



Social Skills Critical for Success in Elementary School: Teachers' and Special Educators' Perspective

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Abstract

Introduction Students with more advanced social skills are more likely to meet teacher expectations in terms of classroom behaviour and participation in the teaching and learning process. On the other hand, students with special educational needs (SEN) often have difficulties in developing these skills. Insight into social skills that teachers consider critical for the success of students in their classes enables better preparation of SEN students for inclusion in a mainstream environment. The purpose of this study is to determine which social skills are considered critical for classroom success by regular teachers who teach students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in inclusive classrooms and special educators in special schools.

Method The sample consists of 33 regular teachers and 57 special educators. The Social Skills Improvement System (SSIS) Teaching Form was used for data collection.

Results Both participant groups attributed the highest value to Cooperation skills, however skills related to Responsibility and Self-Control were also highly valued. Ratings of teachers and special educators differ significantly only for Empathy skills, with significantly lower values attributed by special educators. Significant differences between participants who teach in lower and upper elementary grades were found only for special educators, with a higher value for Assertion attributed by special educators in upper grades.

Conclusion Teachers and special educators place significant emphasis on social skills such as Cooperation, Responsibility, and Self-Control, which facilitate unhindered teaching and learning processes.

Keywords: social skills, autism spectrum disorder, teachers, special educators, inclusive education, importance rating.

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1. Introduction

Social skills are behaviours that in specific circumstances, predict significant social outcomes. Important social outcomes in a school context may include a) acceptance by peers, b) assessment of social skills by significant others (e.g., teachers), c) academic achievement, and d) other behaviour that are consistently correlated with the previous (Gresham, 1988; Gresham et al., 2001). These skills are context-related and enable the individual to complete social tasks competently (Little et al., 2017). Social skills enable successful adaptation and development of positive relationships with family, friends, and peers. They are essential in the educational and professional context, as well as in everyday life, as they facilitate the successful management of complex interactions and group dynamics (Moody & Laugeson, 2020; Vlachou et al., 2016). The adoption of appropriate social skills is considered crucial in the social development of students and their well-being. This is particularly relevant to inclusive education, where social skills development in students with special educational needs (SEN) is linked to academic attainment, social inclusion, and successful transition to adulthood. The willingness of teachers to tackle the difficulties in social skills development of SEN students, and to apply social development strategies, is seen as a key variable that affects the implementation of successful interventions at the school level (Beaumont et al., 2015; Vlachou et al., 2016; Vyas, 2022). Teachers need to take up an active role in supporting students to acquire the necessary social skills for successful interaction and development of social relationships. They need to foster a positive classroom climate, model appropriate behaviour, encourage cooperative learning, and explicitly teach social skills (Mansoori et al., 2013). Students with advanced social skills meet teacher expectations regarding classroom behaviour and climate and facilitate the teaching and learning process (Lane et al., 2012). In addition, students with more proficient interpersonal skills are less likely to experience conflicts with teachers and instead are more likely to have close relationships with them (Trang & Hansen, 2021). Also, it seems that at least in some school subjects, teachers base their assessment not only on academic skills but also on the student's social skills (Gustavsen, 2017). Understanding teacher expectations related to student behaviour can contribute to more focused and efficient social skills interventions (Banković et al., 2021). Teachers' perspective on the importance of distinct so-

cial skills is particularly valuable for social skills assessment. A contextual approach to the assessment of social skills requires not only considering the goals and motivation for social behaviour from the child's perspective but also considering responses of others in their environment that may reinforce or discourage the social behaviour. Newly learned social skills need to be naturally reinforced to generalise in the child's everyday environment. When others in the environment reinforce the application of a new social skill, regular use of that skill is more likely. As teachers, along with peers and parents, are one of the relevant sources of information, it is assumed that social skills which they identify as valuable will be naturally reinforced in the environment (Hupp et al., 2009). Lane et al. (2003, 2004, 2006, 2010) in a series of studies found that teachers and special educators value Cooperation skills and Self-Control more than Assertion. Most valued skills included following teachers' directions, control of temper during conflicts with peers and adults, responding adequately to physical aggression of peers, getting along with people who are different and adequate use of leisure time. In general, teachers showed a proclivity for valuing skills that enable unhindered teaching and learning, emphasising agreement, harmony, and moderation. When looking at differences between special educators and regular teachers, they found that despite the equal perceived value of Self-Control and Assertion, regular teachers consider Cooperation as more valuable than special educators.

2. Goal

This study aims to determine which social skills are perceived as critical for classroom success by regular teachers of students with ASD in inclusive classrooms and special educators who teach in special schools.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample

The sample comprises 57 special educators (54 females and 3 males) and 33 teachers (26 females, 7 males) who teach students with ASD in their classrooms. All special educators (27 from Serbia, 30 from Macedonia) work as classroom teachers in special schools, while all teachers (15 from Serbia, 18 from Macedonia) teach in regular schools. The sampled special educators exclusively pertain to those with a teaching role in special education classrooms, while special educators who offer individualised support to students in special schools (such as psychomotor re-education

or preventive corrective exercises) or those who engage with individual students outside the classroom were deliberately excluded from the sample. The age of special educators ranges from 25 to 60 ($AS = 40.96$, $SD = 7.60$), while the age of teachers ranges between 24 and 63 years ($AS = 43.00$, $SD = 11.19$), where the subsamples did not differ significantly by age ($U = 812,000$, $Z = -0.730$, $p = 0.466$). Amongst special educators, 23 teach in lower and 34 in upper elementary grades. Amongst teachers, 22 participants were lower grades teachers and 11 upper-grade teachers. The age of students (taught by special educators or regular teachers) in lower grades ranges from seven to twelve years old in Serbia, and from 5.5 to 11 years old in North Macedonia. Students in upper grades are aged between 12 to 14 or 15 years in Serbia, and 11 to 15 years in North Macedonia. As per the Law on Elementary Education in the Republic of Serbia (2021), the maximum classroom size in special education classes is 10, while the number is reduced to six in classes which accommodate students with multiple disabilities. In regular schools, a class can accommodate a maximum of 30 students, but the number drops to 28 if a child with developmental disabilities is included. If two students with developmental disabilities are included, only 26 students are permitted, which constitutes the maximum number of children that may be included in a regular class. Similarly, in Macedonia, the maximum classroom size in regular schools is 30. This number is reduced by 3 for each special needs student who is included in the classroom. The number of special needs students included in regular classrooms is limited to two. The Law on Elementary Education (2020) defines the maximum number of students in special education classes per various categories of disabilities: eight students with mild intellectual impairment; four students with moderate, severe, and profound intellectual impairment; five students with autism spectrum disorder; and five students with multiple disabilities.

Special educators have a weekly workload of 20 hours (in Serbia) and 22 to 29 hours depending on the grade (in Macedonia) of direct work with students for mandatory subjects. In regular schools, the weekly workload for direct work with students for mandatory subjects ranges from 20 hours (in Serbia) to 18 to 30 hours depending on the grade (in Macedonia). In both educational systems this workload does not include elective subjects, nor additional responsibilities, or duties assigned to teachers or special educators. In Macedonia,

special educators follow special teaching plans and programs approved by the Ministry of Education and the Bureau for Development of Education, whereas, in Serbia, they follow an individual educational plan (Law on Elementary Education, 2021).

3.2. Instrument

For this study, we used The Social Skills Improvement System Teacher Form, (SSIS; Gresham & Elliott, 2008) specifically the section for assessment of social skills. This section of the instrument assesses the manifestation frequency of 46 social skills and the rater's perceived value of the social behaviours being assessed, for the student's success in the classroom. In line with the research goals, only importance ratings were used. Participants were required to rate the importance of each social skill on a 3-point scale (0 = not important; 1 = important; 2 = critical).

Unlike the common administration of the instrument that involves assessing social skills exhibited by a particular student, in this study, participants rated the importance of each social skill for the success of any student in their class. The reliability of subscales was satisfactory in both sample groups. In the special educators group: Communication ($\alpha = 0.82$), Cooperation ($\alpha = 0.70$), Assertion ($\alpha = 0.77$), Responsibility ($\alpha = 0.77$), Empathy ($\alpha = 0.79$), Engagement ($\alpha = 0.85$), and Self-Control ($\alpha = 0.85$). In the teachers group: Communication ($\alpha = 0.78$), Cooperation ($\alpha = 0.62$), Assertion ($\alpha = 0.73$), Responsibility ($\alpha = 0.76$), Empathy ($\alpha = 0.78$), Engagement ($\alpha = 0.82$), and Self-Control ($\alpha = 0.77$). In addition to the SSIS, we used a short social-demographic questionnaire to collect participant data (age, gender, grade they teach, level of educational setting).

3.3. Data Analysis

To evaluate the parameters that hold significance, pertaining to the frequency of importance ratings given by special educators and teachers for specific social skills, we employed descriptive statistics, specifically utilising percentages. Due to the limited sample size and small sub-samples, non-parametric statistical techniques were applied for further analysis. The Mann-Whitney U test was employed to investigate differences between two independent groups, namely special educators, and teachers, as well as to examine the disparities between special educators and teachers in lower and upper grades. The test involves ranking the data, calculating the sum of the ranks for each group, and then using a U statistic to determine whether there are significant differences between the groups. Next, we used the

Wilcoxon signed-rank test. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test involves calculating the differences between pairs of observations, ranking the absolute values of these differences, and then using a signed-rank statistic to determine whether there are significant differences between the samples (Rey & Neuhäuser, 2011). We conducted a paired difference test of repeated measurements within each sample subgroup (special educators, teachers) to assess whether the mean ranks of subscales differ. The comparison included 21 pairs in total, where each subscale was compared to all other subscales. Due to the larger number of repeated measurements, we used the Bonferroni post hoc correction (see Csumitta et al., 2022), resulting in a significance cut-off set at $p \leq 0,002$.

4. Results

Table 1 shows the percentage of special educators and teachers that rated the importance of a specific skill with 2 points (“critical”). The table lists the top 15 skills that were rated as critical by at least 30% of the participants, in at least one group of participants.

Looking at the distinct domains of social skills, it is evident that special educators and teachers most frequently regard critical social skills related to the Cooperation domain, such as ‘following teacher directions’

and ‘following classroom rules’, ‘completing tasks without bothering others’, as well as ‘participating appropriately in class’. In the Responsibility domain, both participant groups consider ‘students well behaved when unsupervised’ extremely important for success in school, while special educators (57.9%) are to some extent more inclined to agree with this, compared to teachers (45.5%). However, ‘accepting responsibility for their actions’ is very important for 36.4% of teachers, while only 12.3% of special educators consider this skill critical. When looking at Assertive skills, one-third, or approximately one-third of participants in both groups consider ‘saying when there is a problem’ and ‘asking for help from adults’ as key skills for student success. In the teachers’ group, similar results were observed for two skills in the Engagement domain (‘interacts well with other children’ and ‘participates in games or group activities’) and the Self-control domain (‘resolves disagreements with teachers calmly’ and ‘uses appropriate language when upset’), while special educators rate these skills as less valuable.

The contrary is evident when looking at two Communication skills – ‘responding well when others start a conversation or activity’ and ‘making eye contact when talking’.

Table 1. Percentage of special educators and teachers that rated the skill as “critical.”

Item description	Domain / Subscale	Special educators	Teachers
Is well-behaved when unsupervised.	Responsibility	57.9	45.5
Follows your directions.	Cooperation	52.6	54.5
Pays attention to your instructions.	Cooperation	50.9	42.4
Follows classroom rules.	Cooperation	42.1	39.4
Completes tasks without bothering others.	Cooperation	40.4	48.5
Participates appropriately in class.	Cooperation	35.1	21.2
Says when there is a problem.	Assertion	33.3	36.4
Asks for help from adults.	Assertion	33.3	30.3
Responds well when others start a conversation or activity.	Communication	31.6	18.2
Makes eye contact when talking.	Communication	29.8	24.2
Uses appropriate language when upset.	Self-Control	28.1	30.3
Participates in games or group activities.	Engagement	26.3	33.3
Interacts well with other children.	Engagement	22.8	36.4
Resolves disagreements with you calmly.	Self-Control	21.1	33.3
Takes responsibility for her/his actions.	Responsibility	12.3	36.4

Table 2 shows the rank of subscales according to the total average importance rating of skills in one subscale (min. = 0, max. = 2). There is a consensus between the groups' perceived value of the domains of social skills behaviours, associated with each subscale. Both special educators and teachers attributed the highest importance to Cooperation skills, followed by Responsibility and Self-control. Next, En-

gagement, Assertion, and Communication are considered as less important, while the Empathy domain is seen as least important. Although teachers in comparison to special educators attribute higher importance to all subscales (except Cooperation), the Mann-Whitney U test confirmed that ratings between groups differ significantly only in the Empathy domain ($U = 664.00, Z = -2.376, p = 0.018$).

Table 2. The rank of subscales by the importance of skills and differences in subscales rating between special educators and teachers

Rank	Subscale	Special educators		Teachers		U test	Z	p
		AS	SD	AS	SD			
1	Cooperation	1.35	0.37	1.28	0.36	805.50	-1.017	0.309
2	Responsibility	1.06	0.35	1.22	0.37	699.50	-1.843	0.065
3	Self-Control	1.05	0.43	1.20	0.36	804.00	-1.177	0.239
4	Engagement	1.01	0.40	1.14	0.39	725.50	-1.611	0.107
5	Assertion	0.98	0.36	1.07	0.34	844.00	-0.818	0.414
6	Communication	0.89	0.43	1.06	0.36	738.50	-1.709	0.087
7	Empathy	0.88	0.38	1.04	0.38	664.00	-2.376	0.018

Table 3. Differences in importance rating of social skills between participants in lower and upper elementary grades

Subscale	Special educators				Teachers			
	Lower grades	Upper elementary grades	Z	p	Lower grades	Upper elementary grades	Z	p
	AS (SD)	AS (SD)			AS (SD)	AS (SD)		
Cooperation	1.32 (.34)	1.38 (.38)	-0.892	0.372	1.28 (.39)	1.29 (.29)	-0.039	0.969
Responsibility	.99 (.35)	1.10 (.35)	-1.878	0.060	1.24 (.39)	1.18 (.33)	-0.453	0.650
Self-Control	.97 (.40)	1.10 (.44)	-1.664	0.096	1.17 (.38)	1.26 (.37)	-0.683	0.495
Engagement	1.01 (.43)	1.01 (.39)	-0.518	0.604	1.13 (.39)	1.16 (.41)	-0.165	0.869
Assertion	.86 (.34)	1.05 (.36)	-2.096	0.036	1.08 (.38)	1.03 (.27)	-0.214	0.830
Communication	.86 (.40)	.91 (.45)	-0.779	0.436	1.10 (.40)	.99 (.28)	-0.942	0.346
Empathy	.80 (.37)	.93 (.38)	-1.844	0.065	1.06 (.43)	1.00 (.29)	-0.118	0.906

The results obtained using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test to examine differences in the importance rating between individual subscales in both participant groups show that special educators consider skills in the Cooperation domain as significantly more important compared to skills in any other domain: Responsibility ($Z = -5.678, p = 0.000$), Self-control ($Z = -5.131, p = 0.000$), Engagement ($Z = -5.973, p = 0.000$), Assertiveness ($Z = -5.934, p = 0.000$), Communication ($Z = -6.176, p = 0.000$) and Empathy ($Z = -6.082, p = 0.000$). Further,

skills comprised in the Responsibility domain are considered significantly more important than skills in the Communication domain ($Z = -4.117, p = 0.000$) and Empathy ($Z = -4.001, p = 0.000$). In addition, Self-control skills are regarded as significantly more important than Communication skills ($Z = -3.130, p = 0.002$) and Empathy ($Z = -3.987, p = 0.000$).

A similar advantage was observed for Engagement skills compared to Communication ($Z = -4.178, p = 0.000$) and Empathy ($Z = -3.202, p = 0.001$). Teachers

value Cooperation skills significantly more than Assertiveness skills ($Z = -3.137, p = 0.002$), Communication skills ($Z = -3.139, p = 0.002$), and Empathy ($Z = -3.514, p = 0.000$).

Responsibility skills are considered significantly more important only compared to the Empathy domain ($Z = -3.028, p = 0.002$). The Mann–Whitney U test was used to test the differences in ratings of assessed skill domains between participants teaching in upper and lower grades, within each sample group. Table 3 shows the average values of importance rating of each

5. Discussion

The goal of this study was to determine the perspectives of teachers and special educators regarding the importance of distinct social skills for successful functioning in the classroom and school environment. The results point out that both groups of participants attributed the highest value to skills in the domain of Cooperation, however, Responsibility and Self-Control skills are highly valued.

When looking at both participant groups together, the results are in line with findings from previous studies, that utilised the former version of the instrument – The Social Skills Rating System, and with results from standardisation studies of the updated version (SSIS) used in this work (see Gresham & Elliott, 2008). In these studies, teachers and special educators highlight Cooperation skills and Self-Control as critical for student success in the classroom, while the Assertion domain is less valued (Lane et al., 2003, 2004, 2006, 2010, Meier et al., 2006).

Similar results were found in a study of perceived value by high school teachers and special educators from high schools specialised for SEN students (Banković et al., 2021). Although participants in the study attributed somewhat higher value to Self-Control compared to Cooperation skills, differences were not statistically significant.

Both domains of skills are perceived as significantly more important than Assertion, which agrees with our results, at least when considering Cooperation, where we identified a statistically significant difference compared to Assertion.

Partially different findings in the importance rating of social skills domains and the significance of differences may be due not merely to differences in educational level and setting (elementary vs high school), but also due to certain methodological differences. Namely, our results may reflect the global nature of

subscale by lower and upper elementary grade special educators and teachers, as well as the significance level of differences between those groups. Although values of arithmetic mean in all social skill domains are higher in the special educators group teaching upper grades, compared to their colleagues in lower grades (except in the Engagement domain), a statistically significant difference is found only in the Assertive domain ($U = 263.500, Z = -2.096, p = 0.036$). Between teachers in lower and upper grades, differences across the social skills domains did not reach statistical significance.

teachers' expectations, considering that teachers were instructed to rate the importance of social skills needed for any student in their class. In the study by Banković et al. (2021), participants rated the value of social skills for particular students, thus the findings were probably, at least partially based on specific behavioural characteristics of individual students with mild intellectual impairment.

When looking at distinct skills, we found partial overlap with findings from other studies. For instance, in one research (Lane et al., 2004) over half of the teachers in regular elementary schools consider Cooperation ('paying attention to and following directions', 'appropriate use of leisure time') and Self-Control ('anger management in peer and adult relationships', 'getting along with others' and 'appropriate reaction to physical aggression') skills as critical.

On the other hand, none of the Assertion domain items were rated as critical by the majority of teachers. Similar results were noted in the study by Meier et al. (2006). Skills that are needed for uninterrupted following of lessons, such as 'paying attention to and following the teacher's directions', 'following classroom rules', 'completing tasks without disturbing others', and 'adequate behaviour in the absence of direct supervision by teachers' were perceived as critical by the majority, or close to the majority of teachers in our sample.

Then again, between 21% and 37% of participants considered skills that are needed for appropriate relationships with peers and solving interpersonal conflicts as critical. In general, the noted value hierarchy of skills in our study, in view of broader domains, as well as in view of distinct skills, is in line with findings in earlier works, stating that teachers and special educators attribute critical value to skills related to good academic achievement, learning habits, and classroom behaviour as critical for student's success in school; while less value is attributed to interpersonal

and problem-solving skills (see review study by Lane et al., 2012). However, unlike the above-mentioned studies that identify several skills considered as critical for classroom success by more than 50% of participants (e.g., seven in the study by Lane et al. (2004) or eleven by Meier et al. (2006)), results from our sample identify only three skills in the special educators group, and one skill in the teachers group rated as critical by just over 50% of participants. It is plausible that participants in our sample generally consider the social functioning of students as less valuable, compared to other aspects of school behaviour, such as academic engagement or cognitive skills related to academic success. This assumption, possibly a result of cultural differences and differences in the educational systems across countries, should be further examined in future research efforts. For example, in Hong Kong less focus is placed on Empathy and Communication skills, and much more on the development of academic skills (Cheung et al., 2017).

Because all participants in our sample work with students with ASD, the results can have implications for the necessary provision of support for these students when entering the school environment, both in mainstream and special education. Students with ASD require explicit teaching e.g., by social skills training interventions (Elliott & Gresham, 1991, as cited in Lane et al., 2012), particularly for skills in the domains of Cooperation, Responsibility, and Self-Control, which would optimize classroom success.

When creating interventions, consideration should be given to differences in the evaluation of certain domains of social skills between teachers and special educators. In our research, teachers gave slightly greater importance to all domains of skills, except for the domain of Cooperation, although the difference was not statistically significant (except for the domain of Empathy). Lane et al. (2004, 2010), for example, found that elementary school teachers perceive Cooperation skills as significantly more important for student success than special educators, which is inconsistent with our results.

The explanation offered by the authors highlights the potential effect of the classroom size and students' characteristics, as well as the respondents' level of training.

According to the authors, teachers are responsible for managing the behaviour of a larger number of students during the school day, while special educators

have more experience in teaching students with behavioural problems and are better prepared to manage children's behaviour through professional training programs, and therefore are more confident when it comes to uncooperative students. In our opinion, it is possible that the class heterogeneity in terms of the types and severity of students' disabilities, makes it more difficult to teach without interruptions than in regular classes, therefore special educators value this area of skills relatively more than teachers. Thus, for example, attention problems, which are very common in the population of students attending special schools (Đorđević & Banković, 2014), negatively affect learning and task-oriented behaviour and reduce student achievement (Hughes & Kwok, 2006, as cited in DiPerna et al., 2017).

It seems that special educators who teach in upper elementary grades have somewhat higher expectations regarding the social functioning of students compared to those who teach in lower grades, especially in the domain of Assertion skills. These expectations may stem from the generally superior intellectual and socio-communicative abilities of older students. However, as information on the severity of disabilities, or the level of their socio-communication skills was not collected, this assumption should be confirmed or refuted by subsequent research exploring the perception of special educators who teach students with different degrees of disabilities and different levels of development of the mentioned skills. Certainly, the identification of changes in the expectations of special educators in relation to grade level highlights the potential need to include Assertion skills in the focus of social skills interventions as part of the preparation for transitions from lower to upper elementary grades (Lane et al., 2010).

Since previous research mostly used the former version of the instrument (Social Skills Rating System) (e.g., Lane et al., 2003, 2004, 2006, 2010, Meier et al., 2006), a full comparison to results obtained for individual subscales in this research cannot be applied. Even when the current version of the instrument, namely SSIS, was used, the results were not entirely comparable. For illustration, we find a similar hierarchy of social skills domains in the study by Frey et al., 2014, where the Cooperation domain importance rating had the highest (1.29), and the Empathy domain had the lowest (0.99) average value.

However, this research assessed perceptions of pre-school teachers, and not teachers and special educators in elementary schools. Although, the Empathy domain is attributed with the lowest perceived value in both participant groups in our sample, the observed significant difference between teachers and special educators, where teachers attributed higher value to this domain, could be explained by the higher levels of social cognition characteristic for students in regular schools. Future research should examine factors that may potentially shape the perceived importance of certain social skills by teachers and special educators, such as the personal characteristics of students and the general level of challenging behaviour in the classroom. Certainly, given the inconsistency of the findings (when compared to results of other research), as well as the relatively small number of participants in our research, the results should be taken with a certain amount of caution.

Conclusion

Overall, the results of our study reveal more similarities than differences between teachers and special educators in terms of expectations regarding social skills critical for student success in the classroom. Therefore, we can conclude that similar skills would be needed for the successful adaptation of students in both regular and special education environments, but that certain differences in expectations (e.g., in Empathy or Assertion skills between special educators in lower and upper elementary grades) may have implications for student support. The presented results suggest that teachers and special educators emphasise social skills needed for successful teaching and learning, therefore prevention and treatment programs in the domain of social skills should be focused primarily on skills in the Cooperation domain.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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