The relationship between student infractions and social emotional competence: A program evaluation of Responsive Classroom(RTM)

Bloodine Barthelus

College of William & Mary - School of Education

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wm.edu/etd

Part of the Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons, Educational Leadership Commons, and the Educational Psychology Commons

Recommended Citation

https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.25774/w4-3424-fh50

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STUDENT INFRACTIONS AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE: A PROGRAM EVALUATION OF RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM®

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Faculty and Staff of the School of Education

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

By

Bloodine Barthelus

May 2015
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STUDENT INFRACTIONS AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE: A PROGRAM EVALUATION OF RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM®

by

Bloodine Barthelus

Approved February 20, 2015 by

Leslie W. Grant, Ph.D.
Chairperson of Dissertation Committee

Margaret E. Constantino, Ph.D.

Megan Tschantzen-Moran, Ph.D.
Dedication

Forty-four years ago a man emigrated to the U.S. from Haiti, knowing very little English and leaving behind his family. He had nothing but $21 in his pocket and a dream. This work is dedicated to that man, my Father as well as my Mother for every sacrifice that was made to ensure that I could someday cross this finish line. For every degree that you both missed out on so you could work the extra job or take on additional hours, I say, “Thank You.” This one is for you. And to my son, Gideon, may you never shy away from the challenging work, which is sure to come in life and in learning. It is tough but always worth it, so engage, and live the life that you imagine. You are more than able to do so.
# Table of Contents

Dedication iii  
Acknowledgements vii  
List of Tables ix  
List of Figures x  
Abstract xi  

## CHAPTER I: Introduction  
2  
Context for Reform in Disciplinary Approach 6  
Context of Evaluation 9  
Program Context and Criteria 12  
Purpose of the Evaluation 14  
Program Evaluation Model 15  
Evaluation Questions 18  
Definition of Terms 18  
Summary 20  

## CHAPTER II: Review of the Literature 22  
History and Impact of OSS 22  
Zero Tolerance Policies 23  
Gun-Free Schools Act 23  
Disparities and Inequities Resulting from OSS 26  
School-to-Prison Pipeline 29  
Impact of Disruptive Student Behavior 30  
OSS as a Deterrent for Disruptive Student Behavior 31  
Social-Emotional Competence 33  
Social-Emotional Deficits Among Urban Youth 34
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework of Social-Emotional Competence</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits of Developing Social-Emotional Competence</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social-Emotional Learning in Practice</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsive Classroom® as an Intervention</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III: Method</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation Model</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Design</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participants</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Sources</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Evaluation Management Plan</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Evaluation Standards</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Considerations</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengths, Delimitations, and Limitations</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IV: Results</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document Review</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RC Committee and School Staff Focus Groups</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation Question 1</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation Question 2</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation Question 3</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgments

I am grateful to several individuals for the completion of the project. I’d first like to thank my dissertation committee for being the community of scholars that I needed to create an evaluation of this caliber. Dr. Grant, I am ever grateful for your patience, encouragement, and your steadfast and consistent guidance which kept me on track and on pace to finish despite the many challenges which arose throughout the process. Dr. Tschannen-Moran, thank you for always reminding me of the big picture and how much value my work has and will have even as it veered sharply from the original plan. Dr. Constantino, thank you for refining my work, asking the tough questions and challenging me to think on a level that encompasses a broader scope of the issue presented. I didn’t always like the process but I appreciated the end result.

To my son Gideon, my most important and valuable earthly treasure...thank you so much for sacrificing time with your Mom for what seemed like three long years and doing it with such grace. You are such a wonderful being, and I appreciate your encouragement and reminders to “keep working on your paper, Mommy.” I love you dearly. Many thanks to my sister Brege and her husband (my brother) Edwin for the many weekends and days you chose to take Gideon so I could have time for class or just to write. I could not have done this without you both. To my sister Natacha, for all of your prayers and for taking Gideon in for a long summer break; you are so appreciated and loved. To my youngest sister, Fabby...thank you for providing me with a quiet place to focus and write during the holidays. A huge congratulation to the new Dr. Linda Barthelus and Dr. Thamarra Barthelus...it was nice to have walked this path alongside you both. Who would have thought that three doctorates would come out of one family in
the same year? And to my three nephews who serve as a constant reminder that life is never as serious as we make it despite the challenges of a doctoral program. Thank you all for the small doses of laughter and fun throughout.

To my cohort...thank you for making this experience all the more rewarding by sharing your experiences and your knowledge. I could not have asked for a better set of professionals to get to know during this phase. More specifically, I'd like to thank Shannon Finnegan for your ongoing support and friendship. Getting to know you has been a wonderful byproduct of this journey.

Finally, to the participants of the evaluation and the administration, both current and former, from Rockport ES...there would have been no evaluation without your willingness to sacrifice your time to share and support this process. I respect the work that you do on a daily basis with our students and your commitment and dedication to becoming better at what you do. Thank you for participating and affording me the opportunity to catch a glimpse of what makes Rockport great.
List of Tables

Table 1 District XYZ OSS 3 Year Totals 10
Table 2 Evaluation Data Sources and Analysis 62
Table 3 Focus Group Participants: Years of Experience 77
Table 4 Descriptive Statistics of BERS-2 for Teachers (N= 7) 78
Table 5 Descriptive Statistics of BERS-2 for Students (N=7) 79
Table 6 Descriptive Statistics of BERS-2 Teacher and Student Index Scores 80
Table 7 Descriptive Statistics of Frequency of Infractions and Suspensions 82
Table 8 Rockport: Trend of Most Common Behaviors Resulting in Suspension 100
List of Figures

Figure 1 Logic model of the Responsive Classroom® program at Rockport 17

Figure 2 BERS-2 TRS and YRS, with comparison of individual student index scores 80

Figure 3 Percentages of infraction severity, classified by tier and by school year 84
Abstract

This program evaluation uses a mixed-method approach to determine the extent to which Responsive Classroom® supports an increase in social-emotional competence in students leading to a reduction in discipline infractions. Through the use of student and teacher rating scales from the Behavioral and Emotional Rating Scale-Second Edition (BERS-2), the social-emotional competence strength of participating 5th grade students was measured and an analysis conducted of the relationship between the students’ social-emotional competence and frequency of discipline infractions incurred over a 3-year period. The study incorporated school staff focus groups to identify any facilitating conditions and barriers which exist in the implementation of Responsive Classroom® and the program’s efficacy in reducing discipline infractions. School staff reported the following facilitating conditions supported a reduction in discipline infractions: a positive change in their practice as educators, the inclusion of logical consequences in managing student misbehavior and an increase in student social-emotional competence as evidenced by a decrease in severe infractions and fewer peer conflicts. Some of the barriers presented by school staff included: a lack of initial and ongoing training, limited staff buy-in, and inadequate administrative support with severe student behaviors.

Although all teachers seemed to see the value in Responsive Classroom®, the challenges of implementing the program with fidelity were prominent. A document review of all discipline referrals over the 3-year period drew non-conclusive data due to inconsistencies in recording. A significant decrease was found, however, for severe infractions which require documentation for suspension approval. Recommendations for schools interested in implementing social-emotional learning programs include
incorporating a district-wide approach which focuses on program planning and
implementation, incorporating a focus on both formative and summative program
evaluation and ongoing professional development and support for school staff to ensure a
high level of fidelity and consistency with implementation.
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STUDENT INFRACTIONS AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE: A PROGRAM EVALUATION OF RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM®
CHAPTER I: Introduction

Students are being excluded from their right to an education due to disciplinary measures. In School Year (SY) 2009/2010 alone, based on data from 26,000 middle and high school schools, over two million students were suspended from school (Losen & Martinez, 2013). In addition to practices which were already in place, the implementation of policies such as zero tolerance which appeared on the heels of the Gun-Free Schools Act have pushed administrators in the direction of opting to use exclusionary discipline measures, such as suspensions and expulsions, as one of the first resorts rather than a last one (Fabelo et al., 2011; American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Zero tolerance refers to policies which "punish all offenses severely, no matter how minor" (Skiba & Peterson, 1999).

Two million student suspensions translates to over 14 million hours, or almost 2.2 million days, of lost instruction. This accounts for an increased likelihood of academic failure and overall student disengagement (Losen & Martinez, 2013). Moreover, there is significant research which points to the inequities which are evident in the assignment of suspensions, particularly in four different categories: (a) race, (b) gender, (c) socioeconomic status, and (d) students with disabilities (Fenning et al., 2012; Losen & Martinez, 2013; Nielsen, 1979; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). All of these factors have led to myriad unintended consequences, such as an increase in student disengagement, retention, and dropout, and what has been termed the school-to-prison pipeline. The school-to-prison pipeline refers to a phenomenon which affects a disproportionate number of students of color that consists of a set of negative interactions
between and among children, youth, their families, school personnel, other service providers which contribute to arrest and incarceration (Osher et al., 2012, p. 284).

Most school districts have a code of conduct that provides a framework regarding how discipline is handled in the school setting (Fabelo et al., 2011). These codes are typically divided into five tiers of discipline infractions, or negative student behaviors, and assigned possible actions, which school staff and administrators can take when students engage in the corresponding behaviors (Fabelo et al., 2011). The lower tiers of infractions usually offer a wider variety of consequences. For example, dress code violations or being tardy offers various low level disciplinary responses, such as a verbal redirection, which does not require removal from the classroom. Infractions that are found on the higher tiers generally have fewer responses presented and may limit administrators to either suspensions or expulsions. These offenses are commonly serious and consist of criminal behavior such as assault. The challenge, however, that exists with a code of conduct lies in how teachers and administrators interpret the list of infractions (Fabelo et al., 2011). There is not always agreement on which behaviors would constitute an offense of disruptive classroom behavior. For this reason, discipline actions may not be implemented in an equitable manner and one student may obtain an out-of-school suspension (OSS) for the same behavior that earns a different student a much more menial consequence.

Most disciplinary actions begin with a student discipline referral. When a student commits an infraction, the staff member who is present must determine whether the behavior can be handled within the current setting or escalated to an administrator. This, again, is an area where subjectivity is an issue and varied interpretations of the code of
conduct may cause disproportionality in the code’s enforcement. In a one-year study of middle school disciplinary data, Skiba et al. (2002) found, that there were racial and gender disparities in office referrals and thus suspensions and expulsions. Their study corroborated several others that have shown that black students, particularly boys, are referred and disciplined at higher rates than their white peers (Children’s Defense Fund, 1975; Children’s Defense Fund, 2013). It was also found that there were disparities according to SES, although those were not as significant as race and gender (Skiba et al., 2002).

The disparity represented in office referrals is significant, since this is the usually the first step towards administrative action, which can lead to OSS. In a study which reviewed discipline referrals from 365 elementary and middle schools during SY 2005/2006, researchers found that there were statistically significant differences in the rate of office referrals based on race and gender, with Black students accounting for twice the office referrals of their White peers in elementary school and three times the referrals in middle school (Skiba et al., 2011). The study also found that although students were referred for the same behaviors, oftentimes students of color would receive much harsher penalties such as OSS or expulsion than their White peers.

Another study raises the possibility that the disproportionality may begin with office referrals, which are made by classroom teachers (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Upon careful review of the nature of referrals, it was found that many of the infractions of white students were based on objective incidents (e.g., smoking, leaving without permission) which are clearly defined in the code of conduct. On the other hand,
referrals of black students required much more subjectivity from the individual referring (e.g., excessive noise or disrespect).

A report written by the Children's Defense Fund (2013) focused on the disparities in discipline evident in Mississippi schools. Researchers reviewed discipline data of 59 districts from SY2009/2010 and found that Black students were at least twice as likely to have a disciplinary incident and resulting action as white students. Nationally, in a sample drawn from 7,000 school districts, although 18% of students were black, they represented 38% of all suspensions (Children's Defense Fund, 2013). The data also revealed that black boys and girls were suspended at higher rates than their White peers. More specifically, one in five black boys and one in ten black girls received at least one OSS (Children's Defense Fund, 2013, p. 6).

Despite its ongoing use in many schools, the high rate of repeat suspensions may indicate that OSS is ineffective as a deterrent; it fails to work as a modifier of inappropriate behaviors and does not reinforce pro-social behaviors among students (Raffaele Mendez, Knoff, & Ferron, 2002). Evidence of this comes from a year-long study conducted in Florida which found that less than 1% of students who received in-school suspension, OSS, or corporal punishment had only one infraction (McFadden, Marsh, Price, & Hwang, 1992). All other students had more than one which may raise the question of whether the use of suspension was beneficial in preventing future misbehavior.

In a statewide longitudinal study that examined discipline records of all seventh grade students, it was found that almost 6 in 10 students were suspended or expelled from school at least once between their sixth and 12th-grade year (Fabelo et al., 2011). Of those
students who were suspended or expelled, the average number of suspensions and expulsions obtained during their middle and high school years was 4, leading some to believe that the desired effect of modified behavior may not have been achieved. OSS may even exacerbate the very behaviors it seeks to deter: Losen and Martinez (2013) found that being suspended even once in 9th grade doubled the likelihood of a student dropping out of high school.

Finally, OSS has also been associated with early entry into the juvenile justice system (Fabelo et al., 2011). In study that examined millions of school and juvenile justice records, almost half of all students who were disciplined 11 or more times were in contact with the juvenile justice system to some extent (Fabelo et al., 2011, p. xii). Students suspended or expelled were 3 times as likely to be in contact with the juvenile justice system in the following year. As the school system becomes increasingly punitive and isolating for those with infractions, the similarities between the school system and the justice system are so apparent that it is virtually impossible not to connect them (Wald & Losen, 2003).

**Context for Reform in Disciplinary Approach**

Schools that are focused on preventing inappropriate behaviors have lower suspension rates than those focused on punishing those same behaviors (Rafaelle Mendez et al., 2002). Using the district’s discipline database, researchers evaluated student suspension patterns across 142 schools. When comparing schools, it was found that elementary schools focused on teaching and reinforcing appropriate behaviors, along with boosting parental involvement, tended to have fewer suspensions (Rafaelle Mendez et al., 2002). Two of the three low suspending elementary schools reported implementing
a school-wide social skills training program. On the other hand, high suspending elementary schools tended to focus heavily on punishing inappropriate behavior. In addition, staff training in classroom management practices and administrator beliefs regarding how student behavior should be addressed made the biggest difference in suspension rates at the middle school level (Rafaelle Mendez et al., 2002). Administrators who focused on responding to student needs and treating students with respect issued fewer suspensions.

Another intervention which has been shown to support a decrease in discipline infractions and suspensions has been the inclusion of social-emotional learning (SEL) programming. SEL has been defined as:

the process of acquiring core competencies to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situations constructively (Elias et al., 1997).

In a meta-analysis involving 270,034 K-12 students, it was found that students who participated in SEL programs showed improvements in social and emotional skills and also reduced problematic behaviors (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). This intervention is the focus of this study and will be discussed further below.

Social-Emotional Competence and Student Behavior

One way to prevent discipline infractions leading to OSS is by increasing the social-emotional capacity of students through programmatic options. Social-emotional competencies allow students to form and maintain positive friendships, emotionally
regulate themselves when necessary, make appropriate choices, and resolve conflicts respectfully (Payton et al., 2008). Many students who are suspended repeatedly may lack the skills to select alternative behavioral options. The need for student centered preventive measures that support the development of social-emotional competence may serve as an effective intervention leading to a decrease in OSS. There is much agreement among those in the field of education and psychology that schools must look at ways to build social competence within children rather than develop systems aimed solely at decreasing disruptive behavior (Stoiber, 2011).

In many urban communities students arrive at school with emotional and social deficits leading to behavioral challenges that affect their ability to succeed (Elias & Leverett, 2011). Students who demonstrate these deficits often are on the receiving end of increasing numbers of disciplinary responses, which can include OSS (Stoiber, 2011). Blair and Diamond (2008) posit that supporting students in developing self-regulation, among other skills, early on can assist in preventing ongoing challenges that can lead to school failure. Students who have difficulty regulating their emotions tend to experience higher levels of anxiety and distress; are easily upset and have difficulty regrouping; and tend to exhibit much more disruptive behavior (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).

Large-scale reviews of three different types of implementation strategies of social-emotional learning programs in grades K-8 found that students who were enrolled in the programs demonstrated positive gains in their personal, social, and academic lives (Payton et al., 2008). More specifically, positive effects were seen in reference to social behaviors, conduct problems, and emotional distress. The study revealed that irrespective
of the format of the program (school-wide in a universal manner, after-school, or mostly targeted towards students showing deficits), positive effects were seen.

In an effort to decrease disruptive behavior and to promote an overall positive school culture, schools are beginning to implement a variety of programs. The Responsive Classroom® (RC) is a universal approach to supporting students’ social-emotional competence and is one of the programs which has been implemented on the elementary level. The following program evaluation studied the effectiveness of RC at an elementary school in developing social-emotional competence in students and its resulting effect on decreasing disciplinary infractions.

**Context of Evaluation**

The context for this study is an elementary school (Rockport, for the purpose of this study) in the mid-Atlantic, within a medium-sized urban school district (District XYZ hereafter referred to as the District) that serves approximately 46,000 students. Although there are several high performing schools in affluent locations of the city, many of the District’s schools are located in high poverty and high crime neighborhoods. The demographics of the District are as follows: 69% Black, 16% Hispanic, 11% White, and 4% other race; 17% students with disabilities; 10% English Language Learners; and 77% students who qualify for free or reduced price lunch.

Discipline is a persistent area of concern for the District. Disciplinary infractions occur on a regular basis, with a wide range of severity, and OSS has continued to be a primary tool for many administrators, as shown in Table 1. It is important to note that although there has been a decrease in the use of OSS over the past three years, its overall usage has remained high. In addition, of the OSS that occurred in SY 2012/2013, 74%
were repeat suspensions, assigned to the same students. This finding supports the research that claims that OSS is not a viable option for modifying student behavior (Skiba, 2014).

Table 1

_District XYZ OSS 3 Year Totals_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>SY 2010-11</th>
<th>SY 2011-12</th>
<th>SY 2012-13</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Enrollment</td>
<td>45,630</td>
<td>46,048</td>
<td>45,912</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total OSS</td>
<td>13,697</td>
<td>10,763</td>
<td>10,446</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary OSS</td>
<td>2,492</td>
<td>1,568</td>
<td>2,524</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rockport is a school of 362 students ranging from Pre-K to 5th grade. The student demographics consist of the following: 20% Black, 66% Hispanic, 5% White, 9% Asian, and 1% Native/Alaskan. In addition, 89% of students qualify for free and reduced price lunch; 58% are English Language Learners; and 11% are students with disabilities. In SY 2012/2013, 63% of students tested at Rockport were either proficient or advanced in Math, and 53% were proficient or advanced in reading. The remainder of students fell in the basic or below basic range in these subjects. Rockport is considered a rising school under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) accountability system, which classifies schools based on their current level of student achievement. According to this system, a rising school is one with good performance, as indicated by a school index score between 45 and 79, on a scale of 1-100.

_Problem_
During SY 2012/2013, Rockport accumulated a total of 22 reported OSS. This number shows a decrease from the previous year, when they reported 23 OSS and 25 in-school suspensions. Although the number of suspensions had not been significant as compared to similar schools in the District, there were some problematic student behaviors, which the administration wanted to address with a programmatic solution (RC Coordinator, personal communication, February 12, 2014). They also realized that their school culture did not reflect the values and norms they held, and sought a model that could support these areas of concern.

In SY 2010/2011, the administrative team visited a school implementing RC to observe the impact that it had on the school’s culture. At that point, they decided that this program could work for their student population and began implementation the following year. A conversation with the former principal of Rockport revealed that the decision to incorporate RC was not made in response to an increase in student discipline infractions, but rather a desire to provide students with skills that were necessary for their overall success. Rockport’s administration wanted to take a holistic approach toward educating their students and offer them the opportunity to relate in a more positive manner with adults and peers in addition to taking on a more proactive role in their education.

Rockport is now in its third year of RC implementation. The RC program was adopted as a means of creating a culture that focuses on building positive student behavior with a systemic approach. The program has been implemented in all classrooms across grade levels. Initial training was delivered prior to SY 2011/2012 and additional training was provided this year for all grade-level chairs. A kindergarten teacher serves as the onsite designated RC facilitator and has participated in each of the offered trainings.
Program Context and Criteria

The RC program was developed by the Northeast Foundation for Children [NEFC] and offers educators tools to expand instructional opportunities by creating positive learning communities and increasing student achievement and teacher effectiveness (NEFC, 2013). The seven principles which guide this approach are: (a) the social curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum; (b) how children learn is as important as what they learn; (c) the greatest cognitive growth occurs through social interaction; (d) to be successful academically and socially, children need a set of social skills; (e) knowing the children we teach is as important as knowing the content we teach; (f) knowing the families of the children we teach and working with them as partners is essential to children’s education; and (g) how the adults at school work together is as important as individual competence (NEFC, 2013).

The RC approach is research and evidence based and is focused on developing three main elements within the school setting: engaging academics, a positive community, and effective management. These elements are implemented through the use of several different key components. The daily morning meeting is the first component, which supports the building of a positive community, and enables teachers to set a positive tone for learning while setting the stage for teaching social-emotional skills such as respect and empathy. Building a sense of community is accomplished through the establishment of community rules and logical consequences. Students develop autonomy and independence through structured academic choices and the use of guided discovery to introduce new concepts facilitating a high level of engagement. Finally, by implementing the key components, teachers are able to take a proactive approach to
discipline within the classroom, leading to a warm, safe, and positive learning environment (NEFC, 2013). All of these program components contribute to the development of social-emotional competence within students that can assist them in achieving a higher level of success in school.

Research in the field of education validates the idea that programs like RC, which are focused on enhancing social and emotional skills for students, have the potential to improve various measures such as peer interactions, classroom social processes, and academic learning (Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu, 2007). Implementation of the RC approach has been associated with the following results: (a) improved teacher-student interactions; (b) higher-quality teaching; (c) improved social skills in children; (d) greater student achievement in math and reading; (e) more positive feelings toward school among children and teachers; (f) teachers more frequently engaged in and placed higher value on collaboration (Rimm-Kaufman, 2006).

There are several intended outcomes for the RC approach. The short term goals include: (a) fewer behavior problems; (b) a decrease in discipline referrals; (c) an increase in positive teacher language; (d) reduced time spent on discipline and redirecting behavior; (e) increased time on task learning; (f) increased student engagement and responsibility for learning; and (g) increased communication with parents (NEFC, 2013). The intermediate goals include: (a) increased effectiveness with instruction; (b) decrease in OSS; (c) increase in student achievement, particularly in math and reading; (d) improved home-school connection; and (e) students have increased positive attitudes and outlooks regarding school (see the logic model in Appendix A for a visual depiction of outcomes). The intended impact from this approach is that students will become
productive and engaged members of their community and parents will be active members of their student’s learning experiences.

Certain elements of developmental psychology serve as the underpinnings of the theory that supports the RC approach. Rimm-Kaufman and Chiu (2007) highlight both the systems theory and the bioecological model as aspects of developmental psychology that are clearly evident in the RC approach. According to the bioecological model, children’s teachers, peers, and their school environment are critical in a child’s development, and interventions which focus on developing these components can greatly influence student growth (Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu, 2007). Systems theory focuses on the relationships within a child’s life and how relationships can serve as an avenue to address the many needs students present at school (Rimm-Kaufman & Chiu, 2007). The RC approach factors into its program the basic rudiments of these theories and seeks to meet the needs that students present in the learning environment while also developing students’ social-emotional competence.

Purpose of the Evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation was to determine the likelihood that the RC approach can support, specifically in the Rockport context, the development of social-emotional competence within students, which may contribute to a decrease in OSS. The study consisted of a product evaluation as it remained focused on the outcomes of the program, both short-term and intermediate. Although there was school-wide application of RC, it was unclear whether the program was having the intended impact on student behavior. This evaluation attempted to provide data that could be tied to the efficacy of
the program and therefore support future budgetary decisions associated with the continued implementation of RC at the school.

Program Evaluation Model

The underlying model represented in this evaluation is the CIPP (context, input, process, and product) model, which comes from the pragmatic paradigm of evaluation. The CIPP model was created by Daniel Stufflebeam as a means for the evaluator to have a broader role in the evaluation of a program and to focus on context, inputs, and activities, rather than simply outcomes (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). This model may focus on all aspects of the program, only certain aspects of the program, or the relationship between the different aspects of the program. The present evaluation utilized a logic model to identify the different elements of the RC program within the Rockport context, but focused primarily on the short, intermediate, and long-term outcomes relating to social-emotional competence.

Logic Model

A logic model is a basic visual element of that communicates the reasoning behind a program or its rationale. It shows the different components of a particular entity, such as the inputs, resources, assumptions, activities, outcomes, and impacts of the program (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). By serving as a precursor to a formal program evaluation, it allows stakeholders to better comprehend the underlying assumptions about why and how a program should work. Logic models are tied to theory-based evaluations since they are intended to bring clarity to the theory embedded within the program, which, in turn, is expected to bring about the intended outcomes or changes within a system.
The logic model presented in Figure 1 represents the RC program as it is intended to function. The desired outcome is that by attaining a high level of fidelity to implementation by the Rockport school staff, a true assessment of effectiveness can occur.
Figure 1. Logic model of the Responsive Classroom® program at Rockport
Evaluation Questions

1. To what extent does the RC program contribute to social-emotional competence in 5th-grade students?

2. What is the relationship between social-emotional competence in 5th-grade students and student disciplinary infractions?

3. To what degree has the RC model been shown to decrease the number and severity of discipline infractions?

4. What are teachers’ and support staff’s perceptions of the facilitating conditions and barriers to RC leading to a reduction in infractions?

Definition of Terms

Context, input, process, product (CIPP) model – Stufflebeam’s four-part model of evaluation. The context evaluation prioritizes goals; the input evaluation assesses different approaches; the process evaluation assesses the implementation of plans; and the product evaluation assesses both the intended and unintended outcomes (Mertens & Wilson, 2012).

Disciplinary infraction – a violation of school protocol or rules according to the student code of conduct that results in a disciplinary action.

Evaluand – the entity that is to be evaluated, such as a project, program, policy, or product (Mertens & Wilson, 2012).

Focus group – A group interview whereby participants have the opportunity to share their perspectives and experiences regarding the issue of discussion (Stringer, 2007).
In-school suspension—require a student to report to a designated room on the school campus other than his/her assigned classroom, for as short a duration as a single class period or for as long as several days (Fabelo et al., 2011).

Logic model – A model that displays the sequence of actions in a program, describes what the program is and will do, and describes how investments will be linked to results (Mertens & Wilson, 2012).

Out-of-school Suspension (OSS) – the removal of a student from the school environment for a period of time as a disciplinary action (Raffaele Mendez et al., 2002).

Product evaluation – An evaluation that measures, interprets, and judges the achievements of a program in attaining its overall goals (Mertens & Wilson, 2012).

Pragmatic paradigm – The belief that reality is individually interpreted and that the methodological choices will be determined by the evaluation questions. Focuses primarily on data that are found to be useful by stakeholders, and advocates for the use of mixed methods (Mertens & Wilson, 2012).

Social-emotional competence – the capacity of an individual to form close and secure adult and peer relationships; experience, regulate, and express emotions in socially and culturally appropriate ways; and explore the environment and learn—all in the context of family, community, and culture (Yates et al., 2008).

Social and emotional learning – the process through which children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to develop social-emotional competency (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, n.d.).
Summary

Developing social and emotional competence within students may reduce the use of OSS significantly. Over the past 25-30 years there has been a significant increase in students being excluded from the educational setting due to common infractions such as disruptive behavior in the learning environment (Children’s Defense Fund, 1975; Fabelo et al., 2011; Nielsen, 1979; Skiba et al., 2002). Despite the fact that the number has been rising, there has been little indication in the research that schools have become safer and more productive learning environments as a result of these measures (Rafaelle Mendez et al., 2002; Lunenburg, 2010). Lunenburg (2010) found that violence, bullying, and a disruptive learning environment continues to be the norm for many students.

The field of education is currently left with a stained history of disparity and inequity as study after study show that students of color, students with disabilities, male students, and students of low socioeconomic status are seemingly targeted with the use of OSS (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Skiba et al., 2002). Looking only at the number of suspensions doesn’t give a complete picture of the problem because it fails to depict the amount of repeat suspensions which are occurring with a sure trajectory of future dropout and/or entry into the criminal justice system (Children’s Defense Fund, 2013). It has been found that many of the students who receive OSS as a disciplinary action are the same who choose to drop out later on (Children’s Defense Fund, 2013; Losen & Martinez, 2013). In addition, law enforcement is now frequently involved in student disciplinary issues that were previously handled by school administration, leading to a more systematic entry into the juvenile justice system (Children’s Defense Fund, 2013; Fabelo et al., 2011).
By providing solutions to assist students in developing necessary social-emotional competence, schools can begin to support students in becoming productive participants in the school community (Stoiber, 2011). Programs like RC, which provide a systematic and comprehensive approach to social-emotional development, may provide a solution for schools that are looking to develop and support students rather than exclude them.
CHAPTER 2: Review of the Literature

Despite the use of OSS in many schools, repeat suspensions may indicate that OSS is ineffective as a deterrent; OSS fails to work as a modifier of inappropriate behaviors or as a tool to reinforce pro-social behaviors among students (Raffaele Mendez et al., 2002). Many students who are repeatedly suspended may lack the social-emotional competence to select alternative behavioral options. Alternatives to suspension that support the development of social-emotional competence may serve as an effective intervention, leading to a decrease in OSS.

There is much agreement among those in the field of education and psychology that schools must look at ways to build social competence amongst children rather than develop systems aimed solely at decreasing disruptive behavior (Stoiber, 2011). This literature review informs readers about OSS and the inequities present in its use. It also provides a definition of social-emotional competence and how its development in students can support a decrease in disruptive behavior. The RC model specifically supports students' social-emotional competence in the elementary school setting. This proceeding evaluation seeks to determine the extent to which a programmatic option such as RC can impact OSS by building social-emotional competence within students.

History and Impact of OSS

OSS is the removal of a student from the regular instructional setting for a predetermined period of time as a discipline response to a behavior infraction. The use of OSS as a disciplinary measure has occurred over the past 25 years and is a disciplinary response to an infraction; OSS does not typically include interventions that might
promote future pro-social behaviors (Raffaele Mendez et al., 2002). Several policies have had an effect on the use of OSS and its prevalence in public schools.

**Zero Tolerance Policies**

Zero tolerance refers to policies that punish all offenses severely no matter how minor the offense and with no regard for the context surrounding the incident. These policies were originally adopted to assist in dealing with drug enforcement on the state and federal level in the 1980s (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Despite the original intent of zero tolerance policies, they were soon applied to myriad offenses such as “environmental pollution, trespassing, skateboarding, racial intolerance, homelessness, sexual harassment, and boom boxes” (Skiba & Peterson, 1999, p. 373). The enforcement of these policies was met with much criticism as harsh punishments such as OSS were being given for the most minor offenses.

By the 1990s, the use of zero tolerance on the state and federal level began to decrease; at the same time, use of zero tolerance policies began to increase in K-12 settings. Zero tolerance policies soon became widely accepted by schools as a policy mandating specific predetermined responses to all student infractions no matter how minor or egregious (Fabelo et al., 2011; American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Schools began to either suspend or expel students for all levels of infractions, with little regard for the context surrounding a particular situation (Children’s Defense Fund, 2013). These policies, although initially intended to deal with offenses involving drugs and weapons, have been used broadly in schools to address countless additional, lower level offenses.

**Gun-Free Schools Act**
Although zero tolerance policies were used nationwide, it was not until the passage of the Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA) in 1994, that the law mandated harsh disciplinary actions for particular offenses. The GFSA states the following:

Each State receiving Federal funds under ESEA must have in effect, by October 20, 1995, a State law requiring local educational agencies to expel from school for a period of not less than one year a student who is determined to have brought a weapon to school. Each State's law also must allow the chief administering officer of the local educational agency (LEA) to modify the expulsion requirement on a case-by-case basis. (U.S. Department of Education, 1994, para. 2)

Based on the definition provided above, the GFSA was intended to reduce the number of weapons on school grounds along with reducing overall violence in schools or at school events (Mongan & Walker, 2012). An annual report, The Indicators of School Crime and Safety, created through a collaboration of the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Justice, provides data on trends regarding school violence and weapons on school premises. According to the 2013 report, the following data were found:

Between 1993 and 2011, the percentage of students in grades 9–12 who reported carrying a weapon anywhere on at least 1 day during the past 30 days declined from 22 percent to 17 percent, and the percentage who reported carrying a weapon on school property on at least 1 day also declined, from 12 percent to 5 percent (Robers, Kemp, Rathbun, & Morgan, 2014, p. vii).

Mongan and Walker (2012), posit that it is possible that the decrease in weapons at schools since the passage of the GFSA may prove that such policies are successful
when assessed across the entire student population. A slightly different trend appears, however, when the data are viewed separated by gender. Males have gone from 18% weapon possession on school grounds in 1993 to under 10% in 2011 (Robers et al., 2014). Female students, however, have only gone from 5% in 1993 to 4% in 1999 and stayed at this level for over 10 years before dropping to 2% in 2011. This may indicate that the GFSA did not have the same effect on female students as it did on males. This may also be due to the fact that females brought fewer weapons to schools prior to the inception of GFSA and although their percentages have dropped slowly, they are still on the decline. As a result of the slow and minimal decline for female students, some argue that a policy which was intended to minimize weapon possession across the entire student population may not be as all-encompassing as intended (Mongan & Walker, 2012).

An additional relevant data point in the *Indicators of School Crime and Safety Report* is the percentage of students in high school who have reported being threatened or assaulted with a weapon (Robers et al., 2014). According to the most recent report, the percentage of students reporting that they fit this criterion went from 7.3% in 1993 to 7.4% in 2011. It is important to note that although there were fluctuations in the percentages over the course of the documented 18 years, the reported percentage never fell below the initial rate, despite a decrease in overall weapon possession. Percentages, however, of students injured or threatened with weapons have increased since GFSA was adopted and went from 7% to 9% from 1993 to 2009 (Robers, Zhang, & Truman, 2010). Similar findings were not reported in the 2013 Indicators of School Crime and Safety report. Mongan and Walker (2012) purport that the increase may be due to the small number of students who are bringing weapons to school becoming increasingly violent.
but there was no conclusive evidence found to support this argument. Overall, it has been shown through the data reported, that GFSA has led to a decrease in the number of weapons brought to schools. Despite, this fact, there is still much disagreement regarding whether schools are safer and if the measures used were equitable.

Since the passage of this act, the number of suspensions has steadily increased (Fabelo et al., 2011). Despite the rise in suspensions, there is no clear indication that schools are safer or students better behaved than before (Fabelo et al., 2011). The largest numbers of suspensions are due to students not following the school rules as opposed to dangerous or violent acts (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003; Fabelo et al., 2011).

The widespread use of OSS is correlated with a number of unintended consequences. OSS has significant correlation with poor academic achievement and grade retention, delinquency and school dropout rates, student disaffection and alienation, and drug use (Raffaele Mendez et al., 2002). Being suspended even once in 9th grade doubles the likelihood of a student dropping out (Losen & Martinez, 2013). In addition, the use of suspension has been associated with entry into the juvenile justice system: the term School-to-Prison Pipeline describes the strong association between exclusionary discipline practices, dropping out of school, and subsequent entry into the juvenile justice system (Wald & Losen, 2003).

**Disparities and Inequities Resulting from OSS**

OSS has led to a well-documented system of disparity and inequity on the basis of race, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status, which has negatively affected students for over 35 years. The Children’s Defense Fund (1975) conducted one of the earliest studies to report higher rates of suspensions for Black students than White students, and
also found that Black students were more likely to be suspended repeatedly, although no differences were found in the length of suspensions (Skiba et al., 2002). Several studies and reports have provided evidence that the issue of disparity and inequity with the use of OSS still remains prevalent (Fabelo et al., 2011; Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 2011).

Fabelo et al. (2011) found that Black students were 31% more likely to incur disciplinary action than their White or Hispanic counterparts. Finally, Losen and Martinez (2013) discovered that, since the 1970s, the rate of suspension for Black students increased 12.5 percentage points, while it only increased by 1.1 percentage points for White students. Although Hispanic students were not suspended at the same rate as black students, there was a dramatic shift upward seen in this study for these students when compared to White students once they enter the secondary level (Losen & Martinez, 2013).

It is possible that referral bias is a likely explanation for the overrepresentation of Black students facing disciplinary actions, as opposed to greater (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Referral bias denotes the argument that office discipline referrals may be subject to potential bias, as they are based solely on the teacher’s perception of a given situation (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O’Brennan, & Leaf, 2010). Office discipline referrals are the primary means by which students are sent to an administrator when a behavior infraction has occurred on the classroom level. Several studies have found that Black students have a higher number of referrals than White students for reasons which require much more subjective judgment, such as disrespect, threat, and excessive noise (Skiba et al., 2002). Although Black students were referred for disciplinary infractions at a higher rate than other students,
White students tended to be referred for more serious rule violations such as smoking or vandalism (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Shaw & Braden, 1990; Skiba et al., 2002).

There is also much disparity when reviewing OSS in terms of gender and disability. Boys are 4 times more likely than girls to be referred to the office, suspended, or subjected to corporal punishment (Skiba et al., 2002). Students with learning disabilities were 2.5 times more likely to be suspended or expelled than those without learning disabilities (Raffaele Mendez et al., 2002). Students with emotional disability were 11 times more likely to be suspended or expelled than those without the disability. A statewide longitudinal study which reviewed student records covering a 6-year period found that three-quarters of students with disabilities were suspended or expelled at least once and if students with emotional disabilities have a higher likelihood of being suspended or expelled (Fabelo et al., 2011). Finally, in a study analyzing discipline data from over 26,000 U.S. middle and high schools, Losen and Martinez (2013) found that 1 in every 5 secondary students with disabilities had been suspended.

When the variables of race, gender, and disability status are combined, the forecast for one particular subgroup—the Black male with a disability—becomes rather dim. According to the study conducted by Losen and Martinez (2013), 36% of Black male students with disabilities enrolled in middle or high schools were suspended at least once in 2009-2010. This means that there was a greater than 1 in 3 chance that these students would face a suspension during SY 2009/2010. These students have among the highest rates of OSS. A correlational analysis conducted in a large, diverse school district consisting of 97 elementary schools and 45 secondary schools further supports this assessment (Rafaelle Mendez et al., 2002). The analysis revealed that demographic
variables such as mobility, low socioeconomic status, and race have a strong positive relationship with suspension rates, primarily on the elementary level for Black students and those of low socioeconomic status. Rafaelle Mendez et al. (2002) found that on the elementary level, 12% of Black males experienced at least one suspension, compared to 3% of White males and 3% of Hispanic males.

School-to-Prison Pipeline

The frequent use of OSS has contributed to what has been called the School-to-Prison Pipeline. This pipeline refers to the strong association between exclusionary discipline practices, dropping out of school, and subsequent entry into the juvenile justice system (Wald & Losen, 2003). Some have even gone so far as to call this the Cradle to Prison Pipeline, since it signifies the targeting of specific groups of students very early on with the use of policies such as zero tolerance (Children’s Defense Fund, 2013). As a result of the implementation of zero tolerance, students as young as six years old have been arrested for many nonviolent offenses at their schools that may include yelling at teachers, causing a disruption in the classroom or leaving the classroom without permission (Children’s Defense Fund, 2013). Most suspensions are given due to minor infractions such as tardiness and truancies and may not warrant an OSS (Fenning et al., 2012; Skiba & Peterson, 1999). As a result, students are on the path of falling behind academically due to missing a significant amount of instruction, which tends to lead to possible retention and eventual dropout as this cycle continues.

According to the Children’s Defense Fund (2013), every second and a half a student is suspended nationally and every eight seconds a public high school student drops out (p. 5-6). Students who are suspended may find themselves less engaged in the
learning environment with each subsequent suspension. This lack of connection and the potential of falling significantly behind academically can lead to significant consequences (Skiba et al., 2011). Students who are repeatedly excluded from school tend to continue to act out, leading to an escalation of consequences (Children’s Defense Fund, 2013). These consequences may serve as direct links to the juvenile criminal justice system (Fabelo et al., 2011). Currently, states are spending more than 2 times the amount on a prisoner than a student in a public school (Children’s Defense Fund, 2013). As OSS continues to be used as a primary response to student infractions, it is possible that the prison population, and thus the increased need for funding in this area, will continue to rise at an alarming rate.

**Impact of Disruptive Student Behavior**

Disruptive student behavior can lead to consequences, which can affect the overall learning environment, and thus student achievement (Parker, Nelson, & Burns, 2010). When the American Federation of Teachers polled classroom teachers, 17% reported the loss of 4 or more hours of instructional time per week due to student misbehavior; 19% reported a loss of 2 to 3 hours (Walker, Ramsey, & Gresham, 2003-2004). The percentages were even higher in urban schools, where 21% of teachers overall and 24% of secondary teachers reported a loss of 4 or more hours of instructional time per week. In addition, 38% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that student misbehavior affected their classroom instruction (Robers et al., 2014). This ongoing loss of time limits the quantity of effective instruction that students receive, thereby impacting overall student achievement.
According to McEvoy and Welker (2000), the time taken to correct just one student’s misbehavior leads to time off task for all other students in the classroom. As a result, there is a compounding effect, for not only the student in question, but also for all others, whenever disruptive behavior occurs. It is clear that disruptive student behavior is an issue in schools that cannot be ignored, since it directly impacts the teaching and learning process and therefore overall student achievement.

**OSS as a Deterrent for Disruptive Student Behavior**

OSS has not proven to be an effective deterrent for student disciplinary infractions. The primary goal of suspensions is to decrease or eliminate the probability of a repeat offense that warrants another referral or suspension, but multiple suspensions speak to the fact that this method is not successful (Rafaelle Mendez et al., 2002). McEvoy and Welker (2000) posit that despite the deleterious effects of disruptive student behavior on the learning environment, there is little evidence supporting the use of exclusionary practices when addressing student misbehavior. A review of literature completed by the American Psychological Association (2008) concluded that there is no evidence that zero tolerance disciplinary policies have led to safer school environments or an overall improvement in student behavior. Rather, schools which were focused on preventing inappropriate behaviors, rather than punishing those same behaviors, had lower suspension rates (Raffaele Mendez et al., 2002).

Many believe that the use of OSS is necessary because it: (a) improves student behavior by getting the parent’s attention and involvement, (b) deters other students from misbehaving, and (c) ensures a productive learning environment (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003; American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008;
Raffaele Mendez et al., 2002). The literature, however, has not shown conclusive evidence supporting these intended effects. Although OSS may prompt a level of parental involvement, more often than not it leads to significant issues for the family, such as lost work and income or a student being left home unsupervised (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003). Children who tend to incur the most suspensions are usually from homes in which supervision may be unlikely (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003). It has also been found that students who are unsupervised during a suspension are more likely to commit crimes and become involved in behaviors that lead to further consequences.

The literature has not supported the claim that OSS is successful in deterring other students from misbehaving. There is no evidence that zero tolerance disciplinary policies applied to nonviolent misbehavior improve school safety or produce positive change in student behavior (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). This is particularly important since the vast majority of suspensions are due to minor infractions (Losen & Martinez, 2013; Raffaele Mendez et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 2002). In addition, there are many administrators who use OSS as a cooling off period for both the student and the staff, rather than as a way to modify behavior (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2003).

Supporters of OSS believe that its use will lead to a learning environment that allows for instruction to take place (Ewing, 2000). Although this assumption is widespread, empirical evidence supporting this claim was not found. Ewing (2000) stated that about 10% of schools used OSS to address one or more severe and violent offenses throughout the year. He also states that zero tolerance policies could have an impact on
the school environment by reducing distractions and improving overall safety. Despite some assertions otherwise (Ewing, 2000), a thorough review of the literature has not revealed any empirical evidence that OSS makes schools safer or improves learning.

Numerous studies report, however, that there is no true value found in the use of OSS (Losen & Martinez, 2013; American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Some have even gone so far as to ask whether, in light of the lack of research-based support for the use of suspension, its frequent use is ever an appropriate response. In 1975, the Children’s Defense Fund conducted a study on suspended students and recommended that OSS should only be used in cases of property damage or assault. More recent evidence seems to point to the continued validity of this recommendation.

Social-Emotional Competence

Students are exhibiting negative behaviors that can lead to a disruption in the learning environment; this, in turn, makes instruction difficult and impacts student achievement negatively (Stoiber, 2011). Since OSS has not proven to be an effective method to deter these behaviors, schools are in need of ways to respond which minimize inappropriate student behavior (Fenning et al., 2012). In a meta-analysis done to determine high yield strategies that contribute to student achievement, Hattie (2009) found that disruptive student behavior had a significant impact on the success of all students. Despite the findings, Hattie posits that the removal of disruptive students is not the solution; rather an increase in the skill level of staff members to address the needs and behaviors of such students is imperative.

By building students’ capacity to deal with conflict, improving students’ self-awareness, developing students’ skills to manage emotions, and fostering healthy social
interactions, schools can empower students to make positive choices. Stoiber (2011) states, "efforts aimed at stopping a disruptive or acting-out behavior but that fail to improve one's capacity to get along with others and enjoy relationships represent an empty success" (p. 47). In addition, building this capacity, particularly in students who face myriad life-stressors, can serve as a preventive measure of student misbehavior and increase the likelihood of school success (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004).

**Social-Emotional Deficits Among Urban Youth**

There are several factors that have been shown to hinder the development of social-emotional competence in urban youth. According to Barbarin (2002), some of these factors include: early deprivation or trauma, family instability or conflict, involvement in the child welfare system, limited resources, and neighborhood danger or violence. In addition, the effects of poverty are numerous and can include homelessness. These effects have been described as an "endless series of hurdles" (Elias, Zins, Graczyk, & Weissberg, 2003, p. 308) that students must continuously navigate.

Children faced with one or a combination of these elements may experience minimal opportunities to develop and implement the necessary skills and are at risk of poor social-emotional development (Aviles, Anderson, & Davila, 2006). When this reality is coupled with the likelihood that students will face conflicts with peers or deal with the challenges of learning new concepts, there is a high probability that there may be resulting discipline infractions. Students who do not gain the necessary social-emotional skills are at greater risk of falling behind in school and experiencing not only deficits with social relationships and emotional stability, but also behavioral challenges, which can potentially lead to OSS (Aviles et al., 2006).
Theoretical Framework of Social-Emotional Competence

Thorndike introduced the idea of social intelligence in 1920 and described it as the ability to understand others, manage people, and act wisely in social contexts (Seal, Naumann, Scott, & Royce-Davis, 2011). Prior to this point, much of psychology remained focused on why human beings behaved as they did, without speaking of the steps that can be taken to improve those behaviors. Gardner (1993) also became a pioneer in this field when he introduced the concept of multiple intelligences. Of the seven intelligences, he proposed two forms of personal intelligence and labeled them interpersonal (directed towards others) and intrapersonal (directed towards oneself) intelligence. Someone with intrapersonal intelligence has a true assessment and understanding of self and uses that understanding to inform life decisions (Gardner, 1993). These two intelligences—intrapersonal and interpersonal—relate directly to the field of social intelligence and social-emotional development (Seal et al., 2011).

Sternberg (1985) added to this new viewpoint of intelligence with the triarchic theory of human intelligence. This theory divided intelligence into three different components: (1) contextual (relates intelligence to an individual’s external world), (2) experiential (relates intelligence to the individual’s internal and external world), and (3) componential (relates intelligence to an individual’s internal world). Although many before him had argued that intelligence was fixed at birth, he believed there were different variables that affected intelligence, particularly context and experience. This led him to an expansion of his primary theory, which he termed, successful intelligence:

People are successfully intelligent to the extent that they have the abilities needed to succeed in life, according to their own definition of success within their
sociocultural context. They succeed by adapting to, shaping, and selecting environments, which they do by recognizing and then capitalizing on their strengths, and by recognizing and then compensating for or correcting their weaknesses. (Sternberg, 2003, p. xvi)

Sternberg (2003) believed that intelligence could be taught and that schools were in a dynamic position to teach in a way which catered to more than one type of intelligence. Through the experiences and context of schooling, it is possible to increase students' level of social-emotional intelligence.

Social intelligence, however, hardly stands alone, since it is usually coupled with emotional intelligence. Until the concept of emotional intelligence was presented, emotions were mainly seen as disturbances in one's mental activity that must be controlled. Salovey and Mayer (1990) found that emotional intelligence is a subset of social intelligence that "involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions" (p. 189). They believed that emotional intelligence aligned directly with Gardner's (1993) personal intelligences, which is divided into inter- and intrapersonal intelligence, since these aspects of intelligence speak to the feelings and emotions that affect human behavior.

Individuals with emotional intelligence demonstrate the ability to regulate their emotions in a logical manner (Mayer & Salovey, 1995). By recognizing one's own emotional state and utilizing this information to manage life's conflicts and overall behavior, individuals are able to actualize a higher level of functioning (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Although Salovey and Mayer were the first researchers to bring the theory
of emotional intelligence to the forefront, it was through the work of science reporter, Daniel Goleman (1995) that the concept gained mainstream awareness.

The development of emotional and social intelligence along with problem-solving skills can help students significantly with managing themselves as well as others (Elksnin & Elksnin, 2003). The skills that are developed with social-emotional competence are: problem-solving behavior, perspective taking, person perception, self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, internal motivation, and social skills (Goleman, 1995). Children develop the ability to perceive and understand emotion with age; students who are at risk of failure may need to acquire these skills through direct instruction to ensure development in this area. By understanding their own emotions and learning to interpret and understand the emotions of others, students are better positioned to deal with a variety of emotions including anger and frustration.

**Benefits of Developing Social-Emotional Competence**

The development of social-emotional competence may provide students with the skills they need to manage behaviors that may lead to OSS. Elias et al. (1997) report the following:

Social and emotional competence is the ability to understand, manage, and express the social and emotional aspects of one's life in ways that enable the successful management of life tasks such as learning, forming relationships, solving everyday problems, and adapting to the complex demands of growth and development. (p. 2)

Research indicates that OSS may not deter student misbehavior. Schools are mostly focused on decreasing problematic behaviors using punitive measures that include OSS,
even for minor infractions (Children’s Defense Fund, 1975; Fenning et al., 2012). In a one-year study, it was found that 25% of students receiving in-school suspension, OSS, or corporal punishment had over 5 disciplinary infractions, 75% of students had between 1 and 5 infractions, and less than 1% of students committed only 1 offense (McFadden et al., 1992). This may provide strong reasoning for schools who are seeking to modify student misbehavior to employ measures other than OSS.

Focusing on reducing problematic behavior is not enough. Stoiber (2011) found that improving social competencies of students had much more of an impact on student behavior, since it allowed students to develop skills necessary to acquire positive social relationships. It was also shown that there are differences between low and high suspending schools with similar demographics. Low suspending schools were found to have the following attributes: (a) particular attention is paid to developing prevention strategies which help limit inappropriate behavior (e.g., social skills training for students, behavior management training for teachers), (b) increase in parent involvement including participation in the development of a school wide discipline plan, and (c) a belief that responding to the needs of students and providing them with respect is effective in reducing problematic behavior (Rafaelle Mendez et al., 2002, p. 274). In promoting social-emotional learning in schools, Goleman (n.d.) asserts that the goal should not be to simply reduce problematic behaviors but to enhance the school climate and thus impact student achievement overall.

Social-Emotional Learning in Practice

Students who are deficient in social skills tend to demonstrate two types of problems: acquisition and performance (Elksnin & Elksnin, 2003). Acquisition problems
occur when students do not have the required social skills to cope in various situations, while performance problems occur when the student has the skills but fails to use them. The development of social-emotional competence can help compensate for the lack of skills that students may present with and allow students an opportunity to respond differently to potential triggers. This management can lead to a decrease in some misbehavior that might otherwise lead to OSS. Becker and Luthar (2002) concur that although there is significant focus on building the academic skills of disadvantaged students, school reform that places an emphasis on social-emotional skills is just as important for student success.

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is an organization that has done extensive research in the area of developing social-emotional competence in schools and is focused on increasing the implementation of social-emotional learning (SEL) in school settings. They define SEL as the process through which children and adults acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to develop social-emotional competencies such as: (a) recognizing and managing their emotions, (b) setting and achieving positive goals, (c) demonstrating care and concern for others, (d) establishing and maintaining positive relationships, (d) making responsible decisions, and (e) handling interpersonal situations effectively (Payton et al., 2008).

In a meta-analysis encompassing 320,000 students, Payton et al., made several discoveries regarding SEL programming in schools (2008). One finding was that students in SEL programs showed an increase not only in social and emotional skills, but also academically, with an average increase of achievement test scores of 11-17 percentile points. Students also showed better attitudes towards self, others, and school, and
demonstrated fewer behavior concerns, social issues, or emotional distress. Overall, students were much more stable socially and emotionally, leading to a more balanced and successful approach to school.

Another finding was that the effectiveness of SEL programming did not vary or minimize based on context (Payton et al., 2008). A level of success was seen whether SEL was offered during the school day or in an after school setting and there was no difference seen among urban, suburban, or rural locations. In addition, racial and ethnically diverse student population showed gains despite their differences.

Finally, the analysis revealed that programs conducted by school staff were effective and incorporating SEL into the regular learning routine could be beneficial. When teachers have the appropriate skills, they can minimize the possibility of students disrupting their own learning and that of others in the classroom (Hattie, 2009). In order to move toward increased school success, school leaders and staff must be willing to support what is typically seen as behavioral education for all students (Utley, Kozleski, Smith, & Draper, 2002). Recognition that the development of social-emotional competence is the foundation for academic success will pave the way for ongoing development and implementation in this area (Elias et al., 2003).

**Responsive Classroom® as an Intervention**

The high rate of OSS can be reduced by building students’ social-emotional competence through appropriate programmatic options such as Responsive Classroom® (RC). One of the reasons why social-behavioral training has sometimes not been successful is due many of the programs being implemented in a fragmented manner, as opposed to a systematic, integrative, and comprehensive manner (Stoiber, 2011). The RC
program meets this suggestion of being a systematic program that is integrated within the present curriculum.

RC was developed by the Northeast Foundation for Children (NEFC) and offers educators tools to expand instructional opportunities by creating positive learning communities and increasing student achievement and teacher effectiveness (NEFC, 2013). The seven principles which guide this approach are: (a) the social curriculum is as important as the academic curriculum; (b) how children learn is as important as what they learn; (c) the greatest cognitive growth occurs through social interaction; (d) to be successful academically and socially, children need a set of social skills; (e) knowing the children we teach is as important as knowing the content we teach; (f) knowing the families of the children we teach and working with them as partners is essential to children's education; and (g) how the adults at school work together is as important as individual competence (NEFC, 2013).

The RC approach is research and evidence based and is focused on developing three main elements within the school setting: engaging academics, a positive community, and effective management. These elements are implemented through the use of several different key components (NEFC, 2013). The daily morning meeting is the first component and enables teachers to set a positive tone for learning while setting the stage for teaching social-emotional skills such as respect and empathy. Building a sense of community is accomplished through the establishment of community rules and logical consequences. Students develop autonomy and independence through structured student academic choices and the use of guided discovery to introduce new concepts. Finally, by implementing the key components, teachers are able to take a proactive approach to
discipline within the classroom, leading to a warm, safe, and positive learning environment (NEFC, 2013).

As children move into secondary school, there appears to be a greater willingness to suspend or expel students from the learning environment due to disciplinary (Losen and Martinez, 2013). Thus, the need to build social-emotional skills on the elementary level becomes greater. By implementing a program such as RC, schools can begin to address some of the social-emotional deficits that may increase the likelihood of recurring behavior concerns for many students.

Summary

Developing social and emotional competence within students may reduce the use of OSS significantly. Over the past 25-30 years, there has been a significant increase in students being excluded from the educational setting due to disruptive behavior. Despite this increase, there has been no indication in the research that schools have become safer and more productive learning environments as a result of these measures. Instead, the field of education is left with a stained history of disparity and inequity as study after study shows that students of color, students with disabilities, male students, and those of low socioeconomic status are seemingly targeted with exclusionary discipline practices. In addition, the large numbers of students suspended annually only account for one suspension per student and fail to capture the repeat suspensions assigned to many.

By providing solutions that assist students in developing necessary skills to manage the myriad emotions and challenges which tend to arise during their school career, schools can begin to support students in becoming productive participants in the school community. Programs like RC, which provide a systematic and comprehensive
approach to social-emotional development, may offer promise in making a difference and providing a potential solution for school staff looking to help students with challenges as opposed to excluding them.
CHAPTER 3: Method

As schools continue to strive to prepare students for college, career, and life, there remains an ever-increasing need to include much more than the fundamentals of a strong academic program. The diversity within the student population reveals varied levels of competency, not only in the cognitive domain, but also the social and emotional domains. Preparing students for success in life requires a broad and balanced approach to education that allows the opportunity for academic mastery along with skills necessary to become responsible adults (ASCD, 2007).

All students, but primarily those who exhibit behavior challenges in schools, can benefit from an inclusion of SEL skills into the teaching and learning framework. Improving social competencies of students has a significant impact, since it allows students to develop the skills necessary to build positive social relationships (Stoiber, 2011). The RC program places a significant focus on students' social-emotional competence and boasts decreased discipline infractions and increased student engagement (NEFC, 2013). This evaluation of RC sought to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent does the RC program contribute to social-emotional competence in 5th-grade students?
2. What is the relationship between social-emotional competence in 5th-grade students and student disciplinary infractions?
3. To what degree has the RC model been shown to decrease the number and severity of discipline infractions?

44
4. What are teachers’ and support staff’s perceptions of the facilitating conditions and barriers to RC leading to a reduction in infractions?

These questions served as a guide for the study in determining methodology and assessment instruments that would be used. The first question directly linked the RC program as a potential contributing factor associated with an increase in students’ social-emotional competence. The second question referred to whether there is an association between the RC program and a decrease in discipline infractions. The third question assessed whether an increase in social-emotional competence in elementary students is associated with a decrease in student infractions and the severity of those infractions, school-wide. Finally, the fourth question sought to assess the perception of school staff regarding the RC program and its potential role in reducing student infractions.

Evaluation Model

An evaluation allows the evaluator to determine value and impact of a particular program. It provides transparency to stakeholders who may determine whether a particular program is worth the investment of time, money, and resources. The paradigm that frames the evaluation will determine how this is done. Mertens and Wilson (2012) highlighted the following four paradigms which frame the worldview and approaches one can take toward evaluation: (a) postpositivist paradigm, (b) pragmatic paradigm, (c) constructivist paradigm, and (d) transformative paradigm. The postpositivist paradigm is sometimes referred to as the scientific method, since it tends to begin with a hypothesis, follows the typical steps of scientific research, and is heavily focused on the methods of data acquisition used (Creswell, 2009). Postpositivist researchers use a quantitative approach to data collection and believe that absolute truth can never fully be known.
Therefore, the goal is never to prove or disprove a hypothesis, but rather to indicate whether or not there was a failure to reject the hypothesis. In addition, the role of the evaluator is distant in an effort to minimize bias (Mertens & Wilson, 2012).

The constructivist paradigm has a much more relaxed approach to evaluation. Instead of viewing evaluation as a closed-ended venture with very specific answers, it allows for a much more participatory role of both the stakeholders and the evaluator, coupled with the use of open-ended questions (Creswell, 2009). The assumption is that individuals seek a greater understanding of the world around them and rather than beginning with a preconceived theory, the theories and greater meaning are discovered inductively. Constructivism requires the evaluator to play much more of a participatory role, leading to a greater impetus to ensure that personal biases and values are known so as not to affect the evaluation process and outcome.

The transformative paradigm has a social justice mission and is primarily focused on bringing a voice to marginalized groups and challenging systems of power that limit or threaten human rights (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). The guiding principle of an evaluator’s role within this paradigm is transformation through social justice and addressing inequities. Due to the need for change being addressed, this paradigm lends itself to research that is accompanied by an action agenda that may positively impact the lives of participants (Creswell, 2009).

The final paradigm is termed pragmatic. This approach often utilizes a mixed method approach focused on acquiring data that can be utilized by stakeholders (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). It is this utility which is the guiding principle for the pragmatic evaluator. Instead of focusing on methods, as does the postpositivist, the focus is on
application and what works regarding the current problem (Creswell, 2009). In addition, although the purpose of a pragmatic evaluation is not social justice, it can be reflective of social justice since it works towards finding feasible solutions. This evaluation of the RC program is rooted in the pragmatic paradigm.

The underlying model represented in this evaluation is the CIPP (context, input, process, and product) model, which is situated in the pragmatic paradigm. The evaluation can focus on all aspects of the model as a whole; only specific aspects; or the relationship between the different elements. The context evaluation focuses on goals; the input evaluation appraises the different resources or approaches in place; the process evaluation is focused on the activities implemented; and the product evaluation assesses the end results, both intended and unintended (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). The CIPP model was created by Daniel Stufflebeam and allows the evaluator to have a broader role in the evaluation of a program and to focus on more than simply outcomes (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). The purpose of this evaluation was to assess the product of the RC program in the area of short-term outcomes at Rockport.

**Research Design**

Rockport has been implementing RC for the past three years. As a result, it was not possible to conduct pre and post assessments to determine a change in social-emotional competence among students. To assess the level of change in this area, a quasi-experimental design was used to test the impact of RC. A quasi-experiment allows an evaluator to use groups that are already intact and does not require participants to be randomly assigned to specific groups (Creswell, 2009). A matched comparison group was selected from a nearby elementary school (Burch ES) that has not implemented RC
to participate in this evaluation. Unfortunately, due to an unforeseen principal turnover at
the matched school, it was no longer possible to include Burch ES in the evaluation. In
addition, once the 2014/2015 school year had begun, the ability to secure an alternative
match school was limited. As a result, the proceeding program evaluation incorporated
data solely from the school of implementation.

Participants

The participants were students and school staff consisting of a combination of
teachers and related service providers (e.g., social worker and school psychologist).
Students were asked to provide personal feedback via a rating scale regarding their level
of social-emotional competence. Teachers were given a corresponding rating scale to
complete on participating students. In addition, school staff was invited to participate in
a focus group to provide a richer aspect of their perspective regarding the effectiveness of
the RC program.

Students. In order to assess students’ current level of social-emotional
competence, the students within the 5th-grade cohort who had attended Rockport ES for
at least two years were invited to participate in the study. Active parental consent was
required and only obtained from a limited number of parents. As a result, the sample
consisted of seven 5th graders from Rockport ES. The 5th-grade cohort with a two-year
stipulation was selected for two reasons. One reason was that the Behavioral and
Emotional Rating Scale Second Edition (BERS-2) was developed for students in the fifth
grade and beyond and could not be administered to students in lower grades. The reason
for the two-year stipulation was to remove any student from the study who did not have
the opportunity to be exposed to the RC program for at least two years. By building these
parameters, a stronger study was developed with a much more robust link to the programming in place at Rockport. Students were asked to complete the youth rating scale designed to assess their level of social-emotional competence.

School staff. The administration of Rockport had attempted to provide RC training for as many teachers as possible. Due to limited resources, the entire staff had not yet been trained. Currently, 9 of the 30 staff members had received the complete weeklong RC training. All other teachers had received local training, consisting of guidance and RC implementation support from trained colleagues, during in-service trainings prior to the start of the school year. In addition, monthly 30-minute collaborative sessions provided ongoing training and support for all teachers, with an expectation that RC components would be implemented in all classrooms. Rockport also had an RC committee that planned monthly collaborative trainings and was tasked with supporting teachers in implementing the program. For the purpose of this program evaluation, only the teachers who instructed the 5th-grade cohort were asked to participate in the survey portion of data collection. Two focus groups, however, were conducted: one consisting of the RC committee and another with teachers who had been locally trained. In addition, an interview with the former principal of Rockport ES was conducted.

Data Sources

This program evaluation utilized a mixed-methods approach to compile data. Several data sources were used to acquire the necessary information for the evaluation. The quantitative data was acquired through the use of surveys and the analysis of office discipline referrals over time. Student assessments were focused on measuring students’ social-emotional competence levels. Teacher surveys focused on teachers’ assessment of
the students in their class in the area of social-emotional competence. Focus groups provided more in-depth, qualitative data in answering the evaluation questions. All data sources are explicated further below.

**Document review.** A review of documents can supplement other sources of data by providing an alternative viewpoint around the evaluation. The documents reviewed in this study were discipline referrals logged into the District database for Rockport ES. The count of discipline referrals over the course of the past three years provided supporting data for evaluation questions two and three.

**Surveys.** Surveys are a quantitative strategy used to identify trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample from the population (Creswell, 2009, p. 145). They also provide a means to measure a variety of skills and attributes in a relatively short time. Although the ease of administering a survey can be alluring, it is essential that the tool used is valid and reliable and can provide a high level of rigorous data collection. Validity speaks to whether the tool measures what it states it does. A high level of validity allows researchers to make inferences from the scores acquired. There are typically three forms of validity; content (do the items measure the content they were intended to measure), predictive or concurrent (do the scores predict a certain criterion), and construct (do items on the survey measure the concepts they are intended to measure) (Creswell, 2009).

The reliability of an assessment tool is determined by its internal, as well as, test-administration and scoring consistency level (Creswell, 2009). Internal consistency has to do with how reliable an assessment tool is in measuring the same content or construct across various test items: Does every question measure what it is intended to measure?
Another area is test-retest correlation, which measures whether or not scores remain stable after a second administration. Obtaining an assessment with a high level of validity and reliability is essential in conducting a sound study.

The assessment tool used in this study was the BERS-2. The second edition contains the same teacher scale from the original BERS but also includes a corresponding parent and youth rating scale (Epstein, Mooney, Ryser, & Pierce, 2004). This tool is an intact instrument for use in a variety of settings, including schools, as a resource to evaluate outcomes of services provided. It is a norm-referenced, standardized assessment consisting of 52 Likert-type items, which can be rated on a 0-3 scale. For the purpose of this study, only the teacher and student rating scales were used.

The BERS-2 has five subscales that test the following constructs: (a) interpersonal strength, (b) family involvement, (c) intrapersonal strength, (d) school functioning, and (e) affective strength. The parent and youth rating scales contain one additional subscale assessing career and vocational strength. BERS-2 was created to assess the level of competency in these areas for elementary and middle school students and can be completed as a self-report or a report by others. Scores are calculated for each subscale and then combined to provide an overall score. Higher scores represent greater perceived strength in the constructs assessed (Epstein et al., 2004).

Test-retest reliability for the BERS-2 was at or above .80 over a one-week period (Denham, Ji, & Hamre, 2010). Inter-rater reliability, which measures the consistency by which different individuals with the same scale (teacher-teacher) would rate the same behavior, was also high, at .83.
The BERS-2 also fares well in the areas of content, concurrent, and construct validity. Convergent validity is a subset of construct validity and refers to the degree that a test's scores correlate with other tests that are designed to measure the same skills. To determine convergent validity for this scale, three studies across three different age groups (kindergarten, primary elementary, and adolescents) were conducted (Epstein et al., 2004). The studies consistently found that the moderate to high positive correlations with competence-oriented scales were statistically significant (Epstein et al., 2004, p. 360).

Students in the 5th-grade cohort were administered the survey. In addition, students' primary teachers from the previous year (4th grade) completed the survey. Since the survey was given at the start of a new school year, I chose to use teachers from the previous year as a means of obtaining data from individuals who had spent the most time with the assessed students.

The survey provided data to support evaluation questions one and two. For question one, descriptive statistics were reported on the results of the teacher and student rating scales. Question two, however, was focused on the relationship between social-emotional competency in students and the total number of discipline referrals. A correlation analysis determined whether a high rate of social-emotional competency was associated with a lower number of discipline infractions and whether that association was positive or negative.

**Focus groups.** Another way of characterizing a focus group is a group interview. Focus groups are usually conducted with a small group of participants and may provide a deeper and richer dive into the selected areas of research than can be found solely
through quantitative measures such as rating scales. They offer participants a forum to share their experiences and perspectives on the issue being discussed “without the constraints of interpretive frameworks derived from researcher perspectives” (Stringer, 2007, p. 73). The steps that should be followed to provide a solid framework for a focus group include: (a) setting ground rules, (b) explaining procedures to participants, (c) ensuring smooth facilitation by keeping the topic focused and timely, (d) including a recorder to document participant responses in their own words, (e) conducting plenary sessions for the purpose of feedback and clarification, (f) allowing participants to share in the analysis process, and (g) making an action plan (Stringer, 2007).

The steps listed above provide an extensive amount of involvement from all participants and are greatly focused on an action research format. Although focus groups were used to provide greater insight and depth to the program evaluation of RC by adhering to the first four steps, some changes were implemented beyond this point. There were two 90-minute focus groups conducted with a 6 participants in one and 3 in the other. One group consisted of the RC committee at the school, half of whom had attended an RC training; the other was made up of teachers who had been locally trained. The school staff and administration had an opportunity to review and discuss the results and findings from the surveys as well as the focus groups during the spring semester, after the evaluation was completed.

Many of the data sources were used to provide information on different levels. The focus groups provided a portion of the necessary data for evaluation question four. Emerging themes were analyzed based on participant responses to determine their overall assessment of the RC program. The surveys and focus groups not only highlighted the
students' level of social-emotional competence, but also assessed whether the survey results were congruent with the experiences of school staff. This level of overlap from different angles provided an opportunity for triangulation, which reinforced the findings of the overall evaluation. Triangulation strengthens the study by providing similar findings from a variety of data sources (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

Interview. An informal interview was conducted with the former principal (the principal) of Rockport ES. Stringer (2007) suggests that an interview should be designed as an informal conversation which allows the participant to describe the process or situation from their own perspective. The initial plan was to include only the school staff and students through focus groups and surveys. As the evaluation continued, it became apparent that a conversation with the principal would be beneficial in providing clarity on several points. The principal shared that he was not as involved in the implementation of RC at Rockport but empowered others on his staff to take the lead and develop a plan. The interview was therefore focused on gaining the principal’s perspective on the reasons behind the implementation of the RC program, the desired results, and the type of documentation which occurred regarding student discipline infractions.

The interview lasted about ten minutes and helped provide context for evaluation questions three and four. The questions asked consisted of the following:

1. What were some of the reasons why you chose to incorporate RC at Rockport ES and what were some of the changes you desired to see as a result?

2. Did you see any changes in student or staff behavior which you could attribute to the inclusion of RC?
3. Can you describe how discipline infractions or office referrals were documented over the past three years?

Data Collection

The quality of research hinges upon the quality of the data collected and impacts the overall accuracy, validity, and reliability of the study (RAND National Defense Research Institute [RAND], 2009). As a result, it was imperative that the techniques used to collect data were well planned and executed and allowed for minimal unplanned deviations. This evaluation allowed for several data sources to be used in sequence rather than in concert. Sequential data permits the subsequent data sources to add to the interpretation of the results found in earlier sources (RAND, 2009). This evaluation was also strengthened through the use of triangulation, since several methods converged around one topic or issue (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The following section provides details regarding how the selected data were collected.

Document review. Discipline infractions requiring intervention of additional support staff are typically the ones that lead to OSS. These are usually called office referrals. At Rockport, the office staff is instructed to enter all office referrals into a district-provided database, which serves as a system of record for infractions occurring in each respective school building. Given that I am also an employee of the District in the department of student discipline, quantitative data from Rockport was easily accessible. The data provided a count of discipline infractions entered into the system over the course of the past 3 years.

One of the advantages of this data collection method is that the necessary information was already intact and available for use. There were, however, some
limitations, which require consideration. Front office school staff is frequently called on to complete a variety of tasks in the midst of students, parents, and school staff coming in and out of the office with specific needs. In an environment such as this one, there is a possibility that accurate entry of office referrals may not always occur. Another limitation may be staff members who did not follow the established protocol and did not write a referral even though the student had been sent to the office. Finally, teachers might have chosen to handle varying levels of behavior in their rooms even though the infraction could have been classified as one that necessitated an office referral. These limitations could have led to referral numbers that are not fully representative of reality.

Surveys. A total of seven students were administered the BERS-2 youth rating scale. The survey was given in the fall semester of the school year and was administered at a time that was conducive for both the students and the teachers. Due to the requirement of the District to have all outside evaluators administer their own assessments, I instructed the students on how to take the assessment and what steps to follow when they completed the task. All surveys were collected upon completion and scored manually. Prior to participating in the evaluation, students were given a disclosure letter informing their parent or guardian of the purpose of the evaluation and how the survey results would be used. A permission form was also attached requesting parental consent.

One of the limitations associated with the youth rating scale is the possibility of inaccurate user interpretation. Students might interpret the questions differently than expected and thus answer in a way that might not be accurate. Despite this limitation, due to the scale's high rating in construct validity, this issue might have been minimal.
**Focus groups.** Two focus groups were conducted with 3-6 participants in each group. One group consisted of locally trained teachers who had implemented RC in their classrooms. The second group included individuals on the RC committee at Rockport. The focus groups took place after the surveys were administered. This allowed the opportunity to include any areas of concern identified when analyzing the results of the survey. In addition, focus groups can work in conjunction with surveys to provide supportive evidence of initial findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

A protocol provides a framework and structure for the focus group (RAND, 2009). It takes into consideration the type of questions that will be asked, when they will be asked, and ensures that the group remains focused on the research at hand. There are several different types of protocols that can be used. A funnel protocol begins with broad questions and tapers off with more specific questions, giving participants an opportunity to gain a level of comfort prior to delving deeply into potentially sensitive issues. Inverted funnels provide a second type of protocol and begin with very narrow, closed-ended questions and end with broader inquiries. The idea is that participants will get into the mode of answering questions about the topic through immediate inquiry of background information (RAND, 2009).

The tunnel method is used when there is limited time. Broad questions are avoided and the depth of all questions is similar (RAND, 2009). Finally, the quintamensional method was developed by Gallup in 1947 and seeks to evaluate the intensity of a respondent’s opinions by focusing on: (1) the level of awareness of an issue, (2) uninfluenced attitudes, (3) specific attitudes, (4) why the attitudes are held, and
(5) intensity of the attitudes (RAND, 2009, p. 50). For the purpose of this evaluation, although the topic may not be considered sensitive by most, the funnel protocol was used.

The first question used was broad and more descriptive in nature, allowing all participants to respond by sharing about how they began their career in the field of education. These types of questions have been called grand tour questions and typically consist of several small questions that encourage full participation (RAND, 2009). As the protocol continued, the questions became much more focused on the RC program and any changes the participants had identified in students’ behavior and social-emotional competence. In addition, the inclusion of probing or clarifying questions allowed the evaluator to fill in any gaps in the data. It was essential that all interview questions were developed carefully and tied to the evaluation questions, which support the purpose of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). A full protocol linking the focus group questions to the evaluation questions is included in Appendix A.

I served as the facilitator and identified an additional individual who co-facilitated and served as the note taker. The note taker documented data such as participant responses, non-verbal communication of participants, and the group dynamics observed during the session. In addition to the notes taken, the session was also audio-recorded and later transcribed. Prior permission was obtained from focus group participants for the recording to take place.

Despite the advantages of a focus group and the rich data that can be obtained, there are some disadvantages. One potential concern is the possibility of groupthink, where participants begin to respond with the same sentiments as the group without giving thought to their own personal perspectives or ideas (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Another
potential disadvantage is the possibility of some participants responding to all questions and taking over while others speak minimally. An experienced facilitator can mitigate this issue by steering the group away from a vocal individual and encouraging broad participation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

Although the administration encouraged staff members to participate, the evaluator communicated that participation was voluntary and there would be no consequence for anyone's decision to opt out of any component of the study. Participants were also given a full disclosure of the purpose of the evaluation and how the data would be used. Confidentiality clauses between the participants and me were signed to encourage a high level of candor.

Data Analysis

Some of the data used for the evaluation came from extant documents. Discipline referrals were captured through a district-wide online database. This database was used to capture all discipline referrals over the past 3 school years which were later reviewed and quantified. The appropriate releases were secured to allow access to individual student discipline files and completed rating scales. The scales were completed in a way which fully respected the rights of those participating and ensured confidentiality.

A mixed-methods approach was used to analyze the accumulated data. Both qualitative and quantitative data were obtained and analyzed to provide a broader perspective and a richer understanding of the RC program's impact on the students of Rockport. The first evaluation question referred to whether or not the RC program was associated with an increase in social-emotional competence in students. The BERS-2 assessment tool allowed for a quantitative analysis of the data. All 5th grade students who
met the criteria of having been at Rockport for a 2-year period were invited to complete the self-report scale, although only seven participated after active consent was received. In addition, teachers were asked to complete a corresponding scale on the same group of students. The scales were scored with a Likert scale and an overall score was obtained. Descriptive statistics were used to report the findings of the rating scales for the student participants.

The second evaluation question refers to the potential association between the RC program and the number of discipline infractions in the school setting. Rockport had not focused on maintaining a high level of documentation regarding discipline infractions in the form of discipline referrals. As a result, not all teachers were consistent in filling out referrals when sending students to the office. For the students who presented with referrals in hand, the office staff entered the information into the district database, which served as a system of record for all behavior infractions occurring on the school level.

Since the RC program had been in place for 3 years, discipline data were obtained from the past 3 years and frequency counts were used to assess whether the number of infractions had increased, decreased, or remained the same over a period of time. Another reason why I chose to focus on strictly the past 3 years is due to the fact that the district database had only been in place for that period of time. A focus was placed on identifying trends seen in the data over the designated period of time in terms of frequency and severity of infraction.

The third evaluation question focused on the potential correlation that may exist between social-emotional competence in primary students and the frequency of discipline infractions. A correlation analysis was conducted with social-emotional competence as
the independent variable and discipline infractions as the dependent variable. It is important to note that this level of analysis only determines whether one variable is associated with another and to what degree. Despite the results of the analysis, causality is never a factor that can be inferred without controlling for a significant number of variables (Caldwell, 2010). The analysis does, however, determine the strength of any association seen as well as the direction, whether positive or negative. To obtain the necessary data for this question, student-level discipline referral data were matched to student results on the survey for the 5th-grade participants.

The final evaluation question was answered with qualitative data from the focus groups conducted with teachers locally trained in implementing RC and the RC committee members. The focus groups were used as a means of probing deeper into issues that might have surfaced during the document review and/or through the ratings scales. The analyzing process was qualitative and focused on identifying recurring, emergent themes among participants' responses. This was done by transcribing the notes of the focus group and assigning particular codes to specific data by hand coding. By tabulating the codes, the prevalent themes emerged. The focus groups were designed to gain insight into the beliefs of the staff regarding the efficacy of the RC program, primarily in the areas of increasing social-emotional competence in students and decreasing discipline infractions. Table 2 provides a full view of which data sources were used to answer each evaluation question and how they were analyzed.

61
Table 2

Evaluation Data Sources and Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation Question</th>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Data Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. To what extent does the RC program contribute to social-emotional competence in 5th-grade students?</td>
<td>Survey; Teacher &amp; Student Rating Scales</td>
<td>Descriptive Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What is the relationship between social-emotional competence in 5th-grade students and student disciplinary infractions?</td>
<td>Teacher and Student Rating scales Frequency counts from discipline referrals</td>
<td>Correlation analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. To what degree has the RC model been shown to decrease the number and severity of discipline infractions?</td>
<td>Discipline referrals school-wide</td>
<td>Quantitative analysis of data logs and referrals determining frequency and trends in number and severity of discipline referrals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What are teachers’ and support staff perceptions of the facilitating conditions and barriers to RC leading to a reduction in infractions?</td>
<td>Two Focus Groups RC1: RC Committee RC2: Locally trained teachers</td>
<td>Qualitative review of focus group responses and identification of themes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Program Evaluation Management Plan

The overall timeline for this evaluation was not extensive and took place fairly quickly. Although there is always a possibility of teacher turnover or reassignment, which may cause complications with obtaining adequate data after the current school year, due to the IRB process for the school district and the college, assessment data was not acquired until the fall of SY 2014/2015. The information gained assisted the school in determining any adjustments or corrections that could be considered to increase the likelihood of the RC program's success. For these reasons, all collection of documents
for review along with administration of rating scales took place in the fall of SY2014/2015. A full report was ready for presentation to the administration during the final quarter of SY 2014/2015 to avoid disrupting the district testing cycle. It was important to discuss the anticipated timeline with the school administration to ensure that any potential challenges could be dealt with prior to the commencement of the evaluation. The timeline for this study is presented below.

- January - March 2014: Development of proposal and acquisition of assessment tools
- April 2014: Proposal defense
- May - July 2014: University IRB process and approval
- May - August 2014: School District IRB Process and approval
- September - November 2014: Administration of Assessment, Data Collection, & Document Review
- December - January 2015: Data analysis and interpretation of results

The key individuals involved in the evaluation process were the lead evaluator (me), who is also a program specialist with the school district's student discipline and school climate team, and the appointed school based RC facilitator. Additional individuals who were involved at various points are the RC committee members, specific members of the school staff, and students.

Resources needed included an allotment of time and money for the purpose of completing the full evaluation. Due to the fact that the evaluator is an employee of the District and treated as an outside, independent evaluator, compensation was not
necessary. Materials needed included adequate space to conduct the focus groups and paper for any copies that were made during the course of the evaluation process.

**Program Evaluation Standards**

A joint committee comprised of three organizations: the American Educational Research Association (AERA), the American Psychological Association (APA), and the National Council on Measurement in Education combined with 12 additional organizations to create the Program Evaluation Standards used in evaluations of programs, projects, and materials (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). These standards consist of five different elements and serve as a guide for those engaging in applicable studies. The components are: (a) utility, (b) feasibility, (c) propriety, (d) accuracy, and (e) meta-evaluation. Utility standards ensure that stakeholders find the information collected useful in meeting their needs. Feasibility standards help evaluators assess the likelihood that the evaluation can be carried out efficiently and effectively. Propriety standards provide guidance on ethical execution of an evaluation. Accuracy standards seek to support a high level of data accuracy, which leads to high dependability of evaluation results. Finally, meta-evaluation standards focus on high quality evaluations through adequate and accurate documentation that meets the needs of intended users.

These standards served as guidelines and provided a framework for the current program evaluation. Utility was taken into consideration by discussing the needs of the participating schools at the onset of the study. The administration of Rockport expressed a desire to have the data available to them to support their programmatic decisions in the future. In addition, they were interested in discovering teacher perceptions regarding the
efficacy of the RC program and its potential impact on student behavior. This study sought to answer these questions.

The first step in preparing for this study was identifying and securing the participation and permission of two school administrators. This was an important first step since it assisted with securing available data sources and increased the overall feasibility and propriety of the study. In addition, although the study was being conducted for educational purposes, it still met the utility standard and provided useful information to the participating schools. Their needs were determined and factored into the study during the initial meetings. This is particularly significant since only one of the two schools had a program that was being studied. It was possible that the matched school could have viewed the study as a negative focus on some of the challenges they face. A remedy to this issue was full disclosure of the data that would be collected, the ways in which confidentiality would be maintained, and suggestions of how the information obtained through the study could support the school with its overall goals.

An essential component of propriety is the protection of human and legal rights and the respect shown to all participants and stakeholders (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). In this study, propriety was accomplished on various levels. First, all completed surveys were reviewed solely by the evaluator. In analyzing the data, particular attention was paid to overall trends as well as any identification of strengths and/or weaknesses in particular skill areas for groups of students. Second, focus groups identified trends but also allowed time for member checking to ensure that the evaluator interpreted participant communication accurately. This also assisted with developing a balanced study that addressed participant concerns with clarity.
The following steps were taken to increase the level of accuracy in this study: (a) ensured the inclusion of a matched school to increase the validity and reliability of the study's findings; (b) assessment tools used, such as the BERS-2, were thoroughly researched and shown to provide high validity and reliability in the area of social-emotional competence; (c) data sources utilized, such as data logs and discipline referrals, were assessed utilizing sound quantitative methods; (d) focus groups were conducted and evaluated in a way which supported a high level of qualitative research; and (e) the overall evaluation and communication of results was conducted with integrity and free of intentional omissions, misconceptions, or errors.

**Ethical Considerations**

In addition to the program evaluation standards, the American Evaluation Association also provides *Guiding Principles for Evaluators*, which covers many ethical considerations for evaluations (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). These guidelines consist of five principles. The first highlights the need for evaluators to engage in systematic and data-based inquiry about the evaluand. The second principle is that evaluators are competent in the program evaluation process and also demonstrate cultural competence. The third principle speaks to the need for evaluators who are honest and carry out the evaluation with integrity in addition to ensuring that the evaluation process is carried out with those same qualities. The fourth principle admonishes the evaluator to maintain a high level of respect for all stakeholders involved in the evaluation process. The final principle focuses on the responsibilities which evaluators must take into account to ensure the overall welfare of participants. Although many of these standards are addressed through the previously discussed *Program Evaluation Standards*, their
implementation was again assured through the approval process of the Institutional Review Boards.

The initial plan was to collect all data prior to the end of the current school year; however, due to the District’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) process and the high number of assessments administered by the District toward the end of the year, this option was not feasible. As a result, data collection from the BERS-2 along with the teacher focus groups took place in the fall of SY 2014/2015. In addition, securing all of the necessary documents, such as discipline referrals, occurred in the fall.

All requests to conduct research in the District require an extensive approval process, which is filtered through the Office of Data and Strategy. In order to be considered, all research requests must be submitted as a proposal including the following: (a) a cover sheet, which identifies the title of the research as well as a description, the researcher, a timeline for the research, data requested or collected, and the affiliated organization or school; (b) a narrative description of the research proposal which will include full disclosure of the scope of the study including the participants, stakeholders, assessment tools, research design/methodology, a plan to obtain parental consent and maintain privacy of all data obtained; (c) data collection plan and schedule which will cause minimal disruption to the learning environment; (d) description of how participants will be informed of the research project and any incentives which will be used to increase participation: and (e) inclusion of any supporting documents which are available such as copies of assessments or focus group questions and a letter of support from the requester’s organization.
Once all documents were submitted, the approval process took about 90 days for completion. Once approved, an approval letter was issued to the researcher along with a Memorandum of Agreement. A Confidentiality Agreement is also included if the research requires confidential data and was not needed for this evaluation. All principals who had chosen to participate in the research were provided a copy of the approval letter. The completion of this process initiated a similar, although shorter, process on the college level. Approval from both allowed for commencement of the study.

Strengths, Delimitations, and Limitations

Every study has its areas of strengths as well as limitation and delimitations. Disclosing these areas and understanding the parameters of the research at hand further strengthens the overall study. Limitations are factors outside of the researcher’s control which may restrict the process of the study or affect the outcome (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 8). Delimitations, however, are parameters set by the researcher to intentionally limit the scope of the study. The strengths, limitations, and delimitations of this program evaluation are discussed in detail below.

Relative Strengths

Mertens and Wilson (2012) refer to feasibility as the level by which an evaluation can be carried out successfully. One of the definitive strengths of this evaluation is the ease by which the data were obtained. By using surveys, which can be manually scored to obtain information from all stakeholders, the administration and interpretation of the data became much less formidable. In addition, by reviewing documents that were already in existence, I was able to maximize the resources available without the need to create new data sources.
An additional strength is that the level of utility associated with the evaluation was significant. Through the use of surveys and focus groups, stakeholders were encouraged to participate in the process in a way that allowed their perceptions to be assessed and incorporated into the overall evaluation. The focus groups also assisted participants in redefining their understanding and opinions of the RC program and the impact that it might have had in their classrooms.

**Delimitations**

To maintain feasibility, the sample size for the survey data was limited to one grade level of a school as opposed to the entire student population. Some of the factors that contributed to this decision were the cost of the assessment instrument, the administration of the youth rating scales to the appropriate grade level, and the increased time and resources associated with administering an assessment school wide at the beginning of a school year.

An additional delimitation was the population chosen for the study. Although there are several schools within the District who had implemented RC, the focus was whether this program could be associated with raising social-emotional competence in schools with a high percentage of minority students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. As a result, Rockport was selected as a school that matched the requirements of the evaluation contextually, although their implementation of RC was still in its initial years.

**Limitations**

The use of surveys allows for participants to self-report, which can yield some particular advantages and disadvantages. The advantage is that surveys are simple to
administer and can be given to large groups of individuals. The disadvantages include the potential incongruence between what is being reported and what is actually occurring (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). There is also the possibility that the reader could have interpreted the question inaccurately and answered it based on this misinterpretation (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). This may cause the level of accuracy associated with the surveys to be somewhat questionable.

Another significant limitation is the lack of a match comparison group in this study. As a result, it was not possible to assess the RC program with any level of accuracy at a point in time. This led to the use solely of descriptive statistics for the student participants and heavy reliance on the perceived changes by the school staff through the focus groups which were conducted.

The overall focus of the evaluation was formative in nature and sought to discover the impact that RC as a collective program, has on increasing social-emotional competence. This evaluation did not seek to evaluate the different components of the RC program to determine which elements contributed the most to the results, nor did it seek to focus on program fidelity. This may prove to be a valid limitation for future researchers or school districts and schools who are considering the RC program. For this reason, generalizability of results should be kept to a minimum and should be used as a complementary factor in determining whether the RC program could potentially meet a school's needs.

Obtaining office referrals as a primary source of data regarding discipline is also a limitation of the evaluation. Established protocols are not always followed uniformly. In addition, the administration from Rockport had not focused on ensuring that all teachers
followed the protocol in place. As a result, some teachers might have chosen to handle certain higher-level infractions in their classroom while other, similar infractions might have warranted a discipline referral. In addition, some teachers may have sent students to the office without an accompanying referral. Both of these scenarios could limit and skew the number of referrals in the database and provide an inaccurate count of infractions occurring in the schools.

Finally, the timing of the evaluation provided some additional limitations. Due to the IRB process, data regarding the previous three school years could not be collected until the fall of SY2014/2015. This included the administration of assessments to students and teachers along with conducting focus groups. These steps would have been much more feasible at the culmination of the year, since teachers would have been with their students for the entire year and could have assessed them based on more recent memories of teacher-student interactions. In addition, there is much more flexibility in time toward the end of a school year for the administration of assessments after end of year academic assessments has been completed. Moving the time frame to the fall brought on a few challenges such as the possibility of teacher turnover, which may have increased the likelihood of obtaining incomplete data.

Summary

Identifying and implementing research-based programs to promote social-emotional competence and academic engagement is imperative, since it can lead to higher levels of overall student success and achievement (Payton et al., 2008). This study examined the correlation between RC programming and students' social-emotional competence. Following a pragmatic approach, a mixed-methods analysis made use of
surveys, focus groups, and document reviews to obtain a deep and rich collection of data. These data are intended to continue a meaningful conversation around programmatic options that may potentially build up students who have not been successful in school due to ongoing behavior challenges.
CHAPTER 4: Results

In addition to the many instructional initiatives and programs that schools incorporate to support student achievement, researchers are beginning to view the development of social-emotional competence as a potential component that should be explored to further support students. The purpose of this program evaluation study was to determine the extent to which the RC program has an impact on the development of social-emotional competence in 5th-grade students and the potential ensuing effect this may have on disciplinary infractions that take place in school. In addition, this study examined the facilitating conditions and challenges associated with implementing social-emotional learning programs such as RC in a typical public school setting with low to medium achievement, where increasing student academic proficiency on end of year standardized assessments remains the primary focus. Data collection for this study took place from September to November 2014. Although the proposed evaluation plan included a matched school, which was detailed in Chapter 3, due to unforeseen challenges, the inclusion of a matched school was not possible. The results, including the adjustments made, of both the quantitative and qualitative data collected in this evaluation are presented in this chapter. In addition, findings are separated according to the evaluation questions below proposed in Chapter three.

1. To what extent does the RC program contribute to social-emotional competence in 5th-grade students?

2. What is the relationship between social-emotional competence in 5th-grade students and student disciplinary infractions?

3. To what degree has the RC model been shown to decrease the number and severity of discipline infractions?
4. What are teachers’ and support staff’s perceptions of the facilitating conditions and barriers to RC leading to a reduction in infractions?

Data Collection

The BERS-2 was used to collect data in answering two of the four evaluation questions. The questions are as follows:

1. To what extent does the RC program contribute to social-emotional competence in 5th-grade students?

2. What is the relationship between social-emotional competence in 5th-grade students and student disciplinary infractions?

The BERS-2 included both teacher and student scales. The teacher scales were given to the two 4th-grade teachers from the previous school year to complete about the behavior the current 5th-grade students. Teachers were given the rating scales and afforded a month to submit the completed scales to the evaluator. The evaluator administered student scales on two separate days. Students participating in the study were given a 30-minute window to complete the self-assessment independently after being given the instructions.

A few occurrences throughout the data collection process required adjustments to be made in how the data would be analyzed and reported. According to the IRB requirements of the school district involved in this study, parents were expected to give active consent in order for students to participate. About half of the current 5th-grade class of Rockport Elementary transitioned to alternate schools over the summer, leaving them with a total of 23 5th-grade students at the beginning of the school year. Only 7 parents consented to having their students participate in the study, yielding a 30% response rate. In addition, the original matched school, Burch ES, was no longer able to participate in
the study due to a change in leadership and new building initiatives during SY 2014/2015. Due to the study’s timeframe and the challenges of finding time to conduct a study in a new school after the start of the school year, the option of obtaining an alternate school was not feasible. As a result of these conditions, both the aggregate and individual student data from these scales have been reported as descriptive statistics.

Document Review

The District used an electronic system, which served as the discipline record and file for all schools and their students. The system tracked all disciplinary infractions that were recorded and all suspensions that were assigned. Although schools have used their discretion in the past to determine which infractions would be documented in the system, final approval of all proposed suspensions, by either the school or district, could only be granted through the district-wide system in place.

A review of the disciplinary records over the course of three school years (SY 2011/2012, 2012/2013, 2013/2014) was conducted to gain an understanding of trends regarding the frequency and severity of disciplinary incidents taking place at Rockport. The information gained from this review was used to answer the following evaluation questions:

- What is the relationship between social-emotional competence in 5th-grade students and student disciplinary infractions?
- To what degree has the RC model been shown to decrease the number and severity of discipline infractions?
The discipline documents provided an additional layer of data along with the rating scales to determine the nature of the relationship between social-emotional competence and disciplinary infractions for the students included in this study.

**RC Committee and School Staff Focus Groups**

Two focus groups were conducted as a means of obtaining qualitative data regarding the school staff's ideas and perceptions of the RC program and its potential impact on students overall. The data obtained were used to answer the following evaluation question:

- What are teachers' and support staff's perceptions of the facilitating conditions and barriers to RC leading to a reduction in infractions?

A ten-question protocol was designed and facilitated which led to an open discussion of the successes, challenges, and concerns surrounding the RC program. I facilitated both focus groups, which were audio-recorded, and had a note taker on hand who recorded the nuances and non-verbal communications that could not be recorded otherwise. Although a 90-minute window was allotted for each focus group, the first lasted 60 minutes and the second lasted 30 minutes. Both were facilitated after school on a weekday and were voluntary.

The first focus group consisted of six school staff members who served on the RC committee at the school and received full training in the program (RC1). The second group consisted of three teachers who received on-site training from colleagues through professional development sessions and morning collaborative sessions (RC2). Each group contained school staff with a variety of years' experience in education. Table 3 provides the combined years of experience in education the participants from the two respective
groups had. The data yielded a mean of 10.2 years of experience, with a minimum of 1 year, a maximum of 23 years, and a mode of 7 years.

Table 3

*Focus Group Participants: Years of Experience*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years of Experience</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-11</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12-14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18+</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 3, only one participant had fewer than six years of experience in the field of education. All participants had at least one year of experience at Rockport during the time of RC implementation.

**Evaluation Question 1. To What Extent Does the RC Program Contribute to Social-Emotional Competence in 5th-Grade Students?**

The BERS-2 rating scale was used to determine a social-emotional competence index score for students. A total of seven students participated in the study by completing the Youth Rating Scale (YRS) component of the BERS-2; teachers completed the Teacher Rating Scale (TRS). The 4th-grade teachers from the previous year completed rating scales on the students involved in the study. Due to the lack of a matched school
and limited number of participants, I was unable to determine the extent to which the RC program contributes to social-emotional competence in the participating students.

The BERS-2 scale provides an index score for six different components of a child's social-emotional competence: interpersonal strength, involvement with family, intrapersonal strength, school functioning, affective strength, and career strength (Epstein, 2004). Once completed, each subscale produces an index score that provides information regarding a student's level of competence or strength that area. The range provided, along with the corresponding level of competence on the BERS-2 subscales are as follows: 4-5 = poor; 6-7 = below average; 8-12 = average; 13-14 = above average; 15-16 = superior; and 17-20 = very superior. As shown in Table 4, teachers scored all students within the average to superior range across subscales on the BERS-2 TRS. Students, however, scored themselves within the below average to very superior range across subscales, as shown in Table 5. The findings from the scales have been presented as an overview of the social-emotional competence level of students at a point in time.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BERS-2 Index Subscale</th>
<th>Minimum Score</th>
<th>Maximum Score</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Strength</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>3.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Involvement</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>3.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrapersonal Strength</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>2.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Functioning</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective Strength</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1.73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

78
Table 5

*Descriptive Statistics of BERS-2 for Students (N=7)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BERS-2 Index Subscale</th>
<th>Minimum Score</th>
<th>Maximum Score</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Strength</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>1.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Involvement</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>1.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrapersonal Strength</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Functioning</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective Strength</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the BERS-2, the following are the ranges of index scores given to
determine a student’s level of social-emotional competence: 70-79 = poor; 80-89 = below
average; 90-110 = average; 111-120 = above average; 121-130 = superior; and 130+ =
very superior. Teachers rated all students who participated in this study as having either
above average or superior social-emotional skills on the BERS-2 rating scale. It was
found that the students in this study, with one exception, tended to rate themselves lower
than their teachers and had scores between the average to very superior range. Figure 2
shows a comparison of each student’s self-assessed score and their teacher’s rating.
Figure 2. BERS-2 TRS and YRS, with comparison of individual student index scores

In addition to the individual scores presented in Figure 2, descriptive statistics of the students as a group are also presented in Table 6. On average, teachers rated their students and students rated themselves in the above average range. Overall, students involved in this evaluation scored high on all subscales of the BERS-2 scale. Due to the lack of a matched school, it is not possible to determine the extent to which RC contributed to the high range of social-emotional competence found with the participating students.

Table 6  

Descriptive Statistics of BERS-2 Teacher and Student Index Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean BERS-2 Score</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TRS BERS-2 Index Score</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>120.7</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YRS BERS-2 Index Score</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>112.4</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Evaluation Question 2. What is the Relationship Between Social-Emotional Competence in 5th-Grade Students and Student Disciplinary Infractions?

The indicators for the second evaluation question were the BERS-2 index scores for the students involved in the study correlated with the discipline infractions found for those students. All seven students involved were scored in the above average to superior range on the BERS-2 by their teacher and were in the average to superior range when self-assessed (see Figure 2). A review of all discipline referrals made over the 3-year time period found none assigned to the participants. No correlation between data points could be made.

Evaluation Question 3. To What Degree Has the RC Model Been Shown to Decrease the Number and Severity of Discipline Infractions?

The indicator used to answer this question was the school’s discipline referrals over the past 3 school years (SY 2011/2012 – SY 2013/2014). These 3 school years encompassed the time in which the RC program had been implemented. It is important to note that, in reviewing the student infractions over time, it was found that there had been a 66% increase in the number of infractions recorded from SY 2012/2013 to SY 2013/2014. Communication with Rockport’s former principal revealed that this increase was most likely due to a member of the administrative team being tasked with documenting all referrals made in the District’s system of record beginning SY 2012/2013 (personal communication, December 13, 2014).

Due to the limited amount of tracking of infractions which occurred in the first year, it was not possible to draw conclusions simply from the number of infractions found. Great accuracy could be assumed with the number of recorded suspensions. The
District's system is the only avenue that schools could use to record and approve a proposed suspension. It was therefore much simpler to compare suspension numbers, as opposed to infractions, since entry into the system was required for a suspension to acquire full approval. Table 7 shows the number of infractions and suspensions recorded.

There were a total of 211 infractions recorded and 46 suspensions assigned over the course of the 3 years. Although the total number of suspensions increased by 3 from SY 2012/2013 to SY 2013/2014, there was also a 17% decrease in the number of infractions that resulted in suspension between those two years.

Table 7

Descriptive Statistics of Frequency of Infractions and Suspensions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>Infractions Recorded</th>
<th>Suspensions Recorded</th>
<th>Percentage of Infractions resulting in Suspension</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011/2012</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012/2013</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013/2014</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another data point that will help to answer this evaluation question is a review of the level of severity assigned to the different infractions recorded in the district-wide database. Infractions are divided into five Tiers in the District. It is important to note that there is no correlation between the District's discipline tiers and those which are typically associated with the Response to Intervention model.

Tier 1 is assigned to infractions that typically include insubordination or cause minor disruptions to the classroom environment without causing damage to school property or harm to others. Tier 2 is assigned to infractions that cause disruption to the
school environment and may include damage to school property or minor harm to self or others. Both Tiers 1 and 2 are typically considered classroom level response infractions, which do not require an administrative action and cannot result in a suspension. A persistent Tier 2 infraction, however, which continues despite classroom level intervention, can be elevated to a Tier 3 infraction; at this point, suspension can become an option.

Tier 3 is the first Tier in which suspension is an option. Infractions in this Tier tend to cause significant disruption to the school environment and/or cause harm to the student or others. Tier 4 is the most severe level that can be assigned on the elementary level, and is used when the student’s behavior has caused major disruption to the school operation, destroyed school property, or caused significant harm to the student’s self or others. At this level, suspension is the only administrative option.

Figure 3 shows the number of infractions at each Tier over the past 3 school years. Although there was a discrepancy in the level of reporting over the past 3 years, all suspensions were recorded. It is therefore safe to say that all Tier 4 infractions were recorded, since they all resulted in suspension. The data showed a steady decline in the number of severe, Tier 4 infractions. Between SY 2011/2012 and SY 2013/2014, there was a 16% drop in Tier 4 infractions.

The implementation of RC may have contributed to a decrease in the severity of infractions occurring at Rockport over the past three years. Since RC is designed to support the development of social-emotional competence in students, it is possible that an increase in these skills may have led to a decrease in severe infractions warranting
suspension. Additional research implications regarding the extent to which RC or SEL initiatives can reduce infraction severity have been presented in Chapter 5.

![Figure 3. Percentages of infraction severity, classified by Tier and by school year.](image)

**Evaluation Question 4. What Are Teachers' and Support Staff Perceptions of the Facilitating Conditions and Barriers to RC Leading to a Reduction in Infractions?**

Two focus groups were conducted to serve as indicators for evaluation question four. The first group (RC1) consisted of six participants and represented a blend of classroom and resource teachers and a school counselor. Participants in this group had all received formal training in RC and served as members of the RC committee at the school. The second group (RC2) consisted of three participants who worked as resource teachers at the school. Neither of the three had received any formal RC training, but rather local training at the school, which had been given in the form of on-site professional
development and monthly 20-30 minute morning collaborative sessions conducted by members of the RC committee.

Both focus groups were recorded and transcriptions of each were hand coded to analyze for emerging themes. The process of coding consisted of both open and predetermined coding. Open coding allows categories or codes to emerge from the data as it is analyzed whereas predetermined coding approaches the data with pre-set codes (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The combination of these approaches afforded me the opportunity to incorporate my school-level experience through the use of predetermined codes while maintaining a level of flexibility found in open coding. The codes selected were based on observations and experience that I have had, as a practitioner, in schools where programs have been introduced or implemented. A qualitative codebook (Creswell, 2009) was created to record a listing of all predetermined codes, definitions of the codes, and a frequency count of each. A copy of this codebook has been included in Appendix B.

Through the process of open coding, several codes emerged from the transcriptions of both focus groups. The predominant emergent codes have been incorporated into a codebook as well and are included in Appendix C. It is important to note that although some codes listed have low frequency counts, the decision was made to include them based on the level of agreement that was found among the remaining group participants when the issues were mentioned.

The coding conducted revealed three emerging themes which were categorized as (1) barriers or challenges of RC at Rockport (2), benefits of RC at Rockport and (3) leadership. The codes that were included for the theme of barriers included: (1) training
needs, (2) fidelity, (3) inconsistency, (4) program limitations, and (5) staff buy-in. The benefits of RC revealed the following codes: (1) impact on teacher practice, (2) increased student social-emotional skills, and (3) increased teacher collaboration. Finally, the codes for leadership included: (1) program priority, (2) school vision, which includes school culture, and (3) staff support.

**Barriers to implementation of the RC program.** Despite the varied level of exposure to RC, participants in both focus groups agreed that the need for additional and broader training in the RC program was significant. Participants who were locally trained (RC2) spoke of acquiring only fragmented pieces of the program, such as the morning meeting, and never understanding the philosophy and full scope and purpose of RC. One teacher in this group stated, “For a lot of us who don’t know a lot about it, it was presented as morning meeting...and then later on it became clear that there’s more to Responsive Classroom...but we’ve never read the book.” Another teacher stated, “We have teachers who are teaching right now who probably have not received any training on Responsive Classroom...they know we’re an RC school but what that means has not been fully communicated.” Those who received the full RC training voiced that the inability to build on their initial training posed concerns regarding their capacity to implement RC for students with challenging behaviors.

Additional barriers linked with the training that were spoken of several times by both groups were fidelity and consistency. Several teachers highlighted the lack of consistency with implementation at the school. One teacher stated, “The experience kids are having with the Responsive Classroom program is different from room to room.” The issue of fidelity was brought up several times in both groups, but mainly as a result of
limited training among other concerns, such as time. Several participants from each group made comments such as, “if they’re (teachers) not trained they’re not going to understand the why.” The general consensus seemed to be that, without adequate training, it was a stretch to expect teachers to understand the RC program and then implement it. One teacher summed it up by stating, “I think to be consistent, we need staff buy-in, [and] to get buy-in, we all need training.”

Participants also spoke of the challenge of incorporating RC due to the many instructional initiatives that limited their time. One participant brought up the example of how time for morning meeting had been cut short due to the inception of an intervention model designed to offer students additional academic support. One teacher stated that even those who received full training and were clear on RC as a whole, found it challenging to implement the different components “because of other pressures; other curriculum minutes (requirements)...we pick bits and pieces but we don’t follow the whole thing.”

A major barrier, spoken of primarily in RC1, was the perceived limitation of RC in supporting students with challenging behaviors. One teacher stated that fidelity to the model tended to disintegrate when teachers were dealing with particularly challenging behaviors. When the groups were asked if they believed that RC was insufficient for some of these challenges or if the lack of consistency might have exacerbated the problem, many reported that RC was insufficient. Numerous comments were made such as, “they’re going to need a lot more than Responsive Classroom,” and, “I don’t think that RC was made for the small handful of kids that need extra.” Additional statements referenced the need for a discipline plan specific to Rockport that works alongside RC
and includes suspension, to help manage extreme behaviors in the classroom. Teachers expressed frustration with the administration’s unwillingness to utilize suspension, per the District’s discipline policy, although the student infractions allow for such action.

Benefits of the RC program. Despite the challenges that were discussed, participants from both groups found several benefits of incorporating RC. One emergent code that was found was the positive impact RC had on teacher practice. Although the level of RC training received by each group varied significantly, there was consensus with the idea that RC helped them develop much more positive relationships with their students and assisted them in becoming more aware and reflective as educators. A teacher from RC2 stated that through her use of morning meeting, she felt like “I knew my students better.” She stated that just having time dedicated to something other than “strict academic[s]” helped her to build relationships with her students. Others spoke of how their approach to student discipline had been modified through their use of logical consequences. They found themselves thinking of what a logical consequence would be in a variety of situations, rather than simply responding with an unrelated action. One teacher stated that when misbehaviors had occurred she chose to “find [a consequence] that makes sense.” The incorporation of logical consequences is a strong component of RC as it seeks to help educators respond to misbehavior in a way which allows students to learn from their mistakes in a respectful manner (NEFC, 2015).

Teachers also discussed RC’s impact on their language. Participants commented on the recognition of how their language could escalate situations in the classroom and how making a concerted effort to use appropriate language with students had resulted in fewer exacerbated situations. One teacher stated, “I’ve seen teachers use certain language
that instead of making a situation bigger than what it is, they actually deescalate and take care of it.” This decrease in situations that could lead to extreme behaviors was also seen in the discipline data reported in Figure 3 where a decrease in severe infractions was presented over a 3-year period.

Finally, participants brought up teacher collaboration as an element that had increased significantly through the use of RC. Participants in RC1 mentioned learning strategies from their colleagues, spending time watching one another model different RC components, and working together to provide additional support to students with challenging behaviors. Participants in RC2 did not mention increased teacher collaboration.

Participants from both groups believed that RC had impacted the social-emotional competence of students to some level. Both groups stated that they noticed an increase in students’ ability to resolve conflicts with peers independently and appropriately. Teachers who worked at Rockport throughout the implementation of RC spoke of the difference in the number of infractions that had occurred during recess and the limited number of complaints they receive from students while supervising. Participants reported seeing students using the RC skills that had been discussed and modeled in morning meeting and in the classroom when they were out at recess. Comments such as “they are using their words more and trying to figure out how to solve their problems” and “kids have been able to walk away...and it hadn’t escalated into a suspendable act like a fight” were common among participants.

Participants also reported observing an increase in students’ demonstrated level of self-awareness and self-regulation. Several teachers stated that most students were now...
able to articulate how they were feeling and many others could ask for what they needed to support themselves at the time. One teacher stated that even for students who had started at Rockport with low social-emotional competence, unable to voice their concerns, “by the end of the year they would be able to say, ‘I’m feeling frustrated.’” Other students, who might have started at a higher level of social-emotional competence, might have exhibited a “meta-cognitive awareness of what they’re feeling and why.” In addition, participants reported they had observed students self-selecting to take a time out or break when their emotions began to escalate and asking to return when they were able to settle down, without any prompting from an adult. All of these changes seen were attributed to the incorporation of the RC program.

The role of leadership. Leadership was a code that emerged from the data; when analyzing the transcripts of both groups, it was found that several codes seemed to fall under this theme. Some of the codes which came up through the focus groups around this theme were knowledge of the school vision by school staff and an understanding of how RC fits in as a priority in the overall school culture. The issue of priority appeared to have a direct correlation with what participants deemed as staff support or the lack of it, implementation time, and the instructional focus placed on RC. To begin this review, we will first look at the school vision.

The clarity of how RC fit into the school vision was an issue that came up in both groups. When participants were asked why RC was incorporated, there was no clear answer from anyone, except the teacher who served as the RC coordinator. She mentioned that it fit their school mission and goals of the school and it was research based so they felt it would be a great fit. All other group participants were unclear
regarding why RC was being implemented at Rockport. One teacher from RC2 stated, “I don’t know why they implemented it... I don’t know if they went looking for something because of a lack, or if they came across it another way.” Another teacher in RC2 stated, “I don’t know, but I can speculate and say that the children were more and more challenging and that we needed a balance, a solution.” A teacher in RC1 stated that she thought it had been used in the past but it faded away due to a lack of fidelity. Finally one teacher stated that it may have been because of “the emphasis of Responsive Classroom on social interaction, personal conduct... and some of our student population doesn’t get a lot of that kind of training at home.” Several participants expressed agreement with this final point.

In conjunction with the vision is the instructional focus and priority given to RC as an integral part of the school culture. Again, the intense focus placed on instructional time caused one participant to state that many of the strategies of RC would not work because the time is not there as RC would cut into the limited daily instructional minutes. It is important to note that some of the concerns that were brought up around priority were as a result of a recent administrative change. The year of this study was the school’s first year with a new principal. Although the study was focused on the RC program and its inclusion at Rockport over the past 3 years, participants expressed that what once appeared to be a strong culture that held RC as an instructional focus was currently fading away.

Another component of leadership that was brought up was staff support. Participants from both groups expressed concern over the administration’s lack of support regarding challenging student behaviors. One teacher stated, “There’s a strong
message here that we are supposed to take care of it ourselves, within Responsive Classroom." This sentiment was confirmed in a conversation with Rockport's former principal. He stated that there was an expectation that teachers would use their resources within the RC model to address most student behaviors within the classroom. Participants in both groups expressed concern that, due to the administration's perception that RC could handle all student behaviors administrator's support for teachers was not always given in the expected form. One teacher stated that when administrators had come by to support, they offered suggestions of strategies that did not even fit the RC model, such as stickers, charts, and extrinsic rewards. Many teachers expressed their desire for support to include removing the student from the classroom, since they had exhausted their RC options by the time they called for assistance.

Participants from both groups expressed the need for a discipline plan in addition to RC. One teacher stated, "It's more like management. We're using the buddy classroom so that hopefully you don't have to have a huge discipline plan in place, but I guess that's where we're struggling." Buddy classrooms are teacher peer classrooms which students can utilize to take a time out to refocus when their behavior begins to escalate. Another teacher mentioned that the district behavior Tiers and corresponding actions were not followed by the leadership and, despite the severity of the student behaviors, teachers were still expected to manage those behaviors in the classroom. Most teachers agreed with this comment.

When a statement was made by one of the group participants regarding the low number of suspensions at the school, several teachers expressed frustration regarding the minimal use of this option. A comment was made concerning the administration's
unwillingness to suspend, although the District document of tiered student behaviors
clearly listed suspension as an option. One teacher stated, “I didn’t feel empowered to
really understand how to get a child suspended when I thought it was warranted, and
whether I would be backed up.” Another teacher stated that by the time teachers asked for
a suspension, they have already done and tried “a lot of things” which have not worked.
There was agreement among the participants that at some point suspension is the correct
response and when that response was not given, they did not feel supported.

It was mentioned by the RC coordinator that in their second year of
implementation, the administration took some time to go through the District’s discipline
tiers and to explain the expectations at each level. The conflict between the staff and
leadership seemed to reside in the expectations surrounding Tier three infractions. One
teacher stated that when students were causing a major disruption in her classroom which
made it impossible to teach, she believed they needed to be removed and at times
suspended. Other teachers expressed that students fighting should result in a suspension
but at times they did not. Both of these listed infractions fall within the District’s Tier
three infractions where suspension is an option but is not a requirement. It was evident
that frustration levels among the staff increased when the leadership opted against
suspension when the opportunity existed.

Throughout the 3-year implementation of RC at Rockport, there were both
facilitating conditions and barriers which determined the extent to which RC facilitated a
decrease in student discipline infractions. Among many barriers discussed, school staff
remarked on the significant need for both initial and ongoing training in RC for the entire
staff. Most group participants believed that the lack of training presented as a decrease in
fidelity and program consistency across grade levels, which hindered potential program results. In addition, several components of leadership were questioned, since teachers felt unsupported when student behaviors were perceived as severe. Despite these barriers, almost all teachers reported an improvement in their practice, particularly in the area of teacher language and student interactions, which they perceived as contributing to a decrease in student escalations. In addition, it is possible that RC may have contributed to a decrease in student discipline infractions, since most group participants disclosed their observations of decreased student conflicts, an increase in student self-regulation, and a decrease in severe discipline infractions over the 3-year implementation period.

**Summary**

Chapter 4 provided a detailed analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data sources: teacher and student behavior-emotional rating scales, a document review of discipline infractions and suspensions, and two focus groups. All data sources were explained fully along with a detailed analysis including prevalent themes that presented in the focus groups.
CHAPTER 5: Conclusions

Disruptions to the learning environment that lead to a decrease in the delivery of instruction, peer and adult conflict, as well as unsafe and violent altercations, are often met with discipline referrals, which can lead to suspension or expulsion without dealing with the root causes of such behaviors (Sherrod, Getch, & Ziomek-Diage, 2009; Smith, Bicard, Bicard, & Casey, 2012). What has rarely been addressed is the reality that social-emotional competence in students serves as a foundation for academic success and can ward off myriad behavior challenges (Elias et al., 2003). Stoiber (2011) posited that school initiatives should be focused on building these student competencies rather than simply eliminating challenging student behavior.

In light of these realities, schools like Rockport are beginning to look for and implement programs like RC to address students' social-emotional deficits and contribute to an increase in the necessary competencies. This program evaluation uses a mixed-methods approach to determine the benefits and challenges of implementing an SEL initiative in an urban elementary school and its impact on discipline infractions. It also evaluates the extent to which the RC program contributed to an increase in social-emotional competence in 5th-grade students.

Conclusions could not be made regarding whether the social-emotional competence seen in the participants was due to the implementation of RC or if there had been a decrease in infraction counts over the 3-year span. What is apparent is the decrease seen in the most severe infractions resulting in suspensions. In addition, almost all focus group participants reported significant barriers to implementing RC fully: the lack of teacher training along with various elements of school leadership, such as
administrative support regarding extreme student behaviors. Despite these concerns, teachers still reported a positive change in their own practice and felt that there was a noticeable difference in the social-emotional competence of students at Rockport since the implementation of RC began. A full discussion of the findings reported in Chapter 4 in addition to implications and recommendations for program implementation and future research is provided in this chapter.

Discussion of Findings

Based upon the research found on the RC program, it was assumed that an increase in social-emotional competence would have occurred during the implementation period in the 5th grade students at Rockport. As noted in the literature review, there is significant evidence that a focus on SEL initiatives can lead to a decrease in discipline infractions and an increase in student academic achievement (Payton et al., 2008; Stoiber, 2011). These were my expectations as I began this evaluation. Although the students involved in this study demonstrated significant strength in the competencies rated, due to the inability to incorporate a matched school and the very small obtained sample size, it was not possible to determine whether the current rating is due to the implementation of the RC program. In addition, a lack of accurate discipline tracking provided limited insight regarding the trends that occurred during the 3-year implementation period. Findings from the focus groups provided insight that is beneficial in determining the perceived benefits and challenges of the RC program. A discussion of all data points is presented fully within this chapter.

RC Program and Social-Emotional Competence
The BERS-2 rating scale was used to determine an overall strength index of five different scales: interpersonal strength, family involvement, intrapersonal strength, school functioning, and affective strength. A composite of all five subscales created an index score, which fell within ranges set by the developers. Teachers who had previously taught the students completed the scales and the selected students also completed self-assessments using the YRS. The data revealed that all seven students scored between average to superior ranges on the TRS while the students scored themselves between the below average to very superior range on the YRS. Greater variability was found with the YRS than the TRS. The difference in the mean index score between the TRS and YRS was 8.3, with the TRS having a higher mean index score. It is unclear, based on the data acquired, whether the strength of the index scores increased over the 3-year implementation period of the RC program or if the program had any impact on the current score. What is clear is that teachers perceived all participating students as having high social-emotional competence.

Social-Emotional Competence and Student Discipline Infractions

A study that examined the effects of an SEL program on children placed in an intervention and control group found significant differences in students who were exposed to the program (Frey, Nolen, Edstrom, & Hirschstein, 2005). Students in the intervention group showed less aggression, behaved more cooperatively, and displayed more pro-social skills than students in the control group. Teachers in the study reported that decreases in antisocial behavior were largest among students who had previously been rated as highly antisocial. It appears that the development of appropriate skills led to fewer classroom disruptions due to problematic behaviors. Additional studies have found
the same results when SEL programs were implemented (Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Weissberg, & Schellinger, 2011; Frey et al., 2005; Payton et al., 2008).

The students in this evaluation were found to have no discipline referrals from the past 3 school years. Although it is possible that there may have been human error in tracking all discipline referrals, based on the level of social-emotional competence found from the rating scales, it is likely that the students did not have behavior challenges that resulted in discipline referrals warranting administrative intervention. The literature supports this assumption, since it shows that students with high social-emotional competence tend to have positive social relationships, leading to minimal problematic student behaviors resulting from peer conflicts (Stoiber, 2011). The research suggests the high social-emotional competence found in the students who participated in this evaluation may have contributed to their lack of discipline infractions incurred over the past three years.

**Frequency and Severity of Discipline Infractions in an RC School**

Students who have the opportunity to develop social-emotional competence are less likely to engage in antisocial behaviors and more likely to demonstrate skills such as self-awareness, self-regulation, and positive peer interactions (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Payton et al., 2008). These pro-social behaviors might lead to a decrease in overall discipline infractions occurring in the learning environment. At Rockport, documentation of discipline infractions has not always been a priority; thus, data about the frequency of infractions over the 3-year RC implementation period presents a limited perspective.
The severity of infractions at Rockport, however, is one that can be assessed with a high degree of certainty. As mentioned in Chapter 4, there are four Tiers of infractions that can be used on the elementary level in the District. Tier 1 and 2 usually result in classroom level responses, whereas Tier 3 carries the option of an on-site or off-site suspension. Tier 4 is the most severe level of infraction and only offers administrators the option of suspension. This option can only be documented and approved through use of the mandated database. The principal of Rockport communicated that, although all discipline infractions that occurred were not included in the district’s database, all suspensions were documented. These factors contributed to more accurate reporting of Rockport’s most severe infractions.

Over the past 3 years, Rockport experienced a decline in its most severe discipline infractions. Figure 3 shows a 16% drop in Tier 4 infractions from SY 2011/2012 to SY 2013/2014. Although there were a total of 140 infractions recorded in the district’s database for SY2013/14, only two of those were severe enough to warrant only suspension as an option. Another point to examine is the type of behaviors that most frequently resulted in suspension. Table 8 shows the three most common behaviors resulting in suspension over the 3-year period. It is important to note that for all 3 years, fight with no injury and reckless behavior continued to be problematic. However, bullying, which started as the most common behavior resulting in suspension in SY 2011/2012 drops to the second most common the following year, and is not even listed in the final year.
Table 8

*Rockport: Trend Of Most Common Behaviors Resulting In Suspension*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranking</th>
<th>SY 2011/12</th>
<th>SY 2012/13</th>
<th>SY 2013/14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Most common</td>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>Fight with no injury</td>
<td>Fight with no injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Most common</td>
<td>Reckless behavior</td>
<td>Bullying</td>
<td>Reckless behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd Most common</td>
<td>Fight with no injury</td>
<td>Reckless behavior</td>
<td>Disruption</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Statements from the focus groups seem to triangulate the findings here. Several teachers mentioned noticing that peer conflicts declined since implementing the RC program. A point that was brought up repeatedly was the difference in the number of altercations that occurred during unstructured times such as recess. Comments such as “they are taking the skills learned in morning meeting and using them in recess” and “they are learning to solve their problems with their words” were met with broad agreement in the focus groups. Some teachers even mentioned observing higher levels of self-regulation among students and noticing that students were selecting to walk away rather than have a situation escalate. These comments and observations may explain why bullying rates seem to have declined.

The development of social-emotional competence helps students build skills such as in-person perception, perspective taking, and the awareness necessary to build positive relationships that do not foster activities such as bullying (Goleman, 1995; Stoiber, 2011). In addition, it is through the process of SEL that students learn to care about others, engage in ethical and responsible behaviors, and make positive choices (Elias et al., 1997), which can steer them away from bullying and negative behaviors overall. In a
study conducted with over 300 seventh graders to determine the impact of an SEL program on bullying, students who participated in the program showed significant reductions in self-reported bullying and victimization from pretest to posttest (Domino, 2013). The focus on asset building through SEL might have been beneficial to students.

Accurate frequency data would have allowed greater insight regarding the extent of impact the RC program had on student discipline. It would be highly beneficial for districts to support schools in ensuring that discipline infractions are well documented. This level of documentation can serve as baseline data for future programs and evaluation data for programs that are currently in place. One teacher in the focus group stated, “If there was a way to track the number of office referrals, number of suspensions...that would be really useful and give us a goal to work towards, but nothing like that has existed at this school.” It is likely that teachers who are tasked with implementing many of the programs that are initiated would support and appreciate a system that tracks and reports back the results. This would allow them to identify the potential impact of the programs used and further support the reasoning to either move forward with implementation or reevaluate the program’s efficacy.

**Perceived Facilitating Conditions and Barriers to RC Leading to a Reduction in Infractions**

The focus groups provided particular focus into the many challenges, frustrations, as well as benefits and successes experienced by school staff when implementing a new program. The emergent themes found through the coding process included facilitating conditions, barriers, and leadership. Each of these is discussed in detail below.
Facilitating conditions leading to a reduction in infractions. One of the benefits of incorporating the RC program is an increased amount of teacher collaboration (Sawyer & Rimm-Kaufman, 2007). Teachers reported that RC supported them in developing deeper relationships with their students and in turn build a sense of community in the classroom, which was not there previously. The RC belief that knowing the children we teach is as important as knowing the content we teach (NEFC, 2013) was actualized with several teachers at Rockport.

Others in the focus groups reported that the program’s focus on teacher language pushed them to become much more aware of their interactions with their students and to choose responses which limited escalation. One teacher stated, “We start looking a lot at our teacher language and how we were saying things to the children, and finding that our language makes a shift in the discipline as well.” Teachers also reported an increase in teacher collaboration through the use of buddy classrooms to support students, observing their colleagues engage in interactive modeling, and providing accountability to one another in implementing RC components. This collaboration falls in line with the belief system behind RC, which states that staff collaboration is as important as individual competence (NEFC, 2013).

Another component of RC is the inclusion of logical consequences when student misbehavior occurs. Teachers reported that instead of automatically giving a rote consequence for an infraction, they tended to think about what made sense as a logical consequence. Participants reported that this approach, along with the decline in escalated situations, allowed the focus to remain on instruction. A meta-analysis conducted supported the idea that teachers’ skill in providing effective classroom management and
decreasing disruptive behavior had significant effects on student achievement (Hattie, 2009). It is important to note that the RC1 group, which has had the most RC training, reported the most impact on their teaching practice and increased collaboration with colleagues, whereas the RC2 group only reported a positive impact on their interactions with students.

Another facilitating condition mentioned by members of both groups was the noticeable increase in social-emotional competence in students. One increased skill seen in many students was the ability to self-regulate. Teachers reported that students were able to articulate their feelings, ask for time away from an activity, settle down, and ask to rejoin the group. All of this was done without prompting from an adult, allowing instruction to continue seamlessly more often than before RC implementation. The extant literature frequently mentions the ability to self-regulate as a crucial development for students. For children at risk of failing, a focus on developing skills in self-regulation is a more effective strategy than a singular focus on academics (Blair & Diamond, 2008). It was also found that self-management skills, which include self-regulation, prepare children for the current challenges in school and those ahead (Lopes & Salovey, 2004).

Facilitating barriers to RC leading to a reduction in infractions. There were many barriers mentioned by both focus groups but none was met with as much unanimity as the lack of training. According to the logic model presented in Figure 1, two of the inputs included monthly morning collaborative sessions and in-service training for staff who were not formally trained in RC. The staff members in RC2 received solely local training that was provided by the school. Teachers in this group mentioned having a limited understanding of RC and believed that RC consisted solely of the morning
meetings. They mentioned that no knowledge of the philosophy and overall goal of RC was ever communicated; thus, their level of implementation was limited. The morning collaborative sessions were viewed as piecemeal and fragmented, as opposed to a streamlined approach to RC. One teacher in this group stated that although she had a brief study on teacher language with her grade level team, she did not fully comprehend the component enough to implement it with fidelity. Another teacher stated that she never understood the research and the rationale behind the program and this would have been helpful.

Although training was also a concern for the RC1 group, the issues brought up focused on the consequences of inadequate or insufficient training. The teachers in RC1 expressed concerns centered on the lack of consistency and fidelity of implementation of the RC program. Stoiber (2011) posits that SEL interventions are often not implemented as intended and lack the necessary systematic, integrative, and comprehensive approach needed for success. Schools are then left with fragmented programs with limited impact.

Another concern was the issue of staff buy-in. The RC facilitator stated that staff buy-in would always be an issue when the lack of training is ongoing. A 2-year study conducted with New Jersey teachers, assessing the contributing factors of teacher participation and buy-in in a whole school reform initiative, corroborated this point (Turnbull, 2002). The researcher found that teachers were more likely to demonstrate buy-in to school reform programs when they had “adequate training and resources, helpful support from model developers, school-level support, administrator buy-in, and control over the reform initiative in their classroom” (Turnbull, 2002, p. 248). Holcomb (2008) has suggested that when teachers are included in the change process from the
beginning and offered the time to form commitments to the intended goals, staff buy-in is not often an issue.

Both groups expressed concern that the RC program had limited reach and could not adequately support students with significant behavior challenges. Statements such as "where fidelity often breaks down is with the most challenging students," "I don’t think RC was made for the handful of kids who need extra," and "they’re going to need more than just a Responsive Classroom," were met with almost full agreement. One teacher also voiced the frustration that RC was only pro-active and pre-emptive, but not prescriptive enough to provide teachers with guidance on how to manage the inappropriate behaviors which tended to arise. The RC facilitator linked this concern to a lack of training and mentioned that the RC program had much broader training available to address such issues, but staff had not experienced this training.

The issue of program limitation also prompted a discussion about the perceived lack of administrative support and insufficient use of student suspensions. Teachers reported that certain behaviors required suspension and expressed dissatisfaction that the administration did not always follow through with this expectation. One teacher stated, "I didn’t really understand how to get a child suspended when I thought that it was warranted, and whether I would be backed up." Another stated, "Sometimes we’ve already tried a lot of interventions; we know when it’s at that level and they need to be suspended." Both statements were met with agreement from group participants.

A survey of over 34,000 public school teachers supported some of these sentiments regarding administrative support (Tickle, Chang, & Kim, 2011). Administrative support was a strong predictor of teacher satisfaction, even more so than
student behavior. In addition, the teachers who were surveyed felt that even when student behavior was a challenge, appropriate administrative support served a mediating role and assisted teachers. In a different study, researchers conducting a meta-analysis of 34 studies about teacher attrition defined administrative support as “the school’s effectiveness in assisting teachers with issues such as student discipline, instructional methods, curriculum and adjusting to the school environment” (Borman & Dowling, 2008, p. 380). When the teacher perceptions of administrative support were high, teacher attrition was minimized.

The literature reveals that the views of the Rockport staff are not unique. When it comes to student discipline, administrative support plays a key role in the level of backing teachers perceive. The role of leadership in addressing concerns about administrative support and further discussion of the staff perception of the leadership role in RC implementation is addressed below.

**The importance of leadership.** The theme of leadership is one that emerged from the participant feedback on topics such as school vision, staff support, and program priority. When group participants were asked why the decision to implement the RC program was made, there was an almost unanimous dearth of explanation. One staff member stated that she was not clear on whether there was an actual need or the administration was looking for an SEL program for another reason. Others simply stated that they were unsure. This lack of clarity may point to a lack of shared vision around the RC program and where it fits in the school’s overall vision and focus. Shared vision comes up repeatedly in the literature as a significant component in school reform and one that is crucial for success when an organization undergoes any degree of change (Fullan,
The implementation of RC facilitated a level of change at Rockport. Fullan (2001) referred to this change as reculturing—transforming a culture or changing the way things are done in an organization (p. 44). In a review of literature about educational leaders who were effective in leading school reform, the following themes were found: (1) development of a shared vision; (2) development of relational trust with staff; (3) use of multiple sources to solve complex problems; (4) consistent focus on teaching and learning; and (5) responsive to external demands (Holmes et al., 2013). The findings from the focus group interviews found challenges in the first two components.

School staff reported being unclear about why the RC program was being implemented and, once it was implemented, commented on the challenges of finding the time to make the program a priority consistently. The fragmented implementation of any SEL program is not a rare occurrence, since oftentimes there are plenty of ongoing initiatives in place that schools must try to work around (Stoiber, 2011). The lack of shared vision may have also been a catalyst for the participants' perception of limited support from administration. Both school staff and the principal communicated the expectation for most student behavior infractions to be handled through the RC approach. Participants from both focus groups indicated a degree of frustration because their level of knowledge and training in RC did not seem to provide them with solutions and strategies to manage some of the higher-level discipline infractions. This lack of training led to an increased desire for support from the administration in the form of student suspensions and dissatisfaction when those suspensions did not occur.
One of the positive factors that presented regarding leadership was the use of distributive leadership in implementing the RC program. The RC coordinator spoke of the time and flexibility given to the RC committee to develop and facilitate monthly trainings, as well as a full in-service training prior to the start of a new school year. Teachers also commented on the opportunities to collaborate with their colleagues and how this collaboration supported program implementation. A study conducted to evaluate the implementation of a new framework for teaching and learning in a New York suburban middle school supports these findings (Dove & Freeley, 2011). In this study, the school’s choice to operate in a primarily democratic manner allowed for early and sustained participation of teachers in the implementation of the new program.

Limiting factors. There were several factors that contributed to limitations in this evaluation. One factor was the lack of accurate discipline data from the first two years of RC implementation. Although the District has a discipline data system, which schools were asked to use to track discipline infractions, many schools chose to use the system only to enter and approve suspensions. This led to a shortage of discipline data that could be used as baseline and evaluative data when implementing a variety of programs. As a result of this incomplete data, in this evaluation, inferences could not be made regarding the extent to which RC had an impact on discipline infractions.

Another limiting factor was the lack of training provided to staff to incorporate the training as designed. Although the administration wanted to provide training to all school staff, a limitation in funding presented a challenge in accomplishing this goal. As a result, only nine members of the school staff obtained full training. This restricts the
implications that can be drawn regarding the benefits and/or challenges of the RC program, since it was not possible for all teachers to implement the program as designed.

The small sample size included in the evaluation posed an additional challenge and limitation. The use of the BERS-2 rating scale required that only 5th-grade or older students be given the self-assessment. This requirement was taken into consideration when the decision was made to include only one grade level in the study. Unfortunately, obtaining active consent from only seven families brought further limitations to the evaluation. As a result, only descriptive statistics could be drawn from the results.

Finally, the lack of a matched school posed a significant limitation, since it was not possible to assess whether the implementation of RC had any noticeable effect on the social-emotional competence of the students at Rockport. The use of a matched school would have provided a greater depth of insight regarding the extent to which RC could support SEL in elementary students.

**Recommendations for Schools Implementing SEL Programs**

Successful implementation of SEL initiatives requires thorough planning and evaluation to ensure that the necessary resources are available to sustain the program. The literature has shown that a comprehensive, systematic, and integrative approach will fare better and have much more success than one which is fragmented and confined to specific classes or events (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Stoiber, 2011). The following recommendations are made in light of these findings.

**District-Wide Approach to SEL**

There is growing literature to support that SEL has an impact on student achievement (Durlak et al., 2011; Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Social and Emotional
Learning Research Group, 2010). Elias et al. (2003) posited that sound education is a coupling of both EQ (emotional intelligence) and IQ and this was a reality that schools must begin to accept to ensure student success. As a result, it is recommended that districts pursue an integrative approach to SEL that supports the instructional model in place. Integrating SEL as a district instructional focus will allow schools to allocate resources, funding, and training more efficiently.

One of the major complaints from the focus group participants was the lack of training due to the school’s inability to fund ongoing training for school staff. A district focus on SEL could alleviate the pressure on a school’s budget to fund professional development in this area. Another complaint was the lack of time to implement components of the RC program and the competing initiatives that limited program implementation. An integrative instructional approach will allow schools to build the SEL components into the instructional day without sacrificing teaching and learning.

**SEL as an Instructional Focus**

One of the challenges repeatedly mentioned by focus group participants was the ongoing struggle to implement components of RC without losing instructional times. Defragmenting SEL and allowing for a model which is integrated into the academic structure of the school day would minimize the ongoing conflict around time and may produce a much more sustained impact on student growth.

Jones and Bouffard (2012) found that even when well-designed SEL programming was implemented with fidelity, the effect sizes were still modest. They propose four principles of SEL development that will lead to more effective school based approaches: (1) continuity and consistency are essential for SEL skill development; (2)
social, emotional, and academic skills are interdependent; (3) SEL skills develop in social contexts; and (4) classrooms and schools operate as systems (p. 8). These principles posit that a more beneficial manner in which to approach SEL programming is through an integrated instructional approach which is interwoven into the regular structure of the academic day. Schools can focus on this integrated approach by looking for opportunities to incorporate SEL skills within the general routines of the day such as class meetings, delivery of conflict resolution strategies to students and a provision of opportunities for students to practice skills learned. In addition, a concerted effort can be made to provide SEL training to the entire school staff, thus increasing the likelihood of a common language in supporting students.

**Program Planning and Implementation**

The Social and Emotional Learning Research Group (2010) defines implementation as “how well an intended program is actually conducted once it begins” (p. 3). A meta-analysis of 213 studies of SEL programs found that when programs were implemented after careful planning, there were positive changes in six areas for students: (1) social and emotional skills, (2) attitudes about themselves, others and school, (3) social and classroom behavior, (4) conduct problems such as classroom misbehavior and aggression, (5) emotional distress such as stress and depression, and (6) achievement test scores and school grades, including an 11% gain in academic achievement (Social and Emotional Learning Research Group, 2010). It was found, however, that when proper implementation did not occur, increases were mainly seen in attitude and conduct problems. Poor implementation can undermine a program’s potential student impact regardless of its overall strength (CASEL, n.d.).
Once an evidence-based program has been selected, plans must be made to ensure that the program is implemented with fidelity. Jones and Bouffard (2012) found that it is rare that schools integrate SEL in ways that are embedded into the day-to-day interactions of students and staff. For these reasons, proper and extensive planning should occur prior to beginning implementation. Although a logic model was created for the sake of this evaluation, Rockport did not have one. The development of a logic model can provide a roadmap for a school in identifying all elements of the program that should be considered for seamless implementation. In addition, a logic model allows the process of evaluation to begin during the planning phase, by ensuring that staff members are clear on all inputs and have the necessary resources to support the listed activities or processes. Allowing time up front for proper planning will offer the opportunity for a defined training and monitoring plan, which increases program implementation.

**Program Evaluation Focus**

A plan for evaluation should be created alongside any initial program planning that occurs. Both formative and summative evaluation should be conducted to provide ongoing information to the administration and school staff regarding how the program’s implementation process is progressing and the end result or impact (Mertens & Wilson, 2012). A formative evaluation of the RC program at Rockport would have revealed the impact of fragmented training in addition to the teacher’s need for additional support with challenging student behavior. In addition, this type of evaluation would have provided implementation data regarding fidelity and how well the program was developing. This information is crucial, since it has been found that implementation quality is critical to program effectiveness (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).
A summative evaluation should also be conducted to determine if the proposed short, medium, and long term effects of the program are being actualized. Plans to adjust, expand, or eliminate the program can be made based on the results of this evaluation.

Professional Development

When Fullan (2010) studied the strategies used by principals who were able to transform failing schools within a year's time, he found they had two strategies in common: job-embedded professional learning for teachers, and principals who participated as learners in both trainings and the overall reform process. The literature is clear on the significance of teacher training and how the lack of it places the success of program implementation at risk (Schultz et al., 2010). Participants of both focus groups expressed the need for thorough and full training for all staff members, as opposed to the partial training received on-site. Schools interested in implementing SEL programs should develop a professional development plan that supports the school staff and administration in implementing the selected program with fidelity. In addition, ongoing professional development should be designed to address any emerging concerns—such as the handling of challenging student behavior at Rockport—as they arise to ensure timely support and issue resolution.

Program Sustainability

Staff turnover can have a significant impact on the sustainability of an SEL program. Ongoing training for new staff members creates a costly necessity for some schools while varied levels of program knowledge and understanding can lead to challenges with implementation and fidelity. All of these concerns were raised by focus
group participants as a reality of what had been occurred during the three-year implementation period.

More specifically, principal turnover can cause dramatic shifts in how programs are implemented or if they are maintained at all. A study which focused on the perceptions related to implementation and sustainability of an SEL program found that school staff perceived the administrator as the single most important factor contributing to the sustainability of a program (McIntosh et al., 2014). This will typically lead to a decline in programming when there is leadership turnover.

Researchers have found that principals can increase the likelihood of program sustainability by doing the following: (1) playing a role in developing a school culture where school staff work towards a shared vision; (2) providing clear expectations and accountability to school staff; and (3) using creativity to ensure that resources are allocated in a manner which allows staff members to obtain the necessary supports (Strickland-Cohen, McIntosh, & Horner, 2014, p. 20). Some of the identified supports should include components which can serve to build team leadership among the staff which can continue despite a shift in administration. Components might include time for regular meetings that entail data review which can inform practices for sustained program efficacy.

RC provides a perfect opportunity for team leadership as it calls for the inclusion of an RC coordinator at each school site. Empowerment of the coordinator can occur with the provision of additional time to run meetings, support teachers and provide a higher level of accountability and guidance to school staff. This level of shared leadership allows for a greater likelihood of program sustainability over time.
Recommendations for Future Evaluation and Research

This evaluation consists of teacher and student rating scales, school staff focus groups, and a review of discipline data. A tremendous gap in this evaluation, as well as the literature in general, is the inclusion of student interviews, which could speak to the differences students perceive in themselves, their peers, and the overall school culture as a result of SEL programming. Students' insight could provide tremendous guidance regarding beneficial strategies for implementation and integration. This approach would support the viewpoint that students are not simply consumers of education, but participants in the process.

Another area for future research is the potential for instructional coaches to provide ongoing support in the integrative process of SEL programming. Rockport's school district has instructional coaches who work with teachers based on cycles that are focused on different aspects of the curriculum. The literature has shown that an integrative, systematic, and comprehensive approach to SEL programming has the most impact, and that those programs that have an instructional focus have a high likelihood for quality implementation. Incorporating SEL into an instructional coaches' cycle can provide ongoing support for teachers who need additional training and guidance. In addition, it would place this level of programming at the forefront alongside academics. Additional research is needed to discover if any schools have had success with a model such as this one and to explore the barriers and successes of such an approach.

This evaluation did find a drop in severe discipline infractions that, according to the District's discipline policy, required suspension as a response. Although several studies show a decrease in discipline infractions as a result of SEL initiatives (Durlak et
al., 2011), there is room for further understanding about the infractions that still occur. Additional research could provide insight regarding the severity of infractions that may still occur after the implementation of an SEL program and how schools should continue to address these infractions in an effort to maintain a productive learning environment.

Although there are several SEL programs which schools can choose to implement, many may find it challenging to sustain selected programs due to a lack of funding or the need to provide ongoing training for staff. Future research focused on how school staff can teach and model some of the components of SEL for students with minimal disruption to the instructional day would prove to be beneficial.

Finally, the year in which this program evaluation was conducted, Rockport experienced a change in leadership, which resulted in further fragmentation of the implementation of the RC program. In previous years, there were monthly collaborative sessions focused on different aspects of RC, in addition to an in-service at the beginning of the year in which RC was presented as a core component of the school’s culture. The change in leadership has brought about a focus on new initiatives and a reduced emphasis on the continuation of RC. Given that program sustainability is a constant concern with high teacher and leadership turnover, further research is needed in determining potential strategies that could be used to keep successful programs in place despite changes in personnel.

Conclusions

According to the former principal of Rockport, RC was not implemented as a result of a rise in discipline infractions or an unruly student population. There was a desire to provide a well-rounded educational experience to students and to offer them an
opportunity to develop the skills to be participants in their learning and not simply consumers. Among the administration, there seemed to be agreement that there should be more to student success than simply academic achievement. Although these values were not shared with all staff members, this was why the RC program was implemented at Rockport.

This evaluation sought to determine the impact of the RC program on students' level of social-emotional competence. Further, this evaluation sought to determine whether the development or increase in social-emotional competence could lead to a decrease in discipline infractions that could eventually result in suspensions if persistent. The evaluation design began with a small sample size and due to limited parental active consent; only descriptive statistics could be obtained. In addition, the loss of a matched school limited the final determinations that could be made.

Despite these limitations, two focus groups provided rich data regarding the facilitating conditions and barriers that led to RC reducing discipline infractions. Although only a few staff members had ever received full RC training, while the remainder of the staff relied on partial on-site training, almost all group participants reported that the inclusion of RC components improved their practice as teachers and supported them in building better and stronger relationships with their students. Several teachers also reported an increase in collaboration with their colleagues as they worked to implement components of RC. Finally, staff members noted changes in student behavior and social-emotional competence, with examples of students managing their emotions and peer conflicts in a productive manner. Barriers mentioned included the lack of
training, inconsistent program implementation, and a lack of administrative support with challenging student behavior.

Despite the challenges in implementing SEL into schools with the high academic pressure that exists, there is ample support for the inclusion of SEL alongside the rigors of academics. I have provided recommendations for schools moving in this direction, including the importance of a district-wide SEL focus, an emphasis on program planning, implementation and evaluation, and the inclusion of professional development. Future research that includes student interviews may provide meaningful insight into how SEL is perceived and processed from the student standpoint. Additionally, research about strategies to ensure that effective programs can remain in place despite high teacher and leadership turnover would expand the possibilities for the success of SEL in schools.

Student discipline may always be a concern in schools as students present with a full spectrum of skills and challenges. The way in which schools respond may be the determining factor regarding whether these challenges persist or subside. The literature is clear: addressing disciplinary infractions with exclusionary practices does not change behavior and leaves students further disengaged and at risk for failure. Fortunately, SEL has begun to take center stage, not only as an option for minimizing disciplinary infractions, but also for supporting students with academic achievement and overall student success. It is my hope that we continue to prepare students fully for the future by providing them with a variety of skills necessary to ensure that their options remain plentiful for college, career, and life.
References


McIntosh, K., Predy, L. K., Upreti, G., Hume, A. E., Turri, M. G., & Matthews, S. (2014). Perceptions of contextual features related to implementation and
sustainability of school-wide positive behavior support. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 16*(1), 31-43.


126


http://static1.squarespace.com/static/513f79f9e4b05ce7b70e9673/t/5331c7b1e4b02a8560774c0a/1395771313269/the-benefits-of-school-based-social-and-emotional-learning-programs.pdf


http://www.aft.org/newspubs/periodicals/ae/winter0304/walker.cfm

competence in young children: The foundation of early school readiness and success.
*Infants and Young Children, 17*(2), 96-113.

Yates, T., Ostrosky, M. M., Cheatham, G. A., Fettig, A., Shaffer, L., & Milagros Santos,
competence*. Center on the Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learning.
Champaign, IL: University of Illinois.
Appendix A

Focus Group Protocol Based on Research Questions

Introduction and Disclosure

a. Welcome and appreciation for participation in the focus group
b. Introduction of researcher and note-taker
c. Full disclosure of purpose of the study and the function of the focus group
d. Procedures including audio recording of focus group and expected length of time required
e. Ground rules and confidentiality agreement

Welcome & Opening Questions

1. Please tell us your name; how long you’ve been a teacher; how many years you’ve been at this school and why you chose to become a teacher.

Evaluation Question #1: To what extent does the RC program contribute to social-emotional competence in elementary students?

2. Please speak briefly about your experience with the RC program and how it came to be adopted at the school.

3. Social-emotional competence refers to the capacity of an individual to form close and secure adult and peer relationships; experience, regulate, and express emotions in socially and culturally appropriate ways; and explore the environment and learn—all in the context of family, community, and culture. How would you rate the social-emotional competence of your students at Rockport if you had to choose between low, medium, and high, and why?
4. What is your impression of how the RC program has contributed to the development of social-emotional competence in the students at Rockport?
   a. Probe: Can you provide an example of how students have developed in this capacity?

Evaluation Question #2: What is the impact of the RC model on discipline infractions?

5. What are your impressions of how the students in your school have been affected by the RC program?
   a. Probe: How has it affected the students’ social skills?
   b. Probe: How has it affected discipline in your class?

6. How has the RC program impacted the frequency of discipline infractions that would typically result in OSS?

Evaluation Question #3: What is the relationship between social-emotional competence in elementary students and student disciplinary infractions?

7. To what extent have students utilized developed skills to avoid discipline infractions in the classroom?
   a. Probe: Can you provide an example of when you’ve seen this occur?

Evaluation Question #4: What are teachers’ and support staff perceptions of the facilitating conditions and barriers to RC leading to a reduction in infractions?

8. What factors have led to the success of RC?

9. What are the barriers to the success of RC?

10. Do you have any additional comments about the RC program that we haven’t already discussed?
## Qualitative Codebook: Predetermined Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predetermined Code</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Training needs</td>
<td>Implementation challenges due to a lack of sufficient training</td>
<td>✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓</td>
<td>RC1: 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>RC2: 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fidelity</td>
<td>Inaccurate implementation of expected program elements</td>
<td>✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓</td>
<td>RC1: 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>RC2: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of consistency</td>
<td>Level of regularity and uniformity in implementing the program is varied</td>
<td>✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓</td>
<td>RC1: 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>RC2: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Priority</td>
<td>The school has made this program an instructional focus and has woven its elements into the day-to-day school operation.</td>
<td>✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓</td>
<td>RC1: 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>RC2: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>Level of support given to teachers from support staff and administration in implementing the program</td>
<td>✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓</td>
<td>RC1: 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>RC2: 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic relevance</td>
<td>Does the program fit the population that the school is currently serving?</td>
<td>✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓</td>
<td>RC1: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>RC2: 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited reach of program</td>
<td>Inability of program to support students with heightened behavior challenges</td>
<td>✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓</td>
<td>RC1: 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>RC2: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of resources</td>
<td>The school does not have the necessary resources to implement the program as expected.</td>
<td>✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓</td>
<td>RC1: 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>RC2: 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time challenges</td>
<td>The level to which the academic day allows the</td>
<td>✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓✓</td>
<td>RC1: 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>RC2: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity to implement the components of the RC program.</td>
<td>RC1: 5</td>
<td>RC2: 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conflict resolution skills</strong></td>
<td>Students are learning the skills they need to manage peer conflicts on their own.</td>
<td>✓✓✓✓ ✓</td>
<td>RC1: 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>RC2: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Self-awareness</strong></td>
<td>Teachers and students are much more aware of areas of growth and strength and work to improve both.</td>
<td>✓ ✓</td>
<td>RC1: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>RC2: 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix C

### Qualitative Codebook: Emergent Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emergent Codes</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Leadership              | The perception of direction and support that school staff receives in implementing the RC program. | ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ | RC1: 2  
|                         |                                                                         |           | RC2: 3 |
| Teacher Practice        | The implementation of RC has led to positive changes in how teachers relate to students and the way in which they instruct. | ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ | RC1: 3  
|                         |                                                                         |           | RC2: 1 |
| School Vision           | The guiding principles that inform school staff regarding where the school is headed and the goals it chooses to accomplish. | ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ | RC1: 5  
|                         |                                                                         |           | RC2: 2 |
| Staff Buy-in            | Staff willingness to implement RC and belief in its effectiveness.       | ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ | RC1: 4  
|                         |                                                                         |           | RC2: 1 |
| Increased Instructional Time | The extent to which teachers perceive they have more time on task due to a decrease in student discipline infractions. | ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ | RC1: 1  
|                         |                                                                         |           | RC2: 1 |
| RC & Discipline Correlation | The extent to which RC provides guidance on managing discipline infractions. | ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ | RC1: 2  
|                         |                                                                         |           | RC2: 0 |
| Teacher collaboration   | The process of teachers working together for the betterment and          | ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ | RC1: 2  
|                         |                                                                         |           | RC2: 0 |
| Need for Suspension | The perception that only suspension can correctly discipline particular student infractions. | √√ | RC1: 2  
RC2: 0 |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|-----------|
| School Culture      | Phenomenon that explains how things are done in a school and what has become the modus of operandi. | √√√√√ | RC1: 6  
RC2: 0 |
Appendix D

Staff Consent Letter

August __, 2014

Dear Teacher,

I would like to invite you to participate in a program evaluation of the Responsive Classroom® program that has been implemented at Rockport for the past three years. The purpose of the evaluation is to assess whether the program is associated with an increase in social-emotional competence in students and if there is any correlation between the program and a decrease in discipline infractions. I am a doctoral student at the College of William and Mary and will serve as the evaluator in this study.

Each 4th grade teacher will participate in the study by completing a survey for each of their 4th grade students from the previous school year (currently in 5th grade) who have attended Rockport for the past two consecutive years. Completion of each survey will take approximately 10 minutes. The surveys are designed to give a rating on a student's level of social and emotional skills. Due to the number of surveys which will need to be completed, you will be given a full month to complete the surveys.

All information obtained from the surveys will be kept confidential. Participation in this study is voluntary and involves no unusual risks to you or your students. You may rescind your permission at any time with no negative consequences.

If you agree to participate, please indicate this decision below and return the bottom portion to your school's business manager. If you have any questions about this study or would like to review the survey prior to providing consent, please feel free to contact me at xxx-xxx-xxxx or my dissertation chair, Dr. Leslie Grant, at xxx-xxx-xxxx. If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the College of William and Mary Protection of Human Subjects Committee at 757-221-3966.

Sincerely,

Bloodine Bobb-Semple Barthelus

THIS PROJECT WAS FOUND TO COMPLY WITH APPROPRIATE ETHICAL STANDARDS AND WAS EXEMPTED FROM THE NEED FOR FORMAL REVIEW BY THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS COMMITTEE (Phone 757-221-3966) ON 2013-06-01 AND EXPIRES ON 2014-06-01.
Please indicate below your decision regarding your participation in this study:

I give consent for the item checked "Yes" below and I am aware that I may report dissatisfactions with any aspect of this experiment to the Chair of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee at phone 1-855-800-7187 or rwmcco@wm.edu:

Yes   No

My participation in this research project.

____________________________________________(Printed name)

____________________________________________(Signature)

_______________________Date

I am aware that I may report dissatisfactions with any aspect of this experiment to the Chair of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee at phone 1-855-800-7187 or rwmcco@wm.edu.
Appendix E

Parent Consent Letter: Rockport Elementary School

September __, 2014

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I would like to include your child in a program evaluation of the Responsive Classroom® program that has been implemented at Rockport for the past three years. The purpose of the evaluation is to assess whether the program is associated with an increase in social-emotional competence in students and if there is any correlation between the program and a decrease in discipline infractions. I am a doctoral student at the College of William and Mary and will serve as the evaluator in this study.

Each 5th grade student will participate in the study by completing a survey that will rate his/her level of social and emotional skills. It should only take about 10-15 minutes to complete the survey. To help with this study, I would like permission to allow your child to complete the survey; to have his/her 4th grade teacher complete a survey for your child; and to review your child's discipline record. All of your child's information will be confidential and will only be used for the purpose of this study. Your child's name will not appear in any reports of this study. You also have the right to review a copy of any survey, questionnaire, checklist, etc. being administered to your child.

Participation in this study is voluntary and involves no unusual risks to you or your child. You may rescind your permission at any time with no negative consequences. Your child can refuse to participate or withdraw from the project at any time with no negative consequences (e.g. their grades, right to receive services, etc.).

If you agree to let your child participate, please indicate this decision on the following page and return it to your child's school. If you have any questions about this research or would like to review the (survey, questionnaire, checklist, etc.) prior to providing consent, please feel free to contact me at xxx-xxx-xxxx or my dissertation chair, Dr. Leslie Grant, at xxx-xxx-xxxx. If you have questions about your child's rights as a research subject, you may contact the College of William and Mary Protection of Human Subjects Committee at 757-221-3966.

Sincerely,

Bloodine Bobb-Semple Barthelus
THIS PROJECT WAS FOUND TO COMPLY WITH APPROPRIATE ETHICAL STANDARDS AND WAS EXEMPTED FROM THE NEED FOR FORMAL REVIEW BY THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS COMMITTEE (Phone 757-221-3966) ON 2013-06-01 AND EXPIRES ON 2014-06-01.

Please indicate below your decisions regarding the various parts of this study:

I give consent for the items checked "Yes" below for __________________________________________________________ (insert student's name) and I am aware that I may report dissatisfactions with any aspect of this experiment to the Chair of the Protection of Human Subjects Committee at phone 1-855-800-7187 or rwmcco@wm.edu.

Yes    No
____   _____ My child's participation in this research project.
____   _____ Obtaining information from my child's discipline records.

______________________________________________  (Parent/Guardian printed name)
______________________________________________  (Parent/Guardian signature)

____   _____ Date

Parents, please be aware that under the Protection of Pupil Rights Act. 20 U.S.C. Section 1232© (1)(A), you have the right to review a copy of the questions asked of or materials that will be used with your student(s). If you would like to do so, you should contact Bloodine Bobb-Semple Barthelus to obtain a copy of the questions or materials.

Please return this page to your child's school.