Brenda tells Juan that she does not want to be his friend anymore. What should the teacher do?" The participants were expected to provide a narrative addressing how they would handle this situation if they were present in this situation.

Interview. Interviews were used to gather more in-depth information about HS staff views regarding social skill instruction; there were some variations in wording for program staff and teachers (Voorhees, Berlin, & Hadden, 2008). Our two primary questions for the current study were*: "What are the most important social skills taught in the classroom?"* and *"Tell me about any specific social skills curricula that are used in your classroom."* We included standard probes (follow-up questions to gather additional information about how the curricula were implemented, how social skills were taught within classroom activities, and the challenges to curricula implementation and social skills instruction).

Data Analysis

Open-ended Survey Questions. The open-ended questions and the conflict scenarios were coded by two project staff members who held doctorate degrees in education. Responses were coded at the word or phrase level to capture the social skills the respondents were describing (e.g., sharing toys, positive interactions). To develop the a priori categories that guided the full content analysis, one researcher reviewed 20 responses (25% of respondents) for each open ended question (classroom practices and classroom situations) and noted key ideas that were represented in each of the 20 responses. Responses were sampled across time points to ensure that responses did not over represent a particular program. Analysis was conducted at a "unit of meaning" level so one response could have contained multiple key ideas.

The researcher then reviewed the key ideas looking for similarities across respondents in order to develop initial categories or themes. Once themes were identified, the researcher defined the themes using exemplars from the responses that had already been reviewed. Responses that represented discrete units of thought that did not answer the question posed were sorted into a miscellaneous category to be reviewed at a later date. Once these initial themes were developed, the first and second researchers reviewed an additional sample of responses (30%) to determine

the extent to which the themes were also evident in this additional sample. The researchers independently coded the responses using the list of a priori categories that were developed by the first researcher. The researchers then met to discuss and refine the categories. These refined categories were then used to code all of the responses using the NVivo (QSR International, 2008) software program. The 78 surveys were then coded using the NVivo software and 20% (16 surveys) were double-coded for reliability purposes yielding an inter-rater reliability of 80%.

Conflict Scenario Survey Questions. With the guidance of a qualitative methodologist, project staff developed a scoring rubric to be used to rate the survey responses within the conflict scenario section of the survey. The rubric went through seven iterations during its development. Two to three raters who scored a sample of survey responses tested each version. Refinements to the rubric were made after reviewing the raters' agreement level at each stage of development. The final version was tested by three raters who reached an agreement level of 90% on a selection of 60 responses. We used a PBS Prevent-Teach-Reinforce framework (Dunlap, Lovannone, & English, 2009) to create the anchors within the rubric. Descriptive examples for high, medium and low anchors were developed for each question to assist with the coding process. Participants' responses were rated as low (e.g., response addresses the social issue in a reactive manner; response doesn't answer the question), medium (e.g., response addresses the immediate problem in a constructive manner using universal interventions such as referring to a social skills curricula or influencing the structure of social groups), or high (e.g., response shows thought and reflection about the individual child's behavior or situation such as prompting the target child to respond in a certain way or teaching peers how to interact with the target child).

The rubric was sent to two experts in the field of ECSE to review and validate. Two main questions were answered as part of this validation process: a) Are the rubric categories and descriptions appropriate (e.g. Does the content make sense?), and b) Have we sorted the sample responses appropriately into the high, medium, and low categories? Once feedback was received from the field experts, the 78 conflict scenarios were coded by two project staff who held doctorate degrees in ECSE. Sixteen conflict scenarios (20%) were double-coded for reliability purposes. Interobserver agreement (IOA) for the reliability sessions was 97.5%.

Interviews. We used recommended qualitative research methods (Barnett, Bell, & Carey 1999) to ensure the trustworthiness of our findings. More specifically, to ensure credibility we: a) used "rich data" or transcriptions of tape recorded interviews, rather than post-interview notes; b) obtained member checks by sending transcribed interviews and our conclusions to interviewees for confirmation; c) triangulated interview findings with observations in interviewee's classrooms, and d) used a peer debriefer to give feedback on methodological issues (e.g., potential inquirer bias on data analysis). A student research assistant transcribed each interview; then to ensure accuracy, an experienced research team member listened to the tapes while reviewing each corresponding transcription. Few errors were identified, however, if errors were found or if audiotape segments were found to be unintelligible, the researcher who conducted the interview listened to the tape segment and made corrections.

Next, a systematic and verifiable process was used to develop analytic categories (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and to code the data using NVivo, a computer-assisted program. Two research staff read all of the interviews from one HS program and developed a list of seven a priori categories that were based on: a) this initial review of the transcripts, b) the purpose of the

interviews, and c) the interview questions. Next, the two staff developed specific definitions for each category and used these definitions to independently code interviews from one randomly selected HS program. After they each had coded one or two interviews the researchers met to compare and discuss their codes and to resolve any disagreements by further defining codes. This review and discussion resulted in changes to the primary categories and the addition of subcategories to best depict emerging patterns across programs. The final coding categories included ones related to problem behavior and discipline practices (refer to Snell, Voorhees, et al., 2012) and social skills instructional practices; but only the categories pertaining to this study are reported here. These included: a) *social:* most important social skills to teach*;* b) *universal strategies:* methods that are used to support social-emotional development for all children in the classroom; and c) *challenges:* barriers to supporting children's social-emotional skills (e.g., what challenges, if any, do you have in teaching social skills to your students?). Since codes were based on teacher responses and not on the three levels of intervention, secondary and tertiary level codes were not developed as teachers indicated strategies that they use for *all* students rather than a select few. The researchers used these finalized categories to recode all of the interviews from this initial HS program and then independently coded all of the interviews from a second HS program. They reached 100% agreement on the primary and secondary categories for both sets of interviews. These data were then entered and sorted by categories using NVivo.

Next, one of the researchers coded the interviews from each of the other three programs and entered and sorted the data using NVivo. The second researcher reviewed all of the coded data for these three programs and discussed the codes with the first researcher to resolve any disagreements. The researchers reached 100% agreement on the coded categories. Matrices were developed to summarize the interview data for each program. Additionally, cross program matrices were developed to compare responses across programs. For more information regarding the interview measure, please refer to Snell, Berlin et al., 2012.

RESULTS

Survey Data

Survey participants were asked to *"Give two examples of what you do to encourage positive interactions between children in your classroom".* Table 2 presents the response data for this question. Since respondents were asked to provide two examples, percentages do not equal 100%. Seventeen respondents (22%) provided one response only, and 12 answers were too vague to code properly. The most frequent categories of responses were (a) naturalistic peer interaction strategies: facilitation of social interactions and encouraging children to talk (N=35, 45 %), role plays and modeling (N=23, 29%), talking about feelings or encouraging children to use their words (N=16, 21%), or (b) classroomwide interventions: organizational strategies (e.g., scheduling time for small groups, setting up the physical environment to allow for interactions, N=22, 27%), and social skills curriculum (N=12, 15%).

TABLE 2
Number and Percentage of Teacher Strategies Reported by Survey Respondents to Encourage Positive Interactions Between Children

Teacher Strategies	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Respondents
Classroomwide Interventions		
Organization strategies	22	27%
Uses social skills curricula	12	15%
Talks about friendships	7	9%
Naturalistic Peer Interaction Interventions		
Facilitation of social interactions and encouraging children to talk	35	45%
Role plays and modeling	23	29%
Talks about feelings and encourages children to use their words	16	21%
Helps children work through disputes and problem solves	8	10%
Redirects when children are not interacting properly	2	3%

For purposes of this study, teachers responded to two conflict scenarios that addressed social skills. These scenarios provided an indication of how staff would foster positive peer interaction and respond to challenging social situations in the classroom. These data were analyzed by qualitative methodology and the scoring rubric of low, medium and high described earlier. For the first conflict scenario where a child with language delays is not joining in play in the house center, 17 participants (18%) received a high score for their response. Examples of highly rated responses included provide Lissy with a way to communicate such as pictures or a visual communication system, and model play skills with Lissy using storybooks and puppets. These responses reflect explicit social skills interventions. Sixty-four participants (82%) received a medium score for their response. Examples of medium responses included engage Lissy in one-to-one play with a teacher, reinforce and praise all social interactions between Lissy and her peers, and enlist the help of others such as the speech-language pathologist. These responses reflect naturalistic peer interaction interventions. None of the participants received a low score on the first conflict scenario.

For the second conflict scenario where two children were arguing over a ball and one child told the other she did not want to be his friend, nine participants (12%) received a high score for their response. Examples of highly rated responses included talking with Brenda about the problem and asking how she feels about the situation, helping Brenda and Juan come up with solutions to the problem, and having discussions about feelings and friendships in order to work out the problem. These responses reflect naturalistic peer interaction interventions. Sixty-three participants (81%) received a medium score for their response. Medium rated responses included allowing the children to problem-solve on their own and using social stories with the children. These responses reflect a combination of naturalistic peer interaction interventions and

classroomwide interventions. Six participants (7%) received low scores for their response to the second conflict scenario. Low rated response examples included stopping the interaction and taking the ball from the children and telling the children to apologize to one another.

Interview Results

Important social skills for children to learn. Interview participants were asked to respond to open-ended questions concerning social skills. Results were analyzed by program for two reasons. First, the university IRB wanted to make sure interview participants remained anonymous to the fullest extent possible. We felt analyzing data by program rather than individually would allow this to occur. Second, programs tend to follow certain curricula, philosophies, and procedures. We wanted to see how programs differed rather than individuals. When asked *"What are the most important social skills for children to learn?"* the majority of participants (60%; teachers, teaching assistants and mental health or behavior specialists) responded with statements that were categorized as peer interaction and friendship skills. Examples of skills in this category included sharing, getting along with peers, learning how to interact and communicate with peers, respecting one another, taking turns, cooperating and being good friends. For example, a mental health specialist identified the most important social skills as: *"Getting children to share and just respect one another and use their words to communicate*." One teacher commented: *"Communication is important. How can they possibly be friends if they can't speak to one another?"* A second teacher listed: "V*erbalization…cause if you can't express yourself in one way or another, hopefully in a more positive manner…then you are going to run into problems".*

A variety of reasons were provided for the importance of these skills. For example, one teacher explained, *"Some of them don't have siblings and have never been in daycare, so I think it's really important to let the children know that we are all here to work together and we're all friends."* A teaching assistant indicated: *"With this age group it is important to get them socially ready…with their peers and for kindergarten*." Other social skills that were considered important but mentioned less often were categorized as behavior control (34%, recognizing and expressing feelings, respecting boundaries, keeping hands to self), and social problem-solving (12%, conflict resolution, working out problems with peers, making good choices).

Curricula used to teach social skills. Interviewees were also asked to describe the curriculum they used (if any) to teach social skills to all children in the classroom. Four out of the five programs indicated that they used the *Al's Pals Curriculum*[1] (Wingspan, 2004). One of these programs also used the *Second Step* curriculum[1] (2007). The fifth program used *I Can Problem Solve*[1] (Shure, 1992) as the program-wide social-emotional curriculum but some teachers and guidance counselors used *Al's Pals* as a supplement. The 46 lessons in the *Al's Pals Curriculum* are conducted twice a week lasting 10-15 minutes and extend over a 23-week period; lessons focus on skills such as recognizing and dealing with emotions and social problem-solving. The curriculum makes use of creative role plays, puppets, music, and movement as a substance abuse prevention program, but many viewed the program as a good tool for promoting social-emotional development. The majority of interviewees indicated that they like the *Al's Pals Curriculum* because "*it relates to kids and the children learn a lot"* and "*puppets seem so*

real that it doesn't seem like it is the teacher telling you…it's this fun little character telling you what to do or what not to do".

Interviewees also described specific instructional strategies they used to teach social skills during classroom activities; these are summarized in Table 3. In regard to methods for teaching children about emotions, resolving conflict, and social problem-solving most respondents from all five programs described strategies from their class-wide social skills curriculum (e.g., calm down and problem-solving steps, the use of Al's Place as a quiet place for children to calm down). Some teachers noted that it was hard to teach social skills without a specific curriculum such as *Al's Pals*. Responses regarding strategies to promote peer interaction and friendship skills were similar to survey responses but did not mention the use of a specific curriculum. Classroomwide techniques were described by respondents from four programs. Reading books about friendship, acting out stories, and discussions with children about friendship were mentioned by staff from three programs. One teacher noted: "*Our big motto in class is that we are all friends. We don't have to play with each other to be friends but we all get along and respect each other."* Staff in two programs mentioned organizational strategies: arrangement of physical space (e.g., setting up centers that would promote interaction such as restaurant, providing space for two or more children to play in each center) and planned activities (e.g., board games and paired peers). For example, one teacher noted: "*Sometimes we have a buddy day and I say, go get your special friend…to go to dramatic play."* Naturalistic interventions (e.g., modeling and providing play suggestions) were mentioned by staff from all five programs. A teacher in the program that described the richest variety of strategies commented: *"We just do it as we need to."* A teacher from another program explained: "*If they do things, I'll say-friends don't like to be hit and you are going to make your friend upset and they won't want to play with you…If someone was doing those kinds of things to you, you would be sad…teachable moments."*

TABLE 3.
Categories of Interview Responses Regarding Social Skill Instruction Methods and Challenges

Theme Categories	Number of Programs
Social Skill Instruction Methods	
Social skills curricula	5
techniques (calm down &, problem-solving steps)	
Modeling appropriate skills	5
Providing play suggestions	5
Friendship activities (e.g., reading books, acting out stories, and discussions about friendship)	4
Organizational strategies: (e.g., arrangement of physical space planned activities).	2
Social Skill Instruction Challenges	
Social-emotional curricula implementation issues (scripted, need for extensive training)	5
Meeting individual children's social-emotional needs	3
Increased pressure to teach academics	3

Challenges when using a social-emotional curriculum. Participants also identified challenges to the use of a social-emotional curriculum or to social skills instruction (refer to Table 3). Three types of challenges were mentioned most often. Staff from all five programs mentioned specific challenges in regard to using a program-wide curriculum. While interview respondents considered the Al's Pals curriculum to be valuable, some also indicated that it can be a challenging program to implement because it is scripted and requires extensive training to use. For example, a mental health specialist noted: *"The teachers feel like they cannot go off the script even if they feel like the kids aren't going to get it*." An administrator responded, "*Teachers must be trained to use Al's Pals. Many of our new staff are not able to receive the training because the training often conflicts with other Head Start trainings. They cannot participate [in Al's Pals] without the training."* In two programs, social skills lessons were delivered by someone other than classroom teacher, as is the case in a program where the guidance counselor visited the class twice a week to do the *Al's Pals* lesson. Several teachers expressed concern that children seemed to understand the *Al's Pals* lessons but did not integrate these skills into classroom activities, indicating that these social-emotional skill lessons did not generalize on their own. One teacher expressed her worry about her students learning the target skills through curriculum songs: "*I think with Al's Pals, the challenge is, you teach the lessons and then sometimes, the kids get the song but they don't get the step."* Program staff also had concerns about the curriculum's effectiveness for children with significant problem behavior. One mental health specialist indicated, "*I don't see Al's Pals working beyond children with mild behaviors…when it gets to moderate or severe behaviors....Al's is out the door".*

Interview participants in three out of the five programs discussed the challenge of meeting children's social-emotional needs and the need for classroom staff to use more individualized strategies. An administrator noted: "*Approximately 10-20% of the children…could benefit from a more intensive social skills curriculum."* A behavior specialist noted that some classroom staff do not understand the need for explicit social skill instruction for children with severe and persistent problem behavior; these staff feel that children should be punished for misbehavior rather than taught how to behave. She explained: "*Trying to work with teachers in understanding that just like we need academic modification and differentiation sometimes we need differentiation for behavior.* [Teachers] *are very willing to give a child modified scissors if they have fine motor difficulty [and use] hand over hand [prompting] but giving that different expectation for behavior seems harder."*

An additional challenge mentioned by staff in three out of the five programs was the increased pressure to teach academic skills and how this limits the time spent on social skills instruction. For example, a behavior specialist noted: *"When they are looking at their lesson plans for the week…teaching the academic skills stands out…and they feel a lot of pressure...to teach the 123s and ABCs…it's hard for them to understand that the other [social skills instruction] is important too."* A teacher explained that the program was using an EC curriculum and a literacy curriculum and noted: *"My major challenge with using [the social skills curriculum] is that there is not enough time in the day."* A teacher in a different program noted:

> *I know it is not a good thing to say out loud [but social-emotional] development is more important than that academic piece because if you can't get your social-emotional intact… academics are not going to come. That is my biggest pet peeve and I truly feel*

we've lost sight of this; it's more important now than it ever was before because they are not getting that [social emotional piece] at home.

DISCUSSION

The current study examined the views of HS staff about the value of social skills instruction and strategies used by HS programs to foster children's social competence in order to determine how their current practices fit within the tiered PBS framework. Social skills difficulties are common in HS classrooms and it is critical to address these during the early childhood years. While research indicates the importance of early instruction of social skills in the classroom by teachers, it is necessary to investigate whether teachers, assistant teachers, and program administrators understand both the value of teaching social skills and how to teach social skills in the classroom.

The first study aim was to identify the social skills that HS staff considered most important to teach preschool children. We thought that HS program staff would emphasize skills similar to those described in the 2003 Head Start Outcomes Framework (e.g., developing friendships with peers, expressing feelings, following rules, using compromise) (Office of Head Start, 2003) and this was substantiated. It is worthy to note that peer interaction skills were identified most often as important skills to teach. These findings are similar to those of Odom et al. (1994) and West et al. (2007) who reported survey data that indicated that teachers thought that young children would benefit from social skills interventions targeting peer interaction skills.

The second study aim was to determine methods used in these programs for social skills instruction. As we anticipated, since all of the programs in our study had adopted a curriculum focused on social skill development, the use of their adopted curriculum was mentioned as the primary universal intervention method for social skill instruction-especially in regard to emotional regulation and social problem-solving. While participants in the study also described a variety of appropriate teaching approaches for social skill instruction, the most frequently reported strategies from both the survey and interview fall under universal classroomwide or naturalistic peer interaction interventions (Brown et al., 2008). It is important to note that many of these strategies involved whole group instruction or were used during "teachable moments," rather than involving planned methods to help students apply and generalize skills to daily routines. It is interesting that respondents did not mention using more explicit instructional techniques (e.g., prompting children to interact with their peers or teaching peers to interact with target children) when describing their own practices, but that they did provide examples of these types of strategies when responding to the Lizzie classroom scenario. This is congruent with previous research (McConnell et al. 1992; West et al, 2007) indicating that even if teachers are aware of these explicit instructional techniques and view them as acceptable, they still may not employ them in their own classroom.

While classwide universal interventions provide the foundation for supporting children' social-emotional development, it is imperative for teachers to be able to use explicit instructional techniques when universal methods are not effective and children continue to repeatedly make the same social competence errors. Research shows that when teachers provide explicit social skills instruction and model the key social skills needed to develop their relationships with peers, problem behavior decreases and social skills improve for these children

(Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Joseph & Strain, 2003). Therefore, selecting strategies that are feasible and effective in improving children's social competence skills makes philosophical sense (Brown & Conroy, 2011). Teacher prompting, positive reinforcement, and direct instruction have been identified as effective instructional strategies for use with children with more intensive support needs (Chandler, Lubeck, & Fowler, 1992; Sontag, 1997).

Interview data from the current study reveal interesting reasons as to why teachers feel challenged to provide social skills training in the classroom. Some of the main concerns were the training requirements and lack of flexibility of a scripted curriculum. While some of these requirements are necessary to ensure fidelity of intervention implementation, it may beneficial to provide for some flexibility (e.g., order of topics addressed) to address teachers' needs for autonomy. Respondents also noted the need for additional specialized strategies to address the needs of children with severe and persistent problem behaviors and did not feel their current methods or social curricula addressed these needs. The use of a tiered PWPBS approach holds promise for addressing this need. Training and coaching HS staff to use this tiered intervention approach would help them to build on the universal interventions that are currently used by many programs to include more specialized strategies to meet the needs of children who require more intensive and targeted support (Fox, et al 2009; Snell, Voorhees, et al., 2012).

Finally, interview participants indicated that the pressure to teach academics impeded teachers' ability to provide required social skills instruction. This finding is consistent with the results of other studies which reported that preschool teachers expressed difficulty finding time to teach social skills when programs had an academic emphasis (Early et al., 2007). Federal mandates such as *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) place considerable stress on academic skill instruction. The development of standards and the accountability created by testing requirements have resulted in pressure on teachers of younger children to prepare them to meet these later requirements. As a result preschool programs feel obliged to place more emphasis on academic skills (e.g., phonemic awareness, oral vocabulary and comprehension, conventions of print, numeracy skills) to ensure that *all* preschoolers will be ready for the academic challenges of kindergarten (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Stipek, 2006). Early childhood advocates warn against the possible detrimental effects of an academic emphasis, especially if it leads to less stress on other crucial areas of development such as social competence (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Elkind, 2001).

Limitations

The current study was subject to several limitations. First, this study relied on a sample of teachers and staff from a small number of HS programs in one region of the country. Further, the sample of teachers who were interviewed included a selected subset, rather than all of the teachers who were surveyed and demographic information was not collected about this subset. Also, the samples for the survey and interviews had some overlap in participants. Had the samples been identical and randomly selected from programs across the country, generalization of findings would have been more feasible. Second, the samples we used were clearly not a diverse representation of EC professionals serving young children. Since only 3% of the survey sample described themselves as Hispanic/Latina/Latino, the responses did not reflect a significant cultural subset of EC staff teaching in programs across the country. However, the

sample was unique in that it illustrated the diversity of professionals with respect to program type and professional background. Third, due to a request from the university IRB, we were unable to collect demographic data on the interview participants. While this information would be helpful to the reader, it allowed for more truthful responses since participants knew their identity was anonymous, and their participation could not be determined by their employer. Fourth, we analyzed the data as a whole rather than by the roles the participants served within their EC programs (e.g., teachers, assistant teachers, administrators). It is possible that there are differences in how administrators and mental health specialists responded than how teachers and assistant teachers would respond. Since administrators and mental health specialists are not in the classroom on an everyday basis, their responses may reflect how they would ideally want to teachers to respond, but teachers and assistant teachers responded based on what is possible to do given the current classroom context. Finally, it is possible to have different interpretations of the conflict scenario ratings. For example, in the conflict scenario regarding Lissy who has significant language delays and was withdrawn, we gave a high rating if the participants suggested that the teacher encourage Lissy's peers to include her in their play. Others may give this answer a lower rating if they expected the response to mention that the teacher would train the peers to include Lissy in their play.

Implications

This study adds to the ongoing debate about social skill instruction in the preschool classroom in several ways. Rather than having teachers rely solely on a scripted curriculum to teach social skills, they should be trained to use a wide range of evidence-based methods to teach social skills in the classroom during natural routines across the day. We cannot presume that simply providing staff with a curriculum will mean that the social skill needs of all children are met in preschool classrooms. As previously noted, the use of a comprehensive PWPBS approach holds promise to addressing the social-emotional needs of all children in the HS classroom. Quesenberry, Hemmeter, and Ostrosky (2011) found that HS programs who used more elements of this tiered PBS approach received higher ratings in regard to addressing challenging behavior and promoting social competence. When programs had stronger policies and procedures in place to support children's social competence, teachers were more likely to indicate that they conducted ongoing assessment of children's social skill development and embedded social competence instruction throughout their daily routine.

Another key area of investigation concerns how to support teachers in implementing this hierarchy of evidence-based practices. As suggested by Brown and colleagues (2001, 2008), the development of more "teacher-friendly" interventions that practitioners consider feasible to use is a step in this direction. However, we must also focus our efforts on designing and implementing more effective training methods to assist teachers to learn how to apply these strategies; classroom staff benefit most from follow-up support that focuses on teachers' application of practices (Sexton, Snyder, Wolfe, Lobman, Stricklin, & Akers, 1996; Snyder & Wolfe, 2008). Coaching coupled with videotaped examples of desired instruction in the classroom is an effective method to improve program quality that should be incorporated in training (Ramey & Ramey, 2006). Additional research is needed to uncover the variables that promote change in EC educators' knowledge of and ability to teach social skills to children.

[1] The *Al's Pals Curriculum* (Wingspan, 2004) is a program that develops social, emotional, and behavioral skills in young children ages 3 to 8 years old. Skills taught include: expressing feelings appropriately, using kind words, caring about others, using self-control, solving problems peacefully, and making safe and healthy choices.

The *Second Step* early learning program (Committee for Children, 2007). teaches self-regulation and executive-function skills that helps preschool children learn skills to manage their feelings, make friends, and solve problems.

The *I Can Problem Solve Program* (Shure, 1992) is a cognitive-based social and emotional program targeting children ages 4 to 12 years old. The program uses games, stories, puppets, illustrations, and role-plays to help children acquire a problem-solving vocabulary, learn to understand their own as well as others' feelings, think of alternative solutions, and think of potential consequences to an act.

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