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**VOCATIONAL CURRICULUMS AND BEST PRACTICES FOR  
EMOTIONALLY DISTURBED STUDENTS**

By  
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A Thesis

Submitted to the  
Department of Psychology  
College of Science and Mathematics  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of  
Master of Arts in School Psychology  
at  
Rowan University

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Thesis Chair: Roberta Dihoff, Ph.D.

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## **Dedication**

*I would like to dedicate this manuscript to my mother, Linda J. Tarantula and Kimberly Nizolek.*

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my appreciation to Dr. Dihoff and Brandon for their help and guidance throughout this research.

## **Abstract**

Daniel Tarantula

### **VOCATIONAL CURRICULUMS AND BEST PRACTICES FOR EMOTIONALLY DISTURBED STUDENTS**

2014-2015

Roberta Dihoff, Ph.D.

Master of Arts in School Psychology

Traditional education routes are not always an appropriate fit for students, particularly those with Emotional/Behavioral Disabilities (EBD). With limited academic, social, and self-determination skills, often times upon leaving high school these individuals do not attend or are not successful in a college setting, and seek vocational studies instead. As such, in the interest of fostering success in this population, the current study looks at curriculum requirements, across states, for vocational studies to see if coursework is present which addresses the aforementioned short comings in individuals with EBD. Collection of data revealed a high count of states requiring coursework in Academic Social, and Self-Determination skills.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Purpose of Study**

#### **Need for Study**

Every year youth with Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities (EBD) graduate high school and enter society. Their options at that time are to either continue school in college or join the workforce. For many college is not an option, but at the same time they are unsure of how to go about functioning productively within society, or what they would like to do with their lives. Vocational Services allow individuals to explore job opportunities and gain firsthand experience and training in a particular field. Research has determined that in order for students with EBD to be successful in society they must have certain skills. Skills that can and should be readily available and taught in any state recognized vocational program. Given the opportunities vocational study has to offer individuals with EBD, it is important that vocational services are available to Emotionally Disabled individuals, and that those services meet the needs of this population.

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to analyze core guidelines that pertain specifically to vocational studies for empirically recommended areas of course focus for Emotionally Disturbed students.

#### **Hypotheses**

The expected outcome of this study was that it will reveal states do have, in their vocational guidelines, course work pertaining to the empirically recommended areas of

course focus for Emotionally Disturbed students. To be more specific, this study had three hypotheses: All state standards for vocational programs will include course work in Academic Skills; all state standards for vocational programs will include course work in Social Skills; and all state standards for vocational programs will include course work in Self-Determination Skills.

### **Operational Definitions**

Academic Skills- Skills and abilities pertaining to math, reading, and writing.

Common Career and Technical Core (CCTC)- Standardized requirements for vocational programs set forth by NASDCTEc.

Emotional and Behavioral Disability (EBD)/Emotionally Disturbed (ED) – diagnosis characterized by inappropriate behavior under normal circumstances (aggression), hyperactivity, immaturity (temper tantrums/poor coping skills), an inability to build and maintain relationships, learning difficulties that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.

National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium (NASDCTEc)- Represents state/territory heads of secondary and postsecondary Career Technical Education (CTE) with a goal to cultivate best practices and speak with a collective voice on national policy to promote academic and technical excellence that ensures a career-ready workforce.

Self-Determination Skills- Skills necessary for living successfully as an independent and self-sufficient member of society.

Social Skills- Skills necessary to interact successfully with other members of society.

Vocational Study- Education that prepares people for specific trades and careers.

### **Assumptions**

Due to the analytic nature of the study using preexisting data; it is assumed that the analyzed data is accurate and has passed some form of review before being accessed for this study. As such, all data is assumed to be valid.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Employment Outcomes of Youth with Behavioral Disorders**

Students with severe emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD) have shown over the course of a longitudinal study a pattern of unstable employment and schooling over the course of two years (Zigmond, 2006). While 45.4% of 33 respondents had a job 3 months after high school, the rate of employment managed to increase to 60.6% of respondents being employed at 24 months post-high school. Though this appears optimistic, there is a cause for alarm as most participants obtained jobs that did not require a high school diploma such as food preparation, sales, stocking shelves, etc. Additionally, many of them earned little more than minimum wage, and the average number of hours worked by these same individuals was around 25 to 35 hours (this number exceeded 50 hours a week at times by those holding two jobs), and many of the jobs did not offer health benefits (Zigmond, 2006). In fact, only 3 of the 15 youth original youth who were working at the time of the initial interview were still working at the time of the final interview, and the rest moved in and out of jobs attributing the job changes to “being laid off” (Zigmond, 2006). However, for most of the people interviewed, a job or school provided very little reward (hourly compensation did not rise with time spent in the job, number of hours worked was sporadic, and youth who completed a training course rarely found a job in their field of study) (Zigmond, 2006).

## **Expectations of Schools and Realities**

These results are upsetting, as they suggest that schools are not meeting the expectations put forth by section 602(d)(1)(A) of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA, 2004), which stipulates that the primary purpose of a free, appropriate, public education is to “prepare them [youth with disabilities] for further education, employment, and independent living”. In addition, legislation such as the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002), and the School-to-work Opportunities Act (1994) also put an expectation on secondary schools to prepare students for the world of work. Furthermore, as Zigmond (2006), points out, “for students with disabilities to grow into adults who can function successfully in society, secondary school educators must provide school services that prepare them for the transition to adulthood.”

Unfortunately, this is particularly difficult for educators to do, since many students with EBD regard school as unimportant (Carter & Lunsford, 2005) and youth with EBD have extremely durable disorders which cause them to defy many of the intervention efforts provided to them (Wolf, Braukmann, & Ramp, 1987). They also tend to drop out of school at alarming rates and not attend college (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). As a result, this leads to disappointingly low numbers of positive employment outcomes for those adolescents with EBD (Wagner, Cameto, & Newman, 2003). Thus, Destefano, Hasazi, and Furney (1998) highlight the need for better integrated services to help transition youth from school to work, and Carter and Lunsford (2005) also suggest that "when provided with adequate skills and supports, transition-age youth with EBD have the potential to make substantial contributions in the workplace".

## **Need of Vocational Services**

Vocational programs are often considered for adolescents with EBD over traditional academic routes which, Bullis & Cheney (1999) and Bullis, Morgan, Benz, Todis, & Johnson (2002) have suggested, makes employment a realistic and obtainable goal for this population. Research has also determined employment to be a prominent post school transition goal for youth with EBD (Cameto, Levine, & Wagner, 2004). Hasazi, Gordon, and Roe (1985) found the correlation between high school vocational education and employment, for young adults with disabilities, to be significant. Of the individuals with EBD who graduated from high school in Zigmond's (2006) study, 50-60% of them chose to pursue specific job training from trade schools, vocational centers, or technical programs within community colleges, while fewer were seeking a liberal arts education at a community college or 4-year college. In comparison, the group of EBD youth who dropped out of school in the same study were less likely to attend education of any sort, but those who did were more likely to take a vocational course. This disparity between groups is because transition to adulthood becomes more difficult when students drop out as it often comes with fewer options and services, since public school services are no longer available to them- this includes vocational services (Destefano, Hasazi, & Furney, 1998). Furthermore, vocational training is often the last service used in school by adolescents with EBD (Bullis & Cheney, 1999), as adolescents with EBD have limited involvement in school or community based jobs in high school (Wagner & Davis, 2006). Fortunately though their popularity has increased as its effectiveness as a transition tool has become established over time and a recent study also shows that a higher proportion of high school youth who received a summer job via school vocational services were still



employed at the end of summer compared to those who did not go through the service (National Council on Disability, 2008; Carter, Trainor, Ditchman, & Owens, 2011).

Vocational training is only one facet of success in youth with behavioral disorders. Halpern (1985, 1993) recommends that research be broadened to include a holistic framework of a variety of life goals and factors in the transition of EBD students. More recently, Carter and Lunsford (2005) point out, exclusive focus on skill instruction alone will not adequately meet the many needs of adolescents with EBD to function as members of society. They go on to list an additional three key recommended support areas- in addition to Vocational skills- to increase a student's success in the work force (Social skills, Academic skills, and Self-Determination skills).

### **Social Skills**

Compared to peers without EBD, young adults with EBD have poorer social skills and higher rates of Conduct Disorder (Armstrong, Dedrick, & Greenbaum, 2003). Consequently they have limited interpersonal relationships, which in turn lowers opportunities for employment (Davis, & Vander Stoep, 1997; Edgar, 1985; Kazdin, 1993; Loeber, 1991; Marder, & Di'Amico, 1992; Wagner, 1991; Wagner, Blackorby, Cameto, & Newman, 1993; Wagner, D'Amico, Marden, Neman, & Blackorby, 1992). Wagner & Davis (2006) suggest this is due to the fact that students with ED have more limited interactions with the general population due to their spending less time in general education classes and thus not sharing in prosocial norms of such groups. Furthermore, the very social skill deficits that define youth with EBD are the same skills that dominate lists of worker characteristics valued and expected by employers; consequently, without

such skills those with EBD may have difficulty negotiating demands of customers, coworkers, or employers in addition to adapting to fluctuating social expectations (Kauffman, 2001).

### **Academic Skills**

Students with EBD have a tendency to disengage from school (Wagner, Marder, Blackorby, Cameto, Newman, Levine, et al., 2003). Though students with EBD express an interest in vocation post-secondary school, academic achievement is none-the-less important as it can have a far reaching impact on the life of people with EBD as adults (Lane, Gresham, & O'shaughnessy, 2002). Reading, writing, and math skills are critical in moving past entry level employment, however youth with EBD exhibit deficits in these areas that put them below grade level (Nelson, Benner, Lane, & Smith, 2004; Rylance, 1998). Furthermore, special education students (which youth with EBD are often categorized as) often lag behind their peers in graduation rates (Newman, 2005). Often students with disabilities leave high school and receive a certification of high school completion because they did not meet the requirements for a diploma (Guy, Shin, Lee, & Thurlow, 2000; Stodden, Whelley, Chang, & Harding, 2001). However, graduating with a diploma from high school increases one's opportunity for becoming successfully employed (Rylance, 1998). Wentling and Waight (2001) found that integration of academic and vocational learning may be an effective way of improving academic performance, and Phelps (2003) states that effective schools provide "authentic learning" of content and skills relevant to student interests and future plans. As Harvey (2001) and Rylance (1998) discuss, by making a connection between what is learned and how it applies to the work place students with EBD can be provided a motivating curriculum

with meaningful contexts in which to learn academic skills. Moreover, by merging academics and vocational learning these youth have the chance to access more general education curricula (Eisenman, 2000).

### **Self-Determination Skills**

A determining factor in the importance of self-determination skills is the fact that most workplaces require independence in their workers beyond the level of which many students with EBD have been prepared (Wehmey, Agran, & Hughes, 1998). In addition, acquisition of self-determination skills like that of self-management, problem solving, goal setting and self-advocacy skills is suggested to allow students more meaningful and complete participation in the career planning process, as student interests, preferences, and values are able to be represented, and have been associated with improved employment outcomes (Snyder & Shapiro, 1997; Carter & Lunsford, 2005). Furthermore, data has shown students with EBD tend to have little opportunity to be involved in actively setting their transitional goals (Snyder, 2002). They rely on services to carry them through life because they have relied on them for so long. However, the reality of the situation is once students leave high school and enter the workplace, they lose access to many support services that were available to them in school (Carter & Lunsford, 2005). Davis and Vander Stoep (1997) suggest the thought of becoming independent with fewer to no services heightens the stress associated with transition for individuals with EBD because of the difficulties and societal expectations they face and will face. Thus students particularly those with EBD need to be taught how to be functionally independent members of society without these services while they are still available so

that the issues and stress experienced during the transition from school to work can be mitigated.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### **Data of Interest**

The current study looked at Common Career and Technical Core (CCTC) guidelines for specific course guidelines of various types of vocational studies in regions and states across the country. Only states which adopted CCTC guidelines were used in this study. This amounted to 42 states which were then placed into the following categories based on their geographic location: East (15 states), West (9 states), Midwest (9 states), and South (9 states).

#### **Materials**

Materials for this research included access to the main CCTC website via the internet as well as state websites, Microsoft Excel, and SPSS.

#### **Design**

A descriptive research design was used in this study. The point of interest was to look for empirically based recommended areas of course focus (social skills, academic skills, and self-determination skills), for students with EBD enrolled in vocational programs, within the CCTC guidelines. The information is publically available online and was organized and coded using Microsoft Excel.

#### **Procedure**

The procedure of the current study involved going over each qualifying state's curriculum for the recommended areas of course focus. States were accessed via links posted on the official CCTC website, and searched using the following key words: for

Curriculums, Program of Studies, and Career Clusters in order to ensure a thorough attempt to locate the criteria for this study. Using Excel columns were set up for State, Region, Social Skills, Academic Skills, and Self-Determination Skills. The states were listed according to their initials as was the region of the United States the state in question can be located within. If a recommended area was found within the state's guidelines it was coded as "Y" under the corresponding column. If it was not found within the state's guidelines it was coded as "N". Upon final collection of data it was then transposed into SPSS where a Chi Square was used to analyze the collected data. When entering the data into SPSS "Y" was coded as "1", and "N" was coded as "0".

### **Analysis**

Analysis was done through SPSS. After inputting the data into SPSS a cross tabulation was run in order to observe what percentage of states, both between and within regions, met the desired criteria of having academic, social, and self-determination skills coursework as a part of their criteria. A Chi Square was also run for each hypothesis in order to see if any differences of significance existed between regions. The results found are discussed in the following chapters.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

The current study explored the requirement of specific coursework (Social Skills, Academic Skills, Self-Determination Skills), which have been found to be helpful for individual with EBD, in vocational curriculums. State websites were searched to see if these skills were required coursework in each state's vocational curriculum. In addition, all the states in this study were selected for being recognized by the National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium for their use of Common Career and Technical Core Standards.

There were three hypotheses for the current study, and they were as follows:

#### **Hypothesis One**

States that are recognized by CCTC will have Academic Skills as a part of their state standards for vocational programs. When a Chi Square was run results showed that for Academic Skills, not all states had them as a requirement. However, all states in the Mid-West and South did have Academic Skills as a requirement. The West had 88.9% of its states meet Academic Skills criteria and the East had 80.0% of its states meet Academic Skills criteria.

Table 1.

*Academic Skills Data*

Region		Academic Skills		Total
		No	Yes	
East	Count	3	12	15
	% within Region	20.0%	80.0%	100.0%
	% within Academic Skills	75.0%	31.6%	35.7%
	% of Total	7.1%	28.6%	35.7%
Mid-West	Count	0	9	9
	% within Region	0.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	% within Academic Skills	0.0%	23.7%	21.4%
	% of Total	0.0%	21.4%	21.4%
South	Count	0	9	9
	% within Region	0.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	% within Academic Skills	0.0%	23.7%	21.4%
	% of Total	0.0%	21.4%	21.4%
West	Count	1	8	9
	% within Region	11.1%	88.9%	100.0%
	% within Academic Skills	25.0%	21.1%	21.4%
	% of Total	2.4%	19.0%	21.4%
Total	Count	4	38	42
	% within Region	9.5%	90.5%	100.0%
	% within Academic Skills	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	% of Total	9.5%	90.5%	100.0%

Presence (in percent) of Academic Skills criteria found by Region, within Region, and across the country.



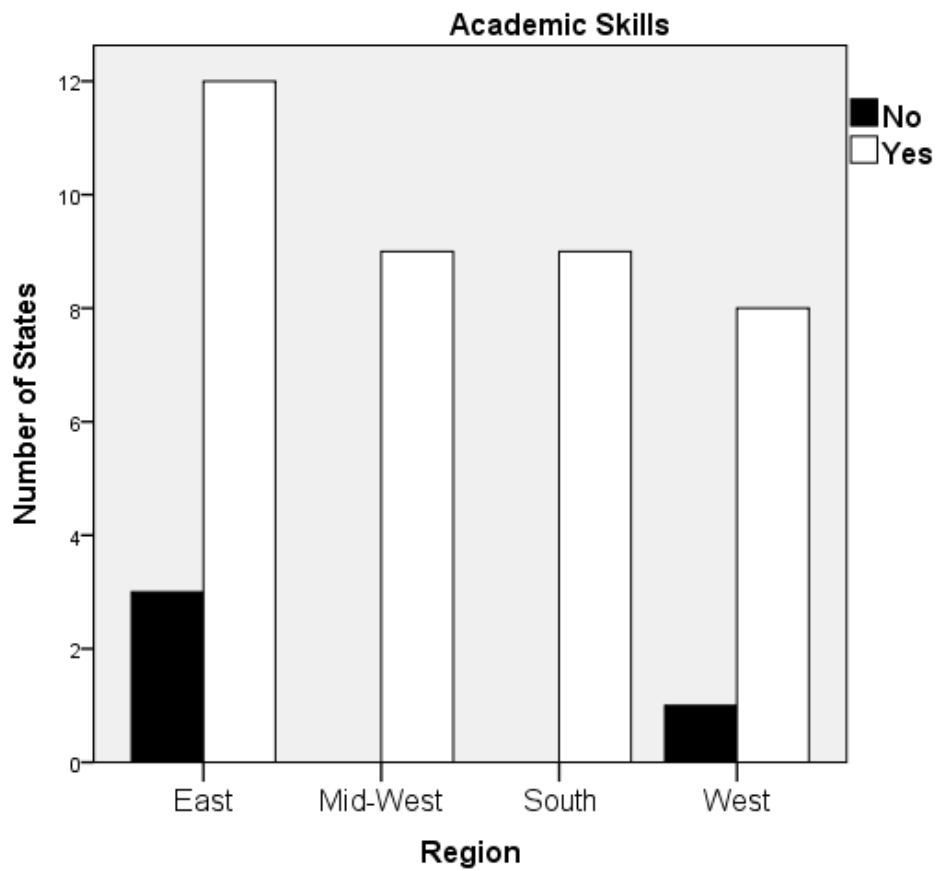


Figure 1. States with Academic Skills criteria by region.

Table 2.

*Academic Skills Chi-Square Tests*

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	3.832 <sup>a</sup>	3	.280
Likelihood Ratio	5.126	3	.163
N of Valid Cases	42		

a. 4 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .86.

Since the hypothesis required all states to have academic skills as a part of their vocational curriculum and states in both the East and West failed to meet this requirement, the null hypothesis stands. Chi square analysis showed that there was no significant difference in the number of states that had academic skills as a part of their vocational curriculum between regions.

**Hypothesis Two**

States that are recognized by CCTC will have Social Skills as a part of their state standards for vocational programs. The only region to have all states meet the social skills criteria was the south. In the East, 66.7% of states met the social skills criteria. In e Mid-West, 88.9% of states met the social skills criteria, and in the west, 77.8% of states met the social skills criteria.

Table 3.

*Social Skills Data*

Region		Social Skills		Total
		No	Yes	
East	Count	5	10	15
	% within Region	33.3%	66.7%	100.0%
	% within Social Skills	62.5%	29.4%	35.7%
	% of Total	11.9%	23.8%	35.7%
Mid-West	Count	1	8	9
	% within Region	11.1%	88.9%	100.0%
	% within Social Skills	12.5%	23.5%	21.4%
	% of Total	2.4%	19.0%	21.4%
South	Count	0	9	9
	% within Region	0.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	% within Social Skills	0.0%	26.5%	21.4%
	% of Total	0.0%	21.4%	21.4%
West	Count	2	7	9
	% within Region	22.2%	77.8%	100.0%
	% within Social Skills	25.0%	20.6%	21.4%
	% of Total	4.8%	16.7%	21.4%
Total	Count	8	34	42
	% within Region	19.0%	81.0%	100.0%
	% within Social Skills	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	% of Total	19.0%	81.0%	100.0%

Presence (in percent) of Social Skills criteria found by Region, within Region, and across the country.

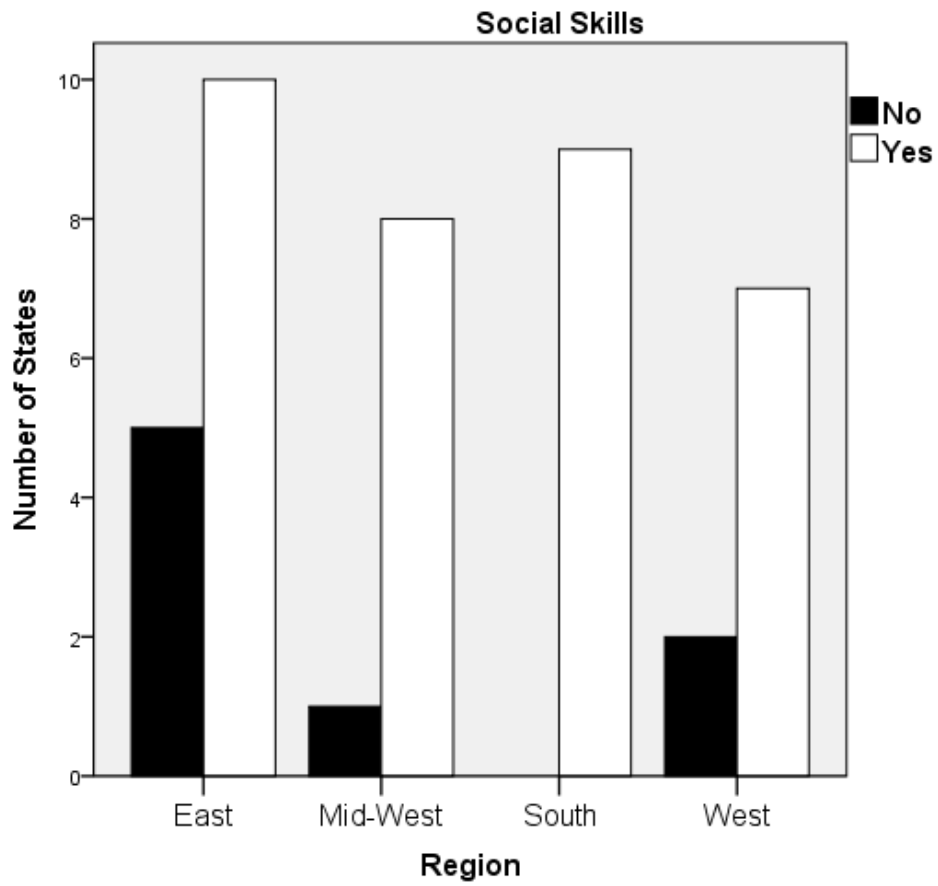


Figure 2. States with Social Skills criteria by region.

Table 4.

*Social Skills Chi-Square Tests*

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	4.529 <sup>a</sup>	3	.210
Likelihood Ratio	5.992	3	.112
N of Valid Cases	42		

a. 4 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.71.

Like the first hypothesis, this hypothesis required all states to have social skills as a part of their vocational curriculum. However, states in the East, West, and Mid-West did not meet this criteria and the null hypothesis stands. Chi square analysis showed that there was no significant difference in the number of states that had social skills as a part of their vocational curriculum between regions.

**Hypothesis Three**

The third and final hypothesis was that states that are recognized by CCTC will have Self-Determination Skills as a part of their state standards for vocational programs. No Region had all its states meet Self-Determination Skills criteria. The East had 80% of its states meet criteria. The Mid-West and South had 89.9% of their states meet Self-Determination Skills criteria. The West had 77.8% of its states meet Self-Determination criteria.

Table 5.

*Self-Determination Skills Data*

Region		Self Determination Skills		Total
		No	Yes	
East	Count	3	12	15
	% within Region	20.0%	80.0%	100.0%
	% within Self Determination Skills	42.9%	34.3%	35.7%
	% of Total	7.1%	28.6%	35.7%
Mid- West	Count	1	8	9
	% within Region	11.1%	88.9%	100.0%
	% within Self Determination Skills	14.3%	22.9%	21.4%
	% of Total	2.4%	19.0%	21.4%
South	Count	1	8	9
	% within Region	11.1%	88.9%	100.0%
	% within Self Determination Skills	14.3%	22.9%	21.4%
	% of Total	2.4%	19.0%	21.4%
West	Count	2	7	9
	% within Region	22.2%	77.8%	100.0%
	% within Self Determination Skills	28.6%	20.0%	21.4%
	% of Total	4.8%	16.7%	21.4%
Total	Count	7	35	42
	% within Region	16.7%	83.3%	100.0%
	% within Self Determination Skills	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
	% of Total	16.7%	83.3%	100.0%

Presence (in percent) of Social Skills criteria found by Region, within Region, and across the country.

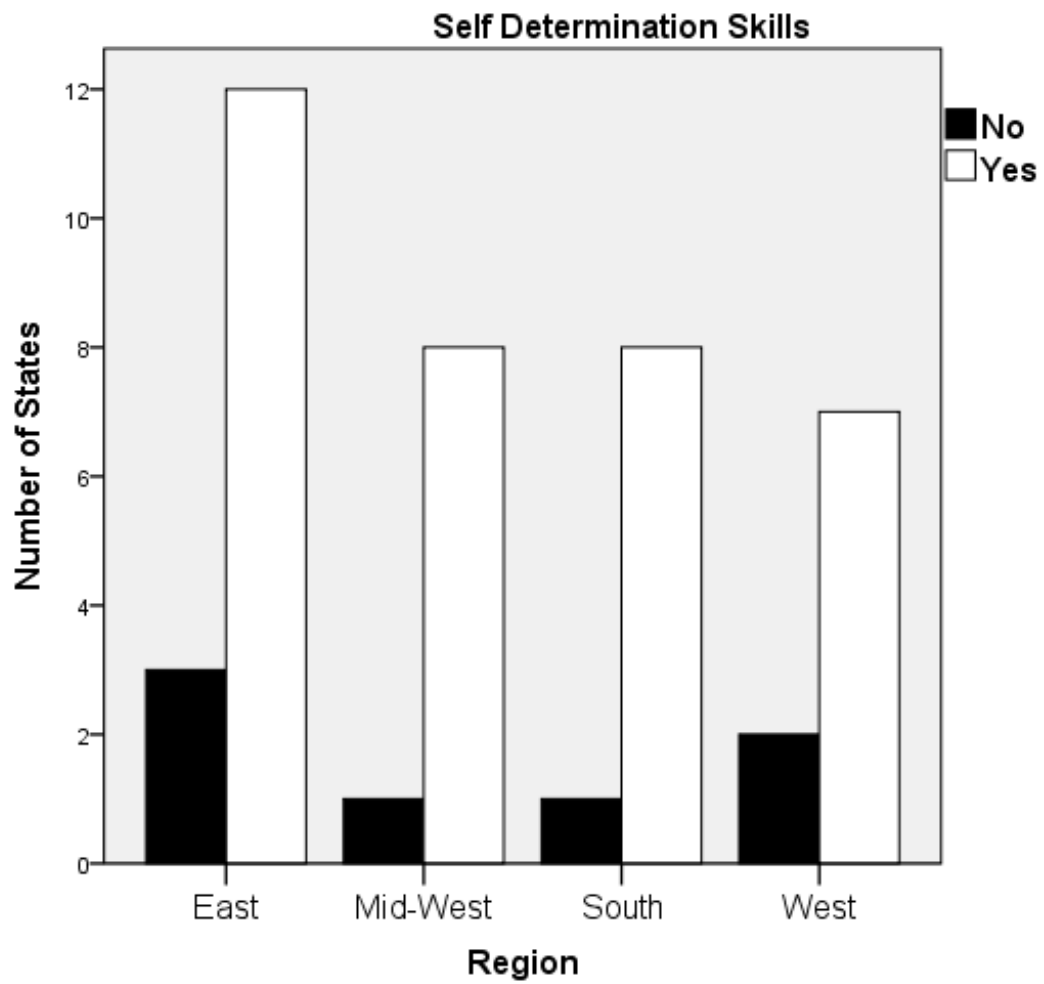


Figure 3. States with Self-Determination Skills criteria by region.

Table 6.

*Self-Determination Skills Chi-Square Test*

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.720 <sup>a</sup>	3	.868
Likelihood Ratio	.742	3	.863
N of Valid Cases	42		

a. 4 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 1.50.

This hypothesis required, in similar fashion as the previous two hypotheses, all states to have self-determination skills as a part of their vocational curriculum. No region had self-determination skills as a part of every state's curriculum and the null hypothesis stands. Chi square analysis showed that there was no significant difference in the number of states that had self-determination skills as a part of their vocational curriculum between regions.



## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to explore whether or not best practices were required in state vocational curriculums for a population that more often than not is drawn towards vocational studies. Specifically, this study looked to see if Academic, Social, and Self-Determination skills, were mandated in state vocational curriculums.

Overall the results of the present study show a majority of states include in their standards the three skills found to be beneficial to individuals with EBD. Findings were consistently high amongst regions particularly in the south which showed 100% of its states mandating Academic and Social Skills. This data suggests states in this region have considered these skills important for vocational education as a whole. This in turn means standards recognized for success by the states reflect those, at least in some part, found to be important via scientific research. Thus laying a foundation of standards across most of the nation. A step that should foster success especially in individuals with EBD who express interest in the trades as a career.

### **Relevance to Literature**

The initial perception and expectation going into this study was to find 100% of states mandating the suggested coursework of interest to this study. However, even though academic, social, and self-determinism skill coursework could not be located in every single one of the states we looked at and their required coursework; a chi square test revealed there to be no significant differences amongst regions in the United States when it came to the prevalence of these skills in state curriculum. Which is further supported by the high percentages of each respective category in the four regions into

which the states in this study were divided. The findings of this study show that on a national stage, states appear to follow the scientifically backed suggestion of Carter and Lunsford (2005) to make academic, social, and self-determinism skills a consistent part of vocational studies by making these three skills a part of the state wide mandated curricular coursework for individuals pursuing vocation based studies and careers. More importantly, the fact that these curriculums are for secondary school education means that an attempt is being made to prepare students for an independent life post-secondary school once they lose access to the support services that were available to them in school (Carter & Lunsford, 2005).

### **Limitations**

A major, and definitely influential limitation to this study was the inconsistent nature and layouts of each state's Department of Education (DOE) website which made it difficult or impossible to locate the information necessary for this study. As such, the inability to find information is not necessarily indicative of its absence from the state standards as all states in this study were recognized by the NASDCTEc. Should this research be conducted again, it would be of interest to the principal investigator to contact each state's Department of Education individually and ask for direct access to the information.

### **Future Research**

Future research possibilities could be to see the correlation in post-secondary school outcomes for students with EBD who are enrolled in vocational education programs of states that require Academic, Social, and Self-Determination Skill course

work as well as the degree of intensity with which each skill is addressed. Research could also look at the individual coursework of vocational programs, pertaining to Academic, Social, and Self-Determination Skills, within these states and look for any possible difference in outcomes for individuals who attend different institutions.

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