The Effects of a Buddy Bench on Social Interactions in Elementary Students with Internalizing Behaviors
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INTRODUCTION
• Students with Emotional-Behavioral Disorders (EBD) exhibit negative behaviors in one of two ways, externalizing behaviors or internalizing behaviors. Externalizing behaviors include acting out and other aggressive and antisocial behaviors. Internalizing behaviors include social withdrawal, anxiety, and depression (Brumariu et al., 2010; Merrell & Gimpel, 1998).
• Internalizing behaviors are more often overlooked but need intervention as badly as externalizing behaviors. These behaviors are associated with an array of negative outcomes (Kaufman & Landrum, 2006; Gresham & Kern, 2004).
• On a typical elementary school playground, 89% of children are playing with friends. Children consistently playing alone often exhibit internalizing behaviors such as depression and anxiety (Coplan, Ooi, & Rose-Kransnor, 2015).
• Recently, the Associated Press (2013) reported that an intervention called the “Buddy Bench” has shown anecdotal success across the country in helping students make friends.
• This study sought to evaluate empirical evidence behind these anecdotal success stories.

METHOD
Design and Procedures
• Baseline data was collected on the solitary behavior of students while at noontime recess on the playground.
• Using a Multiple-Baseline across Participants experimental design, we placed the Buddy Bench on playground 1 (1-3rd grade) and after a trend was established, placed another Buddy Bench on playground 2 (4-6th grade).
• Teachers, using a script, briefed students on the purpose of the Buddy Bench, then, performed a short role play with students and reminded students to use the Buddy Bench daily.
• After a trend was established on both playgrounds, a withdrawal phase was implemented, followed by a return to treatment.

Participants
• 448 Elementary students in grades 1-6, 75% received free or reduced price lunch, and 65% were non-Caucasian

Dependent Variable
• Solitary Behavior – Observers recorded the number of students not engaged or engaging in play behavior alone at anytime during 20 second observation periods.

RESULTS

BUDDY BENCH RULES
If you are alone:
1. Sit at the Buddy Bench
2. If someone invites you to play with them, say “Yes” or “No, thank you”.
If you see someone who is alone at the Bench:
1. Join them and invite them to play, talk, or walk with you
2. If they say no, say “Okay, maybe next time”, and walk away

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DISCUSSION
Effective at Lowering Solitary Behavior
The Buddy Bench appears to be useful as a tool in lowering solitary student behavior on the playground, but needs additional research to verify the validity of our results. It appears to be simple and cost efficient to implement.

Students Like Bench, Teachers Neutral
The Buddy Bench appears socially valid for students based on social validity survey data. Results revealed that teachers were neutral on their perceptions of the Buddy Bench, which contradicted the almost exclusively positive feedback reported in popular media reports. This may be because teachers in past media reports simply wanted reporters to hear only positive comments or because they had a different experience at their schools.

Importance of Staff Buy In
The Buddy Bench needs staff buy in and support to be maximally successful. It does not require significant time or financial resources but, in order for the bench to be successful, administration and teachers should be positive about the bench and support a helping, friendly attitude in the school.

Conclusion
Findings suggest that the Buddy Bench shows promise as a simple, useful, and practical intervention to help students make friends and decrease social isolation. The Buddy Bench intervention may fit as another tool for educators to implement for improving the school recess environment.