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Elementary Special Education Students' Engagement in the Exceptional Student Success Skills Program: A Mixed-Methods Study

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Abstract

This mixed-method study evaluated grade 4 special education student engagement in the Exceptional Student Success Skills (ESSS) program, an Advocating Student-within-Environment (ASE) approach to school counseling. Eight students with diagnosed disabilities participated in the ESSS for eight weeks. Thematic analysis of the student data revealed three themes and four levels of program engagement. The Social Skills Improvement System-Rating Scale (SSIS-RS) Teacher Form, administered before and after the ESSS intervention, provided additional validation for the student data findings by offering a structured, teacher-reported measure of student social and behavioral development. The findings of this study were instrumental in informing revisions for the ESSS program while also illustrating how systematic testing and evaluation processes can drive meaningful improvements. By applying practical analysis, the study highlighted the critical role of assessment in refining and enhancing program effectiveness.

Keywords: school counseling, special education, Advocating Student-within-Environment, Student Success Skills

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2024), 15% (7.5 million) of students enrolled in PK-12 public schools from 2022-2023 received special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Enacted in 1975, the IDEA mandates that a team of educators and professionals recognize and support struggling students whose disability adversely affects their academic performance and check their progress annually. School counselors are vital education team members, providing all students with academic, social, emotional, and career support (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2019, 2022). They use data-informed approaches to close achievement gaps, improve student performance, and promote

inclusivity (Dimmitt & Zyromski, 2020). School counselors offer individual counseling, group counseling, and classroom lessons to students with varying needs and advocate for student and family involvement in the educational process (ASCA, 2019). Additionally, they collaborate with other student support professionals to develop and monitor students' academic, social-emotional, career, and postsecondary plans (ASCA, 2019).

School counselors report a fundamental belief that school counseling is for all students, including exceptional learners (ASCA, 2022). However, they also report feeling only somewhat prepared to provide effective service and activities to exceptional learners (Alvarez et al., 2020). The Advocating Student-within-Environment (ASE; Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2023) theoretical approach to school counseling posits that all students have the potential for high academic achievement, regardless of ability or disability distinction. In addition to removing or reducing factors that hinder student success, school counselors advocate for improving environmental factors for the student's well-being (Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers, 2019; Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2023). A school counselor practicing ASE theory intervenes to help students master skills that were either not fully developed or delayed (Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2023).

Skills and aptitudes targeted with ASE theory include cognitive abilities such as emotional control, initiating activities, working memory, planning, and organizing materials (Barker & Munakata, 2015), as well as social-emotional learning competencies, such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2005). Once students have mastered these skill sets, they become social advocates within their school, serving as a model for or supporting others who are still developing skills as well as contributing to a supportive school environment (Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2023). Students who master these skill sets can carry them

into their family environments and social circles, which could enhance their family and social relationships (Cantor & Osher, 2021). Outcomes from ASE-grounded interventions have demonstrated student gains in cognitive abilities, social-emotional learning competencies, and academic achievement (Ceballos et al., 2021; Lemberger et al., 2015; Lemberger et al., 2018; Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2021) and teacher growth in mindfulness dispositions and reduction of teacher-student conflict (Molina et al., 2022).

School counselors use theories to find interventions that could most effectively address the unique needs of all students, including exceptional students (Kim et al., 2024; Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2020). A school counselor working from the ASE theory is most advantageous for exceptional learners because it focuses on developing cognitively based social skills and social-emotional learning competencies (Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2023). For example, students receiving special education services often report having fewer friends, feel detached and disliked at school, and are more likely to avoid social situations (Bruefach & Reynolds, 2022). These exceptional students also experience lower status among their peers in the classroom, less peer-nominated popularity, and lower social preference over time (Estell et al., 2008). Based on the ASE perspective, a school counselor can positively intervene by delivering counseling services (e.g., classroom curriculum) that promote social skill building, demonstrate appreciation for each student's unique disposition, foster authentic relationships, and contribute to a positive school environment (Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers, 2019; Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2023). Despite earlier research showing the social struggles that exceptional learners encounter, evidence-based social and emotional learning classroom interventions specifically for exceptional learners are still few and far between (Hassani & Schwab, 2021). Therefore, delivering an evidence-based school counselor-led core curriculum grounded in school counseling theory and explicitly designed for exceptional learners can expand the comprehensive school counseling program's reach and realistically meet all students' needs.

Exceptional Student Success Skills: Development

The Exceptional Student Success Skills (ESSS) intervention (Brigman et al., 2020) is a school counselor-led classroom intervention explicitly developed for the exceptional student education (ESE) population. The developers derived the ESSS classroom program from the same research foundation used for the Student Success Skills (SSS) evidence-based K-12 curricula series (Brigman & Webb, 2020). Researchers have implemented the SSS classroom program with diverse student populations, including exceptional learners, and reported positive attendance and behavioral and cognitive outcomes (Bowers et al., 2018; Fairclough, 2016; Villares et al., 2012; Villares et al., 2023; Webb et al., 2019). For instance, Fairclough (2016) found that grade 5 ESE students who participated in the SSS program in general education classrooms experienced increased cognitive and behavioral outcomes. The results revealed a significant decrease in absences, test anxiety, and increased self-regulation among the treatment group (Fairclough, 2016). Similarly, Bowers and colleagues (2018) discovered that the students experienced gains in executive functioning abilities (e.g., inhibitory control, goal setting, task initiation, monitoring, cognitive flexibility, and completion) and social-emotional learning constructs. However, these students also displayed decreased attention and engagement in various program tasks (e.g., worksheet completion) (Bowers et al., 2018). Such results were consistent with those of Zyromski and colleagues (2022), who found that students with an individual education plan (IEP) could better identify skills and behaviors corresponding to school success after participating in a modified SSS program. Given recommendations from both studies (Bowers et al., 2018; Zyromski et al., 2022), the first author co-created the new ESSS comprehensive core curriculum to explicitly meet exceptional learners' needs (Brigman et al., 2020).

The developers based the changes in the ESSS program on the findings in prior research (Bowers et al., 2018) and the alignment to the ASE theoretical framework. The ESSS and SSS programs share ASE's philosophical underpinnings: all students have the potential to achieve;

however, environmental factors can compromise students' abilities and success (Villares et al., 2011). The ESSS program supports student growth through social-emotional learning constructs and the ASCA Mindsets and Behaviors (ASCA, 2021; Brigman et al., 2017).

Exceptional Student Success Skills: Activities

The ESSS comprehensive core curriculum consists of eight 45-minute scripted classroom lessons containing standardized PowerPoint presentations delivered by the school counselor once a week for eight weeks, plus one booster lesson repeated monthly, as needed. Table 1 briefly depicts how each classroom lesson follows a beginning, middle, and end format and the various topics covered. As a result of ESSS activities, students focus and learn skills that promote goal setting, create a caring classroom environment, improve memory skills, build healthy optimism, and improve performance under pressure (Brigman et al., 2020). Some programmatic enhancements include reducing technological stimuli, increasing the use of graphic organizers, establishing a contingency reinforcement system, social skill-building activities, and a modified check-in/check-out goal report (Brigman et al., 2020).

Table 1
ESSS Activities

Lesson	Beginning	Middle	End
Lesson 1	ESSS Overview: Classroom Goals	LGFG; Goal Setting and Action Planning	CICO
Lesson 2	CICO; Goal Reporting	Interviews	LGFG; Goal Setting and Action Planning
Lesson 3	CICO, Goal Reporting	Interviews; Calm Place	LGFG; Goal Setting and Action Planning

Lesson 4	CICO, Goal Reporting	Interviews	LGFG; Goal Setting and Action Planning
Lesson 5	CICO, Goal Reporting	Interviews; Keep Kool Tunes	LGFG; Goal Setting and Action Planning
Lesson 6	CICO, Goal Reporting	Interviews; Making Friends Activity	LGFG; Goal Setting and Action Planning
Lesson 7	CICO, Goal Reporting	Interviews; Stress Busters Activity	LGFG; Goal Setting and Action Planning
Lesson 8	CICO, Goal Reporting	Interviews; Growth Mindset Activity	LGFG; Goal Setting and Action Planning

Note. LGFG = Looking Good, Feeling Good; CICO = Check-In/Check-Out

The ESSS program, in its commitment to comprehensive support, significantly emphasizes the school counselor's role. The program proposes using a Check-In/Check-Out activity (CICO) to maintain the collaborative partnership between teacher and school counselor and continue supporting ESE students between weekly classroom lessons. CICO is a flexible tool used within positive behavioral interventions to track behavior throughout the week. The ESSS program can be tailored to meet the unique needs of any student, allowing them to set their own goals each day and share in monitoring those goals with their teacher. This adaptability, coupled with the active involvement of the school counselor, underscores the ESSS program's commitment to meeting students where they are while providing ongoing support between classroom lessons.

Given the social struggles often faced by ESE students (Vyrastekova, 2021), the ESSS program utilizes social skill-building opportunities throughout each structured activity. Once a

concept is presented to students, they are instructed to use a think/pair/share process to personalize the new information. During these think/pair/shares, students are encouraged to practice attending and listening skills, empathy, and encouragement responses. This structure is repeated within the Looking Good, Feeling Good (LGFG) activity, wherein students consider the impact of key lifestyle habits on overall mood and energy. After participating in the LGFG reflective activity and charting progress through a graphic organizer, students are asked to draw the identified mood, encouraging the connection between facial expression and emotional experience.

The interview activity, a part of the ESSS program, is crucial in providing a safe environment for students to practice social skills. Students pair up with their peers weekly to engage in a structured conversation about common topics. The school counselor, who floats the room, coaches students in conversation skills, further supporting the development of attending and listening skills in a practical experience that can transcend the classroom. By practicing social skills within this safe environment, students inherently engage in universalization (Yalom & Leszcz, 2020), a concept through which students feel they are not alone in their unique situations that can otherwise feel extremely isolating. This practice is woven throughout each activity presented in the ESSS program to reinforce social skill-building opportunities in non-threatening environments.

Purpose and Research Questions

Students with an IEP face unique learning circumstances, necessitating a comprehensive understanding of their engagement in the ESSS program. The current study utilized a mixed-methods design aligned with the ASE perspective. A qualitative approach was used to identify themes and participants' level of engagement in ESSS activities. At the same time, quantitative analysis examined the teacher's perceptions of the grade 4 ESE students' academic competence, social skills, and problem behaviors. Two research questions (RQ) guided the study:

1. Do the completed ESSS intervention activities reflect the engagement levels of grade 4 special education students, as measured by participant artifacts?
2. Does a teacher's perception of their special education students' engagement in the ESSS intervention influence their views on students' academic performance, social skills, and problem behaviors as measured by the Social Skills Improvement System Rating Scale?

Method

The developers of ASE theory suggest that students' well-being and success depend on the interaction between their abilities and the context in which they learn and grow (Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2023). We used a convergent parallel mixed method (Kroll & Neri, 2009), nonrandomized design, to evaluate how select grade 4 students were affected by the ESSS program, as consistent with the suppositions of ASE theory. Qualitative data was collected throughout the ESSS intervention through student activities and was analyzed separately through a thematic analysis. Quantitative data was collected before and after the ESSS intervention to explore teachers' perceptions of grade 4 special education students' academic competence, social skills, and problem behaviors. The respective data was analyzed independently and then converged during interpretation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The mixed methods approach was well-suited to the small sample size and the unique characteristics of grade 4 special education students with varying disability classifications. Furthermore, the nature of the study to evaluate the ESSS program calls for a need to explain initial results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017). The qualitative component provided in-depth insights into personal experiences with the ESSS program, which quantitative data alone could not capture. Additionally, by incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data, the researchers were able to triangulate findings, offering a comprehensive understanding of how the program impacted students' academic competence, social skills, and emotional development. This

methodological approach offered a strong foundation for deriving thorough and subtle conclusions that will inform revisions to the ESSS intervention.

Participants and Setting

The study occurred in a private special education K-8 school serving approximately 100 students in the southeastern United States. The students attending the school have disability designations ranging from specific learning disabilities to neurocognitive disorders, and 100% receive state funding. The school employs ten full-time teachers, one school counselor, and one administrator.

Based on scheduling, the school administrator and counselor selected a grade 4 classroom to receive the curriculum during the Fall semester. The entirety of the grade 4 class, four boys and four girls (N=8) received parental consent to participate in the study. Their disability classifications included language-impaired (87.5%), speech-impaired (37.5%), specific learning disabilities (12.5%), autism spectrum disorder (37.5%), and other health impairments (12.5%). Ethnicity was indicated through student records as white (56%), Black (17%), Hispanic/Latino (7%), and other (4%). All students attended the same grade 4 classroom, with a white female teacher who had 17 years of teaching experience. Additionally, a white female school counselor with 18 years of experience delivered the ESSS intervention.

Researchers

The first author is a white female with 12 years of experience as a counselor and nine years as a counselor educator. Her counseling experience extends to school counseling and consultation within school settings. She contributes to scholarship and research regarding the use of ASE school counseling theory. Her scholarship in school counseling research pertains to the efficacy of the Student Success Skills program, specifically with marginalized populations. The first author is a co-developer of the ESSS intervention. The first author is vested in ensuring the ESSS program is

effective for diverse learning populations. Given outcomes from the SSS classroom lesson with special education students (Bowers et al., 2020), she constructed this research as an open way to understand if the ESSS intervention engaged students as intended. Such investigation is intended to be an exploratory first step (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017), allowing for outcomes to inform program modifications. The first author is responsible for coding the qualitative data collected, to understand how students engaged with ESSS curricula activities.

The second author is a white female with over 27 years of experience as a teacher, school counselor, and counselor educator. On the research team, she was responsible for triangulating findings by validating codes and emerging themes within the qualitative data and integrating interpretations when combined with the quantitative data. While her research background pertains to school counseling outcome research, she remains neutral on the results related to the ESSS program. The third author is an Asian American female with five years of experience providing mental health counseling to diverse populations such as adolescents and at-risk youth. She contributed to the research team by co-authoring and co-editing the manuscript.

Instruments

Participant Artifacts. This study utilized student-written activities as completed as a part of the ESSS curriculum to capture and assess engagement in various aspects of the intervention (see Table 1). Worksheets collected include the LGFG activity, Interviews, and CICO. Data from these activities were systematically collected and analyzed to discern patterns, trends, and overall engagement in the ESSS activities.

Social Skills Improvement System-Rating Scale. The researchers used the Social Skills Improvement System-Rating Scale (SSIS-RS) Teacher Form to measure social and emotional skills and academic behaviors. The SSIS-RS Teacher Form includes 83 items organized into three domains: social skills, problem behaviors, and academic competence (Gresham et al., 2010). Each

domain contains multiple subscales. The social skills domain includes subscales of communication with seven items (range: 0 to 21), cooperation with six items (range: 0 to 18), assertion with seven items(range: 0 to 21), responsibility with six items (range: 0 to 18), empathy with six items (range: 0 to 18), engagement with seven items (range: 0 to 21), and self-control with seven items (range: 0 to 21; Gresham et al., 2010). Items that assess communication include statements such as, "Takes turn in conversations; Makes eye contact when talking" (Gresham et al., 2010, p. 159). The problem behaviors domain includes subscales such as externalizing with 12 items (range: 0 to 36), bullying with five items (range: 0 to 15), hyperactivity/inattention with seven items (range: 0 to 21), internalizing with seven items (range: 0 to 21), and autism spectrum with seven items in addition to 8 social skill items that contribute to total subscale (range: 0 to 45; Gresham et al., 2010). An example of items that assess problem behaviors such as bullying includes, "Forces others to act against their will. Keeps others out of social circles" (Gresham et al., 2010, p. 159). Teachers respond by using a never, sometimes, often, or always scale to indicate the frequency of the statement (Gresham & Elliott, 2008). It has a median-adjusted reliability coefficient of 0.81 and evidence for validity (Gresham & Elliott, 2008).

Procedures

Following IRB approval, the school counselor and first author sent informational letters home to parents with consent forms. While all students participated in the ESSS program, only those with parental consent were included in the study. Deidentified qualitative data was collected from students during each ESSS lesson through participation in curricular materials, including weekly goals and action plans, self-reported reflections on health and wellness behaviors, emotion identification, and peer social skill-building activities. The school counselor distributed and collected hard copies of the ESSS written materials during each lesson. Quantitative pre and post-test data were collected electronically from the teacher across all students one week before ESSS lesson one

and again the week after the eighth ESSS lesson. The first author trained the school counselor to deliver the ESSS program and observed the weekly classroom lessons to ensure fidelity.

Data-Analysis

The convergent parallel mixed method design adopted for this study provides a robust framework for drawing comprehensive and nuanced conclusions. Qualitative data enriches the analysis by capturing detailed narratives and subtle experiences of students, offering insights into their perceptions and behaviors shaped by the intervention (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Concurrently, quantitative data provides statistical rigor and generalizability, offering numerical evidence of program effectiveness across broader student populations (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Integrating both approaches allows for the triangulation of findings, enhancing the validity and reliability of conclusions drawn about the students' engagement in the ESSS intervention and their teacher's perception of their improved academic competence, social skills, and problem behaviors. This convergent parallel mixed method design ensures that findings are robust and contextually rich (Kroll & Neri, 2009), especially when considering the unique characteristics of special education learners and the inclusive classroom setting within a small private school. A comprehensive understanding of the students' experiences with the intervention provides actionable insights for educators, counselors, and policymakers aiming to optimize student support programs.

To understand student engagement in the ESSS program, qualitative data was examined by the first author through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify patterns and themes that emerged from students' goal-setting activities, reflection on health and wellness behaviors, and tools used to track social engagements. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) guide to thematic analysis, open coding was utilized on student responses to inform the emergence of patterns, which were then organized into themes which are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2

Themes, Descriptions, and Activities

Level	Descriptor	Activities
Holistic Personal Development	Personal growth and well-being, including academic and non-academic achievements, physical health, mental and emotional wellness, and leisure activities aimed at overall self-improvement and life satisfaction.	LGFG: Goal Setting LGFG: Emotion Identification Interviews CICO: Goal & Action Plan
Family and Social Relationships	Family and social interactions and relationships that individuals engage in.	Interviews LGFG: Goal Setting
Personal Fulfillment	Individual passions, recreational activities, and diverse life aspirations.	Interviews

Notes. LGFG = Looking Good, Feeling Good; CICO = Check-In/Check-Out

These themes guided the identification of commonalities and differences in student engagement across ESSS activities and were further refined based on accuracy (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Next, the researcher examined the students' written activities to determine the level of completeness. As seen in Table 3, the first author assigned a value of one to four according to the prescribed descriptors.

Table 3

Criteria for Completion of Student Work

Level	Descriptor	Observed Activities
4	Full Completion: Has been finished in its entirety, with all requirements met	LGFG: Health and Wellness Rating LGFG: Emotion Identification Interviews
3	Partial Completion: Only a portion of the required tasks was completed, leaving some aspects incomplete.	LGFG: Goal Setting
2	Minimal Completion: Few of the required tasks were attempted but not completed	CICO: Goal & Action Plan
1	No Attempt: No effort was made on the required task	CICO: Daily Rating Scales

Notes. LGFG = Looking Good, Feeling Good; CICO = Check In/Check Out

Quantitative data was calculated and averaged across participants, and means, mean differences, standard errors, and confidence intervals for the sample were analyzed (Kazdin, 2011). The study demonstrated a functional relationship between the intervention (ESSS) and dependent variables (social and emotional skill development and behaviors). The study relied on the percent of non-overlapping data (PND) for the difference in mean scores for pre- and post-inventory data (Parker et al., 2011). By combining qualitative analysis of student reflections, goal-setting activities, and social engagement tracking within the ESSS intervention, alongside quantitative measures assessing program outcomes, this study ensures trustworthiness toward a holistic understanding of the depth and breadth of the intervention's impact (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

Results

To answer research question one, open coding of the participants' responses to the ES student activities of LGFG, interviews, and CICO worksheets resulted in three themes: (a) holistic personal development, (b) personal fulfillment, and (c) family and social relationships are represented in Table 2. The primary theme to emerge throughout all activities was holistic personal development, which encompasses personal growth and well-being, including academic and non-academic achievements, physical health, mental and emotional wellness, and leisure activities aimed at overall self-improvement and life satisfaction. Results indicate that students routinely identified goals grounded in holistic personal development every week as informed by their reflection on LGFG rating scales. Related to physical health, students most often identified a goal of increasing their sleep or improving their nutrition by "eating an apple." Rest and nutrition are features of health and wellness discussed and reflected upon within the ESSS program.

Furthermore, as the students completed their LGFG, they reflected on their overall emotions/mood and how health and wellness behaviors influence feelings. Most often, students reported feeling happy. However, other emotions, including sadness, silliness, and anger, were also present. Students also identified academic behaviors they wished to improve within LGFG and CICO activity. One student identified an educational goal and action plan on the CICO: "Get good grades. To get good grades is to turn in homework." Other academic behaviors noted included a plan to increase reading, get an A, and spend more time studying. Leisure activities were evident in both interviews and LGFG, which included those focused on spending time outside playing, exercising, or relaxing.

The theme of personal fulfillment refers to students' passions, recreational activities, and diverse life aspirations. This theme was only noted during the interview activity, whereby students connected about their interests and hobbies. Commonalities found among students include a

passion for playing video games. Furthermore, students identified how they like to spend their time having fun, including "playing on the playground" or "going to the beach." Finally, the theme of family and social relationships depicts meaningful relationships in students' lives. Such findings emerge in the LFGF and interviews, respectively, as students create goals related to their values while connecting with others about their personal lives. Students created goals around family time, stating, "I will spend more time with my parents" and "spend time with family." During the interview activity, students asked one another about their family dynamics, inquiring about siblings and family pets. Most students had siblings and shared that commonality.

Additionally, student work was assessed qualitatively based on the level of completion through visual inspection. As outlined in Table 3, the criteria included fully completed, partially completed, minimally completed, and no attempt, then assigned levels from four to one, respectively. Students fully completed the rating scale and emotion identification components of the LGFG activity throughout the 8-week program, some choosing to use words to describe their feelings while others drew facial expressions. Students partially completed the goal-setting component of LGFG. Students identified a goal to work on over the week by writing a brief sentence or one-word descriptor of their goal. Students were found to fully complete the interview activity, documenting common areas of interest to guide connection and social skill building. Finally, students were found to not attempt the daily CICO form, with minimal completion of the weekly goal and action plan.

The classroom teacher observed individual student changes over eight weeks. In response to question two, the pre and post-test differences were calculated using the sample's mean raw score differences. As shown in Table 4, a comparison of pre-ESSS implementation with post-ESSS implementation using the SSIS-RS Teacher Form indicated increased assertion, communication, cooperation, empathy, engagement, difficulty in classroom work, responsibility, satisfaction, and self-

control. Table 4 also shows a decrease in academic work composition, bullying, hyperactivity, and problem behaviors (internalizing, externalizing, and Autism-related-such as personal and physical self-management in social situations). The greatest improvements were observed with increases in communication (2.25, range: -2 to 4) and composite scores for responsibility (3.00, range: -1 to 6) and decreases in composite scores for problem behaviors (-3.00, range: -8 to 2). Overall, the sample's total score on the SSIS-RS Teacher Form improved from pre- to post-testing. Given the small sample size and its representation of a group with specialized learning needs and accommodations, there is no intention of generalizing these findings to the general population. Instead, coupled with qualitative findings, the results provide valuable insights for refining and enhancing the ESSS curriculum better to meet the specific needs of this student population.

Table 4

Effect of the ESSS Program on SSIS-RS Teacher Form Variables

Variable	*M*	*M* Difference	*SE*	95% CI
SSIS Academic Composition				
Pre-Intervention	2.76		0.55	[1.68, 3.84]
Post-Intervention	2.70	-0.06	0.52	[1.67, 3.73]
SSIS Assertion				
Pre-Intervention	8.88		0.95	[7.01, 10.74]
Post-Intervention	10.63	1.75	1.34	[8.01, 13.24]
SSIS Bullying				
Pre-Intervention	2.25		0.67	[0.93, 3.57]
Post-Intervention	1.88	-0.38	0.67	[0.57, 3.18]
SSIS Communication				
Pre-Intervention	13.50		1.25	[11.04, 15.96]
Post-Intervention	15.75	2.25	1.21	[13.39, 18.11]
SSIS Cooperation				
Pre-Intervention	10.38		0.56	[9.27, 11.48]
Post-Intervention	11.00	0.63	0.89	[9.26, 12.74]
SSIS Empathy				
Pre-Intervention	10.00		1.04	[7.97, 12.03]
Post-Intervention	11.75	1.75	1.01	[9.76, 13.74]
SSIS Engagement				

Variable	*M*	*M* Difference	*SE*	95% CI
Pre-Intervention	9.88		0.81	[8.24, 11.47]
Post-Intervention	10.63	0.75	0.96	[8.74, 12.51]
SSIS Hyperactivity				
Pre-Intervention	5.63		1.10	[3.47, 7.78]
Post-Intervention	4.38	-1.25	0.71	[2.99, 5.76]
SSIS PB: General				
Pre-Intervention	16.13		2.77	[10.70, 21.55]
Post-Intervention	13.13	-3.00	2.54	[8.15, 18.10]
SSIS PB: Internalizing				
Pre-Intervention	4.88		1.09	[2.73, 7.02]
Post-Intervention	4.25	-0.63	0.80	[2.69, 5.81]
SSIS PB: Externalizing				
Pre-Intervention	6.38		1.52	[3.39, 9.36]
Post-Intervention	4.50	-1.88	1.31	[1.93, 7.07]
SSIS PB: Autism-related				
Pre-Intervention	2.25		0.56	[1.15, 3.35]
Post-Intervention	2.00	-0.25	0.50	[1.02, 2.98]
SSIS Responsibility				
Pre-Intervention	10.25		1.25	[7.80, 12.70]
Post-Intervention	13.25	3.00	1.06	[11.16, 15.34]
SSIS Self-Control				
Pre-Intervention	10.63		1.21	[8.26, 12.99]
Post-Intervention	11.50	0.88	0.98	[9.58, 13.42]
SSIS Sum of Raw Data				
Pre-Intervention	73.50		5.68	[62.38, 84.62]
Post-Intervention	84.50	11.00	6.27	[72.20, 96.80]

Notes. ESSS = Exceptional Student Success Skills; *M* = mean; *SE* = standard error; CI = confidence interval; SSIS= Social Skills Improvement System; PB = problem behavior.

Discussion

School counselors must support every student's academic, social, emotional, and career development, regardless of learning designation or special education classification, to ensure all students have access to an equitable learning environment (ASCA, 2022). The current study occurred within an inclusive school environment where every student experienced some form of academic struggle. The participating students included a sample of grade four students with diverse

needs (*N*=8). The study findings support the school counselor implementing the ESSS program to help meet the needs of special education students in exceptional learning environments. Specifically, the mixed-methods findings highlight which ESSS activities led to increased student engagement. The activities with the highest level of engagement were student-driven and designed to increase student internal capacities (e.g., grounded in the ASE theory). These changes were also supported by the teacher's perceptions of the students' displays of academic competence, social skills, and problem behaviors.

In response to research question one, qualitative data showed how students engaged in ESSS activities through themes of personal holistic development, personal fulfillment, and social and familial relationships. The dominant theme, holistic personal development, encompassed students' growth in academic, physical, emotional, and wellness areas, with goals focused on health behaviors and academic improvement. Personal fulfillment emerged through students' discussions of passions and hobbies, such as playing video games and outdoor activities. Finally, the theme of family and social relationships highlighted students' goals to spend more time with family and their interest in each other's family dynamics. These themes reflect how students engaged in ESSS to foster personal growth, pursue interests, and strengthen relationships. When the original SSS program was administered within a special education setting, students experienced social and emotional gains but struggled with engagement in the material (Bowers et al., 2018). Therefore, the ESSS curriculum was modified to address ESE learners' academic and development needs. ESSS utilizes the key components of universal design for learning (UDL) throughout all aspects of the program, focusing on guiding students using techniques for multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression (CAST, 2019). Interventions grounded in functional behavioral analysis, visual supports, self-monitoring strategies, and peer-mediated interventions have been found to improve social skills among students with autism spectrum disorder (Watkins et al., 2019). Examples of

program modifications include refinement of the LFGF worksheet by removing access literacy and using simplified graphics as activity questions instead. Additional changes include an increased focus on social skill-building opportunities, such as integrating the interview activity. Overall, modifications to the ESSS program include activities that utilize graphic modifiers, goal setting, action planning for self-monitoring, and opportunities for peer support and social skill building embedded within each activity.

Research question one further examined the completion rate of ESSS activities, ranging from level one to level four. Level four indicates the highest level of completion, and level one shows little to none. The qualitative analysis of students' work revealed that most students did not complete the CICO activity. The CICO activity is dependent on collaborative efforts between teachers, students, and school counselors and was created with the intent to be completed daily. CICO, a common tier-two intervention, has yielded a medium effect size overall but is notably more effective with middle school students than elementary (Park & Blair, 2020). However, much research on CICO is dependent on single case study designs (Maggin et al., 2016), demonstrating its efficacy in an individual setting with outcomes that are teacher-derived and counterintuitive from the ASE foundation. ASE positions the student as the expert within their construction of goals, wherein CICO is traditionally utilized to maintain goals set forth by the teacher or academic setting. The current findings call for reexamining the fit and use of the CICO activity.

Research question two examined the classroom teacher's perception of student changes regarding their academic competence, social skills, and problem behaviors. It should be noted that the increase in difficulty regarding classroom work, as reflected in the decrease in scores in academic work composition in the SSIS-RS, would be expected with progression in an academic year (Hurwitz et al., 2020). As students progress into the school year, work advances from reviewing and practicing previous content to introducing new content. While the need is vast, there still needs to be more

empirical literature to support intervention grounded in theory for special education students (Hassani & Schwab, 2021).

Symptomology of autism spectrum disorder often characterizes school-related difficulties. The study sample included 37.5% of students who have an autism spectrum disorder diagnosis. After participating in the ESSS intervention, students experienced decreased autism-related behaviors as characterized by socially appropriate behaviors such as making eye contact when speaking, respecting the physical boundaries of others, and engaging in opportunities to engage with others. When considering other interventions targeting autism spectrum disorder symptomologies, students experienced higher social skills ratings after participating in the peer-focused school-based intervention than an individual child-led intervention (Kasari et al., 2012). In comparison, the ESSS program is centered around skill-building through peer engagement, as each session integrates a focus on social skill-building through interviewing and think-pair-share.

In the context of quantitative results, which indicate gains in social and emotional skills and decreases in problem behaviors, the findings highlight the reciprocal relationship between students and their contexts, emphasizing how engagement contributes to the overall development of the unique individual student. Problem behaviors are commonly experienced in unique education settings. Students in special education settings have lower self-regulatory skills and social integration than their general education peers (Törmänen & Roebers, 2018). After ESSS participation, their teacher perceived a decrease in overall problem behaviors, further explained by decreases in both internalized and externalized problem behaviors. Finally, the current study further supports integrating theory into school counseling practice. The school counselor participated in an intervention grounded in ASE that led to the development of skillsets that further supported the ability to develop personal agency (Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers, 2019), especially within a population that struggles to advocate for themselves (Bowers et al., 2018).

Limitations and Future Research

A mixed methods study with a small sample size faces several limitations. Firstly, small samples often need more diversity and variability within the population, limiting the study's external validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Small samples reduce the statistical power of quantitative inquiries and limit the depth of qualitative insights gained (Tashakkori et al., 2020), and the descriptive statistics within this study are specific to the current sample and cannot be generalized to the broader population. Given that the study was designed as an evaluation, the qualitative and quantitative data provided comprehensive insights into the study's outcomes. Future research should consider group designs with randomization to test the impact of the revised ESSS program on students who do not receive the intervention. Second, the participating students' disabilities may have impacted their ability to demonstrate their understanding of the program and performance (Leyfer et al., 2006; White et al., 2009). Hence, the current study aims to understand the engagement outcomes from ESSS participation. Support for special education students is a crucial issue within the schools (Lory et al., 2020; Watkins et al., 2019) and continued research is needed that supports practical programming generalizable to special education settings and that is realistic for a practicing school counselor to implement.

Within the spirit of ASE, providing equitable access to empirically supported school counseling curricula is vital to support the development of internal capacities for all students. As the ESSS program undergoes revisions, future research calls for the exploration of program efficacy within public education settings where special education services are provided within inclusion and self-contained classrooms. Through these investigations, it is vital to establish an adequate sample size to develop a foundation of empirical support for the ESSS program.

Future research also calls for assessing the applicability of the ESSS program in conjunction with other SSS programs and delivering it through a multi-tiered system of support. For instance,

school counselors could implement a comprehensive guidance curriculum that addressed the tier 1 general population, encapsulating some students receiving special education services. Still, they may not be designated into exclusive learning environments. Pairing a tier 1 approach with the ESSS program, considered a tier 2 intervention, creates a supportive and inclusive environment throughout the entirety of the school system (Bierman & Sanders, 2021). Future research calls for investigating the SSS suite as a school-wide implementation, including classroom guidance lessons, small group counseling, and parent education.

Implications for School Counselors

School counselors often utilize activities from various sources and create unique curriculums that meet the specific needs of their students (ASCA, 2019). Evaluating school counseling programs is crucial to ensure students actively engage with the material (Ohrt et al., 2021). The current study utilized both quantitative and qualitative data to identify how students engaged in the ESSS intervention. Such evaluation practices are encouraged as school counselors are ethically obligated to use data to identify students needing services and align program goals and outcomes to achieve student-level results. Furthermore, school counselors are encouraged to ground their practice in school counseling theory (ASCA, 2019). The ESSS program is grounded in ASE, which supports the holistic development of students within the context of their unique environments (Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2023). ASE encourages counselors to utilize interventions that consider individual needs, strengths, and challenges students face within their school environments. Through engagement in ESSS, school counselors promote the collaborative development of a supportive and inclusive environment that fosters the growth of social and emotional skills (Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2023). Ultimately, practicing from an ASE framework empowers school counselors to advocate effectively for their students' comprehensive development and educational outcomes, a tool of vast importance for special education students.

Conclusion

Qualitative themes that emerged through ESSS participation included holistic personal development, family and social relationships, and personal fulfillment. Each theme underscores the role of the environment in nurturing student growth. Through ESSS activities, students identify and share the value of supportive family dynamics, positive peer interactions, or opportunities for self-actualization, which are all environments that provide contexts whereby students develop and thrive (Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers Parker, 2023). The qualitative themes supported quantitative data and showed that the students' teacher's perceptions were aligned, demonstrating positive growth for students and the whole classroom.

ASE emphasizes the dynamic and ongoing nature of development, recognizing that students' environments change over time, influencing their developmental trajectory. Similarly, students' interactions with their environments also evolve, shaping their personal growth and fulfillment. School counselors play a pivotal role in supporting all students within the school environment. Grounded in the ASE school counseling theory, the ESSS program provides an intervention responsive to special education students' unique developmental learning styles. The current study exemplifies how aligning interventions with a theoretical framework can increase student engagement and enrich the educational experience.

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