

ABSTRACT

Krystal G. Tyndall, A SENSE OF BELONGING: EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF A SOCIAL EMOTIONAL FRAMEWORK ON STUDENT CONNECTEDNESS WITH SIXTH-GRADE MALES (Under the direction of Dr. Travis Lewis). Department of Educational Leadership, May 2022.

Duckton is a township part of Eastern County Schools, a community of schools comprising three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. Based on data collected from an at-risk referral database, Duckton Middle School experienced a sharp increase in student mental health referrals. The school community endured three student suicides over the last three years. Several parents of students also committed suicide, resulting in increased advocacy and support for their children in response. Separately, sixth-grade males consistently demonstrated a higher number of discipline referrals than any other grade level in the school, as indicated by a three-year trend in the school's discipline report. Student connectedness and belonging play a pivotal role in discipline and at-risk behaviors. Given the concerning trends with disciplinary incidences with male students as well as the increase in mental health referrals and suicidality, the purpose of this study was to monitor the effects of implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional learning framework on student connectedness and a sense of belonging. A mixed method, action research design was employed. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected and triangulated from discipline incidents, student and teacher focus groups, and the administration of the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). Through the use of action research, the collaborative inquiry partners and the scholarly practitioner applied incremental changes as appropriate based on data collected throughout the study. The findings of this study were shared with the school's strategic leadership team to determine if continued use of this SEL framework would occur. The implementation of *Responsive Classroom* had a positive relationship on the development of a sense of belonging and school connectedness.

A SENSE OF BELONGING: EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF A SOCIAL EMOTIONAL
FRAMEWORK ON STUDENT CONNECTEDNESS WITH SIXTH-GRADE MALES

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FRAMEWORK ON STUDENT CONNECTEDNESS WITH SIXTH-GRADE MALES

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents. Mom and Dad, you have always hoped, supported, encouraged, prayed, and cheered me on during this entire journey. You never wavered in believing that I could make it to the finish line. Your encouragement through phone calls and texts made a tremendous impact. Thank you for your unconditional support and love. I am eternally grateful for you both.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Maslow (1943) believed that there are five basic human needs and ranked them in priority. One of those needs in the hierarchy is love and belonging. Friendly and intimate relationships that help individuals identify with a group or groups are essential needs (Hale et al., 2019). Students who have a sense of belonging and feel connected to their school are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors and succeed academically. Students who belong are more likely to graduate from high school and develop the skills and knowledge they will need to succeed in their professional and civic lives (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2009). Student belonging is “the extent to which [they] feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment” (Goodenow, 1993a, p. 80). On the other hand, students who feel less connected to their school community are more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors. These unhealthy behaviors include, but are not limited to, increased substance abuse, habitual smoking, and increased risk for mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety (Peterson & Skiba, 2001).

School connectedness and belonging directly affect student discipline and academics (CDC, 2009). A positive school environment, often called school climate, is characterized by caring and supportive interpersonal relationships; opportunities to participate in school activities and decision-making; and shared positive norms, goals, and values. School connectedness was found to be the strongest protective factor for both boys and girls to decrease substance use, school absenteeism, early sexual initiation, violence, and risk of unintentional injury (CDC, 2009). Research has also demonstrated a strong relationship between school connectedness and educational outcomes, including school attendance, staying in school longer, and higher grades.

In turn, students who do well academically are less likely to engage in risky behaviors (CDC, 2009).

In the school setting, students feel supported and cared for when they see school staff dedicating their time, interest, attention, and emotional support to them (CDC, 2009; McNeely et al., 2002). Smaller schools may encourage the construction of teams of teachers in which a small number of teachers know each student and can ensure that every student has an identified advisor which helps develop more personal relationships among students and staff and allow for personalized learning. This is a key element of social and emotional learning. When social and emotional learning is at the forefront of the educational background, a community is constructed that allows students to develop emotionally, socially, and mentally, all in support of their academic development (CDC, 2009).

Social and Emotional Learning

Social and emotional learning, or SEL, is the process through which children and adults understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, n.d.). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, CASEL, is a non-profit organization that is a reliable source for knowledge regarding evidence-based social and emotional learning environments to promote success of all students. CASEL supports educators and policy leaders and enhances the educational outcomes for students PreK-12 (CASEL, 2015). The use of social and emotional learning cultivates a considerate, participatory, and equitable learning environment using evidence-based practices that engage students' growth socially, emotionally, and academically. This approach is integrated into every part of students' daily life at school, at home and in the community (CASEL, 2020).

This action research study monitored the effect of implementing a social emotional framework on students' sense of belonging and connectedness at Duckton Middle School, a pseudonym, located in Duckton, North Carolina, also a pseudonym. There was an increase in discipline and at-risk behavior with sixth-grade students at Duckton Middle School. This information is shared to identify the background of the focus of practice as to why Duckton Middle School had a disproportionate number of discipline referrals with males, specifically looking at sixth-grade. In order to effectively share the scope of the focus, the purpose of the study, along with key terms, inquiry questions and the theoretical and conceptual framework is presented to gain awareness of the scope of the problem. The chapter will include the background for focus of practice, the purpose of the study, key terms, inquiry questions and the conceptual framework around the focus of practice.

Background of Focus of Practice

The Duckton township, a township part of Eastern County Schools, a pseudonym, is a community of schools comprised of three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. Based on data collected from an at-risk referral database from Duckton Middle School, the school has experienced an increase in student mental health referrals. In 2018-19, there were 56 mental health referrals, in 2019-2020, there were 61 referrals, and as of September 2020, the school had 35 referrals. The community endured two student suicides over the last three years. Two students' parents have committed suicide over a period of six months in the 2019-2020 school year that resulted in increased advocacy and supervision for those students. Sixth-grade males consistently demonstrated a higher number of discipline referrals than any other grade levels in the school, as indicated by a three-year trend in the school's discipline report displayed in Figure 1.

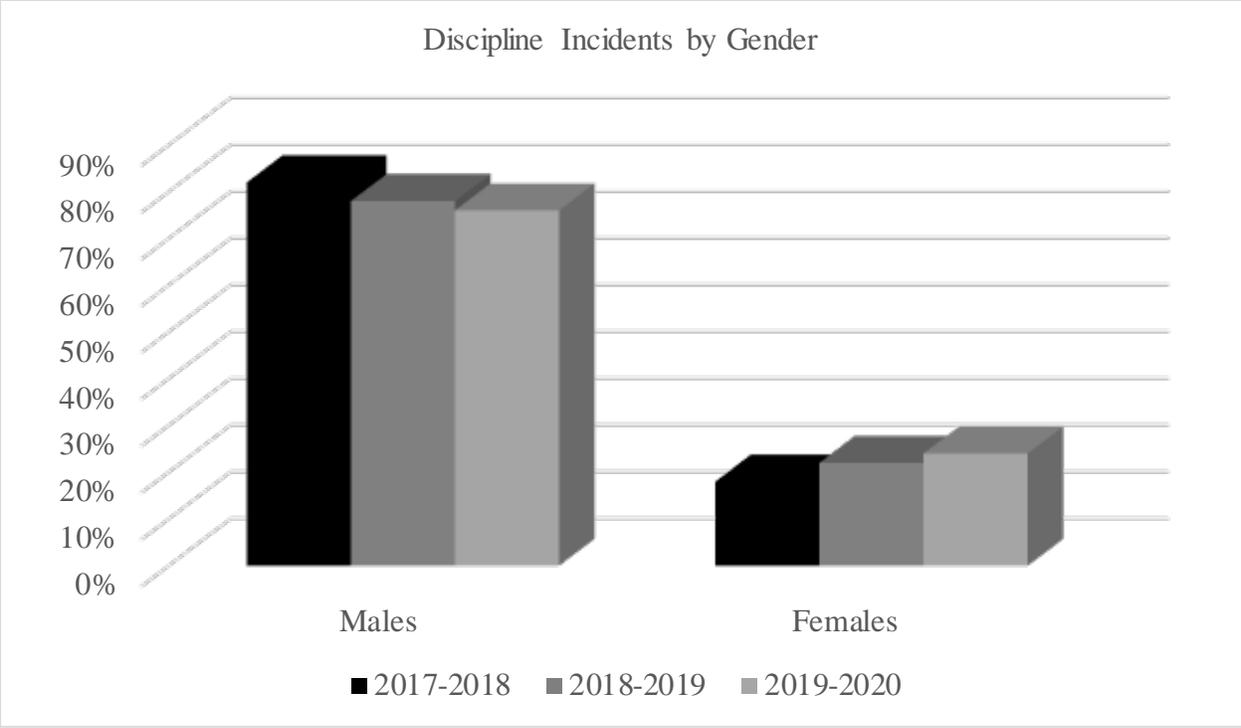


Figure 1. Discipline incidents by gender for 2017-2018 through 2019-2020.

Student Perspectives

In the summer of 2019, 38 Duckton Middle School students participated in a summer school remediation program that was district sponsored. At the end of the program, the students participated in a survey that asked questions regarding school involvement, school safety, school belonging, and school culture. The purpose of the survey was to identify perspectives of students who weren't academically successful. This information collected helped inform the study that students who are not connected and lack a sense of belonging have lower academic achievement. Figures 2, 3, 4, and 5 outline the demographic data of the group of 38 students who participated in the survey.

The student responses from the school remediation sense of belonging survey were relevant to the level of connectedness student felt towards their schools. The purpose of the survey was to recognize viewpoints of students who weren't academically successful during the school year. There was a high percentage of students that are regularly insulted and teased at school along with a high percentage of students who agree that arguments are a common experience while at school. Only 2.6% of students feel proud of the school paired with 28.9% who feel welcome at school. While less than the majority feel safe in the lunchroom, over half of the sample reported that students are absent and skip school regularly. These are clear indicators that there is a lack of school connectedness thus resulting in at-risk, unhealthy behaviors that have potentially led students down an unsuccessful path (CDC, 2009). See Table 1 for survey results.

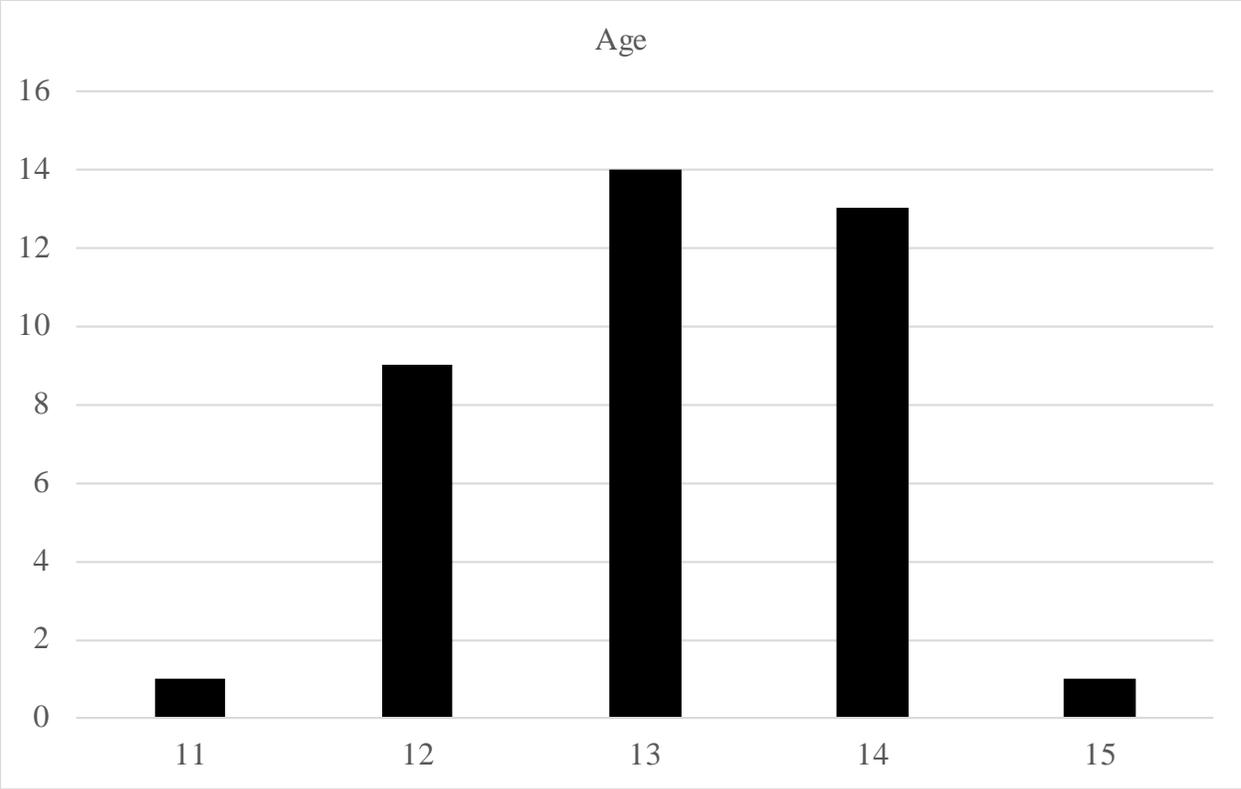


Figure 2. Remediation program sense of belonging survey demographic: Age.

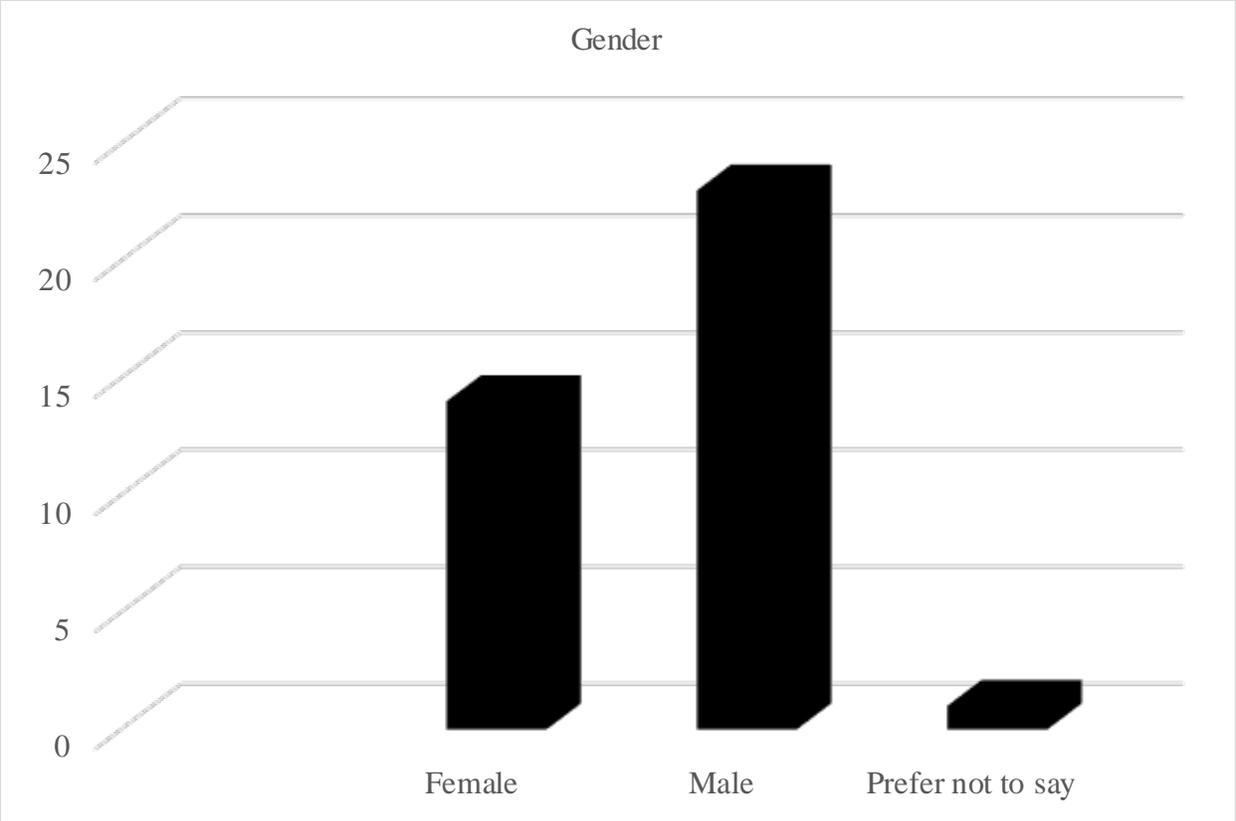


Figure 3. Remediation program sense of belonging survey demographic: Gender.

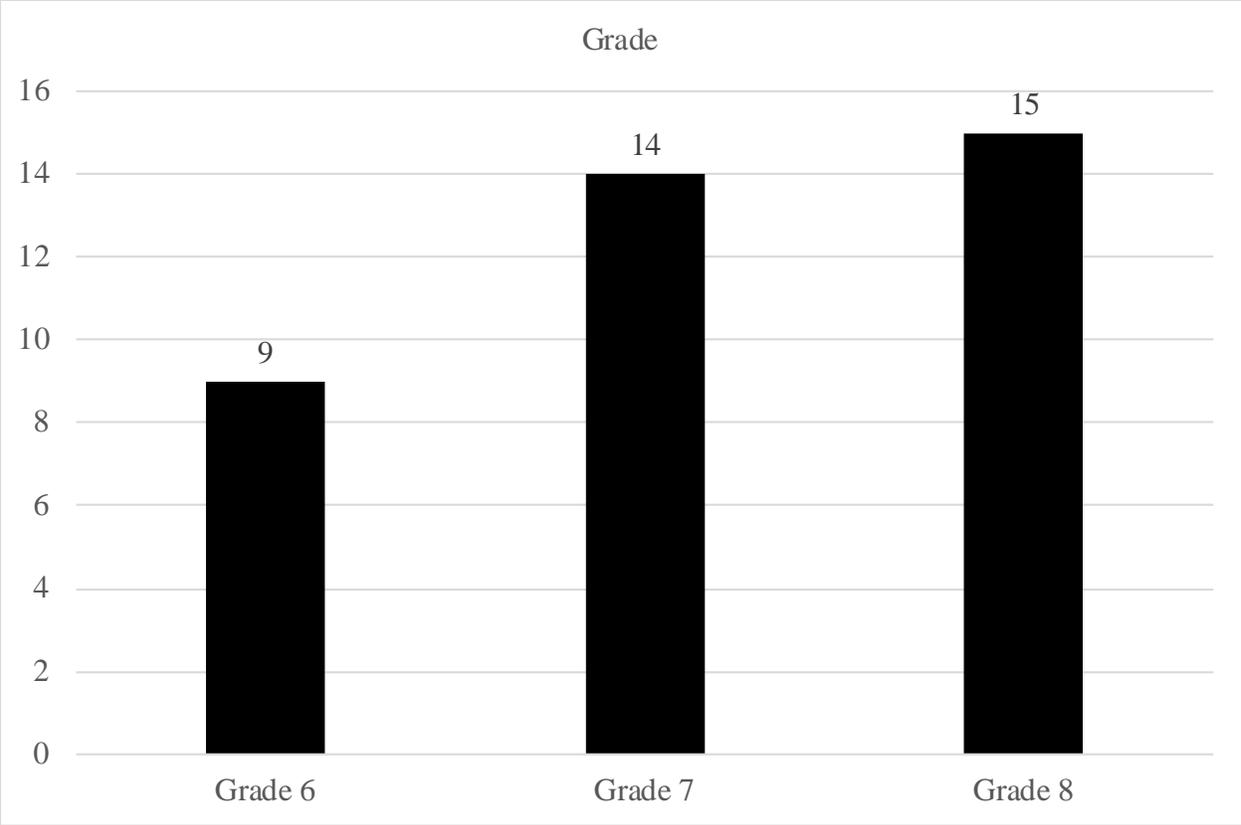


Figure 4. Remediation program sense of belonging survey demographic: Grade.

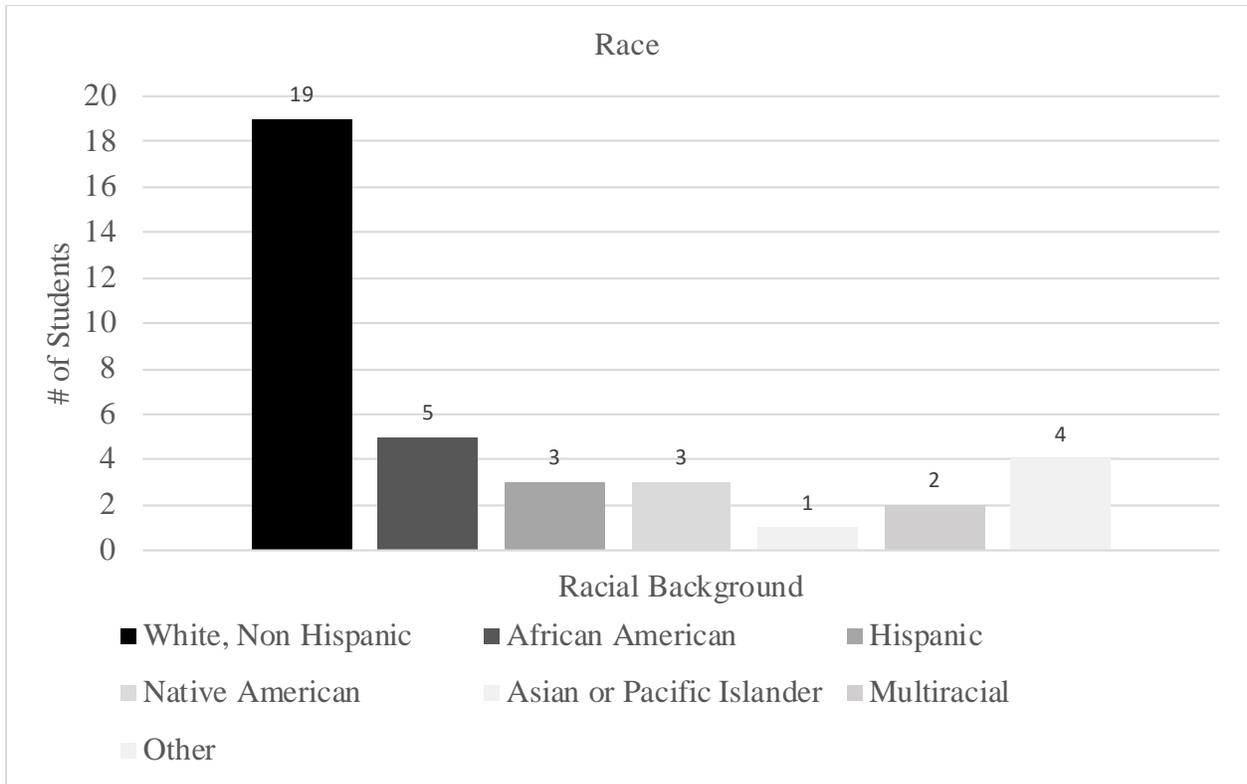


Figure 5. Remediation program sense of belonging survey demographic: Race.

Table 1

Summer School Remediation Program Sense of Belonging Survey Results

% of Students in Agreement	Student Statement
89.0%	agree that name calling, insults or teasing happened regularly at school
81.5%	agree that arguments among students were common at school
2.6%	felt proud of the school
57.9%	students are absent or skip school regularly
52.6%	threats by one student to another are common at school
44.7%	feel safe in the lunchroom
47.0%	students are hassled by other students at school
65.7%	groups of students cause conflicts or problems at school
28.9%	students surveyed feel welcome at school

Faculty Perspectives

At the end of the summer school program, the teachers and support staff hired to conduct the program gathered to discuss their perspectives regarding students' connectedness and belonging concerns at Duckton Middle School in general. There were five white, female teachers (spanning grades 6-8), one white male teacher assistant and one white female teacher assistant, and one white female counselor present for the discussion. The information shared from these discussions were subsequently used to help guide conversations with the school's strategic leadership team as they worked to address student connectedness on campus. During these conversations, several themes became evident. Based on informal parent conferences and dialogue throughout the school year, some students do not have accountability reinforced within their homes. It was observed that student accountability is primarily reinforced by staff members in the school. Teachers frequently observed other teachers talking down to students as if they were not intelligent, often treating them like small children. For example, when students are being disciplined by teachers, rather than getting down on their level, teachers talk down at them rather than to them. As a result, these teachers are not offering the students respect and this lack of respect tends to lessen the students' academic self-confidence and even their attainment of academic success (Meador, 2020).

When academic self-confidence is low, students do not give their fullest potential in the classroom and this lack of effort adversely affects academic success and behavior (Hallinan, 2008; Roorda et al., 2011). The hope and desire to learn, within the student, may be diminished. Home life issues also contribute to a lack of academic self-confidence at school was another source of feedback from the staff summer remediation discussion. Some of the issues at home are beyond the control of the school. Divorce, military deployment of a parent, death, and natural

disasters such as hurricanes that affect the Duckton community are just a few issues that students might face within a school year. It is not inconceivable that school climate has relevance to a student's life satisfaction. Belongingness is important in the lives of adolescents and is a promising factor in promoting resilience (Baskin et al., 2010; CDC, 2009; Lázaro-Visa et al., 2019).

There were additional perspectives shared during those staff discussions that related to how students treat one another. Teachers shared that there had been an increase in students being unkind to one another. They made suggestions for this concern to be addressed during the summer strategic leadership team meeting held after the completion of the summer remediation program. A specific suggestion was made to explore character-building and social emotional frameworks to focus on teaching empathy and kindness. Another perspective that came from the discussion concerned students' connectedness to social media and smart phones. Students' use of cell phones seems to cause disruption, a lack of focus, increased behavior incidents and a lack of self-esteem (Wang et al., 2017). There is a desire amongst the faculty to replace habits that may cause social media addiction with healthier options of connecting with each other.

Discipline Data

Disciplinary data from Duckton Middle School was reviewed for three consecutive school years from 2017-2018 through 2019-2020. Figure 6 displays incident rates by grade level. In reviewing the disciplinary incidents, sixth-grade males made up 41% in 2017-2018 and 52% in 2018-2019. This was after two years of a new behavior management system was implemented at the school. The strategic leadership team designed a school wide behavior management system that utilized a punch card to correct minor behavior infractions in classrooms and around campus. After a series of punches were accumulated, students would be assigned either

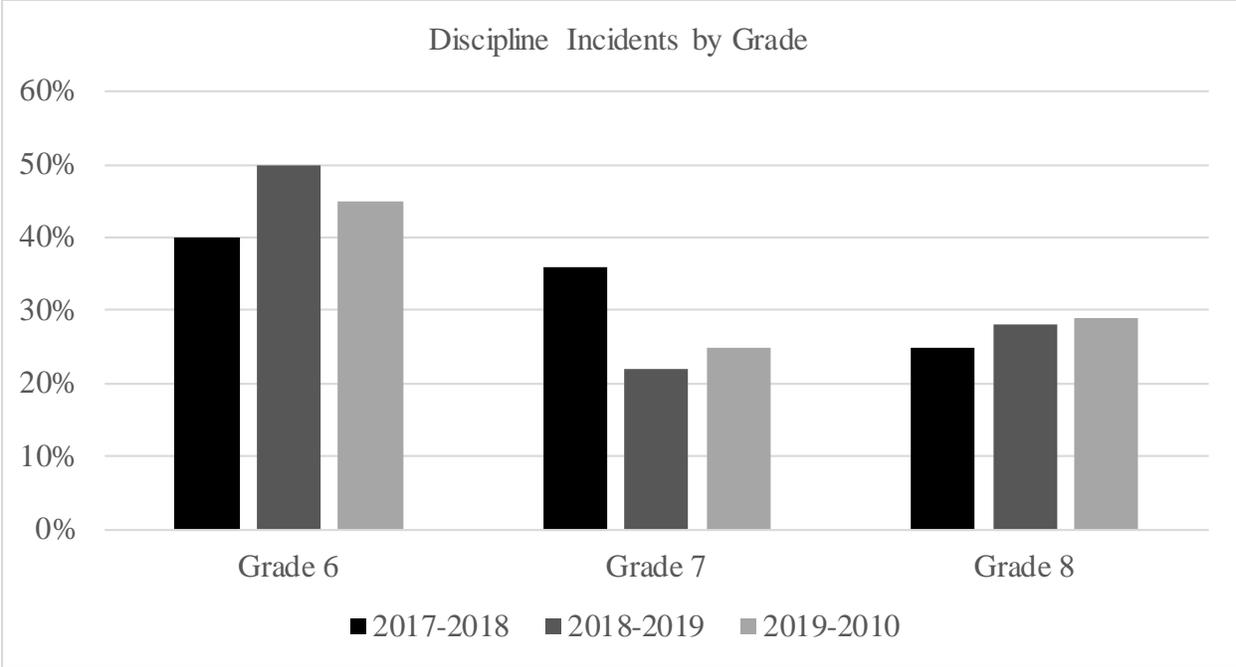


Figure 6. Discipline incidents by grade for 2017-2018 through 2019-2020.

detention, in school suspension, or out of school suspension. During the 2019-2020 school year, the system was moved to an online system that allows students and parents to track behavior in the form of demerits and merits. Consequences remain the same after a certain number of demerits are accumulated. Due to the pandemic of COVID-19 and the transition to at-home remote learning in March through the rest of the school year, there is insufficient data from 2019-2020 to review discipline incidents or the accumulation of demerits and merits.

Climate Surveys

Additional themes were identified from a climate and culture survey administered to staff, students, and parents as required by the Eastern County Schools district, of which Duckton Middle is a member. The survey is disseminated at the end of every other school year. Teachers and students took the survey in the school building while parents were invited to take the survey at a parent night hosted by the school. The results are important in preparing for the following school year. The survey results yielded information that helped clarify the focus of practice.

When asked what students did in class, teachers at Duckton Middle School reported 80% worked with others and 15% completed worksheets. Student reports contrast these statistics reporting that 52% completed worksheets and 26% worked with others. Fifty-six percent of students reported they felt bored in class and 68% felt tired. These findings were useful when considering student disciplinary data and students' sense of belonging. A study showed that higher level of school connectedness and belonging related to delayed initiation of deviant behavior (Dornbusch et al., 2001). The culture at Duckton Middle School was explored as part of the action research study in examining the effect of implementing a social emotional learning framework in relation to student connectedness and belonging, discipline, and at-risk behaviors.

Injury is the leading cause of death among young people (Krug et al., 2002). While the numbers of injuries reported decreased from 1999-2013, there has been an increase since 2013. In 2016, injury deaths, including suicide, homicide, unintentional injury, and intent that is undetermined, for persons aged 10–19 years comprised 70% of all deaths in this age range (Curtin et al., 2018). According to the 2017 High School Youth Risk Behavior survey for North Carolina, 27.7% of boys were involved in a physical fight during the twelve months before the survey was conducted. In all, 14.9% were bullied on school property, 20.3% of boys indicated that they felt sad or hopeless, 11.3% of boys seriously considered suicide and 10.3% planned to commit suicide (CDC, 2020). These at-risk behaviors are displayed with students who do not feel a sense of belonging in their school (Dornbusch et al., 2001).

Stakeholders that may be affected by students who exhibit at-risk behaviors from a lack of connectedness include, but are not limited to, school counselors, social workers, school psychologists and private counseling agencies. In the local township, stakeholders worked reactively to address the emotional needs of their students. Counselor and administrators spent many hours providing emotional support to students and families who experienced suicide, attempted suicide and self-harm after the incidents have occurred. The strategic leadership team brainstormed alongside counselors and administrators to find ways to support the community when these incidents occurred. Providing them the opportunity to proactively assist students in becoming connected with their school through the implementation of a social and emotional framework may decrease reports of at-risk behaviors and injury.

Context of Study

Duckton Middle School is in Duckton, North Carolina. Duckton is located along the coast of North Carolina in Eastern County. Several surrounding communities comprise the Duck

Middle School population. These areas include Hubert, Duckton, Stella, and Midway Park. The combined population of these areas is approximately 20,000. The Duckton township area is directly impacted by the surrounding military bases. The Marine Corps bases at Camp Lejeune and Cherry Point are factors in the lives of our students. Currently, Duckton Middle School has close to 400 students who are federally connected. While the school is not ethnically diverse, it has a wide range of students from various socioeconomic backgrounds with over 40% free and reduced lunch. Duckton Middle School has had Title I status since 2017-2018.

Duckton Middle School's student population is illustrated in Table 2. Duckton Middle School, serving grades 6-8, is the only middle school in the Duckton township. The school has 45 certified classroom teachers, 2 school counselors, 1 media coordinator, 2 assistant principals, and 1 principal. The primary campus was built in 1952. An additional site was adopted in 1999 that now houses the sixth-grade. Construction was completed in July 2008 on a new building that includes a media center, a conference room, a computer lab, an art room, and three additional classrooms.

Statement of Focus of Practice

With the presence of increased student connectedness and a social emotional learning framework, sixth-grade males at Duckton Middle School will have a better chance of being successful academically and behaviorally. They will have the presence of advocates who get to know them on a personal level. They will have a positive peer group which will help limit behavioral incidents and they will be more likely to be successful academically when they are engaged in the school and community (CDC, 2009).

Table 2

Race and Gender by Grade Demographics of Duckton Middle School September 2020

Race/Ethnicity	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8
Females			
Hispanic	14	18	9
Black or African American	11	19	13
Two or More	15	17	8
White	115	101	104
Asian or American Indian	1	1	2
Males			
Hispanic	20	10	12
Black or African American	5	9	8
Two or More	16	19	12
White	96	109	102
Asian or American Indian	1	0	3
Total	294	303	273

Given the disparity among discipline incidents and males, the focus of this inquiry was to monitor the effects of students' connectedness and sense of belonging through the implementation of a social emotional framework with sixth-grade males at Duckton Middle School. This focus addressed the rate of discipline, positive behavior points, and at-risk behavior with sixth-grade males. It was hoped that such implementation would have a positive effect on student success as indicated by a decrease in student discipline incidents, decrease in at risk behaviors, and increase positive behavior points. Previous studies have revealed that students who experience a sense of belonging in educational environments are more motivated, more engaged in school and classroom activities, and more dedicated to school (Hallinan, 2008; Osterman, 2000; Way, 2011). Moreover, students who feel that they belong to learning environments report higher enjoyment, enthusiasm, happiness, interest, and more confidence in engaging in learning activities, whereas those who feel isolated report greater anxiety, boredom, frustration, and sadness during the academic engagement that directly affects academic performance (Furrer & Skinner, 2003).

Members of the Duckton Middle School strategic leadership team met at the invitation from administration to create school goals. One of the goals approved, by the Duckton Middle School faculty, to increase student connectedness was: The school community will know every student well. As part of the action plan to accomplish this goal, members of the strategic leadership team were tasked with exploring research-supported models that seemed to have the potential to provide a framework for creating opportunities for increasing student connectedness, decreasing student discipline incidents and at-risk behaviors. Through this exploration, *Responsive Classroom* was one of the programs brought to the team. Upon careful consideration of this program, a team of teachers, chosen by the principal, attended a professional development

institute to learn more about the social emotional framework that supports it and to be sufficiently knowledgeable about it to begin implementation. A team of 12 teachers and two administrators attended the training to understand the foundation of *Responsive Classroom* and the social emotional learning framework curriculum. This four-day institute gave the *Responsive Classroom* action team strategies for implementation over a period of three years.

The purpose of this action research study was to monitor the effects of implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional learning framework with sixth-grade students on student connectedness and a sense of belonging to address the disparity among males and behavior. To set a baseline for my project, students completed the Youth Risk Behavior Survey. Teachers implemented the lessons from *Responsive Classroom* as part of the daily advisory period three times a week. Staff was trained on implementing this learning approach throughout daily classes. The survey was revisited at the end of their sixth-grade year. Elements of *Responsive Classroom* will be revisited, and delivery will be refined based on the data collection and focus groups among sixth-grade students and teachers who have been trained to implement the framework. Sixth-grade males was the focus of the study monitoring their sense of connectedness and sense of belonging at school, their accumulation of merits and demerits, and youth risk behaviors through discipline and the Youth Risk Behavior Surveys.

The focus of practice, monitoring the effects of a social emotional framework on students' sense of belonging and how it affects youth risk behaviors, may influence different stakeholders. It is imperative for student success that students feel a sense of belonging so that they can safely take risks inside the classroom and be able to make sound decisions outside the classroom. Teachers may be affected in a way that their teaching will change to encompass social and emotional learning. Parents will be affected by the focus of practice as well. By

monitoring the implementation and analyzing data collected, a clear follow up with the strategic leadership team will occur so they can decide where the program implementation is having positive effect on student connectedness and belonging.

Definition of Key Terms

The following key terms will be referred to throughout this focus of practice inquiry:

Accountability Model: North Carolina currently utilizes an accountability model that relies on a system of assigning A-F grades to all schools in the state based on a formula that combines student achievement (80%) and student growth (20%). Schools Performance Grades are based on two components: School Achievement Score and a School Growth Score. A combination of the School Achievement Score and the School Growth Score make up the overall School Performance Grade. Currently, 80% of the School Performance Grade is the School Achievement Score and 20% of the grade is the School Growth Score. School Performance Grades at the middle school level come from 6th-8th End of Grade Tests in Math and Reading, and 8th Grade Science (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction [NCDPI], 2020).

CASEL: The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning CASEL (2017) was formed in 1994 with the mission of establishing high-quality, evidence-based social and emotional learning as an integral part of the foundation of education in preschool through high school programs. Through research, practice, and development of policy, the collaborative works with leaders to prepare educators in the development of policy using the resourceful information to advance the utilization of social and emotional learning in equitable learning environments for the success of all students (CASEL, 2020).

End-of-Grade Testing: North Carolina End-of-Grade Testing, or NC EOG, are standardized tests that are administered in North Carolina for Grade 3 to Grade 8 students. All

students in North Carolina public schools are required to sit for NC EOG tests. The North Carolina End-of-Grade Tests are designed to measure student performance on the goals, objectives, and grade-level competencies specified in the North Carolina Standard Course of Study (NCDPI, 2020).

Engagement: Student engagement refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they must learn and progress in their education. Coates (2007) defined engagement as a “broad construct intended to encompass salient academic as well as certain non-academic aspects of the student experience” including “active learning, participation in challenging academic activities, formative communication with academic staff, involvement in enriching educational experiences, and feeling legitimated and supported by university learning communities” (p. 122).

Responsive Classroom®: An evidence-based approach to teaching and discipline that focuses on engaging academics, positive community, effective management, and developmental awareness (Center for Responsive Schools, 2020b).

Risk Factors: Individual or environmental characteristics, conditions, or behaviors that increase the likelihood that a negative outcome will occur (CDC, 2009)

Protective Factors: Individual or environmental characteristics, conditions, or behaviors that reduce the effects of stressful life events; increase an individual’s ability to avoid risks or hazards; and promote social and emotional competence to thrive in all aspects of life now and in the future (Kipke, 1999).

School Connectedness: School connectedness is defined as the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals (CDC, 2009).

School Culture: Generally, refers to the “beliefs, perceptions, relationships, attitudes, and written and unwritten rules that shape and influence every aspect of how a school functions, but the term also encompasses more concrete issues such as the physical and emotional safety of students, the orderliness of classrooms and public spaces, or the degree to which a school embraces and celebrates racial, ethnic, linguistic, or cultural diversity” (Mitchell et al., 2010).

Sense of Belonging: Student belonging is defined as “the extent to which [they] feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment” (Goodenow, 1993a, p. 80). Students who feel a sense of belonging at school are more likely to graduate from high school and develop the skills and knowledge they will need to succeed in their professional and civic lives (Goodenow, 1993b).

Social and Emotional Learning: Social and emotional learning, or SEL, is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2020).

Student Connectedness: The belief held by students that the adults and peers in their school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals. Students who feel connected to school are more likely to have a number of positive health and academic outcomes (CDC, 2009).

North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey: An anonymous, online survey for all school-based employees, including teachers, administrators, and licensed educators, that provides data collected as one component of collaborative planning and essential for school improvement (North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey Results, 2020).

YRBSS: The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, or YRBSS, monitors six categories of health-related behaviors that contribute to the leading causes of death and disability among youth and adults, including, behaviors that contribute to unintentional injuries and violence, sexual behaviors, alcohol and other drug use, tobacco use, unhealthy dietary behaviors, and inadequate physical activity. YRBSS includes a national school-based survey conducted by Center for Disease Control, as well as state, territorial, tribal, and local surveys conducted by state, territorial, and local education and health agencies and tribal governments (CDC, 2009).

Focus of Practice Guiding Questions

The main question guiding this focus of practice was: What effect does the implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* Social Emotional Learning framework have on student connectedness for sixth-grade males at Duckton Middle School? There are sub questions that will be addressed in the action research study to help the focus of practice. These sub questions directly relate to the social emotional learning theory that CASEL provides as the basis of the *Responsive Classroom* framework.

1. What effect does implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional learning framework have on student behavior as measured by disciplinary referrals?
2. What effect does implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional learning framework have on student connectedness as measured by student and teacher focus groups?
3. What effect does implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional learning framework have on mental health as measured by the Youth Risk Behavior Survey?

Overview of Inquiry

To answer the focus of practice guiding questions, I used a mixed method approach of action research, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data. There were three phases for the purpose of this study, of the Plan, Do, Study, Act Cycle. The PDSA gave structure to implementing *Responsive Classroom* at Duckton Middle School. Planning occurred to prepare for each phase of implementation. Data collection was studied to reflect the impact of the change in order to revise the next phase of implementation (Crow et al., 2019). The first phase established baseline data for the focus of practice. Data was collected from multiple sources including the school's discipline database, the behavior points database, and the Youth Risk Behavior Survey completed by sixth-grade students. The subsequent phases included the implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional framework followed by an analysis of updated data gleaned from the sources from the first phase as well as student and teacher focus groups. The inquiry design will be elaborated upon in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Inquiry Partners

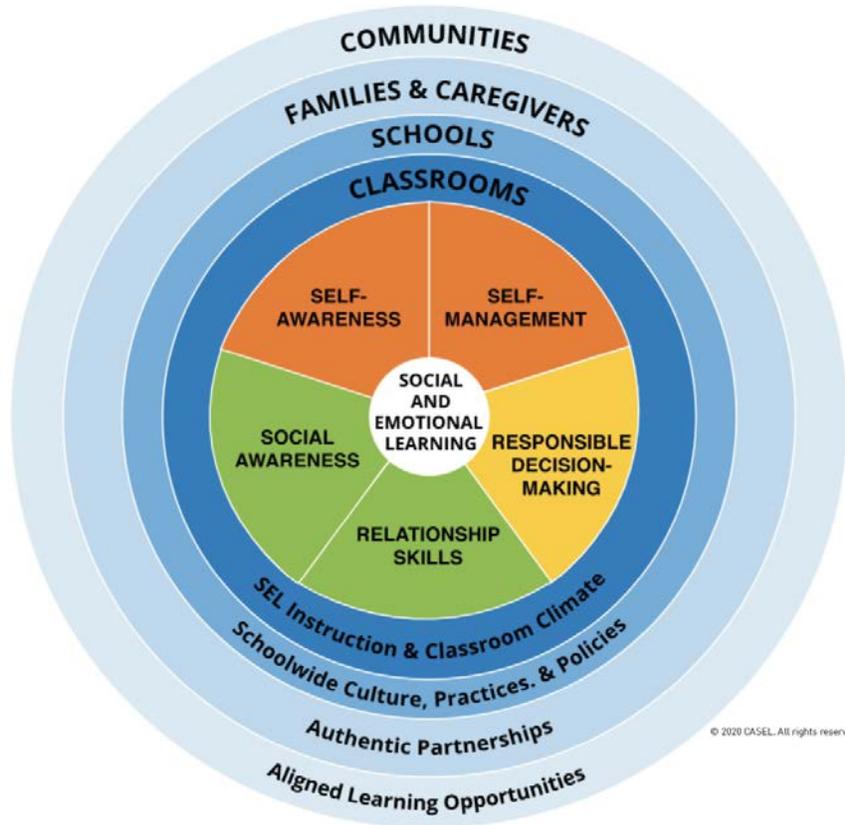
The collaborative inquiry partners who worked on the focus of practice ranged from personnel from Duckton Middle School as well as the district office of Carolina County Schools. Two of the collaborative partners were the principal and assistant principal. Both administrators were utilized in order to manage the fidelity of implementing *Responsive Classroom*. The assistant principal worked closely in the study as she is the administrator leading the sixth-grade team of teachers and students. The *Responsive Classroom* Site team were utilized as partners in the study as well. These teachers were trained in *Responsive Classroom* principles and partnered with other teachers on campus to ensure they had the necessary tools and resources to deliver the

content and curriculum. The team was integral in analyzing data and providing feedback on change ideas to the strategic leadership team at Duckton Middle School.

Theoretical Foundation and Conceptual Framework

Social and emotional learning can be used as an approach to create learning communities that are full of inclusivity, consideration, healthy habits that support all stakeholders to reach a level of performance that meets their full potential. For social emotional learning to be implemented systemically, fostering an equitable learning environment is a focus. This is when all parties feel valued and respected, individuals' interests are affirmed, and cultural values, personal identifies, and family backgrounds are considered (CASEL, 2020).

The lens through which the focus of practice for this study was viewed is the social and emotional learning framework outlined by CASEL in Figure 7. The integrated framework promotes cognitive, interpersonal and intrapersonal competence across key settings including classrooms, schools, families/caregivers, and the communities. The framework consists of five core competencies including self-awareness, self-engagement, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2020). Although social emotional learning will not solve deeply rooted inequities in the education system, it allows for opportunities to discover biases that are present, promotes understanding of inclusivity, discuss the impact of racism, build relationships across various cultures, and cultivate relationships that will close the opportunity gap for adults and students. With this impact, school districts can engage in high quality educational opportunities that promote positive outcomes for all students regardless of race, ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation and other potential differences among each other (CASEL, 2020). Social and emotional learning can be used for improvement across the system not just merely to address at-risk behaviors. While the approach of social and



Note. (CASEL, 2020).

Figure 7. CASEL’s social and emotional learning framework model.

emotional learning is intended to reduce at-risk behaviors and improve the mental health for students and staff, the impact could be greater when it is integrated as a framework across all aspects of the educational system from the how the district office is structured to how instruction in individual classrooms is presented (Taylor et al., 2017).

The social and emotional learning approach that this study implemented is directly aligned with the theory of change introduced by the Center for Responsive Schools (2020b) in Figure 8. With the use of the *Responsive Classroom* approach, behavior problems decrease and social and emotional skill attainment increase. As a result, students are more engaged in their own learning.

The approach is student-centered and focused on teaching and discipline. *Responsive Classroom* was designed from research and evidence-based practices that are used to create a learning environment that is safe, joyful and engaging for all stakeholders within the school (*Responsive Classroom*, 2020). The research from the *Responsive Classroom* efficacy study (Rimm-Kaufman, 2011) and the Economic Value of Social and Emotional Learning study (Belfield et al., 2015) show evidence that when teachers consistently social and emotional learning frameworks, behavior problems decrease, and students' social and academic skills increase. The change theory correlates with teachers feeling more efficacious and students feeling more engaged in their learning when utilizing training from *Responsive Classroom* (Center for Responsive Schools, 2020a).

There are four domains of *Responsive Classroom* that align with the social emotional framework in Figure 5: engaging academics, positive community, effective management, and developmentally responsive teaching. The core belief of *Responsive Classroom* aligns with the theoretical framework of social emotional learning. *Responsive Classroom's* belief is that for

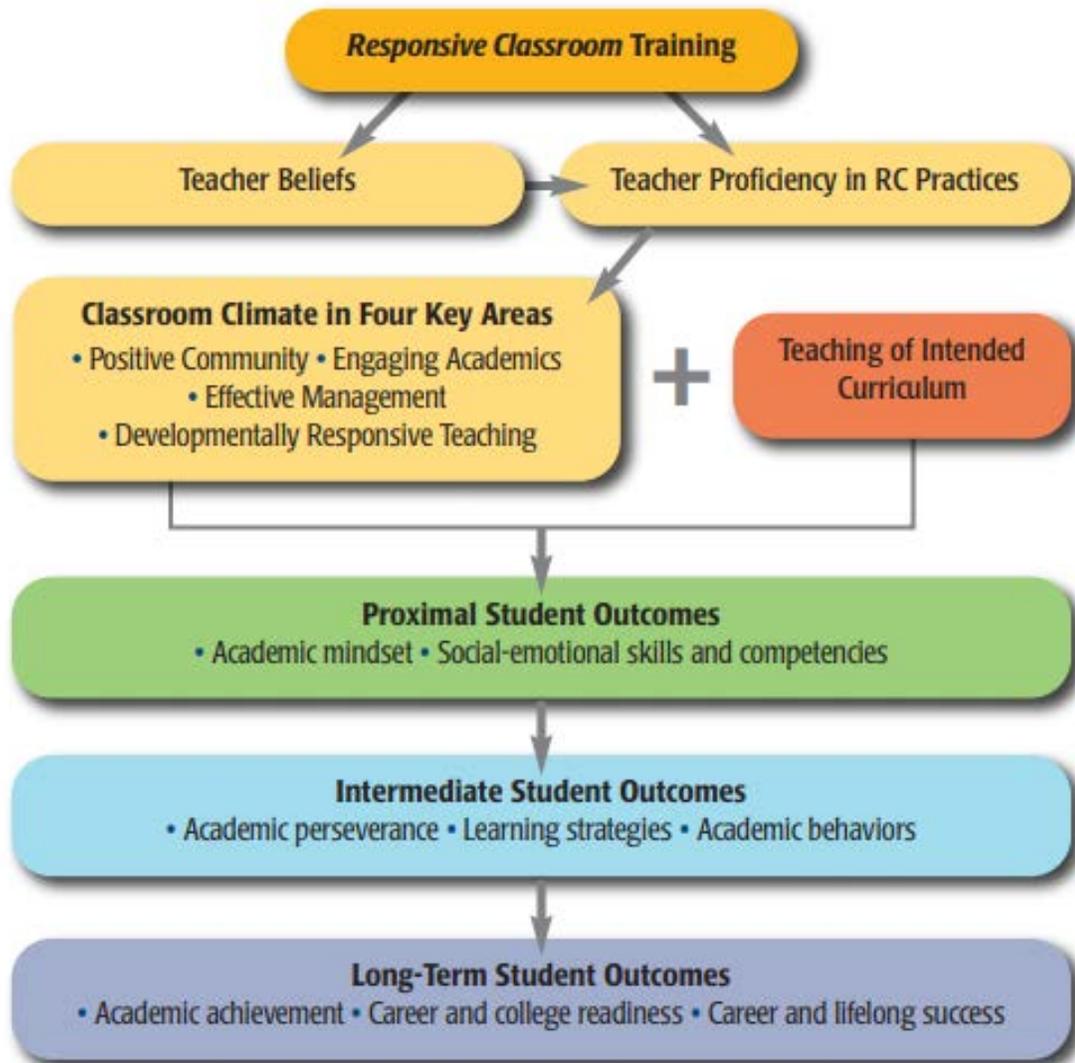


Figure 8. Theory of change by Center for Responsive Schools (2020a).

students to be successful, they should learn social and emotional competencies. These include but are not limited to assertiveness, cooperation, empathy, self-control and responsibility. Additionally, academic competencies such as perseverance, academic mindset, learning strategies and behaviors must be addressed as well (*Responsive Classroom*, 2020). Given this evidence, *Responsive Classroom* was chosen for implementation at Duckton Middle to address the social and emotional needs of students in order to address the strategic planning goal of knowing every student well, decreasing behavior and at-risk incidents, and increasing student connectedness and belonging at Duckton Middle School.

Assumptions

A critical assumption made during this dissertation in practice was that all teachers implementing the *Responsive Classroom* social-emotional framework in their classrooms did so with fidelity. Teachers delivering the framework participated in the professional development institute to effectively deliver the middle school advisory curriculum.

Another assumption was that all stakeholders participating in focus groups as well as those completing surveys provided honest feedback. Even though participants were provided with information that will instruct them that their responses will have no effect on grades or evaluations, stakeholders still might hold reservation to share authentic responses for fear that decisions may be made for future planning and improvement based on responses. In addition, stakeholders may be concerned that their responses will be shared with those outside the focus groups even though a statement of confidentiality will be disclosed prior to each focus group meeting.

A final assumption was that data for sixth-grade discipline would have continued the same upward trend if students had remained in the brick-and-mortar school for the remainder of

the 2019-2020 school year. The school building closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic response, and students received online instruction from the period of March 17, 2020, through May 29, 2020. Therefore, disciplinary data could not be tracked during this period of remote learning. For the purpose of this study, it is assumed the disciplinary trend data would have persisted through the end of the school year had the pandemic not led to a shift to remote instruction.

Scope and Delimitations

This study was focused on Duckton Middle School specifically and may not be replicable to other schools. The inquiry engaged all staff members who have sixth-grade homerooms that have attended the *Responsive Classroom* professional development institute. There were student focus groups that include females and males. However, data disaggregation and analysis included a focus on sixth-grade males as this subgroup has been affected by discipline, academic success, and at-risk behavior specifically at Duckton Middle School.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study was that the entire staff at Duckton Middle School had not been trained in *Responsive Classroom*. Therefore, there was a loss in translation of school wide expectations and content delivery when transitioning from one classroom to another. However, *Responsive Classroom* provided a series of scripted lessons for all teachers to deliver the content. Trained staff members have been assigned non-trained teachers to mentor, guide, facilitate questions, and provide support through the delivery of homeroom lessons. Another limitation is related to the use of the scripted curriculum. Although the planning of lessons is provided, the use of the scripted curriculum may be used precisely by some teachers while others

may be more comfortable adapting to the specific needs of their students after being a part of the professional development institute.

Additionally, with the absence of students in the building during spring of the 2019-2020 school year due to the COVID-19 pandemic response, discipline data and behavior points data will be skewed. The administration was given the directive to only provide positive points during online instruction. As such, the use of the demerit system will affect not only the LiveSchool data in obtaining a baseline for the study, but also the discipline data as well. Furthermore, in continuation of the 2020-2021 school year, students began the school year in a blended remote learning environment attending brick and mortar school only two days a week. Discipline data, at-risk referral data, and dissemination of positive points will look vastly different compared to when students were in the building five days a week.

Transiency among students and staff will be a consistent limitation. While some teachers have attended the professional development institute, there is a likelihood of them moving away from the school due to the transient nature of the school's community. Consistency and continuation of the implementation of *Responsive Classroom* will need to be adapted and monitored based on those staff members trained with regard and sensitivity to our military transient population.

Significance of Inquiry

The study intended to monitor the effectiveness of implementing a social emotional learning framework, *Responsive Classroom*, at Duckton Middle School. The study assumes that the framework was implemented with fidelity. As a result, the implementation aims to reduce student discipline and at-risk behavior incidents. Additionally, increased student connectedness and sense of belonging for sixth-grade males will be enhanced as a byproduct of intentional and

consistent implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* framework through advisory lessons and check-ins with the student advocate on campus.

The findings of this action research study will illustrate the benefits of implementing a social-emotional framework to increase a sense of belonging particularly with sixth-grade males. Identifying ways that students increase their connectedness at school will hopefully increase their sense of belonging. More importantly, educational leaders at Duckton Middle School may be able to use the results of the study to determine the applicability of the social emotional framework to reduce discipline referrals, increase positive behaviors, and decrease the number of risk behaviors that occur each school year. Students who feel less connected to their school community are more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors. These unhealthy behaviors include, but are not limited to, increased substance abuse, habitual smoking, and increased risk for mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety (Peterson & Skiba, 2001). By identifying ways to connect students in the school setting as well as the community, the goal of decreasing at-risk behaviors is a major focus of the study.

One of the implementation strategies in the study was to engage in *Responsive Classroom* Advisory meetings three times a week. These meetings provide a space and structure for teachers to support middle school students, both individually and as a group, as they develop their sense of self and identity in connection to their relationships with peers (*Responsive Classroom, 2020*). The significance of these *Responsive Classroom* Advisory meetings is to build student to student affiliation, energize and re-engage students, reflect and recalibrate on goals, extend learning through themes that promote social emotional health, support academic growth, strengthen advisor-advisee relationships, and develop social skills development and communication (*Responsive Classroom, 2020*).

Social and emotional learning can be used for improvement across the system not just merely to address at-risk behaviors at Duckton Middle School. While the approach of social and emotional learning is intended to reduce at-risk behaviors and improve the mental health for students, the impact could be greater when a systemic approach is integrated as a framework across all aspects of the educational system from the how the district office is structured to how instruction in individual classrooms is presented (Taylor et al., 2017). This would provide students at Duckton Middle School a safe and secure setting in order to have the most conducive learning environment for academic and emotional success. More importantly, the impact may allow school districts to have the opportunity to engage in high quality educational opportunities that promote positive outcomes for all students regardless of race, ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation and other potential differences among each other (CASEL, 2020). There is growing evidence that factors such as physical and mental health and social emotional development affect student learning (Berliner, 2009; Bowden et al., 2020). Recently, the Center for Disease Control findings suggest that students who feel connected at school are 66% less likely to participate in youth risk behaviors (CDC, 2009). Although this study was specifically related to Duckton Middle School, the study may affect national trends to increase student connectedness to reduce participation in unhealthy behaviors.

Advancing Equity and Social Justice

Duckton Middle School's discipline data shows the inequities of the discipline reports for males versus females and the disproportionate number with African American students. Although this study will be specific to Duckton Middle School, this study will help mitigate this and provide a more equitable learning environment. Additionally, the inquiry of the social

emotional learning framework of *Responsive Classroom* advances equity in all four domains of implementation.

With engaging academics, students are given meaningful academic choices in their learning. Students are taught speaking and listening competencies necessary for college and career readiness and teachers utilize interactive modeling to teach new skills that include demonstration and guided practice. In the positive community domain, teachers use positive teacher language that lead each student to envision success, think deeply, set goals, and work hard to achieve them. Responsive Advisory meetings are used to build community, set the tone for the day, and allow students to practice essential language, social, and academic skills. Additionally, parents are viewed as partners with the utilization of strategies to involve families of diverse cultures and backgrounds.

In the domain of effective management, meaningful rules are created by involving students that grow out of learning goals. There is an increased effort to respond to behavior mistakes nonpunitive and fairly in order to respectfully restore positive behavior so students retain their dignity and continue learning. Clear routines and expectations are established to manage classroom time and space in ways that allow students to focus on learning and build autonomy. The fourth domain of developmental awareness advances equity with the goal of knowing all students; a collection of practices for learning about each student individually, culturally, and developmentally. Additionally, *Responsive Classroom* responds to developmental needs and strengths by structuring appropriately challenging lessons and connecting learning to students' strengths and interests (*Responsive Classroom, 2020*). *Responsive Classroom (2020)* further rests on the beliefs that to teach students well, teachers must know them individually,

culturally, and developmentally, and they must create an inclusive environment where all children feel known and celebrated.

Advances in Practice

The inquiry of the impact of a social emotional learning framework on student connectedness with sixth-grade males may make a difference for students as they transition from elementary to middle school. The action research conducted gave stakeholders at Duckton Middle School data to make informed decisions regarding whether to continue the *Responsive Classroom* framework, how to plan for transitioning students from elementary to middle, how to create opportunities that are relevant for sixth-graders in middle school to ensure academic and behavioral success, and how to develop an advocacy plan to ensure the Duckton community knows every student well. If the implementation is effective, although it is specific to Duckton Middle School, this could be a starting point for advancement in Eastern County Schools, North Carolina, or nationally.

Summary

By implementing a social emotional framework, the study monitored any effect of implementing *Responsive Classroom* on student connectedness and students' sense of belonging for sixth-grade males. The guiding questions as well as key inquiry partners were identified to illustrate the importance of collaboration during the action research study. The focus of practice connects CASEL's conceptual framework with the *Responsive Classroom* theory of change. Throughout this chapter, assumptions, scopes and delimitations, and limitations are addressed to understand the specificity of the study to Duckton Middle School. However, the significance of this inquiry is addressed to show the possibility of advancing equity regarding the disproportionate number of incidents with males and discipline rates as well as and changing

current practices at Duckton Middle School that may be of use for other schools in the district and state. The next chapter will provide a review of existing literature around social emotional learning, student connectedness, student discipline practices, climate and culture, and relationships that affect students sense of belonging.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The following review of literature provides background and perspective for examining the focus of practice in this study, which is the lack of sense of belonging and student connectedness resulting in increased discipline and at-risk referral rates for sixth-grade males. The chapter is divided into major sections essential for framing the focus of practice. The sections include sense of belonging, student connectedness, climate and culture, student discipline, social emotional learning, and CASEL. CASEL is the conceptual framework used for implementing a social emotional framework to increase students' sense of belonging and connectedness.

Sense of Belonging

Belonging is rooted in Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs through his theory of human motivation. The theory suggests five essential needs that drive the behavior of individuals in a hierarchical manner. Specifically, Maslow describes how all people have a fundamental need for love and belongingness. He theorized that the need for belongingness would develop only after the physiological and safety needs have been fulfilled. Maslow designates the motivation to belong as related to family, friends, community and social groups. Maslow's work describing the need for belonging has shown to be a fascinating construct that has generated a considerable amount of work on human motivation (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Brofenbrenner, 1977; Fiske, 2004; Josselson, 1992; Oberle, 2016). In addition to Maslow (1954), other early educational researchers brought the notion of belonging into educational situations such as Dewey (1938) and his concept of supportive school environments, Vygotsky's (1962) work on the role of social environment in schools, and Erikson's (1968) work on social identification in educational settings.

The overall concept of belonging has been defined by many. Willms (2000) defines school belonging as a psychological concept related to attachment to school and reinforced by feelings of being accepted and regarded by others (including peers) within the school community. Other definitions of school belonging have combined different concepts, including a sense of community (Osterman, 2000), student engagement (Finn, 1993), and positive interactions with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hamm & Faircloth, 2005).

For the purposes of this study, belonging is “students’ sense of being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teachers and peers) in the academic classroom setting and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class” (Goodenow, 1993b, p. 25). A student’s sense of belonging reflects how they are personally accepted by others in school (Goodenow, 1993b). However, belonging is more than just mere acceptance; it relates to respecting personal autonomy of the individual student. Heightened self-consciousness, increased significance in friendships and peer relations, and decreased personal contact with teachers combine to make the middle school classroom a social context in which sense of belonging, personal acceptance, and social-emotional support for students are crucial (Goodenow, 1993a).

Research has identified a number of important variables related to school belonging (Blum & Libbey, 2004), such as extracurricular activities (Dotterer et al., 2007; Shochet et al., 2007), academic motivation (Anderman, 2003; Whitlock, 2006), and mental health (Holt & Espelage, 2003; Shochet et al., 2011). Extracurricular activities allow for students to engage in the community outside the school classroom as well as build relationships with multiple adults in the school. Students’ academic motivation is shown through engagement in instructional lessons and a desire to make connections to learning beyond standard mastery. When students are

engaged inside and outside the building in ways that meet their needs, students' mental stability remains healthy. These variables contribute to students' sense of belonging and their success academically, socially, and emotionally (CDC, 2009).

When students feel a sense of belonging and are motivated in the school setting, learning improves (Darling-Hammond, 2019). A sense of belonging plays an important role in behaviors that are imperative for academic performance. Generally, students who demonstrate high levels of school belonging report increases in academic achievement. The school environment is the start where connection and membership must take place. Positive interactions between peers and teachers result in a higher level of academic achievement (Booker, 2007; Sánchez et al., 2005).

Slaten et al. (2015) conducted a qualitative study examining the educational needs of marginalized youth at an alternative school. Researchers evaluated the data collected from interviews and generated several themes which related to the educational desires that participants felt their school was meeting. One of the salient themes cited by participants as an educational need was their sense of belonging in school, and as part of that, the genuine relationships students felt with teachers and/or administrators. Students identified school belonging in the form of relationships with school faculty as a major reason to remain in school as opposed to dropping out (Slaten et al., 2015). The outcomes suggested that students reported feelings of school belonging more when their teachers were perceived to promote mastery goal orientation in the classroom. A second finding revealed that teachers who used academic pressure were also more apt to affect school belonging (Slaten et al., 2015). These teachers were more likely to challenge students and nurture their ideas, and request they explain their academic work. The most critical finding by Stevens et al. (2007) was that the more teachers advocated learning over performance, the more students felt like they belonged to their school.

Slaten et al. (2014) examined the impact different types of belonging, including school, had on the way students made career decisions. The results revealed that school belonging considerably influenced career decision making, and the more a student felt that they belonged in school the surer they were in making a career decision (Slaten et al., 2014).

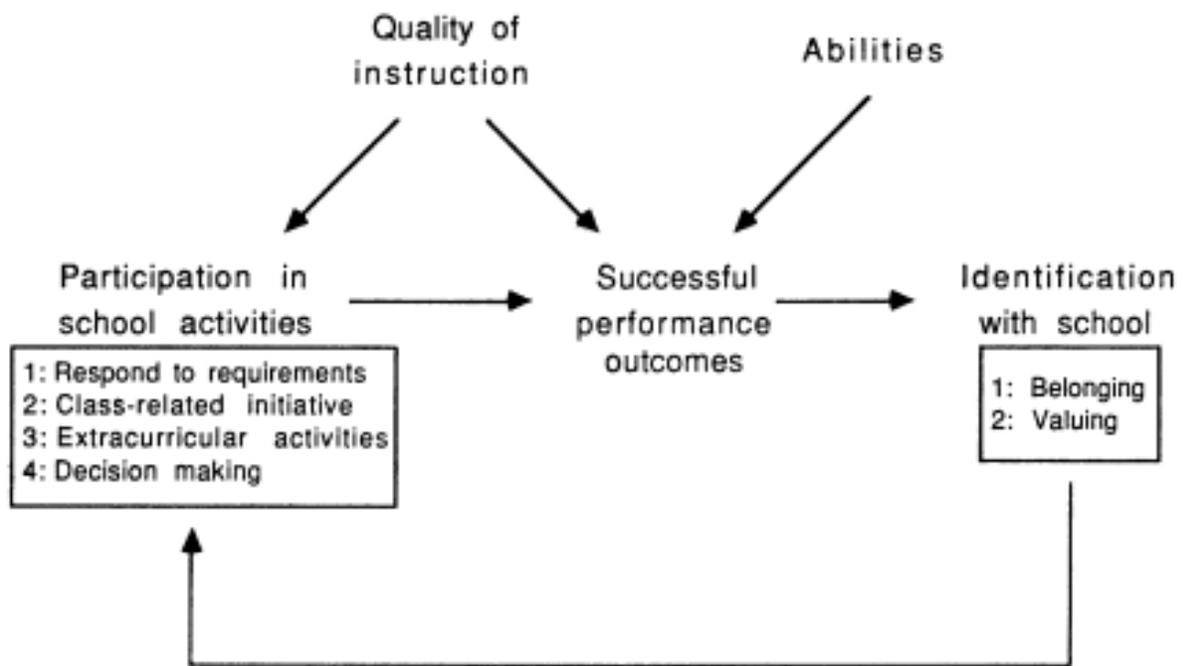
Sense of belonging denotes a feeling of relatedness and connection to others (Booker, 2007; Sánchez et al., 2005). When students are provided with opportunities to connect with other students, they have the capacity to build self-confidence and engage in meaningful activities; these are factors linked to a student's sense of belonging (Ritchie & Gaultier, 2018). Schools have the responsibility to promote school belongingness for all students at an early age to prevent mental health concerns (Vaz et al., 2014). The relationship between school belongingness and mental health is influenced by positive mental health in the primary years and resulting in a sense of belonging after the transition to the secondary level (Vaz et al., 2014).

There is a connection between an influence of school belongingness and positive mental health with typical developing students, as well for students with disabilities. The school environment, student safety, teacher supportiveness and caring, parent support, and peer relationships through extra-curricular activities were all noted as being important contributors to a sense of school belonging (Libbey, 2004). Students with a positive sense of belonging with their school have positive mental health functioning. Studies have found that students who engage in extracurricular activities report a higher sense of school belonging compared to their peers (Blomfield & Barber, 2010; Waters et al., 2010). Time spent on extracurricular activities is seen to be a positive predictor of school belonging for both boys and girls (Dotterer et al., 2007).

Participation in school activities is essential for positive outcomes. As the student progresses through the grades and independence grows, involvement may be experienced within

and outside the classroom. These experiences promote the student's sense of identification with school and further participation in extracurricular activities (Finn, 1989). Figure 9 illustrates this model known as the Participation-Identification Model and indicates that participation in school activities and identification with school lead to successful performance outcomes.

The belongingness hypothesis argues that belonging drives goal-directed activity, and the lack of belonging causes adverse reactions (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). People are happier and healthier when they experience belonging (Booker, 2007; Sánchez et al., 2005). Belongingness suggests that the construct is a fundamental human motivator (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Research that has explored belonging has found that those with a high sense of belonging are more prone to positive attributes such as wellbeing, increased self-esteem, and positive mood (Begen & Turner-Cobb, 2015; Newman et al., 2007), improved memory (Haslam et al., 2010), positive life transitions (Haslam et al., 2010; Iyer et al., 2009), and reduced stress (Newman et al., 2007). Benefits connected with belonging, whether it be to a peer group, school environment or community, have been found to have enduring effects (Walton & Cohen, 2011; Walton et al., 2012). A study by Anderman (2003) found that teachers play a significant role in predicting the sense of school belonging students feel and found that when teachers can encourage mutual respect among peers and provide a safe instructional environment for students there is a stronger sense of school belonging. The more connected students felt to their teachers in particular, the less likely they are to engage in health-risk behaviors: cigarette smoking, drinking to the point of getting drunk, marijuana use, suicidal ideation, sexual behaviors, and weapon-related violence (McNeely & Falci, 2004). The need to belong motivates people to engage socially and form bonds, and the absence of these bonds can often contribute to psychological stress or even



Note. (Finn, 1989).

Figure 9. Participation-identification model.

troubles with physical health. Glasser (1986) suggests that if the basic need of belonging is not met, students will have difficulty achieving academic success.

Although school belonging as a construct has earned a considerable amount of interest in the literature, there are still gaps that need to be addressed by academic researchers. Some initial qualitative research has suggested that students on the margins of the educational system find it extremely challenging to experience a sense of belonging in school (Slaten et al., 2015, 2016). In addition to the need for increasing research focused on marginalized populations' experience of school belonging, intervention researchers have neglected to create studies that require analyzing interventions that may increase a student's sense of belonging in school (Slaten et al., 2015). Interventions such as implementing a social emotional learning framework is an example. The bulk of the literature regarding school belonging has demonstrated how a strong sense of school belonging significantly improves student outcomes, and yet there has been little research on examining what interventions help develop this sense of belonging for students in the school setting. This is a primary motivation for this focus of practice to examine what impact a social emotional framework will have on students' sense of belonging and connectedness.

Student Connectedness

Throughout the literature, a pervasive theme is that the more students are connected to the school and school culture, the more successful they are overall (Libbey, 2004). Being connected serves as a promotive function during adolescence, reducing risks and improving positive outcomes in social, emotional, and academic domains. Comparable to a student's sense of belonging, school connectedness plays a role in how students learn and behave in the school environment. Students' feeling a part of their school, the amount of support and caring from the teacher, the existence of good friends in school, a commitment to current and future academic

development, fair and effective discipline, and participation in extracurricular activities can be traced across several measures of school connection (Libbey, 2004). Student connectedness is an element that is explored as a part of this study to determine the impact of a social emotional framework on students' sense of belonging.

School connectedness is a term used to describe a person's relationship to school. It is the student's belief that their friends and adult advocates care about them as individuals as well as what they are learning (Hurd et al., 2015). With school being an obligatory feature of most young persons' lives, this relationship is influential in determining their overall school experience (Gowing & Jackson, 2016). Students are more likely to succeed when they feel connected to school. Feeling connected at school involve high academic rigor and expectations, support for learning, positive teacher-student relationships and physical and emotional safety (Blum, 2005a). Student connectedness has an impact on student's well-being and participation in youth risk behavior.

Youngsters who are not engaged with learning, and have poor relationships with adults and teachers, are more likely to engage in behaviors that lead to anxiety and depression (Bond et al., 2007; Libbey, 2004). The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health has shown a strong association with school connectedness and risk behavior. School connectedness, when students feel personally accepted, included, cared for and supported by others in the school environment, is associated with resiliency to depressive symptoms. Students who feel connected within their school report higher levels of self-esteem and more adaptive use of their free time (Foster et al., 2017; Goodenow, 1993a; Joyce & Early, 2014; Libbey, 2004). Enhancing student connectedness should reduce risk and promote positive outcomes (Foster et al., 2017; Sieving et al., 2017). Connectedness to family, teachers, peers, and the community play a vital role in a

student's mental health. Youth with social challenges are at risk for a multitude of behavioral and emotional health conditions (Foster et al., 2017). Youth who report a strong connection with their parents are more likely to report lower levels of suicidal ideation, symptoms of depression, self-injury, and parent conduct problems (Foster et al., 2017).

Student connectedness has an impact on academic outcomes. Promoting school wide activities that foster a student's sense of belonging and connectedness will have direct effects on educational expectations (Wong et al., 2019). Students have higher educational expectations when they have a positive relationship with their teachers and feel connected at school (Wong et al., 2019). Students who experience low levels of connectedness withdraw from school (Gowing & Jackson, 2016). Students who have a higher sense of student connectedness may feel an increase in sense of belonging which improves social skills and self-identity leading to lower risk behavior and higher academic success (Oldfield et al., 2018). There is evidence demonstrating that increased student connection to school decreases absenteeism, fighting, bullying and vandalism. Student connectedness promote educational motivation, classroom engagement, academic performance, and completion rates (Blum, 2005b). Students, when they feel they have a meaningful place with their families or schools, establish supportive relationships that can develop a sense of security (Crespo et al., 2013). When students are connected, the sense of security propels students to explore career and life projects beyond their school career (Crespo et al., 2013).

In 2009, the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion studied the impact of sociocultural aspects of student learning, particularly mental health and well-being, on success. They described that students who feel connected to school are more likely to attend school regularly, stay in school longer, and have higher grades and test scores.

Students who are connected are less likely to smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, have sexual intercourse, carry weapons, become involved in violence, or be injured from dangerous activities such as drinking and driving or not wearing seat belts. Connected students are less likely to have emotional problems, suffer from eating disorders, or experience suicidal thoughts or attempts. (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2009).

Students experience connectedness through various opportunities, inside and outside of the classroom, made available to them at school. Opportunities include choices of extracurricular activities that are of interest to the student and instructional strategies that meet the needs of diverse learners. By offering such opportunities, schools have a role to play in promoting resilience. By adopting interventions or a social emotional framework, schools can focus on forming strong relationships with peers and teachers to combat mental health difficulties and meet students' social and academic needs (Oldfield et al., 2018).

Young people experiencing low connectedness are more likely to withdraw from school and experience the difficult outcomes that often follow (Gowing & Jackson, 2016). According to research by Juvonen (2006), students who drop out of school often feel disconnected. Historically underserved students showed insecure attachments to parents, higher conduct problems, peer problems, and emotional difficulties (Oldfield et al., 2018). Students who are not connected at school experience mental health issues, violence, engage in sexual activity, and use illegal substances (CDC, 2020). Additionally, young persons who exhibit low connectedness have shown negative effects on academic achievement, including lower grade and scores, increased absences, and potential withdrawal or dropping out from school (CDC, 2020).

Student connectedness is critical, so much so that the Johnson Foundation and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2009) funded a project that was ran by

scholars and educators to study the effects of connectedness on children's health and education. Based on their research, the group formulated six strategies that could improve school connectedness. The first strategy is teaching parents, staff, and students how to make good decisions. The second strategy is supporting a culture of strong parent participation. The third is creating a climate that promotes students to be involved in extracurricular activities. The fourth creates a positive learning environment that is full of teacher support and encouragement. Professional development for all school staff is the fifth strategy. Lastly, the sixth strategy is creating meaningful relationships among all stakeholders between the school, parents, and students (CDC, 2009). This study has outlined specific strategies for schools to consider when deciding which social emotional learning framework will be aligned to maximize the needs within their community.

There are several strategies that schools can consider in order to increase student connectedness. Implementing high standards and expectations while providing academic support to all students and applying fair and consistent discipline policies that collectively agreed upon and consistently enforced are important. Creating trusting relationships among students, staff, administration, and families while fostering parent and family expectations for school performance and completion are key factors (Blum, 2005a). These relationships will impact the development of student connectedness while harnessing improved family and parent collaboration. Hiring and supporting teachers who are skilled in content, teaching techniques, and classroom management to meet each learners' needs is another example of ways to increase connectedness. By evaluating their philosophy in the interview, leaders are able to hire teachers that match the needs of school. Ensuring that every student feels close to at least one adult at

school is another strategy. By identifying that every child is connected to one adult in the building, creating and maintaining a culture of connectedness becomes a reality (Blum, 2005a).

These components are considered when reviewing three influences on school connectedness: individuals, school climate and school culture. As individuals, students who perceive their teachers and school administrators as creating a caring, well-structured learning environment in which expectations are high, clear and fair are more likely to be connected to school (Blum, 2005b). Teacher support is essential in guiding students toward positive and productive behaviors. Schools have a responsibility to provide students with a safe environment in which to develop academically, emotionally and behaviorally, while at the same time developing relationships with others.

School climate and culture play a key role in student connectedness by providing students with choices and opportunities to engage in areas that support their interests. Students are more likely to visualize their educational future when they are socially and emotionally connected to their teachers and the school. Additionally, when students feel more competent at school, they are more ready to think and plan. (Crespo et al., 2013; Wong et al., 2019). Teacher and student relationships regarding school connectedness are viewed through the lens of climate and culture as student and teacher perceptions provide valuable information regarding ways to increase connectedness.

Climate and Culture

Early in the twentieth century, school climate began to be investigated as one of the essential criteria used to evaluate school effectiveness, although then, educators had not devised this term. Researchers referred to “school atmosphere” as an important element of a successful school (Freiberg & Stein, 1999). The term “climate” refers to connections and attributes of

schools, but it also includes the feelings, moods, and relations within the school environment. The following characteristics illustrates elements that involve school climate. Climate encompasses the feeling of safety, the quality of teaching and learning—which includes social-emotional learning, relationships (with staff, students, and community), and the school environment of cleanliness and a sound structure. Both climate and culture are difficult to define and have distinct differences (Cohen et al., 2009; Withall, 1949).

Schoen and Teddlie (2008) contend that one must examine climate as a level of school culture. School culture plays a vital role in connecting students to school, and one must wonder what happens to the students who are not connected to school. Kartal (2016) defines culture as how teachers operate, how problems are addressed, what relationships with coworkers are like, and how the decision-making processes of the campus work. Climate, however, refers to the character and the quality of life in school. It is the student or teacher experience of school life and reflects the schools' values, norms, goals, relationships, structure, and practices (Dary & Pickeral, 2013).

Climate incorporates the feeling of safety and the quality of teaching and learning—which is inclusive of social-emotional learning, relationships (both with staff, students, and community), and the school environment (Gonzalez, 2020). School climate is defined as the “shared beliefs, values, and attitudes that shape interactions between the students, teachers, and administrators” (Mitchell et al., 2010, p. 272). School is an important context for the development of children and necessary to shape the climate as a safe and stimulating environment to promote learning. By building a positive school climate, conditions can be present for both students and teachers to feel safe, supported, motivated by results, and eager to contribute to the improvement of the school. Those schools who have positive school climates

pay attention to the social and emotional wellbeing of students and adults and not just test scores (Dernowska, 2017).

Climate and culture directly impact students' sense of belonging and connectedness. Values are aligned with a school's climate and culture when students and staff have a sense of belonging in their school. School climate and culture is a key factor in determining school efficiency, belonging, and connectedness. There is a presence of improved academics and social and emotional well being when there is an existence of positive climate and culture. Likewise, there are negative associations that present themselves when the climate and culture are negative (Dernowska, 2017; Gonzalez, 2020).

Positive school connectedness, one aspect of school climate, contributes to students' feelings of safety and well-being (Blum, 2005b; Martinez et al., 2016). When a positive school climate and culture is positive, adolescent development is nurtured, and young people connect to school at higher levels (Dorina, 2013). The school climate and culture will allow for students' sense of belonging to be nurtured and their academic, behavior and social needs will be met (Booker, 2007).

When climate and culture are negative, disconnectedness may occur. Disconnectedness can happen to students if they face bullying (Eisenberg et al., 2003). Peer harassment can also affect student achievement, and students who did not like or connect with school tend to report more harassment. Eisenberg et al.'s (2003) study is very important as it discussed possible connections between school disconnectedness and student harassment. Bullying has a widespread impact on school climate affecting the victims and the bystanders. Bullying is aggression in which a dominant student or group of students repeatedly and intentionally offends or humiliates a weaker student physically, socially, or emotionally.

Students who have negative peer interactions as a result of negative school climate often show poor achievement academically (Mehta et al., 2012). There is a negative association of bullying to school climate that goes beyond only affecting individual students or victims. When there are high levels of bullying, disengagement, including commitment to school and involvement in school activities are affected (Mehta et al., 2012). A fear of being harassed can cause students to become less connected at school and have increased absences. These attributes can lead to low motivation to learn, poor academic achievement and potentially school dropouts. When there is a presence of low motivation, poor academics, and the possibility of dropping out, students may find themselves with more discipline incidents than those who are engaged and academically successful.

Student Discipline

Students attending public schools at times exhibit discipline problems such as disruptive classroom behavior, vandalism, bullying, and violence. Creating effective discipline practices is critical to promoting academic success and providing a safe learning environment (Luiselli et al., 2005). School officials realize that students should be taught how to behave in the same way that academics are taught in school. Training students how to manage and correct their own behavior is critical for a healthy school culture and climate. Schools that combine academics with social and emotional learning and behavior lessons, have better discipline results (Hodge, 2020).

The ongoing debate over a large span of time has not been if discipline should be part of schooling, but how it should be managed. It was Sir William Blackstone's argument that school officials from the 1760s held the same authority as the students' parents (DeMitchell, 2002). Thus, Blackstone stated that school administrators operated under the doctrine of *in loco parentis*, "in the place of the parents," when children were being taught at school. Many years

later, school officials in the 1950s, felt the need to correct the wrong behavior of students by using spankings or other forms of physical violence defined as corporal punishment in schools; of which reasonable force was protected under the law (Triplett et al., 2014).

Corporal punishment is one of the oldest methods of discipline that is defined as inflicting physical harm on students (Curran & Kitchin, 2018). The debate of physical discipline of students in school continued in the 1977 U.S. Supreme Court Case of *Ingraham v. Wright*, ruling that corporal punishment in school is constitutional (Gershoff & Font, 2016). Though several prominent states and organizations openly opposed the use of physical violence against students, corporal punishment still remains in existence widespread (Heekes et al., 2020; Strauss, 2014). Some schools have used suspension as another alternative to corporal punishment for student misbehaviors (Curran & Kitchin, 2018), thus, still implementing a punitive approach to discipline. From July 2009 to June 2018, the rates of multiple-victim, school-associated homicides in the United States increased significantly in recent years (Holland et al., 2019). As violent school shootings have become prominent, the need for anti-bullying movements and alternative discipline policies has been brought to the forefront of policy makers that are ready for change. Though the correlation between bullying and school shootings remain uncorroborated (Mears et al., 2017), media coverage has intensified the need to take a closer look at school discipline.

One of the unfortunate results of the widespread fear of the increasing school violence are exclusionary and zero tolerance discipline policies. Even though these policies have proven to have negative effects academic progress and behavior (Cornell, 2015), nonetheless, more schools are adopting these practices instead of less punitive methods. The idea that zero tolerance policies will deter misbehavior is a misconception in the thinking of advocates of exclusionary

discipline. With the implementation of zero tolerance policies, using suspension and expulsion, students have been unsuccessful at improving their behavior (Kimball, 2013). Since the execution of exclusionary discipline, student behavior and school safety has failed to improve (Skiba & Losen, 2015). These harsh and severe policies of suspensions and expulsions fail to keep students safe (Skiba, 2014).

Zero-tolerance policies operate under the theory that even small infractions need to be dealt with to emphasize the dissatisfaction of the actions. As school violence continued into the 1980s and 1990s, the rise in drug, weapons, fighting, and gang activity caused fear in the United States, and the federal government and school districts had to find a way to battle the issue (Skiba, 2014). Exclusionary discipline and zero tolerance policies were adopted to reinforce that those offenses would not be tolerated and therefore punished (Skiba & Knesting, 2001; Skiba & Losen, 2015). Recently, zero tolerance policies have been expanded to include all weapons, drugs, fighting, and threats and non-violent misbehaviors. The trend of zero-tolerance policies has led to more exclusionary discipline in schools that fail to resolve conflict and create a larger problem in society. In addition, the zero-tolerance approach to discipline has led to an increase in suspensions and expulsions disparities (Skiba & Losen, 2015).

Exclusionary discipline is defined as severe forms of that dismiss the student from the learning environment for a specific period of time (Curran, 2016; Education Commission of the States, 2018; Rocque & Snellings, 2017). Often times the exclusionary school discipline policies include office referrals for suspension, expulsion, and referrals to juvenile justice (Anyon et al., 2014; Wright et al., 2014). The implementation of these policies and procedures differ depending on the school climate and culture. In most schools, the classroom teacher determines whether or not to refer the student for discipline. Depending on the infraction, the student can be disciplined

in the classroom for minor infractions or referred to the office for major infractions and formalized discipline procedures. Teachers have differing viewpoints of what violations constitute a referral. As a result, some teachers view Black and Latinx students as threatening, aggressive, and oppositional compared to White and Asian students (Anyon et al., 2014). These biases affect the way in which discipline referrals are written and enforced.

Restorative justice and conflict resolution are alternative solutions to more traditional discipline practices and has gained popularity across the nation. The idea of resolving conflict calmly and allowing students the chance to mend the relationship caused by their violent actions, resonates with stakeholders that are anxious for change (Hodge, 2020). Rooted in the philosophical underpinnings of social psychology, the need to help adolescents develop their own coping mechanisms is stressed within the conflict resolution theory (Daunic et al., 2000). Conflict resolution programs were developed to teach students problem-solving techniques to resolve conflict among their peer groups. Peer mediation was also introduced along with conflict resolution as an optimal schoolwide approach (Daunic et al., 2000). According to Amstutz and Mullet (2015), if students can learn how to manage behaviors and help others through peer mediation, this type of conflict resolution supports discipline in schools. Conflict resolution arose early in American history by religious groups such as the Quakers and Mennonites (Lindsay, 1998). Though conflict resolution programs began to appear in public schools in the country, the success of the programs were a concern to educators that were not seeing a reduction in violent acts in schools (Hodge, 2020).

Restorative practice is a form of conflict resolution that allows for students to process their wrongdoings through dialogue and decision making (Mallett, 2016). Restorative justice practices are focused on resolving the conflict by exploring the root of the problem so that the

conflict does not have a chance for reoccurrence while making amends to repair the relationship (Hodge, 2020). Rooted in the indigenous practices of the Maori people of New Zealand and the Navajo Native Americans (Kehoe et al., 2017), the practice of restorative justice developed. The spiritual and indigenous practices focused on community relationships and the welfare of all members of the community (Amstutz & Mullet, 2015; Zehr, 2015).

The current application of restorative practices melds together the philosophy of conflict resolution with the idea of restoring relationships and repairing harm (Zehr, 2015). In the schools of the United States, restorative practices have transformed from a reactive response to discipline to a proactive approach by focusing on the social skills such as empathy, responsibility, and respect (Kehoe et al., 2017). Teachers started using restorative practices as an alternative to exclusionary discipline (Fronius et al., 2016). In schools, the emphases are on the community of the classroom where the harm and relationships are mostly likely in need of repair.

Punitive discipline practices impact student's success academically and emotionally. While the goal of these discipline policies in schools was to create a safe learning environment with specific structure and order (Kline, 2016), it has proven to be unsuccessful and more harmful to the academic success of students (Hodge, 2020). Zero tolerance policies hinder academic growth and lead to disciplinary disparities (Morris & Perry, 2016). An argument against zero tolerance policies in school is that it has a negative effect on the academic achievement of students (Triplett et al., 2014) by reducing learning opportunities for students (Cobb-Clark et al., 2015). Research has shown an adverse relationship between suspensions and academic achievement (Morris & Perry, 2016). The students perform academically low and sometimes drop out of school (Forsyth et al., 2015; Mizel et al., 2016; Skiba et al., 2014).

Finally, zero tolerance policies in schools frequently lead to students being referred to the juvenile justice system (Flynn et al., 2016). Students that are suspended and expelled are at a higher risk for jail (Ross, 2016). Black students in comparison to White students are more likely to be arrested or referred to law enforcement (Mills, 2016). This widely accepted referral process, known as the school-to-prison pipeline, is defined as the effect that suspension and expulsion have on students that eventually end up in the juvenile justice system (Mizel et al., 2016). As students come across some form of law enforcement of the juvenile justice system, the possibility of jail increases (Ross, 2016).

In addition to the reasons mentioned above, exclusionary discipline and zero tolerance policies are not designed to change student behavior or help students address their behavior (McNeil et al., 2016). As the primary focus of school is to teach students, teaching appropriate behaviors should be included. Suspensions exclude the student from the school environment where teaching and learning happen, and places them into an environment that does not support change.

Discipline practices have an impact on students sense of belonging, connectedness, and the climate and culture of the school. It is commonly recognized that the number one priority for schools is to keep the students and staff safe. Zero tolerance policies in discipline have not been demonstrated to keep students and staff safer than any other disciplinary practice. In addition, these policies have not proven to enrich the school culture, climate, or environment (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Students are less connected when the number of expulsions is higher than average on a school campus (McNeely et al., 2002).

Proponents of zero tolerance policies also believe that disruptive students should be eliminated from the school environment as not to interfere with the learning of others. It is also

assumed that removing these students creates a better school climate and school environment (Hodge, 2020). Others argue that zero tolerance policies create fear among students and create a culture of exclusionary discipline expectations or a referral to the juvenile justice system (Castillo, 2015). The school culture and climate are therefore defined by the severe consequences that could be received instead of the academic opportunities that are available to students in schools.

The disproportionality of the zero-tolerance policies created a myriad of problems including racial and gender disparities in discipline. Boys have more behavioral problems than girls and are punished more for them (Maxwell, 2017). Research indicates that boys as a group were overrepresented with discipline rates. They account for just over half of students in public school but represent at least two-thirds of the students disciplined in the following categories: out-of-school suspensions, in-school suspensions, referrals to law enforcement, expulsions, corporal punishment and school-related arrests (Maxwell, 2017). Students who received suspensions showed decreases in mean test scores versus males with zero suspensions (Maxwell, 2017). In addition, it is imperative to consider discretionary and non-discretionary decisions to discipline when considering issues with disproportionality and discipline rates. Subtler, implicit biases affect teacher's discretionary decision-making not racial differences in student behaviors or explicit biases, are likely one of the largest contributors to disproportionality (Giravan et al., 2016).

With increased discipline rates and the effect of the disproportionality, there is a solution to the discipline concerns. In 2015, the federal government signed a law, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), asserting that exclusionary discipline needed to be truncated in order to promote learning (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). The ESSA mandates state education agencies to collect data

of exclusionary discipline, support activities and programs for behavioral interventions, and create plans to support school districts to reduce practices of exclusionary discipline. ESSA also dictates school districts to develop plans to reduce exclusionary discipline and identify schools with high discipline rates of disaggregated subgroups. The way to combat exclusionary discipline and zero tolerance policies is by using evidence based proactive and preventative methods such as positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS) and social and emotional learning (SEL) (Hodge, 2020). These approaches encourage a positive school climate that concentrates on learning rather than punishment. Restorative practices are congruent with SEL because it focuses on building relationships and solving problems (Haymovitz et al., 2017).

Social Emotional Learning

Students in a healthy, safe, caring, and stimulating environment have greater capacity to concentrate on academic content and are more likely to participate in school (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016). Social emotional learning is a way to enhance the development of students and adults in the school environment and influence school and life outcomes. When there are intentional practices to build social emotional learning, cognitive skills grow in supportive relationships and shaped by experiences. These programs are effective in supporting the development of these skills (Jones et al., 2017). Transformative social emotional learning seeks to promote equity and excellence among children, young people, and adults (Jagers et al., 2019).

Students who are at risk for disengaging in the learning process may experience lower levels of belonging, thus leading to their failing educational outcomes (Pendergast et al., 2018). Social emotional learning is defined as the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage

emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (McKown & Herman, 2020).

Social emotional learning help students develop critical life skills that will not only help their personal development but also their academic performance (Person, 2011). Social emotional learning programs were associated with reductions in conduct problems including misbehavior, aggression and symptoms of anxiety, depression or stress. There are significant increases in social-emotional skills, socially appropriate behavior, positive attitudes, and academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011). Additionally, significant decreases were found in conduct problems and emotional distress as well as a gain in academic achievement with test scores when social emotional learning was utilized (Durlak et al., 2011).

Social and emotional learning (SEL) in children is the process by which students acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2020). The development of social and emotional competence is key to success in school and in life (Kendziora & Yoder, 2016). Social and emotional learning enhances the capacity of students to integrate skills, attitudes, and behaviors to enable them to deal effectively and ethically with daily tasks and challenges.

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a process of applying and acquiring the skills to manage emotions, express empathy, set goals, create positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2020). These processes focus on the building and repairing of relationships, resolving conflict, refining social interactions through listening, and making a safe learning environment in schools. Graves et al. (2017) declared that helping develop students'

social and emotional learning is vital. Social and emotional learning is taught to students in the classroom as a way to interrelate positively and successfully with one another. The focus is to have self-discipline and mindfulness to avert conflict from happening. Students develop the skills essential to identify the emotions and feelings of themselves and others (CASEL, 2020). The application of SEL programs in U.S. schools varies.

According to Cook et al. (2015), the schools that implement both PBIS and SEL do so for the purpose of permeating theories that promote caring environments focused on student wellbeing. The SEL programs are applied in all grade levels, preschool through high school to provide a sense of humanity and support in the school environment (Sheras & Bradshaw, 2016). One of the goals of SEL in schools is to reduce undesirable behaviors and progress adolescent development (McBride et al., 2016). Social and emotional skills have been linked to the lessening of anxiety and depression among students and academic development in school (Durlak et al., 2011). The benefits of SEL interventions and programs have shown to be positive for students and embrace curricular and community service opportunities. Researchers have indicated that students that are involved in learning the skills of social and emotional learning in the classroom and applying it through service projects for the community have improved attendance and grades (McBride et al., 2016)

The roots of social emotional learning stem from ancient Greece (Person, 2011) when Plato proposed a holistic balance approach to education that requires training in math, science, moral judgment, physical education and character. In the 1960s, New Haven showed modern origins of social emotional learning when James Comer piloted a program where the schools created a collaborative management team, composed of teachers, parents, administration, and mental health providers. The team made decisions on issues ranging from academics to social

programs to change school procedures that were affecting school behavior. New Haven became the hub of social emotional research.

Impact of Social Emotional Learning

There are impacts of social and emotional learning on academics, students' sense of belonging, connectedness and behavior. Social, emotional and cognitive skills develop through our lives and are important to success in our schools, jobs, homes, and communities and allow individuals to contribute meaningfully to society (Jones & Kahn, 2017). Students learn more and classrooms are more effective when adolescents have the skills and abilities to manage emotions, focus their attention, positively navigate relationships with peer groups and adults, persevere in the face of difficulty, learn from and apply academic content, and problem solve (Jones & Kahn, 2017).

Whether we are cognizant of it or not, students are in a continual state of SEL, where their observations and understandings either support or challenge their healthy social-emotional development and ability to learn in general. For educators, this means that we can act with purpose to foster learning relationships and integrate SEL into academic learning to simultaneously augment rigor and relevance, grow healthy social-emotional skills, and avoid mental health problems for our students (Daggett & Jones, 2019).

The success of young students during and after school is intimately linked to a healthy social and emotional development. Students who have a sense of belonging, who can work well with others to problem solve, who can plan and set clear goals, and who can continue through obstacles, in addition to being knowledgeable, proficient, and competent in concepts and ideas, are more likely to take full advantage of their opportunities and reach their full potential (Jones & Kahn, 2017). Social and emotional development comprises specific attributes that students

need in order to set goals, control behavior, shape relationships, and process and remember information (Jones & Kahn, 2017).

Effective Implementation of Social Emotional Learning

Experiences can be molded in ways that positively affect children's social and emotional learning and their academic and life outcomes. There are programs and strategies that have been proven to be effective at cultivating social and emotional development. Social, emotional, and academic development is an important part of pre-K-12 education that can change schools into spaces that foster academic excellence, teamwork and communication, imagination and innovation, empathy and respect, civic engagement, and other skills and dispositions needed for success in the 21st Century (Jones & Kahn, 2017). The combination of social, emotional, and academic development is imperative to effective learning environments and for satisfactorily preparing youth for success in today's society. It is becoming evident that this integrated set of competencies is important for the more and more complex, universal, and quickly changing environment in which our students will live in as adults (Jones & Kahn, 2017).

There are several types of approaches to the implementation of social and emotional learning that, according to CASEL (2015), enable schools to help students develop personal and social competencies. These include (1) infusing teaching practices to make a learning environment supportive of SEL, (2) infusing SEL instruction into the curriculum, (3) generating structures around policies and organization that support social and emotional development of students, and (4) teaching free-standing lessons that directly teach SEL skills. CASEL recommends that after students acquire knowledge and learn new skills, they have opportunities to practice and apply the skills in common situations. As practice opportunities are incorporated to continue developing skill mastery, it is imperative to coordinate classroom and school efforts

within family and community settings (CASEL, 2017). Regardless of the approach a school adopts, CASEL proposes integration of schoolwide practices designed to encourage more positive and supportive relationships among all stakeholders (Weissberg, 2019).

Conceptual Framework

In 1994, the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and the term “social and emotional learning” emerged from a meeting with researchers, educators, and child advocates involved in education-based energies to encourage positive development in children. These social-emotional learning forerunners came together to address apprehension about ineffective school programming and a lack of coordination among programs at the school level (CASEL, 2017). This pursuit of achieving a balanced social emotional learning program through the lens of CASEL is the framework for this study.

This study utilizes the social emotional framework developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (see Figure 7). Through research, the provision of recommendations for practice, and the development of policy, CASEL provides educators with resources to advance the utilization of social emotional learning in equitable learning environments for the success of all students (CASEL, 2017). CASEL’s mission focuses on establishing high-quality, evidence based social emotional learning as an integral part of the foundation of education in preschool through high school programs (CASEL, 2017).

Programs are reviewed and evaluated to determine the level of quality. These evaluations are based on design, implementation and evaluation criteria. The program must be well designed to intentionally promote student development across the five competency clusters, provide time for practice, and include a multiyear roll out. The program should deliver quality training and other support for implementation. The program should also show evidence of effectiveness with

a comparison group of pre- and post-test measurement that demonstrates a positive impact on student behaviors (CASEL, 2015).

CASEL indicates that students are successful when they develop personal strengths including grit, tenacity, perseverance, and positive academic mindsets. Students also learn skills to interact with a diverse group of people in a way that promotes respect. The CASEL framework helps raise student academic performance and positive behaviors while reducing negative behaviors such as school suspensions and drug use (Weissberg, 2019). Students learn to demonstrate safe and healthy behaviors and contribute responsibly to peers, family, school and community as a result of learning the competencies of the social emotional framework (CASEL, 2015).

The conceptual framework of CASEL is the lens through which the focus of practice of this study is viewed. CASEL's integrated framework promotes intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cognitive competence. The competencies of CASEL are most important during adolescence, because of the rapid physical, emotional and cognitive changes that occur during this time in a student's life. Within this framework, the CASEL 5 addresses five broad, interrelated competencies that can be taught in various ways across many educational settings (CASEL, 2017; Kendziora & Yoder, 2016). These competencies are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2017; Kendziora & Yoder, 2016). The CASEL 5 can be taught at various stages of development and across diverse cultural contexts to provide students what they should do to be successful academically, in school and civic engagement, health and wellness, and careers. Self-awareness is the ability to identify emotions, thoughts, and values and how they impact students' behavior. It is the ability to accurately assess one's strengths and weaknesses, with a grounded sense of self-confidence,

hopefulness, and a growth mindset (CASEL, 2017; Kendziora & Yoder, 2016). Skills that are built by developing self-awareness are accurately identifying emotions, having a clear self-perception, recognizing one's strengths, and developing self-confidence and self-efficacy. Self-management is the ability to regulate one's behavior, feelings and views in various situations to successfully manage stress, have self-control of impulses and to motivate oneself. Ultimately, it is the ability to set both personal and academic goals. Skills that are developed within this competency are impulse control, goal setting, self-discipline, and stress management (CASEL, 2017; Kendziora & Yoder, 2016). Social awareness is the third competency addressed in the CASEL framework wheel. It is the ability to empathize with others and take their perspectives, including those from various cultural backgrounds. It is the ability to realize social and ethical norms for behavior while recognizing family, school, and community support systems. Building the capacity to show empathy, appreciate diversity and respect others are identified skills within this competency (CASEL, 2017; Kendziora & Yoder, 2016). Relationship skills is the fourth competency which focuses on establishing and maintaining healthy relationships with diverse individuals and groups. It enhances the ability to communicate clearly, listen, cooperate, resist social pressures, negotiate conflict constructively, and seek and offer help when needed. Additional skillsets include building the capacity for teamwork, social engagement, and effective communication to create healthy relationships (CASEL, 2017; Kendziora & Yoder, 2016). The fifth competency is responsible decision making and the ability to make constructive choices about personal behavior in social situations based on ethics, safety and social norms. It is understanding the realistic evaluation of the consequences associated with various actions while considering personal wellbeing and the wellbeing of others. The competency addresses

identifying and solving problems, analyzing situations, evaluation, reflecting and understanding ethical responsibility (CASEL, 2017; Kendziora & Yoder, 2016).

Adolescents also engage in more risky behavior than younger students and face a variety of challenging situations, including increased independence, peer pressure, and access to social media (CASEL, 2015). These practices are critical for inclusion in professional development for teachers to accelerate integration of the competencies throughout instruction, as well as to promote adult self-care. This effort should be guided by school leaders in order to strengthen relationships between students and teachers, students and students, and teachers and teachers (Weissberg & Cascarino, 2013). CASEL provides a comprehensive plan regarding how to determine the effectiveness of social and emotional learning programs for middle schools, in which programs are reviewed and evaluated to determine the level of quality. These evaluations are based on design, implementation and evaluation criteria. The program must be well designed to intentionally promote student development across the five competency clusters, provide time for practice to include a multiyear roll out, should deliver quality training and other support for implementation and show evidence of effectiveness with a comparison group of pre- and post-test measurement that demonstrates a positive impact on student behaviors (CASEL, 2015).

Theoretical Foundation

The social and emotional learning framework this study will implement is aligned with the theory of change introduced by the Center for Responsive Schools (2020a) in Figure 8. The change theory is aligned to CASEL's conceptual framework by integrating the development of social emotional skills in schoolwide practices and curriculum instruction. When teachers consistently implement and use *Responsive Classroom* beliefs and strategies, teachers feel more efficacious and students' engagement in learning and connectedness and belonging increases. As

a result, social and emotional skill attainment increases and behavior problems decrease (Center for Responsive Schools, 2020a).

Responsive Classroom training begins to shape teachers' beliefs as well as build their proficiency in *Responsive Classroom* practices. Those beliefs and practices are the link to building a classroom climate in four different areas. Those areas are positive community, engaging academics, effective management, and developmentally responsive teaching. With the integration of the described classroom climate and the teaching of the *Responsive Classroom* framework and curriculum, a student-centered focus on teaching and discipline will lead to positive outcomes.

Student outcomes vary and translate over time proximally, intermediately and long-term. Proximal student outcomes include a change in academic mindset and development of social emotional skills and competencies. The intermediate outcomes lead to students' academic perseverance, development of learning strategies, and improved academic behaviors. Student outcomes that result in long term success increase students' level of academic achievement, career and college readiness, and career and lifelong success (Center for Responsive Schools, 2020a).

Responsive Classroom (2020), designed from research and evidence-based practices, will aim to create a learning environment that is safe, joyful and engaging for all stakeholders within the school. By creating a classroom climate based on the fundamentals of a positive community, effective management, developmentally responsive teaching, and engaging academics, the theory of change theoretical foundation is key in designing and developing the implementation of a social emotional framework that will lead sixth-grade males to feel an increased sense of connectedness and belonging (*Responsive Classroom*, 2020).

Summary

Integrating social and emotional development with academic education is foundational to provide opportunities for young people to succeed and impacts the success of our education system and society. Children deserve the opportunity to learn the skills they need to succeed as individuals and as contributing, engaged citizens (Jones & Kahn, 2017). The elements of social emotional learning, student connectedness, sense of belonging, school culture and school discipline are all integral parts of the conceptual framework of CASEL, the foundation upon which this study is based. The literature provides justification for the implementation of a social emotional learning framework in schools for adolescents to develop skills to create a healthy wellbeing and to be successful during and after schooling. Addressing a sense of belonging and school connectedness for students while promoting educational equity is an appropriate means by which to limit at-risk behaviors and disciplinary problems for male students in middle school. The next chapter will provide an overview of the design of this action research study, including the rigor of the inquiry, the inquiry procedures, and ethical considerations for implementation of this study.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS OF INQUIRY

The focus of this inquiry was to assess student connectedness with youth risk behaviors that affect students' social, emotional, and academic success. The exhibiting of youth risk behaviors may be a result of needing a stronger sense of belonging to their school. The collaborative inquiry partners and I planned to implement a social emotional learning framework, *Responsive Classroom* and monitor the impact of the framework on student connectedness for sixth-grade males. Osterman (2000) found that students who experienced a sense of belonging in educational environments were more motivated, more engaged in school and classroom activities, and more dedicated to school. Moreover, students who feel that they belong to their learning environments report higher enjoyment, enthusiasm, happiness, interest, and more confidence in engaging in learning activities than those who feel isolated (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). Those students who feel isolated report greater anxiety, boredom, frustration, and sadness during their academic engagement than their non-isolated peers, which directly affected their academic performance (Furrer & Skinner, 2003).

The purpose of this action research study was to implement *Responsive Classroom* using a social emotional learning approach with the sixth-grade students at Duckton Middle School to increase student connectedness and sense of belonging. This chapter outlines the guiding questions for the action research study, the inquiry design, the context of the study that the collaborative inquiry partners along with the scholarly practitioner were a part of while ensuring ethical considerations, the three main phases of the study, the instrumentation utilized, the selection of participants through purposive sampling, the rigor of the inquiry design, as well as the limitations and assumptions of the focus of practice.

Focus of Practice Guiding Questions

The primary question guiding this focus of practice was: What impact does the implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional learning framework have on student connectedness for sixth-grade males at Duckton Middle School? There are three sub questions that were addressed through the action research study to help answer the primary question. The sub questions relate to the social and emotional learning competencies provided by CASEL and the theoretical basis of the *Responsive Classroom* framework:

1. What effect does implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional learning framework have on student behavior as measured by disciplinary referrals and merits and demerits?
2. What effect does implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional learning framework have on student connectedness as measured by student focus groups?
3. What effect does implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional learning framework have on mental health as measured by the Youth Risk Behavior Survey?

The first sub question was addressed through the collection of data in the form of student disciplinary office referrals and positive behavior points. Positive behavior merits are provided by teachers and staff members to students when they complete a task or show a behavior that goes above and beyond the expectations set forth by the school. These were tracked in the LiveSchool database. The second sub question was addressed through student and teacher focus groups. The third sub question was addressed through the collection of data from the pre and post Youth Risk Behavior Survey. Together, the data collected from these three sub questions

was analyzed and triangulated to aid in answering the primary question at the heart of this action research study. By analyzing and triangulating the data collected from discipline referrals, positive behavior points, pre and post data from the youth risk behavior survey, and focus groups with students and staff, the team of collaborative inquiry partners were able to determine the effects of the initial implementation of the social emotional framework had on students' connectedness at Duckton Middle School. The findings were shared with the strategic leadership team to determine whether to persist with implementation of the framework after the study.

Inquiry Design and Rationale

Action research is utilized to improve quality of organizations, communities and family lives (Mertler, 2019). It is the process of combining theory and practice, action and reflection with the contribution key participants seeking solutions to issues at school that allow the students, teachers, and the community to grow as a result of the study (Bradbury & Reason, 2015). Specifically, for this focus of practice, action research was chosen to identify a problem at Duckton Middle School, take steps to implement changes toward improving processes, collect outcome data, and make decisions to move forward for sustained change (Mertler, 2019).

The study utilized action research, a mixed method approach, using quantitative and qualitative data collection approaches. As Creswell and Creswell (2018) indicated, “qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 42). Focus groups were conducted with students and teachers regarding their understanding of student connectedness and sense of belonging at Duckton Middle School. The theoretical framework applied in this study is from the theory of change by the Center of Responsive Schools in Figure 5 based on the conceptual framework of CASEL. This study will

be used to make ongoing programmatic changes at Duckton Middle School necessary to improve students' connectedness and sense of belonging.

Quantitative data was utilized by analyzing datapoints from discipline incidents, accumulation of merits and demerits, and the administration of the Youth Risk Behavior survey. Creswell and Creswell (2018), indicates "a survey design provides a quantitative description of trends, attitudes, and opinions of a population by studying a sample of the population" (p. 147). This pre- and post-survey, of the YRBS as found in Appendix G, provided the opportunity for students to express their opinions on participating in risk behavior. Analysis of these results helped collaborative inquiry partners determine the effect of the social emotional framework, *Responsive Classroom*, on at-risk behavior before and after implementation.

Responsive Classroom, a social emotional framework, was implemented and applied specifically to address student connectedness with sixth-grade males. By conducting this action research, I along with the collaborative inquiry partners will be able to present findings to the strategic leadership team of Duckton Middle School. Those findings will help glean answers as to why Duckton Middle School has a disproportionate number of male discipline referrals. Also, it will provide collaborative partners with study results and information to determine refinements regarding the implementation of the social emotional framework to increase student connectedness and belonging (Crow et al., 2019).

The Plan-Do-Study-Act, or PDSA, model in Figure 10 demonstrates how the study was organized. The PDSA cycle was utilized in three different phases as the collaborative inquiry partners and I monitored the impact of implementing a social and emotional learning framework at Duckton Middle School. Using PDSA cycles allowed for the collaborative partners and I to

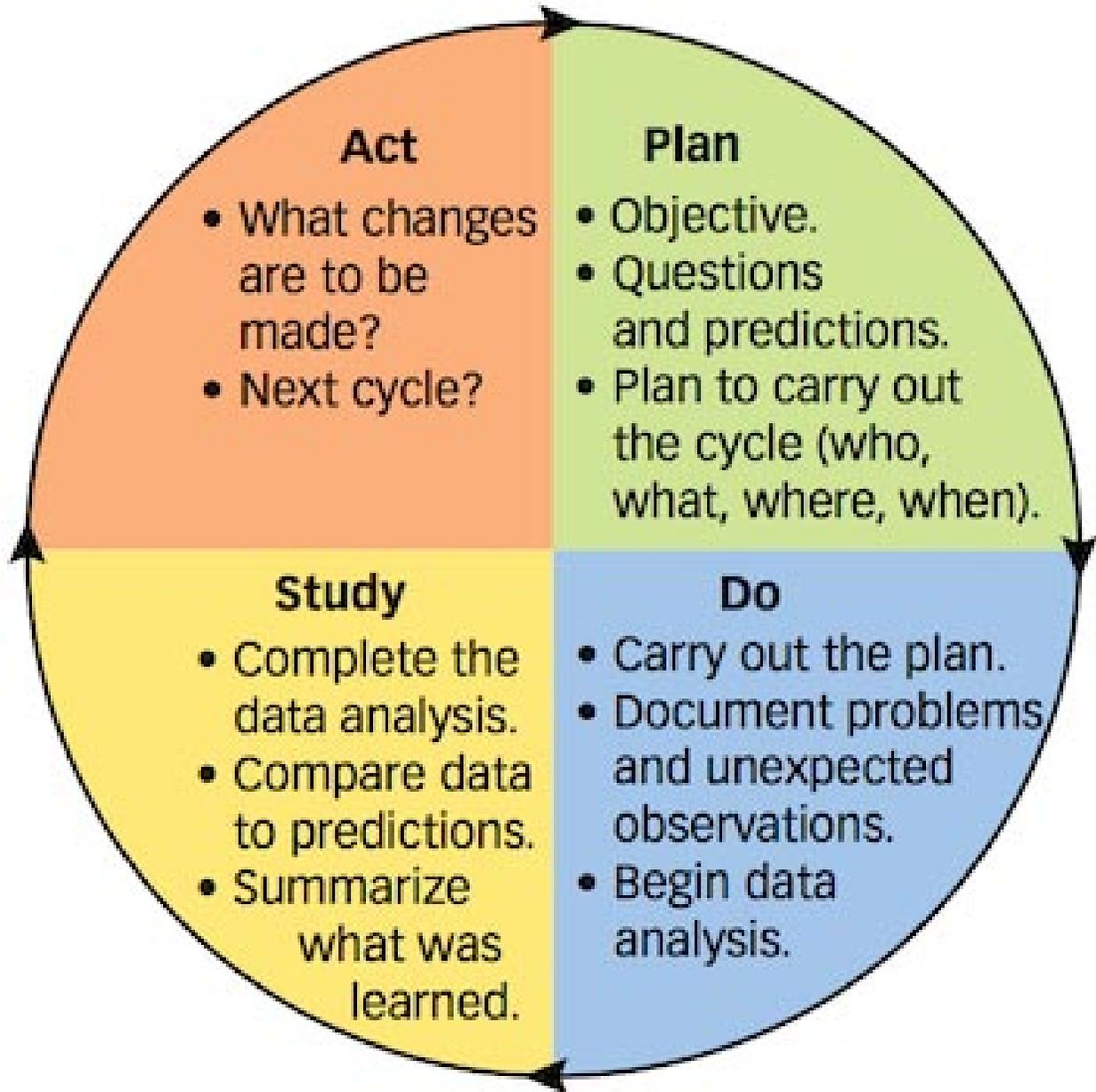


Figure 10. PDSA model (Langley et al., 2009).

test out changes on a small scale, build on learning from these cycles in a structured way before the strategic leadership team decided on continued implementation. This process gave stakeholders the opportunity to see if the change would succeed (Langley et al., 2009). The Plan-Do-Study-Act model was applied to drive three action research phases for this study. The collaborative inquiry partners and I collected data within each action research phase in order to address the questions guiding this study.

In the first phase, collaborative inquiry partners determined the appropriateness of data points used to analyze student connectedness and sense of belonging at Duckton Middle School. In the second phase, implementation of *Responsive Classroom* began. Student focus groups were conducted to determine their opinions of the framework and student connectedness at Duckton Middle School. In the third phase, inquiry partners planned for revisions of implementations based on the return of all students back to in person learning, quantitative data collection occurred, and findings were analyzed to determine the effectiveness of the program on increasing student connectedness and belonging. Table 3 illustrates the focus of practice inquiry matrix, which outlines how sub questions will be answered, the respective stakeholder participants utilized in addressing the respective sub questions, data collection methods for each respective sub questions, and the timeframe for completion of data collection.

Context of the Study

Duckton, North Carolina is located along the coast of North Carolina in Eastern County. Several surrounding communities comprise the Duckton Middle School student population. The Duckton area is directly impacted by the surrounding military bases. The Marine Corps bases at Camp Lejeune and Cherry Point are factors in the lives of the students. Currently, Duckton has close to 400 students who are federally connected by their

Table 3

Focus of Practice Inquiry Matrix

Focus of Practice Inquiry Questions and Sub question	Participant Stakeholders	Data Collection Method	Timeframe
Identification and analysis of the focus of practice regarding mental health, at-risk, and discipline referrals for sixth-grade males	SBMS School Counselors School SBMS Administrators	Demographic Data. Educators Handbook: Discipline Data. LiveSchool: Merits/Demerits, At-Risk and Mental Health Referrals, YRBS Pre Data	November-December 2020
Effect of SEL framework on student behavior for sixth-grade males?	Sixth-Grade Students Sixth-Grade Teachers School Counselors School Administrators	Student Focus Groups	January-March 2021
Effect of implementation of social emotional framework on student behavior and at-risk/mental health referrals?	SBMS Students SBMS Teachers SBMS School Counselors School SBMS Administrators	Educator's Handbook: Discipline Data, LiveSchool: Merits/Demerits, At-Risk and Pride Mental Health Referrals, Teacher Focus Groups	April-May 2020
Effect of implementation of the <i>Responsive Classroom</i> SEL framework have on YRBS data?	Sixth-grade males Teachers Counselors School Administrators	Post Youth Risk Behavior Survey	June-August 2021

parent or guardian being affiliated with a military branch of service. Duckton Middle School's student population, according to the student management system, is currently 835. Since 2018, Duckton Middle School has been affected by two situations that have caused a tremendous loss of in person instruction. In 2018, Hurricane Florence kept our students at home for 39 days. COVID-19 pandemic sent our students home for remote learning March 13, 2020. COVID-19 created a need for smaller number of students for in person learning during the course of the 2020-2021 school year. All students participated in a blended learning environment where half of the students were on campus for two days a week and three days remote. This blended learning occurred until April 2020 when all students returned to in-person learning five days a week. Although we were able to facilitate remote learning, our students and staff have experienced three drastic events that have disrupted the normal learning environment.

Duckton Middle School, serving grades 6-8, is the only middle school in the Duckton township. In the 2019-2020 school year, the demographics of Duckton Middle School were recorded in the student management system as: 71.8% White, 7.54% as African American, 30.1% as Hispanic, 56.1%, 9.9% as two or more races, .91% as Asian, and 0.22% American Indian. In terms of socioeconomic and special education status of the school population, 40.2% of the total student body qualified for the free and reduced lunch program, and 14% of the students were receiving special education services. The current enrollment for sixth-grade is 299 students with 158 of those male and 140 females.

Inquiry Partners

The collaborative inquiry partners who worked with me on the study included school level and district level personnel. Two of the collaborative partners were the principal and assistant principal. Both administrators assisted me in managing the implementation fidelity of

the *Responsive Classroom* advisory lessons. Opportunities for leadership development were available through consistent dialogue with the principal regarding the fidelity of implementation. The *Responsive Classroom* site team were utilized as partners in the study as well. This team of 12 teachers and administrators participated in a four-day *Responsive Classroom* institute that covered the principles and foundation of the social emotional learning framework. The team members were partnered up with other teachers on campus to provide support and to ensure they had the necessary tools and resources to deliver the advisory content and curriculum. The team was used to analyze data and provide feedback on change ideas as the study progressed.

Additionally, there were collaborative partners at the district level, the Director of Student Services and Deputy Superintendent, who were part of the study on the planning side. Not only was this integral in providing up to date information regarding at-risk behaviors at the district level but was also helpful in analyzing data and providing change ideas as a result of the implementation. Figure 11 lists the collaborative partners and their respectful roles during the completion of the study.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to any data collection as part of the action research study, the scholarly practitioner completed ethics certification through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative program (CITI). The completion of the process included training on 13 modules that were submitted for authentication after successfully passing quizzes at a minimum passing rate of 80%. Upon initiation of the study, the scholarly practitioner will request expedited review of the study through East Carolina University's Institutional Review Board, or IRB shown in Appendix A.

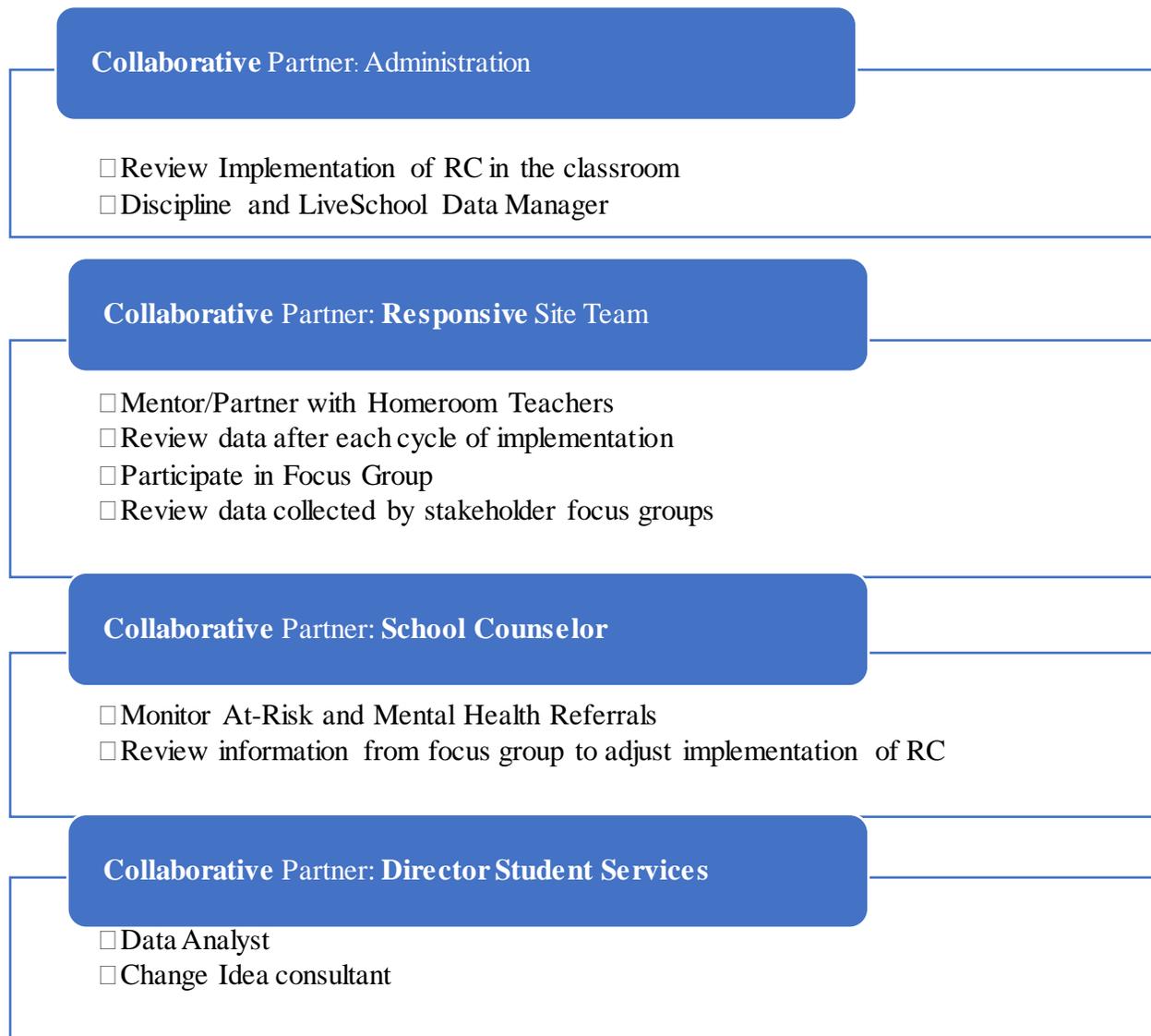


Figure 11. Collaborative inquiry partner roles and responsibilities.

This requirement was completed in advance of implementing the study and updated as appropriate throughout the study to ensure that participants involved were safely and securely protected. Informed consent (see Appendix C) was collected from all participants, staff and students, to ensure that they were aware of the purpose of the research as well as how and with whom the results of the study would be shared. Informed assent was collected from parents via permission slips for the students participating in the focus groups.

Permission to conduct the study by the Eastern County Schools was approved (see Appendix B). Organized by the Director of Research and Accountability, the district's approval process included the consent of the principal of Duckton Middle School. Not only did he support the effort as an administrator but was an integral collaborative partner in the process.

Research and all data collected was stored with a password protected Microsoft 365 one drive account. Research findings were shared with the school's Strategic Leadership Team at Duckton Middle School at the end of phase III so that a determination could be made as to whether to continue implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional learning framework. The Strategic Leadership Team was provided with opportunities to ask questions and provide feedback regarding any necessary changes as part of the three PDSA phases that were included in the action research study.

Inquiry Procedures

The three PDSA phases of action research included mixed methods data collection analyzed by the collaborative inquiry partners, the strategic leadership team, and the administrative team to make revisions to the social emotional framework to improve students' sense of belonging on the campus of Duckton Middle School.

Phase I

Plan

Phase I addressed the sub question: What effect of implementation of social emotional framework on student behavior and the accumulation of merits and demerits? Phase I began with determining what data points were appropriate to collect to analyze potential causes of the disproportionate number of discipline incidents with males, at-risk and mental health referrals, and the prevalence of youth risk behavior (see Figure 12). This planning was conducted with the school administrators and school counselor as collaborative inquiry partners. The discussion included the use of Educators' Handbook, Liveschool, and the referral databases utilized at Duckton Middle School. Educators Handbook houses all discipline referrals collected for the students at the school. LiveSchool is the online resource that contains the merits and demerits given to students by the staff that represents positive behavior and minor infractions. Additionally, decisions were made regarding the data collected from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey used to survey the sixth-grade students.

Do

After the planning phase, data collection began utilizing the tools agreed upon by the collaborative inquiry partners. The method of inquiry was quantitative with use of existing discipline data in Educator's Handbook as well as the LiveSchool positive merit and demerit system. The youth risk behavior survey was deployed to all sixth-grade students (see Appendix G). The mental health and at-risk referral databases were used to collect data on mental health behaviors. The data collection covered school wide referrals and databases; however, due to the discipline data previously presented, a focus will be on the disproportionate number of male discipline incidents. Sixth-grade demographic data is presented in Table 4.

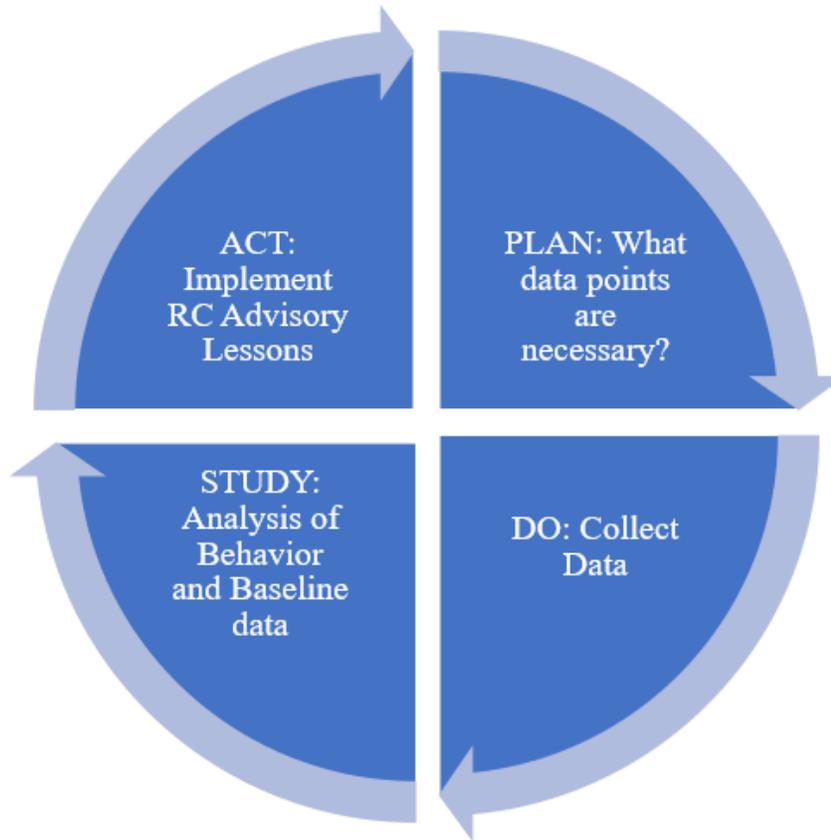


Figure 12. Overview of PDSA for Phase I.

Table 4

Sixth-grade Enrollment Demographics

Race	Students Enrolled	
	Male	Female
American Indian	2	0
Asian	1	3
Black	5	4
Pacific Islander	3	0
White	103	106
Hispanic	23	23
Multi-Racial	13	13
Total Students	150	149

Study

After all data collection was completed, a thorough analysis of the quantitative data occurred with the collaborative inquiry partners, administration and counselors. Analysis of the Youth Risk Behavior survey occurred. The analysis of this data established a baseline for measuring the effect of the social emotional learning framework once implementation began.

Act

Upon analysis of the baseline data, phase I concluded by communicating with sixth-grade teachers on the implementation and delivery plan of advisory lessons provided by *Responsive Classroom*. Advisory meetings are a critical component of the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional learning framework, creating a sense of community within the sixth-grade homeroom classes. The beginning lessons included goal setting, creating a community, and establishing a safe classroom environment for students to engage and converse with each other on topics of interest. Follow-up discussion with the principal created opportunities for leadership development as critical conversations and coaching needed to occur as a result of dialogue within the *Responsive Classroom* action team meetings.

Phase II

Plan

Phase II addressed the sub question: Effect of SEL framework on school connectedness and sense of belonging for sixth-grade males measured by student and focus groups? The second phase continued to look at the effect of the social emotional learning framework on school connectedness and sense of belonging for sixth-grade males in Figure 13. The *Responsive Classroom* action team, as collaborative partners, and the scholarly practitioner developed a plan

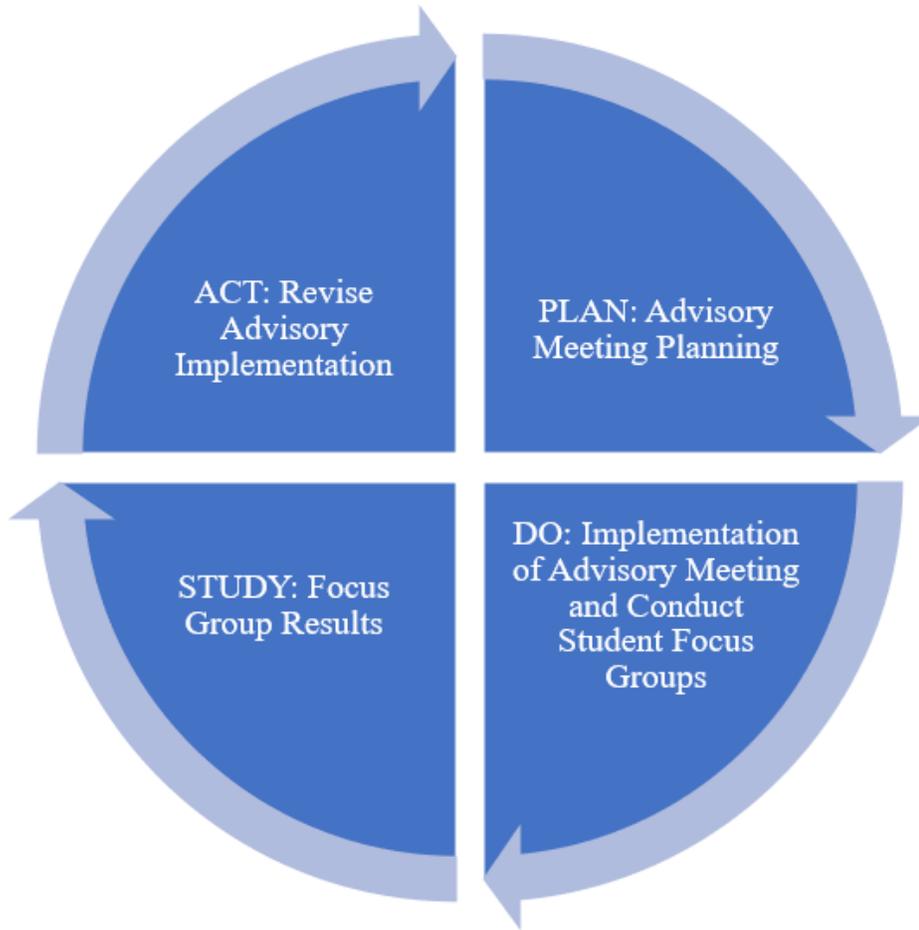


Figure 13. Overview of PDSA for Phase II.

for advisory lesson implementation. Advisory lessons were implemented in all sixth-grade homeroom classes.

Do

After the planning stage, the implementation of advisory lessons occurred. Walkthrough observations by administration and counselors occurred through this part of the phase to monitor the fidelity of implementation. Each homeroom class participated in the advisory meetings as part of the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional framework, but sixth-grade males were the focus. *Responsive Classroom* action team members connected with homeroom teachers to provide support throughout the implementation of lessons. Informed assent was collected by permission from parents for their students to participate in the focus group using Appendix C. Focus groups occurred during the school day in a sixth-grade classroom. Students in the focus group completed a demographic data sheet shown in Appendix E.

Focus groups were conducted using the protocol provided in Appendix F. Sixth-grade male students were selected to participate by their homeroom teacher. Students selected provided an accurate representation of the racial demographic of the school. The purpose of the focus group was to discuss the students' perceptions of advisory meetings. Specifically, questions related to student connectedness, school stressors, student safety, and understanding one another were asked.

Study

Upon completion of the focus groups, I transcribed the focus group session. I used the coding process to generate a description of the focus group setting and participants. Identification of themes from the students' narrative were created (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The collaborative inquiry partners and I analyzed the themes and data that affected student

connectedness and belonging. The results were shared with the *Responsive Classroom* action team.

Act

The *Responsive Classroom* action team worked collaboratively to plan for revisions of advisory lessons and changes were communicated in preparation for Phase III planning with inquiry partners and revision of the implementation plan for advisory lessons. The team worked to determine changes that needed to be made prior to the next round of advisory lessons. The team reviewed the themes that needed to be included in order to increase advocacy and engagement and build community as all students returned to campus in April. This moved the study to the Phase III.

Phase III

Plan

Phase III addressed the sub question: What effect does implementation of *Responsive Classroom* social emotional learning framework have on youth risk behavior as measured by the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (see Figure 14)?

The advisory meetings were adjusted based on information collected from Phase II and elements from various themes were discussed including but not limited to handling stress, honoring diversity, safety for one and all, community outreach and understanding students.

Do

The necessary changes to the advisory meetings were made and teachers were informed prior to the lessons being presented to the students. Upon completion of these lessons, students participated in the post survey of Youth Risk Behavior Survey. Sixth-grade students were invited to participate in the survey. Informed assent was collected via permission slip for parents to give

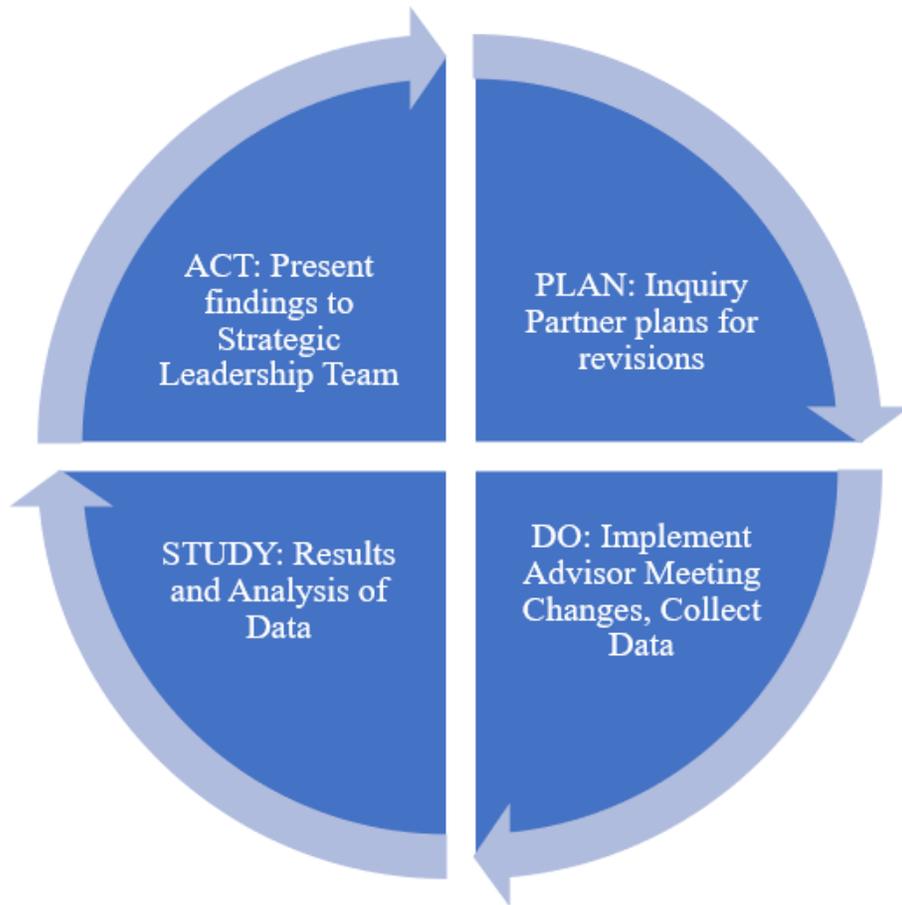


Figure 14. Overview of PDSA for Phase III.

permission for students to participate. The survey was administered in homeroom classes at Duckton Middle School.

Study

Collaborative inquiry partners and I viewed the results of the survey during Phase III. Analysis of the data collected occurred. The triangulation of data was conducted to ensure that biases and perceptions were not skewed. These results were studied before preparing a report that was shared with the strategic leadership team.

Act

The pertinence of Phase III encapsulates the overarching goal of the study. When all factors were considered, phases were completed and data analyzed, I along with the collaborative inquiry partners were able to determine the effect of implementing the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional framework on sixth-grade males' sense of belonging and connectedness. The findings were shared with the principal to make informed decisions on whether to continue implementation of *Responsive Classroom*.

Figure 15 is an overview of how all three phases aligned to formalize the full plan of the action research study. The goal of all three phases was to provide evidence to the strategic leadership team regarding the effect of the implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional framework on student connectedness and belonging. A comprehensive analysis of all three phases were provided in order for the team to make decisions regarding continued implementation.

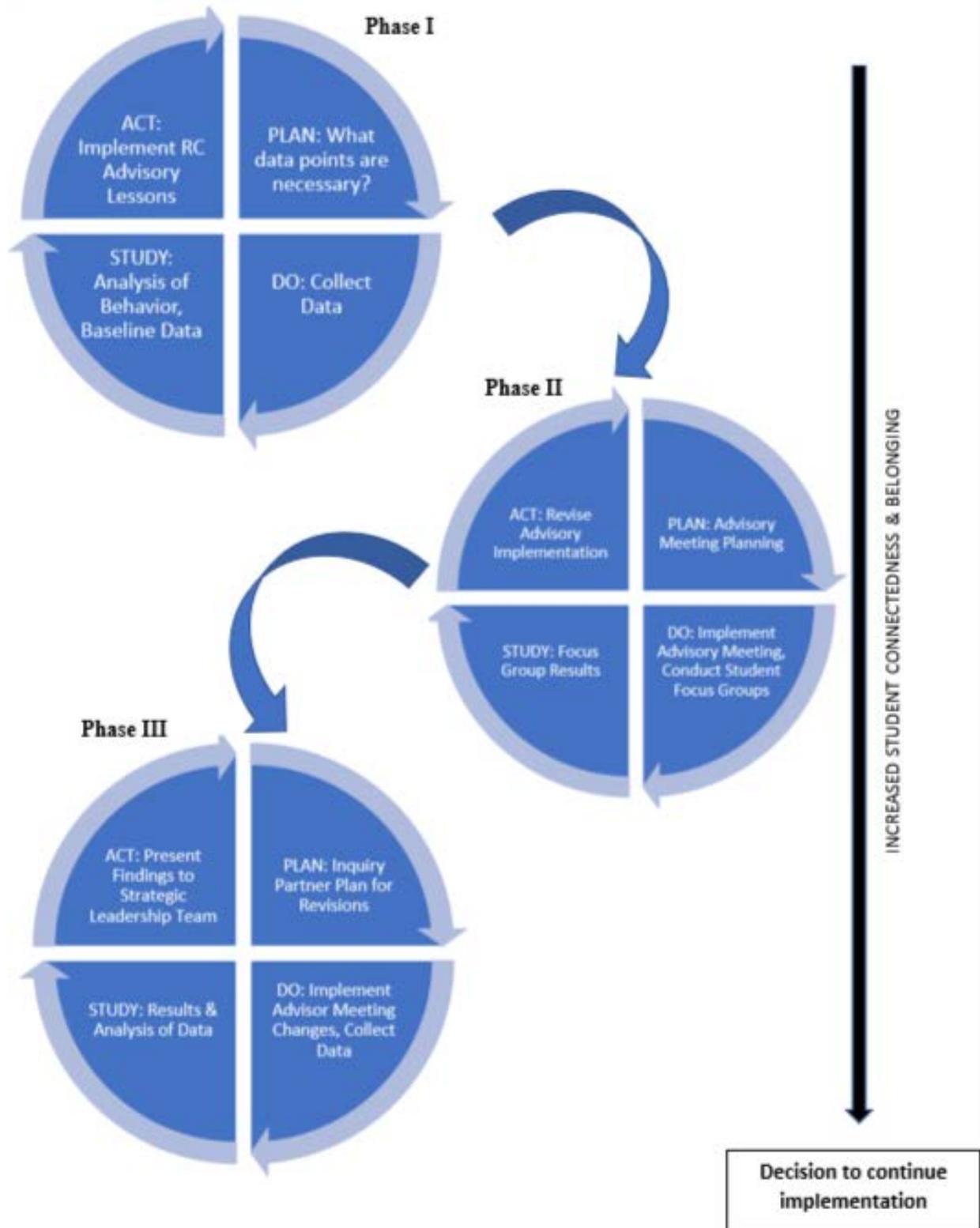


Figure 15. Action research graphic for SEL framework.

Analysis of Approach

The analysis of the approach to the action research study was conducted after completing a pilot study of a focus group of students at Duckton Middle School. The focus group was used to determine student beliefs on belonging, safety, bullying, connectedness, participation in events, and advice on what sixth-graders should know to be successful as they begin their middle school career. This analysis reflected on the institutional practice at Duckton Middle School to develop student connectedness, identification of advocates, reporting of mental health and at-risk behavior, and discipline practices as it relates to sixth-grade males.

Pilot Study Introduction

The pilot study utilized questions pertaining to student connectedness and a sense of belonging at Duckton Middle School. The focus of practice question driving this study relates to how student connectedness and a sense of belonging makes an impact on safety in school. In order to gather participants for the focus group, the scholarly practitioner sent an email to the grade level chairs asking for student selection. The request stated that the scholarly practitioner needed to conduct a focus group with students about student connectedness and safety. Honest, accurate feedback was needed and, as such, teachers would need to submit two to three names of students who would be willing to participate accordingly. Colleagues within the school were asked to assist in compiling a list of names for participants from those submitted.

After receiving the list of names from grade level chairs, the scholarly practitioner and colleagues chose a sample of students that mirrored the demographics of Duckton Middle School. After conducting a brief meeting requesting their participation, seven students were given permission slips to collect informed assent. All seven students returned participation permission slips in order to participate in the focus group. The participants were four females and

three males, four seventh-grade students, one sixth- grade student, and two eight-grade students. There were four white students and three black students.

In order to plan for the action research study, this pilot study aided in refining questions on topics of safety, connectedness, and belonging with a diverse group of students from all three grade levels, male and female, and a range of ethnicities. The questions were developed to offer students the opportunity to express their current beliefs on their own sense of school belonging and school involvement. Details of the pilot study were discussed with two collaborative inquiry partners, the counselor and principal, in a meeting at Duckton Middle School to determine the action research phases.

Pilot Study Design

The pilot project design and data collection techniques used were a focus group of seven students asking specific questions related to student connectedness and a sense of belonging. Students were asked to describe their connections with peers and adults in the school building. Students were asked to identify advocates they feel comfortable talking to and issues they have. Students were asked how often adults greet them in the building with a follow up of how often would you like to be asked that question. These questions relate to the students' sense of belonging within the school. In order to collect data on student connectedness, students were asked about the activities they were involved in at school and if they were not involved, what the barriers were for participation.

Other questions as part of the pilot study focus group pertained to student safety, where they felt safe and less safe and specific times during the day. These questions were created as a result of the student survey information collected from the previous summer school session. The final question proposed in the design was asking for specific advice for rising sixth-graders. As

the student relates to the connectedness of sixth-grade males, the question was designed to formulate a plan to connect sixth-grade students in a way that their sense of belonging increased in order to be more successful in school.

Pilot Study Procedures

Participants were identified by selecting a purposive group of seven students. Students ranged from different races, grade level, and gender. Names were secured and students were invited to be a part of the focus group. Students were given permission slips to collect informed assent (see Appendix D) from their parents/guardians and indicate their need of transportation after school. Students were reminded the day of by being called to the office to attend the focus group. Students were asked to report to the sixth-grade annex building for the meeting. The setting of the focus group was chosen in order to have as much space so students would be comfortable and away from any distractions that would interrupt the session. Additionally, the chairs were set up for participants to see each other as they answered the questions. Food and drinks were provided. The room was set up well in advance of students arriving and the recording device was ready at the onset of the meeting. Upon arrival, students were greeted by a sixth-grade teacher. Upon entering the space, students were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D) and enjoy refreshments as we waited for all participants to arrive. The questionnaire yielded the following results.

The average number of years attending Duckton Middle School was two years. The average amount of schools attended since Kindergarten by the sample of participants is three. The average number of years the sample attended school in Eastern County was 6.5. One student listed that they had repeated a grade level since Kindergarten. Four students do not participate in clubs at the middle school. Four students indicated they do not participate in sports. Two

students indicated they do not participate in clubs or sports at Duckton Middle School. Of those two students, one of them participates in activities outside of the school. One student indicated that they didn't have an adult advocate at school that they felt comfortable talking to.

The questionnaire was used to collect data on how students were connected at school with clubs and/or sports as well as participating in activities outside of school. Additionally, students were able to identify if they have an adult advocate that they feel comfortable talking with at school and or outside of school which relates to their sense of belonging.

Students gathered around a semicircle together to complete the questionnaire and talk with each other prior to the start of the focus group. A script was created to welcome participants, explain purpose and context of the focus group, explain what a focus group is, and make introductions to each other as well as the adults in the room. The explanation that information is confidential, and no names will be used was given. A note-taker was present, and the session was also recorded.

The list of questions was generated (see Appendix E). Questions were sent for review by the collaborative partner for revision. Six questions were chosen with options of follow up questions. The questions started general and moved to a more specific need for answers throughout the focus group. The focus group began immediately. Questions were asked utilizing probes and follow up questions to explore the key concepts more deeply. There was wait time utilized for all participants to answer the questions. The notetaker monitored time throughout. At the end of the time, the focus group ended by thanking participants, gave them contact information for further follow up if requested, and explained how you will the data will be shared. The focus group lasted approximately an hour and fifteen minutes.

Pilot Study Results

When asked to describe your connections with peers and or adults at school, students identified feeling silly, weird, and smiling. The emoji of happy and stressed was selected by three students. Drama and stress were stated in relation to their emoji. In relation to teachers, several students identified smiley faces in order to indicate their positive connections with them as well as generally taking a liking to their teachers. All students in the focus group had an opportunity to identify their adult advocate at school, and most students identified specific people noting that “they were cool,” “they were able to listen and did not take bullying.” One student stated, “I could talk about anything with no judging” and that “I feel comfortable seeking them out to specifically talk to them if issues happened at school.” Another student, a sixth-grader, shared that they did not trust teachers yet because they were still trying to develop a level of trust with an adult or peer.

When asked how often they were greeted by an adult or asked how they were doing overall, several students identified specific teachers who asked these questions every day. Several students noted that one teacher was the only teacher who asked them how they were doing every single day. One student noted specifically that custodians were the adults who asked how they were doing during the day. When asked how often they would like to be asked how they were doing, most students said every day while one said, “two times a week would be enough.” One student noted the importance of the student asking the teacher how they were doing because “they have bad days too. We're all human that goes through things good or bad.”

When asked what activities at school students were involved in, the running club was mentioned so they could spend time with their friends. Drama, in order to express themselves, student council, sports, and cheerleading were shared. Two students indicated that they did not

participate in anything during school or outside of school because they had “too much on their plate with babysitting and practicing with their instrument.” One student noted that he did not hear anything about activities at school until after they had started for the year.

The next question used a Likert scale to indicate how safe they felt at school, with students then being asked to explain their answers. One student said, “two, because I worry about animals and traffic (students walking during transitions) on the breezeway.” One student indicated the number four, because “nothing bad has happened but it’s still possible.” Another student indicated the number three, because “inside school, students are rude and makes them feel bad.” This student also followed up by stating he was someone who made fun of others but not often. One student indicated that they felt safe on a level three because of the open environment of the school building. He sees bullying, he sees people being rude, showing dirty looks, and acts that lead him to not feel safe. The conversation turned quickly into students identifying how unsafe they felt because of the lack of boundaries surrounding the school. One student mentioned that “anyone could come in at any time.” Students identified certain places that they feel safe. Specifically, students identified the orchestra room and the chorus room mainly because it was “far away and out of place, it had closets that you could hide, and curtains that would hide you from the outside.” One student indicated a teacher has a metal bat to be used in case of a lockdown. Students feel unsafe during physical activity time because of trucks on the highway and teachers staying in one area while other people are walking through.

The last question related to students giving one statement of advice to rising sixth graders regarding being successful in middle school and what they would tell them. Students spoke the following: “be respectful, help clean up, do your work, be respectful, don't let anyone get you down, teachers and students will help you, stay away from the bad students, be nice, focus on

work, figure out who you are it gets better, show respect to your teachers, stay on top of your work.”

Pilot Study Analysis

Students feel safe within the walls of the school. It was eye opening to hear students’ perspectives on how open the campus is and how that relates to their safety daily at school. Students have advocates at school. They noted those teachers they feel comfortable talking to about certain issues, teachers who do not tolerate bullying, and teachers who have no judgement towards them when responding to their issues. Students noted that just like some of their friends, teachers are there to support them if they are having a bad day. There was a level of empathy from the students as well in terms of noting that it is important to ask the teacher how they are doing as well. One student noted it is a “win-win” situation if we both ask each other.

Students who were connected to activities at school noted external barriers from preventing them from joining clubs or sports such as babysitting and other household expectations. A follow-up question that was not planned as part of the initial focus group protocol came up regarding how important connections in school are relative to success. Students noted the importance of not isolating yourself and getting out of the house. One student stated the following, “Human interactions are key not just on your phone because on your phone it’s not the same as actually going up to someone. Saying hi, since technology is so advanced these days, everyone just think that you should just text instead of actually going up to see someone.” Students saw the importance of human connection regarding misinterpreting information and communication. Most students indicated that they preferred face to face communication with their friends over texting but realize that it is difficult when not in school.

Focus group protocol was influenced by the pilot and revisions were made based upon the quality of responses to the questions and the feedback from students about the questions' quality. Several focus group questions were revised as a result of the students' responses. Conversations regarding distinguishing between bullying and being rude, the definition of bullying, school rules and policies, and the behavior system were all made prevalent by students. This was a clear indicator that comfort level increased among the student group as the focus group moved along and the candidness of answers increased. As a result of this pilot study, focus group protocol questions were modified in order to more accurately elicit the data needed to understand students' sense of belonging and connectedness at Duckton Middle School.

Inquiry Design Rigor

Trustworthiness is a significant element in establishing inquiry design rigor. There is persistent and prolonged participation at Duckton Middle School. As a former assistant principal, I established trust with the teachers and understand the culture and climate of the school (Mertler, 2019). For this action research study, participants were part of a purposive sample to provide an accurate representation of the school's demographic. The purposive sample completed surveys, took part in focus groups, and were observed by collaborative inquiry partners. Data collection was rich and detailed so that thick descriptions were available to develop trustworthiness. These multiple points were analyzed with the intention that findings came from multiple methods and triangulation will occurred (Mertler, 2019).

Transferability is present as the focus of practice has been described based on the specific issues at Duckton Middle School. Although it is not generalizable, there was information shared specific to the site (Mertler, 2019). As the scholarly practitioner and a former administrator at Duckton Middle School, there was persistent and prolonged participation at the site. As I was an

assistant principal for three years at the school, I built a level of trust with the staff that will implement *Responsive Classroom* and am acutely aware of the culture of the school.

Dependability was addressed as the collaborative inquiry partners kept me abreast of ever-changing needs that occurred at Duckton Middle School. As the scholarly practitioner, I described any changes that occurred that may affect the study to help the study remain stable (Mertler, 2019). Another significant strategy used was peer debriefing. The collaborative inquiry partners were beneficial in conducting peer debriefing as we reviewed and critiqued the research so that it was free of personal bias (Mertler, 2019). Member checking occurred so that students and teachers could verify that their perceptions were accurately depicted and had credibility (Mertler, 2019).

Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions

A delimitation was that this study was specific to Duckton Middle School's students, faculty, and community. Therefore, the findings may not be generalizable to other schools and populations. Since it was also specific to sixth-grade, this study and the findings herein may not be generalizable to other grade levels at Duckton Middle School. A limitation of this study involved teacher buy-in. COVID-19 resulted in students being out of school for an extensive period at the end of 2019-2020. During the school year 2020-2021, students came in alternating days to reduce the number of individuals in the building at any one given time to prevent the spread of COVID-19. On top of feeling stressed about covering standardized curriculum in a blended learning environment where half of the students are in person and the other half are remote, implementing a framework was met with resistance. Additional stressors such as the lingering effects from Hurricane Florence which devastated the community influenced the data collected.

An assumption of this study was that teachers would implement the *Responsive Classroom* curriculum with fidelity. Observations were conducted to ensure this was occurring but was only applicable for the time observers were in the classroom. Another assumption is that students would be honest and transparent with their responses on the survey. Students may not have been honest because they were concerned that responses would be reported to their parent or guardian or that the school may not be pleased with their responses.

Role of the Scholarly Practitioner

My role as a scholarly practitioner was through the lens of a former administrator at Duckton Middle School. The focus of practice came to be as a result of my time as an Assistant Principal at the school from 2017-2018 to 2019-2020. I was trained in using the *Responsive Classroom* framework with a group of teachers in 2018-2019 and began the *Responsive Classroom* action team at the school to discuss implementation. Administration observed sixth-grade homerooms and I gathered observational data to analyze that data collection with the collaborative inquiry partners. In collaboration with the inquiry partners, I analyzed the data from the YRBS survey results to determine the effects of *Responsive Classroom* comparing the pre and post YRBS survey results.

The sample of students were sixth-graders, and I have had no previous connections with these students since I left the school after the 2019-2020 school year. I had no position of authority with the teachers who were a part of the focus group. The collaborative inquiry partners were integral for ensuring that I accurately reported, interpreted, and triangulated the data before presenting the findings to the administration for determination of whether implementation of this framework for SEL would continue at Duckton Middle School.

Summary

The purpose of the action research study was designed to determine the impact of a social emotional learning framework, *Responsive Classroom*, on student connectedness with sixth grad males to increase their sense of belonging. This occurred over the course of three phases of a PDSA cycle. Each phase was designed to answer one of the inquiry questions of the focus of practice. In the next chapter, the study results are presented. The data from the student and staff focus groups, Youth Risk Behavior Survey, discipline rates from Educators Handbook, demerits and merits from Liveschool are analyzed to determine what effect the implementation of the social emotional framework had upon the sixth-grade students at Duckton Middle School.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Duckton, a township of Eastern County in Eastern North Carolina, includes a community of schools comprised of three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. Based on data collected from an at-risk referral database from Duckton Middle School, the school has experienced an increase in student mental health referrals over a three-year trend. The community has also endured both student and parent suicide, which has raised concern leading to increased advocacy and supervision regarding students' emotional health. Students who have a sense of belonging and feel connected to their school are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors that affect social emotional wellbeing and discipline (Juvonen, 2006). Student belonging is "the extent to which [they] feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (Goodenow, 1993a, p. 80). In contrast, students who felt a weak or negative sense of belonging were less likely to identify and intervene in abusive or unhealthy relationships and behaviors. These unhealthy behaviors include, but are not limited to, increased substance abuse, habitual smoking, and increased risk for mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety ("A Nationwide Look at Middle School Students' Sense of Belonging - EVERFI", 2021).

The Duckton community has had its share of traumatic events that have led to increased isolation and separation from peer groups, teachers, and advocates. Hurricane Florence in 2019 left students out of school with no instruction and/or consistent connection to school for 39 days. Students were left homeless for over a year, were uprooted from their community, and separated from social groups and connections. With the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020, students were immediately sent home to receive remote instruction. Students were disconnected from face-to-face opportunities of belonging, connectedness and community. As a result,

students' social emotional needs rose, resulting in demand for increased school connectedness and belonging.

Given the disparity among disciplinary incidents for males, the focus of this inquiry was to monitor the effects of students' connectedness and sense of belonging through the implementation of a social emotional framework with sixth-grade males at Duckton Middle School. This focus attempted to address the rate of discipline and at-risk incidents specifically with sixth-grade males. With the presence of an increased need for student connectedness, implementation of a social emotional learning framework, *Responsive Classroom*, was an opportunity for students to have a better chance of being successful academically and behaviorally (Center for Responsive Schools, 2020a). Students had a presence of advocates who got to know them on a personal level. They had a positive peer group which helped limit behavioral incidents, so that students were more likely to be successful academically when they were engaged in the school and community (CDC, 2020).

The purpose of this action research study was to monitor the effects of implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional learning framework with sixth-grade students on student connectedness and a sense of belonging to address the disparity among males and behavior. The main question guiding this focus of practice was: What effect does the implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* Social Emotional Learning framework have on student connectedness for sixth-grade males at Duckton Middle School? There were three subquestions used to aid in answering the main question:

1. What effect does implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional learning framework have on student behavior as measured by disciplinary referrals?

2. What effect does implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional learning framework have on student connectedness as measured by student and teacher focus groups?
3. What effect does implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional learning framework have on mental health as measured by the Youth Risk Behavior Survey?

In order to answer the first sub question, disciplinary data and positive behavior points data were collected over the course of the school year to review student behavior. Trends in disciplinary and positive behavior points data were affected due to the response to the COVID-19 global pandemic. As a result, students were sent home for the rest of the semester for remote learning in March 2020. For the 2020-2021 school year, students in Eastern County participated in school in a hybrid model. Half of the students were in school Monday and Tuesday and remote the remainder of the week for three days. The other half of the students were remote Monday through Wednesday and in school for instruction on Thursday and Friday. This model was determined by guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to maintain social distancing of six-feet between students while in the building. Students and teachers were required to wear masks each day. This routine continued for the majority of the school year. All students were able to return to in person, face-to-face instruction on school campus in April 2021. The study and data collection were affected based on COVID-19 in terms of the timeline of the study, the implementation schedule, administration of surveys due to student quarantines, participation of students in focus groups based on hybrid learning models, as well as the effects on implementation without a having all students on campus at one time. The second question was measured by conducting both student and teacher focus groups to identify

themes of student connectedness, belonging, and safety during the implementation of Responsive Classroom. The third question was monitored by the number of at-risk and mental health referrals over the course of the year, as well as a pre- and post- dissemination of the middle school Youth Risk Behavior Survey. Survey results were provided by the middle school in aggregated form.

Responsive Classroom Implementation

The implementation of *Responsive Classroom* was initiated by organizing a *Responsive Classroom* Action Team of teachers, counselor, and administrators to collaborate and determine what implementation would look like for the sixth-grade students at the middle school. The team, as collaborative inquiry partners, were consulted throughout all three phases of implementation.

Phase 1

The first phase began with determining the data points that were appropriate to collect to analyze potential causes of the disproportionate number of discipline incidents in sixth-grade, specifically with males and the prevalence of youth risk behavior. Planning meetings were conducted with the school administrators and one of the school counselors as collaborative inquiry partners. The school counselor was active in providing documentation needed for the *Responsive Classroom* action team to make decisions. Data points that were considered were the use of Educators' Handbook, which houses all discipline referrals and Liveschool, the online program that stores merits and demerits collected by students at Duckton Middle School. Once data points were determined, school administrators, the school counselor, and members of the *Responsive Classroom* action team reviewed the data. It was agreed upon that these data sets would be useful to compare trends from previous years.

The principal and the school counselor agreed to use the Youth Risk Behavior Survey as a pre- and post-measure. The surveys would be administered in homeroom classes by their homeroom teacher. This is the same person who would be presenting the *Responsive Classroom* advisory lessons during the study.

To assist the data collection, I converted the paper/pencil Youth Risk Behavior Survey into an electronic version in Qualtrics. This provided up to date information on which classes took part in the survey without compromising anonymity. This was important in order to be sure advisory teachers were providing time and support for students to complete the survey, as well as prompting of administration to follow-up with teachers who did not have their students complete the survey as yet. The school counselor, who was an integral part in providing communication and consistency during the study, provided the *Responsive Classroom* action team and the sixth-grade teachers with a PowerPoint to project for students with directions on the purpose of the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, the link to share, and alternate assignments for students/parents who opted out of the survey. I was able to monitor the timing of the dissemination so that students were able to take the survey while on campus. A thorough analysis of the quantitative data collected during the presurvey occurred with the collaborative inquiry partners, administration and counselors and advisory team. Part of the discussion with the advisory team contained dialogue about the developmental appropriateness of the survey. This conversation stemmed from a sixth-grade teacher, at first, refusing to administer the survey because they were not comfortable with the questions on religious grounds. Administration and the school counselor, in lieu of the concerned teacher, administered the survey to this teacher's class instead. The advisory team read through the results of each question. It was the team's responsibility to be sure they were knowledgeable of the questions - which were provided weeks

in advance for review - and to be able to provide support to their partner teacher, if needed. The analysis of this data established a baseline for measuring the effect of the social emotional learning framework once implementation began.

Upon analysis of the baseline data, phase one concluded by communicating with sixth-grade teachers on the implementation and delivery plan of advisory lessons provided by *Responsive Classroom*. These lessons were reviewed by the school counselor and the *Responsive Classroom* action team in advance of delivering to the sixth-grade team. Advisory meetings were a critical component of the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional learning framework by creating a sense of community within the sixth-grade homeroom classes. The beginning lessons included goal setting, creating a community, and establishing a safe classroom environment for students to engage and converse with each other on topics of interest. These conversations led to follow-up discussions with the principal that created opportunities for leadership development as critical conversations and coaching needed to occur as a result of dialogue within the *Responsive Classroom* action team meetings. Specifically, the principal needed to have one-on-one meetings with a teacher who was actively choosing not to follow the plan and implementation protocols.

Phase 2

During Phase 2, the *Responsive Classroom* action team and I developed a plan for advisory lesson implementation. The plan was to implement these advisory lessons were implemented in all sixth-grade homeroom classes. Members of the *Responsive Classroom* action team were partnered with the sixth-grade teachers who had not received official *Responsive Classroom* training.

The implementation of advisory lessons occurred twice a week. Once while students in Cohort A were on campus and the other with Cohort B students were on campus. In order to

determine the fidelity of the implementation, a walkthrough tool was created. The *Responsive Classroom* action team and school counselor created the walkthrough tool. The tool was then reviewed with the sixth-grade teachers. It was expected that the administration would conduct walkthrough observations on a weekly basis to monitor the fidelity of implementation.

Unfortunately, the number of walkthroughs that were conducted were minimal. There were three administrators on campus, one specifically assigned to sixth-grade, and a total of seven observations conducted during the study. With regards to future implementation, it will be necessary for the administration to set time to conduct walkthrough tools to determine the fidelity of implementation. *Responsive Classroom* action team members were partnered with homeroom teachers to provide support throughout the implementation of lessons. When meeting with the *Responsive Classroom* action team throughout the study, feedback was provided that there was not enough time to effectively work with the partner teachers to help with implementation. As a result, follow-up conversations with administration were conducted. It was determined that *Responsive Classroom* action team members would be provided with time, away from other duties, to help facilitate their partner roles. While there was always an option given and solution to the problem found, the lack of follow-through was evident. There was one sixth-grade teacher who decided to create their own lessons and refused to follow the protocol and advisory lessons by *Responsive Classroom*.

Evidence of the lack of follow-up and implementation concerns came from focus groups with students and teachers. Focus groups were held during the school day with sixth-grade teachers during their planning period. The focused groups were conducted during the middle of the implementation of Phase 2 with opportunity to provide follow-up suggestions to improve implementation. Specifically, I suggested that walkthrough observations increase in order to

determine which teachers were providing advisory lessons as outlined by the study and the *Responsive Classroom* action team.

Focus groups were conducted using the protocol provided in Appendix F with sixth-grader. Sixth-grade male students were selected to participate by their homeroom teacher. Students selected provided an accurate representation of the racial demographic of the school. The purpose of the focus group was to discuss the students' perceptions of advisory meetings. Specifically, questions related to student connectedness, school stressors, student safety, and understanding one another were asked.

The *Responsive Classroom* action team worked collaboratively to plan for revisions of advisory lessons and changes were communicated in preparation for Phase III planning with inquiry partners and revision of the implementation plan for advisory lessons. The team worked to determine changes that needed to be made prior to the next round of advisory lessons. Specifically, there were changes that needed to be made in order to establish community among all students as a result of all students returning to in-person learning in April. Some teachers were apprehensive about combining cohorts and creating new communities amongst their students. The school counselor and the *Responsive Classroom* action team revisited the lessons and made changes to address the concerns. The team reviewed the themes that needed to be included in order to increase engagement and build community as all students returned to campus in April.

Phase 3

Phase III addressed the sub question: What effect does implementation of *Responsive Classroom* social emotional learning framework have on youth risk behavior as measured by the Youth Risk Behavior Survey? The advisory meetings were adjusted based on information

collected from Phase II and elements from various themes were discussed including but not limited to handling stress, honoring diversity, safety for one and all, community outreach and understanding students. The necessary changes to the advisory meetings were made and teachers were informed prior to the lessons being presented to the students. Upon completion of these lessons, students participated in the post survey of Youth Risk Behavior Survey. Sixth-grade students were invited to participate in the survey in the same format as the pre-survey. The survey was administered in homeroom classes at Duckton Middle School ,and I was able to monitor the progress of the survey through Qualtrics.

Collaborative inquiry partners and I viewed the results of the survey. Analysis of the data occurred, and findings were presented to the administration. The triangulation of data was conducted to ensure that biases and perceptions were not skewed. These results were studied before preparing a report that was shared with the strategic leadership team. The pertinence of Phase III encapsulates the overarching goal of the study. When all factors were considered, phases were completed and data analyzed, I along with the collaborative inquiry partners were able to determine the effect of implementing the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional framework on sixth-grade males' sense of belonging and connectedness.

At the completion of the study, I was able to meet one-on-one with the principal to discuss implementation efforts and next steps. I shared the findings were shared with the principal. The conversation provided opportunity for us to discuss necessary steps to consider if further implementation would occur on campus. In an effort to ensure the fidelity of practice, it is imperative that at least one administrator take the role of monitoring advisory lessons and conducting walkthroughs on a regular basis. The principal discussed that this implementation would move to other grade levels in the next school year and all teachers would play a role in the

providing lessons. The *Responsive Classroom* action team would need to have ample time to plan ahead for lessons and have time set aside, free of other duties and responsibilities, to support those teachers who have not received formalized training. Additionally, the administration would need to consider action steps for teachers who do not present lessons as outlined.

Data Collection

To answer the focus of practice guiding questions, I used a mixed method approach of action research, believing that both quantitative and qualitative data would provide greater insight into the effects of implementing the *Responsive Classroom* framework. For the purpose of this study, I utilized three phases of a Plan, Do, Study, Act Cycle. The PDSA gave much-needed structure to the implementation of *Responsive Classroom* at Duckton Middle School and provided opportunities for reflection and improvements. Data collected was studied to determine the impact of the change from implementing *Responsive Classroom* in order to revise the next phase of implementation (Crow et al., 2019). The effects of COVID impacted the data collection in several ways. Since students were in school in a hybrid format, only half of the students in the class participated in *Responsive Classroom* face to face at a time. Students only received *Responsive Classroom* lessons once a week. When all students returned to in person learning in April, *Responsive Classroom* was delivered twice a week. The first phase established baseline data for the focus of practice. Data was collected from the school's discipline database, the behavior points database, and the Youth Risk Behavior Survey completed by sixth-grade students. The subsequent phases included the implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional framework followed by an analysis of subsequent data gleaned from the sources from the first phase as well as student and staff focus groups.

Participants

As part of the implementation of *Responsive Classroom* from January 2021 through May 2021, ten sixth-grade teachers conducted advisory lessons in their homeroom classes to all sixth-grade students. Sixth-grade students were invited to take part in a pre and post Youth Risk Behavior Survey at the beginning and end of the implementation of *Responsive Classroom*. In April 2021, all sixth-grade teachers were invited to be a part of the teacher focus group to gather qualitative data regarding the implementation of *Responsive Classroom*. In May 2021, seven males were invited to be a part of a student focus group.

Teacher Demographics

The teacher focus group consisted of 9 teachers who were part of the sixth-grade team. The group consisted of six females and three males with an age range between 24 and 51. Years of experience in education with teachers ranged from less than one year to 23 year and years at Duckton Middle School ranged between less than one year to 16 years. Of the nine teachers, five were advisors or coaches and four were not. Only two teachers are not connected to a club, sport or organization within the school or in the community. The teachers were part of two different group discussions related to the implementation of *Responsive Classroom*. The discussions included training on the advisory lessons and the core beliefs of *Responsive Classroom*. These discussions included identification of support and clarifying questions regarding implementing the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional framework to sixth-grade students during the research study (see Table 5).

Table 5

Teacher Focus Group Demographics

Teacher Participants	Gender	Age	Years of Teaching Experience	Years At SBMS	Years in OCS	Years in Middle School	Advisor or Coach at SBMS	Activities Sponsor outside of SBMS
Teacher 1	F	25	1	1	1	1	No	Yes
Teacher 2	M	51	23	11	16	23	No	Yes
Teacher 3	F	31	7.5	3	7.5	7.5	No	No
Teacher 4	F	51	15+	5	5	10	Yes	No
Teacher 5	M	52	7	2	7	2	Yes	Yes
Teacher 6	M	41	16	16	16	16	Yes	No
Teacher 7	F	36	15	15	15	15	Yes	No
Teacher 8	F	29	8	5	6	8	Yes	No
Teacher 9	F	24	<1	<1	<1	<1	No	No

Student Demographics

All sixth-grade students were given the opportunity to take a pre and post of the Youth Risk Behavior Survey. There are 148 males and 147 females. Of those, 209 students are White, 46 students are Hispanic, and 26 students are multi-Racial (see Table 6).

Between January 21 and January 29, 2021, sixth-grade students were invited to take the Youth Risk Behavior Survey. Of the 296 students enrolled at Duckton Middle School, 186 individuals started and completed the presurvey. The gender and race makeup of the students who took the presurvey indicate 47.5% were male and 52.49% were female. White students made up 85.96% of the demographic, followed by 4.68% black, and 4.09% American Indian or Alaska Native (see Table 7). The percentage of students by age were 53.59% age 11 and 43.09% age 12 (see Table 8).

This survey was administered by Duckton Middle School staff prior to the implementation of *Responsive Classroom*. At the end of the semester implementation of *Responsive Classroom* from May 11 through May 28, 174 students started and completed the post survey administered by Duckton Middle School. The gender and race makeup of the students who took the post survey were 50.60% male and 49.4% female. There were 77.85% white students, 12.03 black students and 4.43 American Indian or Alaska Native. Upon the close of the survey, the data was exported into an Excel spreadsheet to begin data analysis. There is a difference in age and race from pre- to post-survey due to student transfer enrollment and withdrawals, as well as students having birthdays between the pre- and post-survey.

In May, a student focus group was conducted that consisted of seven males who were enrolled as sixth-graders at Duckton Middle School. All of the students in the group identified as males and six of the seven students were white. All of the students indicated that they had an

Table 6

Sixth-Grade Total Enrollment Demographics

Race	Students Enrolled		
	Male	Female	Total
American Indian	2	0	2
Asian	1	3	4
Black	3	2	5
Pacific Islander	3	0	3
White	102	107	209
Hispanic	23	23	46
Multi-Racial	14	12	26
Total Students	148	147	296

Table 7

YRBS Demographics: Gender and Race by % Total

	Male	Female	White	Black	American Indian or Alaska Native	Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander	Asian
Pre	47.51	52.49	85.9	4.68	4.09	1.75	3.51
Post	50.60	49.40	77.85	12.03	4.43	2.53	3.16

Table 8

YRBS Demographics: Age by % Total

Age	10	11	12	13	14
Pre	0	53.59	43.09	0	0
Post	.59	24.26	69.23	5.33	.59

adult advocate both at school and outside of school. Only one student indicated they were involved in clubs, two were involved in sports, and four were involved in activities outside of school (see Table 9).

Data Analysis

The inquiry was a mixed-method action research study that consisted of qualitative and quantitative data collection. For the qualitative data analysis, data were prepared and organized from the transcripts for analysis; then reduced into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes; and finally represented in figures, tables, and the discussion (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I began by transcribing the focus groups using Microsoft Stream and reviewed them for accuracy. Then, I read through the transcripts to describe, classify, and interpret the data by forming codes. The process of coding involves making sense of the text that was collected from interviews, focus groups, walkthrough observations, and documents (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The coding was used to aggregate the data into small categories of information, seeking evidence for the codes from different databases being used in the study, and then assigning a label to the code. I used lean coding because I began with a short list of initial categories and then expanded as I reviewed the database of information (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Specifically, the process used to analyze the qualitative data is based on Grounded Theory. Ground Theory provides a procedure for developing categories of information (open coding), interconnecting the categories (axial coding), building a “story” that connects the categories (selective coding) and ending with a discursive set of theoretical propositions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). By using the open coding phase, I examined the transcripts from the focus groups to identify categories and themes derived from the text. Once the categories were developed, I identified a single category from the open coding list as the central phenomenon

Table 9

Student Focus Group Demographics

Student Participant	Race	Age	Years in OCS	Club Involvement	Sports Involvement	Activity Involvement
Student 1	White	12	7	No	No	Yes
Student 2	White	12	7	No	No	Yes
Student 3	Multi	12	7	Yes	Yes	Yes
Student 4	White	12	7	No	Yes	No
Student 5	White	12	5	No	No	No
Student 6	White	11	7	No	No	No
Student 7	White	11	7	No	No	Yes

(Creswell & Poth, 2018). Then I identified subcategories that connected to the central phenomenon.

The quantitative data was collected from discipline referrals, positive behavior points system, pre- and post-Youth Risk Behavior Survey, and walkthrough tools. Discipline data was collected over the course of the school year. Additionally, a positive behavior point system of assigning merits and demerits was used throughout the year. This was important to collect as the number of discipline incidents would skew the data because students participating in a hybrid model and were only on campus for two days out of the week. This would not compare to the trend data used to identify the problem of practice where discipline incidents were reviewed when students were on campus five days a week.

A walkthrough tool was created by the *Responsive Classroom* action team. It was disseminated to sixth-grade teachers for feedback. The tool was revised based on feedback given before being implemented by the school administration. This tool was developed in order for administrators to gauge the fidelity of implementation and provide ongoing support for teachers throughout the process (see Appendix H). Walkthroughs are brief 5–7-minute observations where there is a set rubric that guides the observers to look for specific elements. School administrators conducted walkthrough observations throughout the implementation cycle. The Youth Risk Behavior pre- and post-surveys were disseminated to sixth-grade students and results were downloaded into an excel spreadsheet. Comparison of aggregate pre- and post- responses were reviewed to determine potential changes. Triangulation of the data occurred by reviewing the transcripts of focus groups, walkthrough tools, discipline incidents and positive behavior points, YRBS data and identifying similar themes that were present throughout. These qualitative and quantitative data points were utilized to answer the study questions.

Results

Study Question #1

The first study question is what effect does implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional learning framework have on student behavior as measured by disciplinary referrals and behavior points. Sixth-grade students participated in *Responsive Classroom* throughout the entire school year. Participation included being a member of an advisory homeroom group, access and participation in *Responsive Classroom* lessons once to twice a week, and opportunities for open discussions amongst the students and teachers to develop relationships and a sense of belonging and connectedness. The implementation of *Responsive Classroom* lessons was meant to provide experiences where students developed relationships with other students in their class to enhance their level of comfort and trust while building a sense of belonging and connectedness. The teacher's role in this framework was to develop an advocacy relationship and guide the development of trust among each other in the class.

Sixth grade teachers implemented *Responsive Classroom* on various levels. While some teachers received training directly from the Center of Responsive Schools, other teachers received in-house onboarding to prepare for implementation. All teachers began implementation with fidelity. Eight of the nine teachers participated in *Responsive Classroom* as directed by the *Responsive Classroom* action team. The teachers who received direct training infused elements and ideas from *Responsive Classroom* beyond the homeroom time and revisited themes and ideas throughout their core classes. One teacher decided that she would “tweak” her delivery and followed her own agenda “campfire stories” to develop the relationships in the classroom. Seventh and eighth grade students did not participate in implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional learning framework. It was decided to use sixth-grade for the study

because there was a trend of higher discipline rates for sixth-grade over a period of three years. The *Responsive Classroom* action team decided to choose one grade level for implementation before expanding to the other two grade levels. There was a difference in referral rates among grade levels where sixth grade had reduced referral rates compared to the seventh and eighth grade. For the entire school year, sixth-grade made up 20% of the discipline referrals, 33% in seventh grade, and 49% in eighth grade (see Table 10). Even though class sizes were comparable, teachers who utilized *Responsive Classroom* in sixth grade had less referrals compared to classes that did not use *Responsive Classroom*.

In Figure 16, there is a distinctive spike in discipline referrals in the month of April when all students returned to campus for in person face-to-face instruction with an increase of 72 referrals in one month. Prior to that, students were participating in a hybrid model where half the students were on campus and the other half were participating in remote instruction. Additionally, not all months have the same number of instructional days when comparing month to month data. February and April have more instructional days in the second semester. The number of days in the month makes a difference in discipline referrals due to having more days in the classroom.

In Figures 17 through 26, the number of discipline incidents by grade level is represented for each month of the school year. In every month but December, sixth-grade discipline data was lower than any other grade level. In December, seven discipline referrals were reported for both sixth and seventh grade students.

In Figure 18 and 19, the total of merits and demerits given by grade level is shown. There are more merits given in sixth grade than the other grade levels. This stems from the utilization of recognizing positive behavior through the implementation *Responsive Classroom*. Moreover,

Table 10

Discipline Incidents for '20- '21 School Year

Grade Level	%	#	Class Size
Grade 6	20	66	294
Grade 7	33	108	303
Grade 8	47	161	273
Total	100	335	870

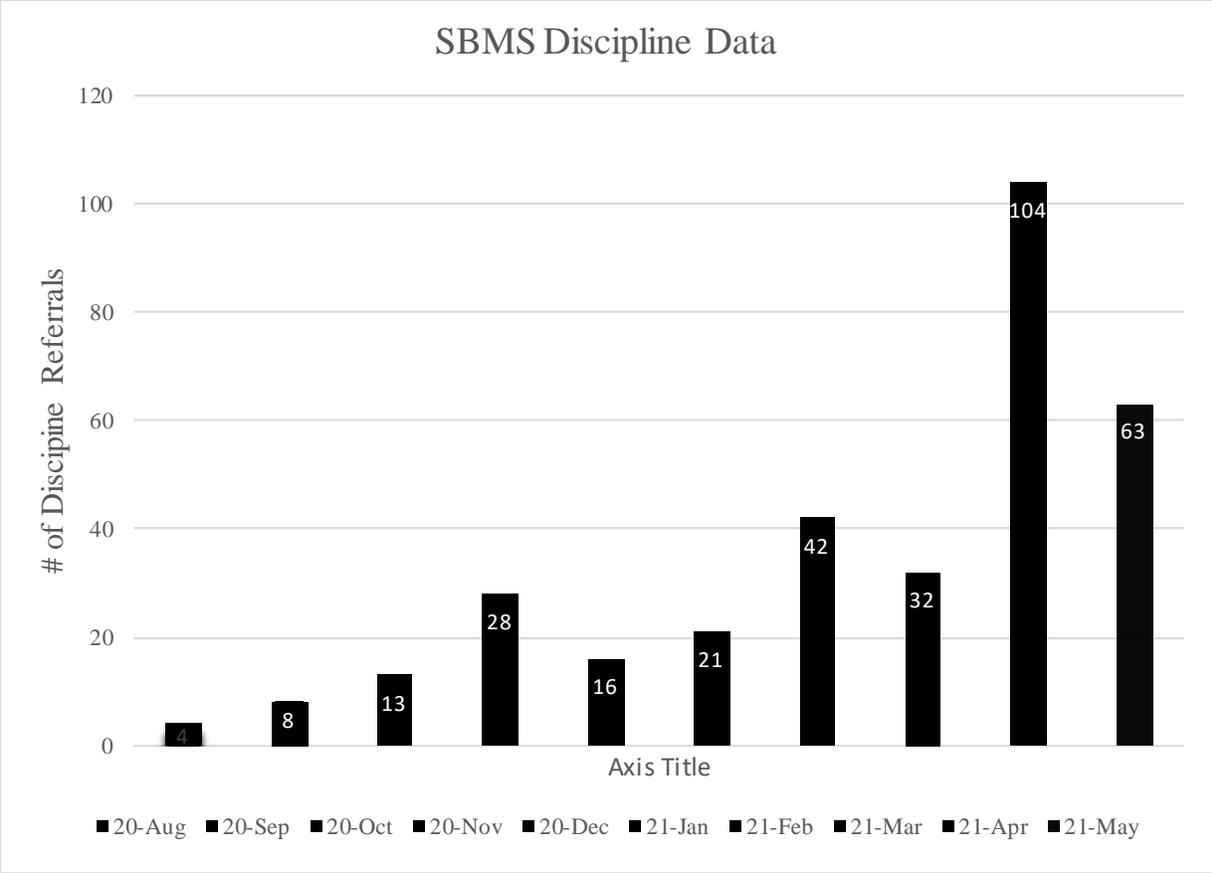


Figure 16. Student discipline data from student management system 2020-2021.

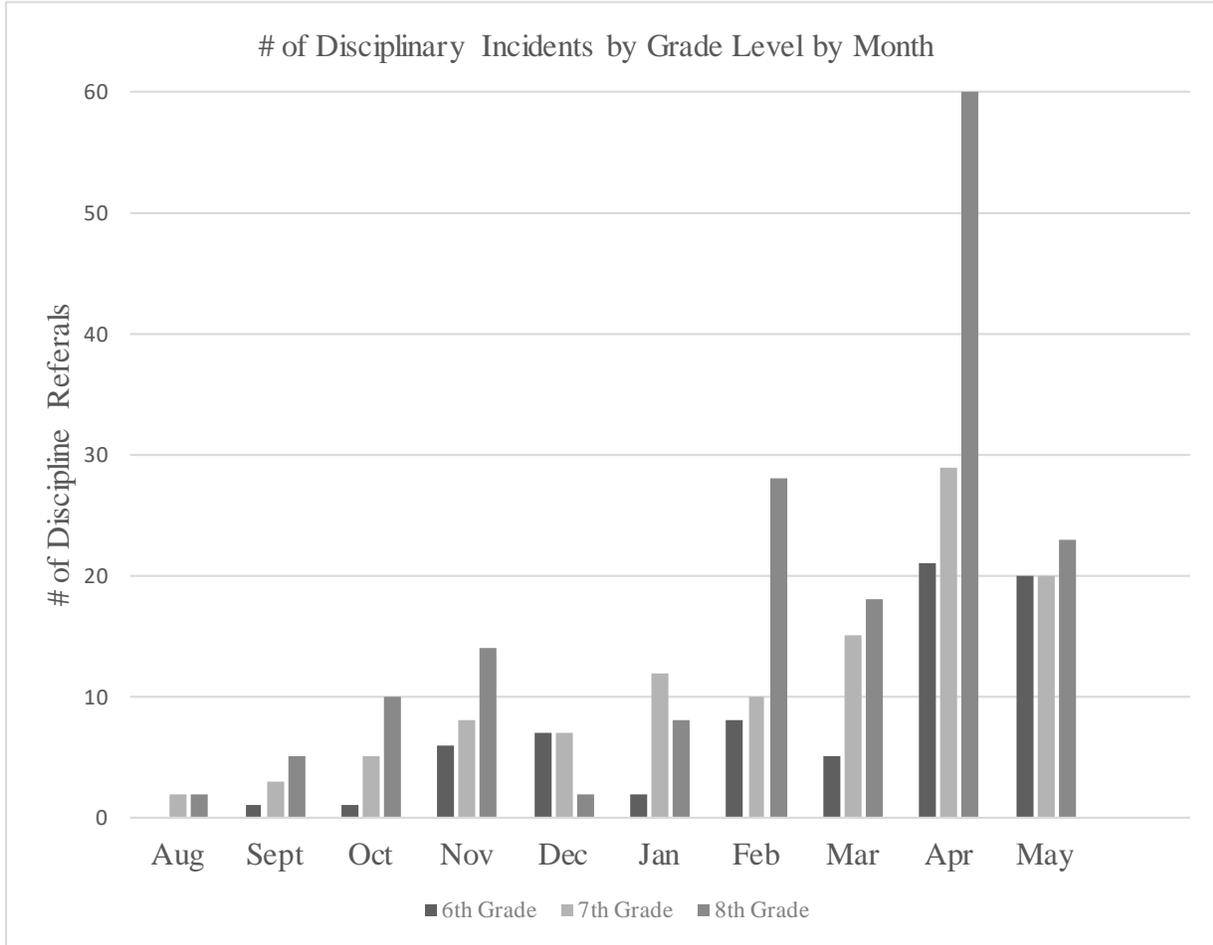


Figure 17. Monthly discipline from the student management system 2020-2021.

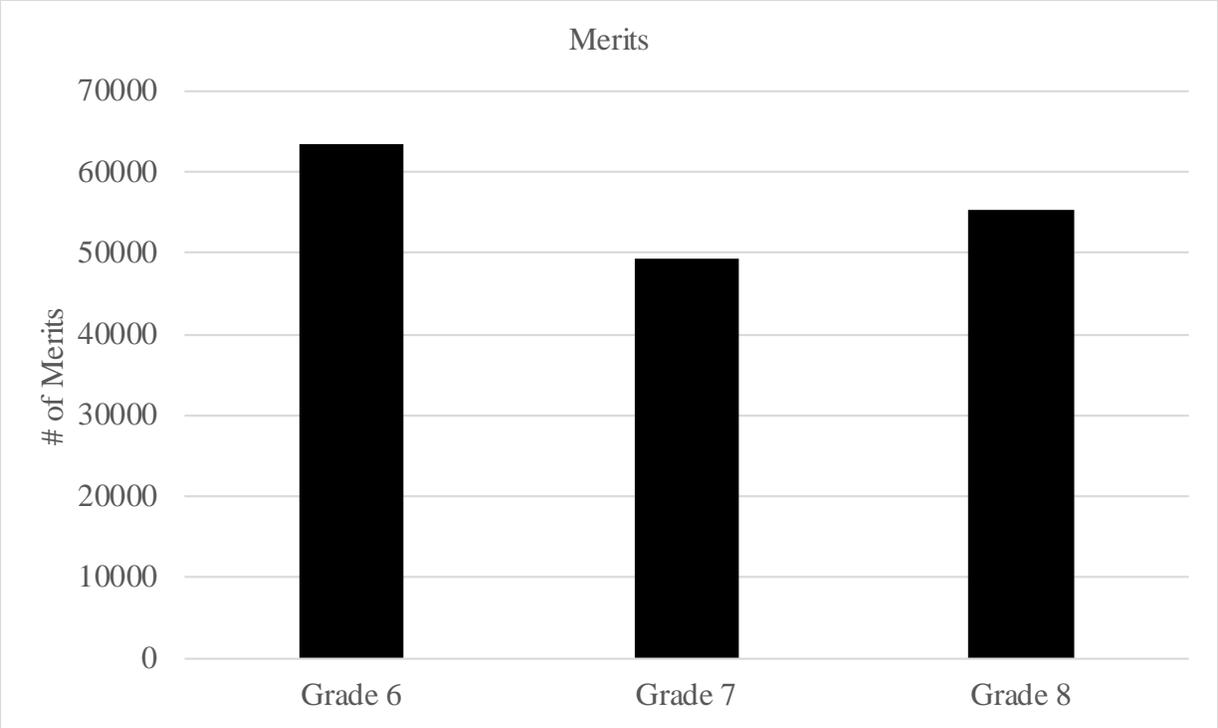


Figure 18. Number of Merits from the Positive behavior system 2020-2021.

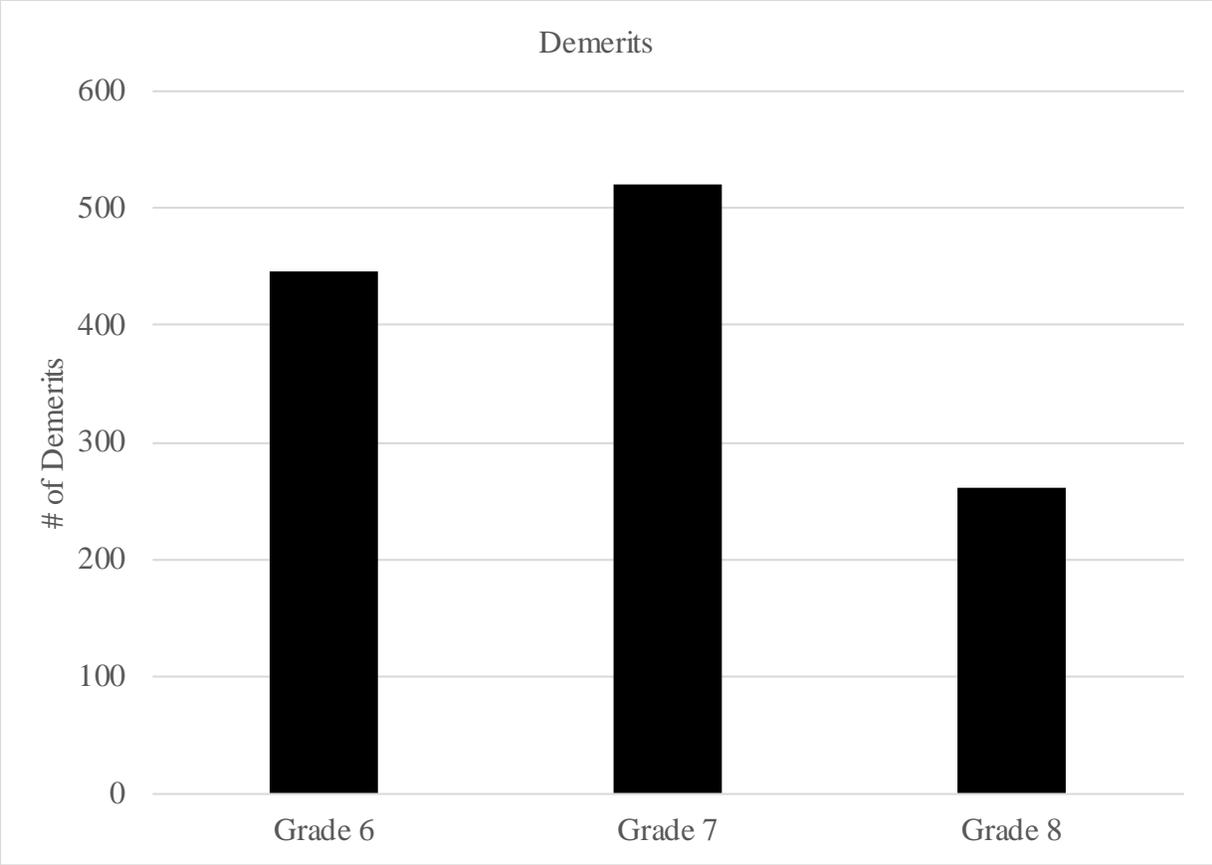


Figure 19. Number of demerits from the Positive behavior system 2020-2021.

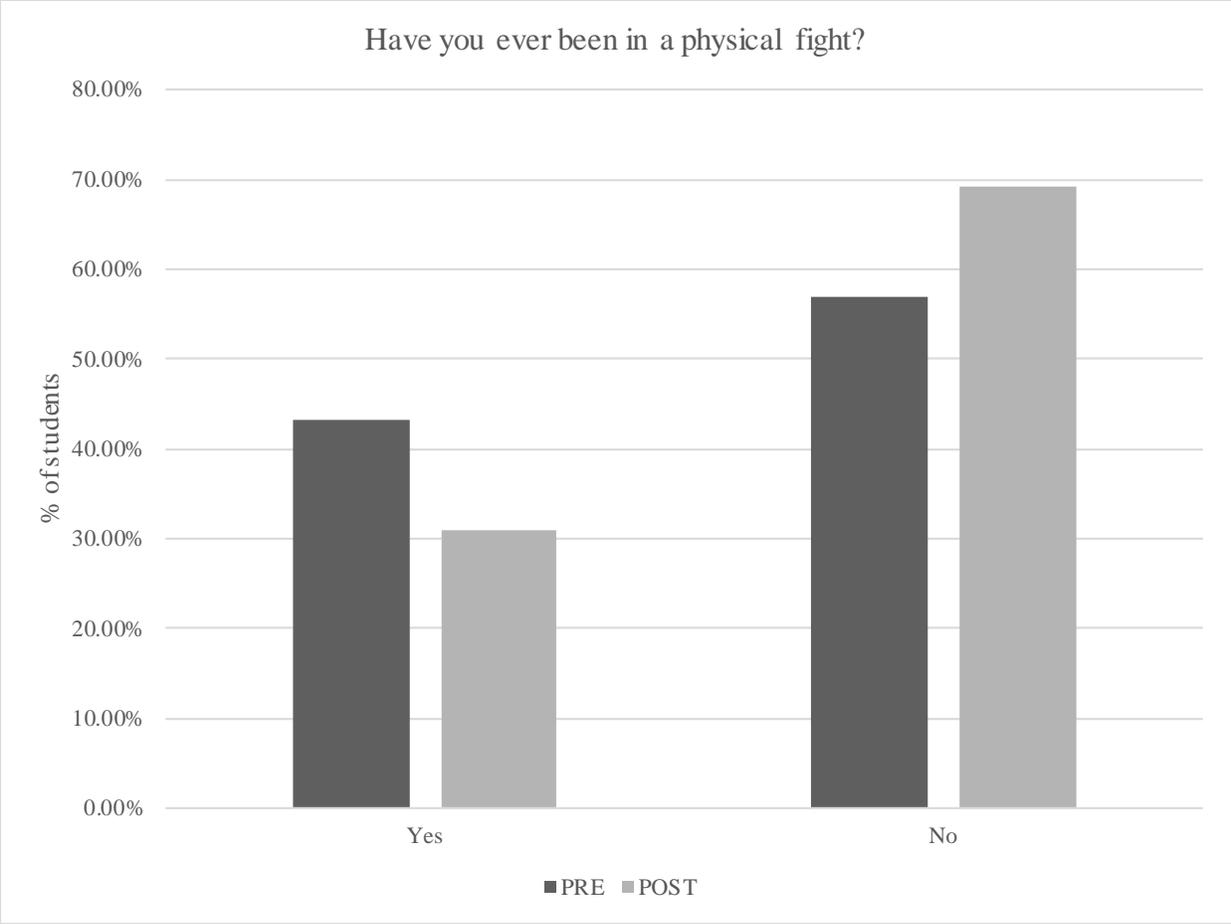


Figure 20. Percentage of students from the PRE/POST-Youth Risk Behavior Survey: Fight.

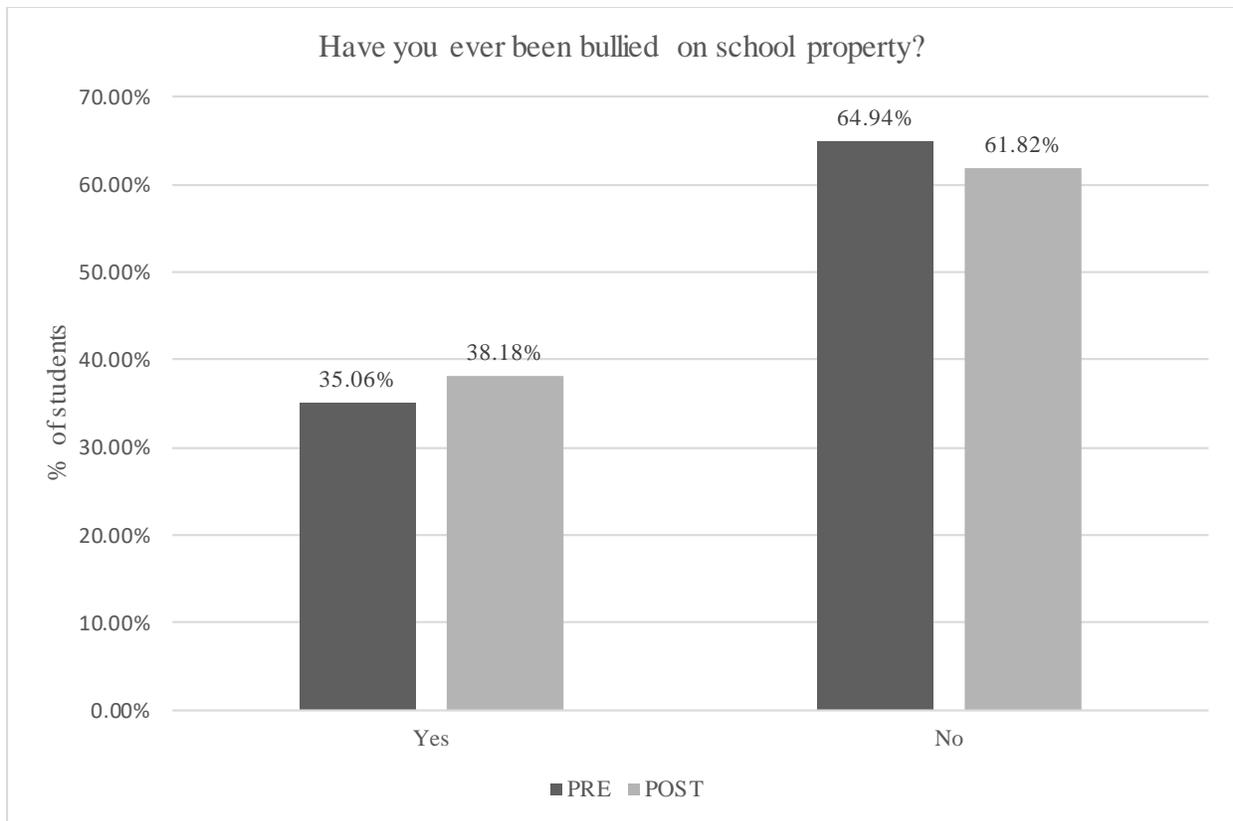


Figure 21. Pre and Post Youth Risk Behavior Survey Results: Bullied.

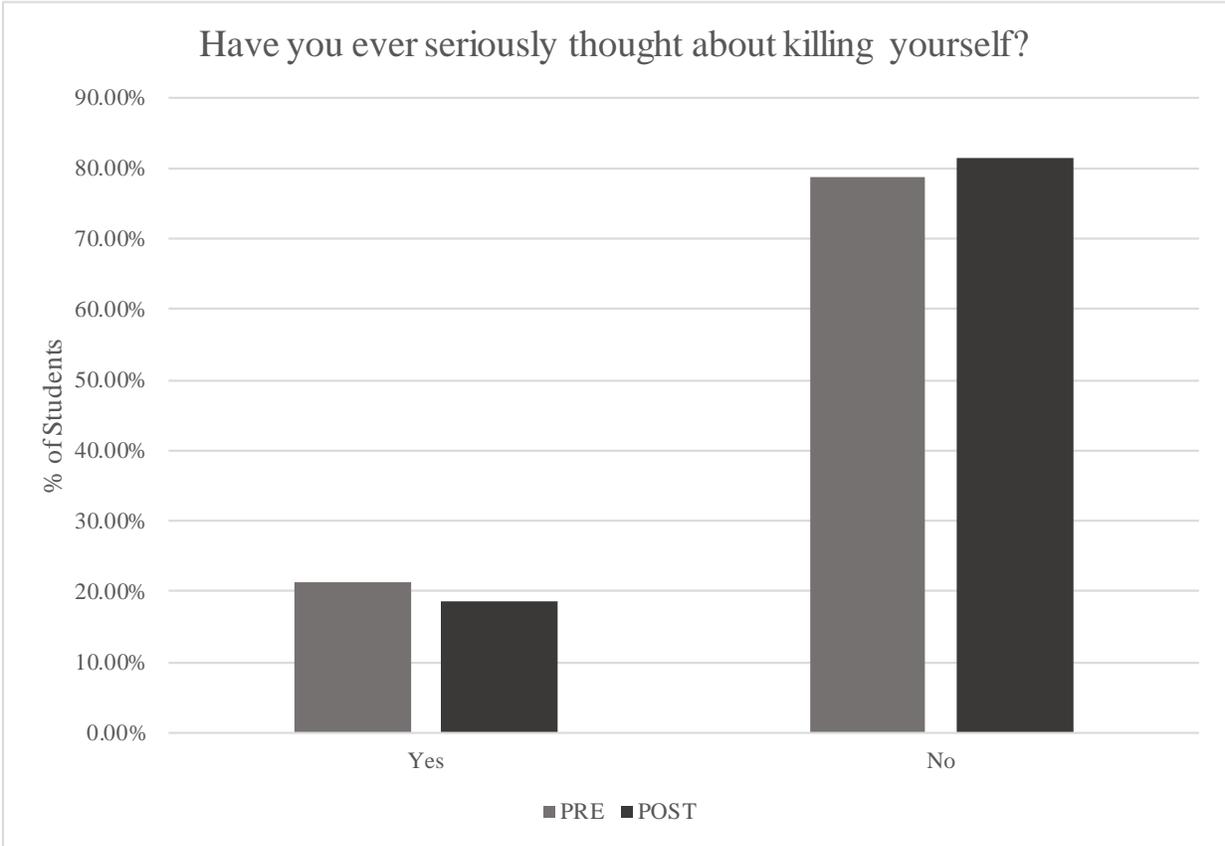


Figure 22. Pre and Post Youth Risk Behavior Survey Results: Killing.

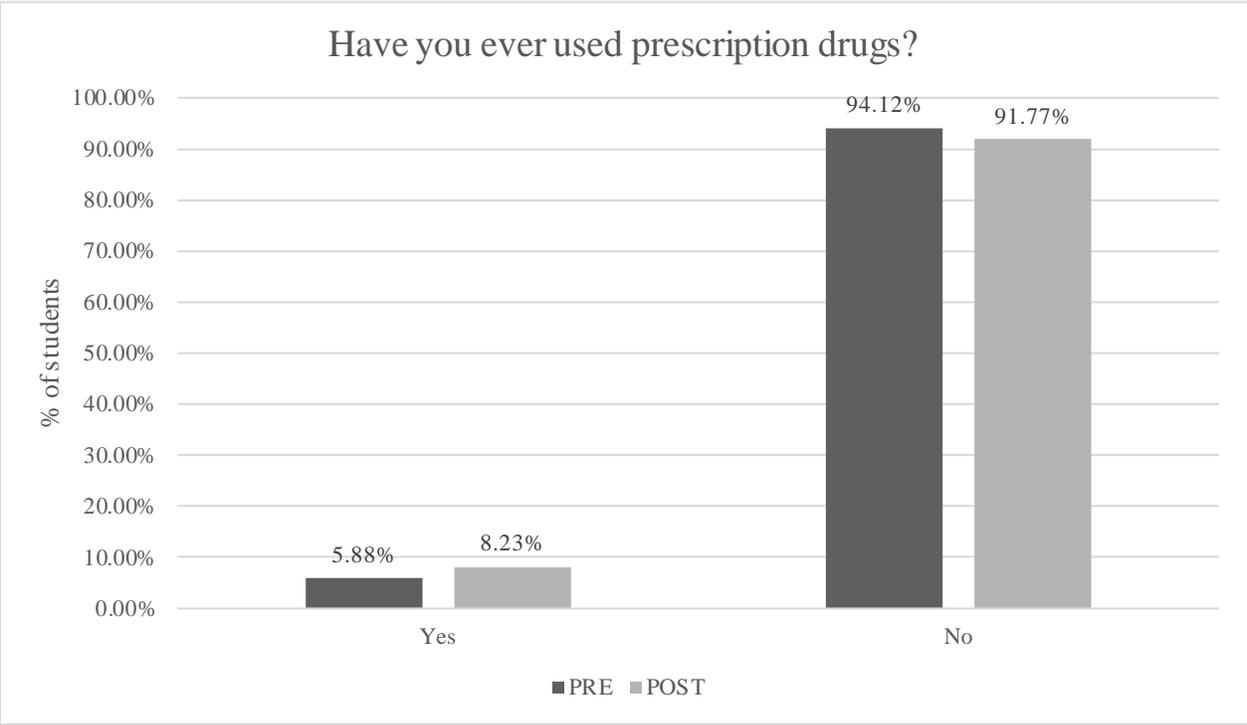


Figure 23. Pre and Post Youth Risk Behavior Survey Results: Prescription Drugs.

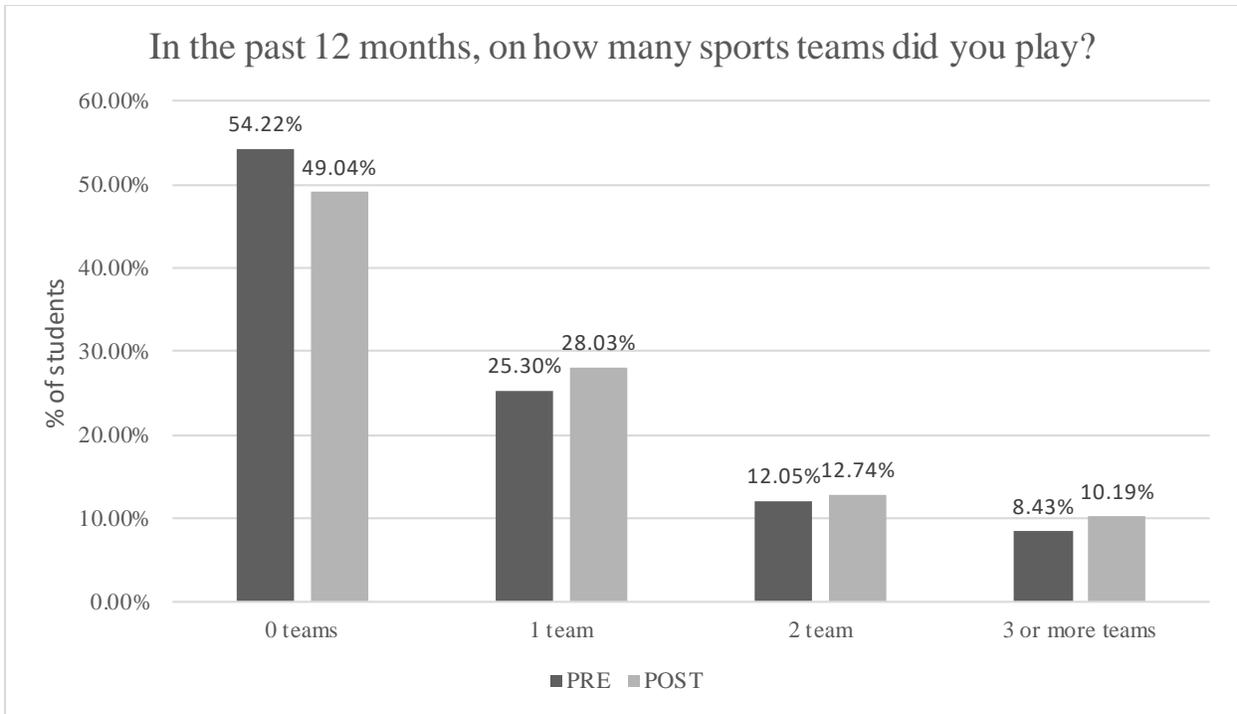


Figure 24. Pre and Post Youth Risk Behavior Survey Results: Sports Teams.

there is data indicating that the number of demerits in eighth grade are lower because eighth grade teachers utilized discipline referrals more frequently. This was recognized by administration as sixth grade teachers utilized the point system more frequently as they implemented the framework.

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey was administered two times during the study. The pre-survey was administered in January before implementation begun. The post survey was administered in May after implementation. Figure 20 shows a decrease in students affirming they had been in a physical fight during the postsurvey. Interventions that occurred between the surveys were *Responsive Classroom* lessons that focused on conflict management, relationship building, and making safe choices.

Figure 21 gleans information from the pre and post survey directly related to students being bullied. There is an increase in the percentage of students reporting they had been bullied from the pre and post. This could be related to a level of trust built between surveys for students to feel more comfortable giving honest feedback to the question. The increase in answering no may be caused by students' understanding of how bullying is defined. Students had the opportunity to learn, express, and explore what bullying is and its effects between the pre and post survey as part of the framework implementation.

All sixth-graders enrolled participated in the pre and post administrations of the Youth Risk Behavior Survey. *Responsive Classroom* played a role to help students develop trusting relationships among their peers and their teacher in the classroom. While the number of students who answered no to the question in Figure 22 is high, the *Responsive Classroom* action team and administration was still concerned with percentage of students who chose yes. As suicide and at-risk behaviors were part of the problem of practice, it is necessary to continue utilizing

frameworks such as *Responsive Classroom* to build connectedness and belonging among our sixth-grade students.

Figure 23 looks at the number of students who have used prescription drugs. Elements of *Responsive Classroom* provided opportunities for students to feel safe when expressing themselves and providing honest answers about their personal choices. The use of this framework provided students with an understanding of the impact of their choices. Additionally, students had a better understanding of the purpose of the Youth Risk Behavior Survey during the post dissemination. This is potentially a reason for an increased positive reporting of the use of drugs.

The focus of the study was to increase student connectedness and belonging. Figure 24 is significant as students who are involved in sports teams are connected in a manner outside the school building. Connectedness increases students' sense of belonging as there is an increase in the number of students who were a part of a team from the time the survey was first disseminated before the implementation of *Responsive Classroom*.

The behavior point system was utilized since trends in discipline incidents would be decreased with the presence of a hybrid learning model with half students being at home and half being on campus. Therefore, the use of the system was utilized to determine the presence of positive behavior as a result of the implementation of *Responsive Classroom*. Sixth-grade students received a higher percentage of merits than seventh and eighth grade (see Table 11). However, sixth-grade received the second highest percentage of demerits compared to seventh and eighth grade (see Table 12). The comparisons amongst grade levels show sixth-grade having the highest percentages for merits while eighth grade received the lowest number of demerits.

Table 11

Positive Behavior System: Merits by Grade Level

Grade Level	%	#	% of total students receiving merits
Grade 6	37.76	63,576	99.32
Grade 7	29.34	49,392	99.59
Grade 8	32.90	55,389	99.64
Total	100.0	168,357	

Table 12

Positive Behavior System: Demerits by Grade Level

Grade Level	%	#	% of total students receiving demerits
Grade 6	36.4	447	46.9
Grade 7	42.3	520	58.6
Grade 8	21.3	261	26.8
Total	100	1,228	

However, eighth grade students received the highest, on average, number of discipline incidents (see Figures 18 and 19).

Study Question #2

The second sub question in the study was what effect does implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional learning framework have on student connectedness as measured by student and teacher focus groups.

Teacher Focus Group

The creation of a positive classroom culture helps students build community and belonging. Climate and culture directly impact students' sense of belonging and connectedness. Values are aligned with a school's climate and culture when students and staff have a sense of belonging in their school. School climate and culture is a key factor in determining school efficiency, belonging, and connectedness. There is a presence of improved academics and social and emotional well being when there is an existence of positive climate and culture. (Dernowska, 2017; Gonzalez, 2020).

Positive school connectedness, one aspect of school climate, contributes to students' feelings of safety and well-being (Blum, 2005b; Martinez et al., 2016). When a positive school climate and culture is positive, adolescent development is nurtured, and young people connect to school at higher levels (Dorina, 2013). The school climate and culture will allow for students' sense of belonging to be nurtured and their academic, behavior and social needs will be met (Booker, 2007). This was one of the first identified themes from the teacher focus group. There was unanimous agreement amongst all teachers that a positive culture played a part in building community within the classroom as a result of implementing *Responsive Classroom*. Teacher 2 incorporates music to help build community,

I have found streaming music while students come in the door allows me to get to know their particular tastes in music. I literally take requests, so I'm changing the music according to what they want to hear and trying that allows me to make a connection with them.

Some teachers, such as Teacher 3, find that the team-building, goal-setting, and relationship development activities that were utilized in *Responsive Classroom* help students relate as a community. "We utilized activities to show what students had in common with each other." *Responsive Classroom* provides opportunities for students to find commonalities among each other when building community. Teacher 8 shared, "The lessons allowed them to learn a lot about each other and a lot of times they figure out they aren't the only ones with a problem and they feel comfortable sharing that out." A particular concern was brought to light when discussing the change in the community when moving from the blended model for learning to everyone back on campus for in person learning. Teacher 4 stated, "They each have their class like culture but now they're about to be merged with the other group and they are kind of worried about that." This concern led to purposeful planning on behalf of the *Responsive Classroom* action team to identify specific lessons that would focus on reintegrating all students in the same room and building a new community of cohesion.

Providing students, a safe place to talk and connect with others in the classroom increases student connectedness is the second theme that emerged from the teacher focus group. Out of the nine teachers, all nine agreed that *Responsive Classroom* provided a safe place for students to talk with each other. Teacher 6 shared, "I think it gets kids talking. It gets them communicating, especially if you pair them up." *Responsive Classroom* provide specific activities that provided students the opportunity to express themselves as indicated by teacher 3 stated "I think it allowed

everyone to feel comfortable communicating openly and have an opportunity to express their opinions.” This was also resonated by Teacher 1. “Over the course of implementation, students got used to the *Responsive Classroom* lessons. They’ve gotten comfortable and they feel safe in expressing their feelings.” When establishing a safe place to express themselves, teacher 7 found that students were broadening their perspectives. “It does get them talking, it makes them think differently. Sometimes, it makes them have that family atmosphere that they might not have at home.” Teacher 5 found, “I think it opens the door for a lot of kids that they do feel safe. They do have those conversations that they might not have, I guess without *Responsive Classroom*.”

While it is clear that students feel comfortable and safe to talk about particular topics, an element of concern was brought up during the focus group. Teacher 4 indicated that they were worried they were not equipped to handle the conversations that students feel comfortable having. “Some of these conversations we have I don’t even have with my own kids.” Similarly, Teacher 5 stated, “I question my role sometimes and I’m not afraid that if the situation needs to be addressed by a counselor, that’s what we do.”

The data from the teacher focus group identified key elements that *Responsive Classroom* could be useful in building peer to peer relationships, providing an outlet for students to feel safe to express themselves and ask questions, and building a positive culture to embrace the development of community for students. The successes came directly when teachers presented the framework with fidelity and incorporated the lessons and themes throughout the core classes rather than in isolation. Challenges were present and stemmed from the symptoms of COVID-19 and the ever-changing learning environments. The *Responsive Classroom* action team, one the key collaborative inquiry partners, was not provided with adequate time to fully support all teachers who were implementing the framework. Another challenge was the lack of time that

administration could devote to completing classroom walkthroughs to monitor the frequency and consistency of the framework implementation. One teacher decided to abort the entire framework and adopt her own style. While this was reported by the *Responsive Classroom* action team to administration, there was no follow-through and mandate for the teacher to change their course.

Student Focus Group

The student focus group provided evidence that *Responsive Classroom* helped students feel connected, build community, and ease the transition into sixth-grade. The first theme identified was students feel connected when given the opportunity to have a voice. All seven students agreed that they liked *Responsive Classroom* because it gave them a voice. Specifically, student #1 stated, “I liked sharing my opinion.” Student #3 shared that they could express themselves about topics they were discussing. “Yes, I really liked it because then you could express like how you feel about that certain particular thing we are talking about that day.” Student #6 shared the comfort level that was developed to be heard. “I kind of like it better because now I can interact with everybody in my class.” Additionally, students shared their gratitude for being asked how they were doing. Student #4 shared,

I feel good about being asked about how I am doing because if I say I'm not doing too well, most of the teachers are like oh what's wrong and then you can express yourself saying like oh, this happened today and it's going to be really down day. And then they can maybe make you feel better and then, like said they said your day could be a lot better.”

Students agreed that their voices were heard.

Responsive Classroom helps build community to assist with the transition to sixth-grade as shared by Student #3.

Yes, I really think it's like that. People should help the people going into sixth-grade likely instead because if you have a great group of friends, they can help you anything. Your group of friends aren't going to get you down, or like aren't going to laugh at you because they're trusted friends and have the same interests.

Part of *Responsive Classroom* suggests that you greet students at the door specifically by using their first (or preferred) name. Of the seven students, six indicated that they were greeted at the door at least once a day by their teacher. Student #3 made it clear during the focus group that is what they want during the day. "I want to be greeted because I mean it just makes you feel better because your teachers are actually caring about you.

When asked, how would you rate your feelings on a scale to one to give with one being I don't feel like I belong at all and five feeling like I really am a part of the community, 100% of students rated themselves at a three or above. One student rated himself at a five, stating, "I made a lot of friends and the teachers, I feel like they like me because I can also visit and talk to them like a father." Student 4 shared it was a great introduction to the transition and recognized that the comfort level would increase over time. "I'll do a three, but I think it will build up as time goes on, because right now we're just in sixth-grade. As the weeks and time goes on, we meet more people and then it's going to just build up and build up." Student #5 resonated with a sense of belonging by recognizing the students they were connected with at school. "So, I think that it's a solid 4.5. It is solid because I feel like I know everybody in my homeroom, and I feel like I know a couple people outside my home room already."

Relationships among peers' boost belonging and connectedness. When asked to use an emoji to describe their connections with their peers, Student # 4 stated, "I choose the diamond emoji because I sometimes look up to my friends and sometimes, they're like shiny and they show me the way." Additionally, Student#2 shared their positive emotions with knowing their peers. "I chose the happy emoji because I am so happy, happy and comfortable around them."

In addition, students discussed their plans to get connected at school. As stated by Student #1, "I would want to join the school's soccer here because I really like playing soccer and I think I would make new friends if I play on the soccer team." Student #6 recognized other opportunities to get connected at school besides sports. "I can even join under the Science Club or maybe the drama club which I think is super cool. Yeah, I like speaking with people interacting with people and making new friends." *Responsive Classroom* has allowed students to get to know each other on a different level and created relationships that have promoted student connectedness.

Study Question #3:

The last study sub question is this study was what effect does implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional learning framework have on mental health as measured by Youth Risk Behavior Survey. The administration of the pre and post Youth Risk Behavior Survey provided the following details regarding risk behavior. In the presurvey, 43.2% of students stated they had been in a physical fight whereas in the post survey, 30.91% of students reported they had been in a physical fight (see Figure 20). The YRBS instrument asked students if they had ever been bullied on campus. Figure 21 shows a rise in the percent of students bullied on campus during the post survey. The pre survey results in 35.06% stating they were bullied on

campus and the post survey yield 38.18%. When asked if students seriously thought about killing themselves, the presurvey results showed 21.3% said yes whereas the post survey results showed a decline at 18.52% (see Figure 22). In Figure 23, the question asks if students had ever taken prescription drugs. The presurvey results show 5.88% of students answered yes compared to the post survey results where there was an increase to 8.23% who answered yes.

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey asks students in the past 12 months, on how many sports teams do you play? There was a decrease in the percentage of students who indicated they had played on 0 teams and an increase in students who indicated they played on 1, 2, or 3 teams. Figure 24 shows increased involvement over the course of the study with students becoming more involved in sports teams.

Summary

Sixth-grade students and teachers were the focus of data collection in this action research study regarding the implementation of *Responsive Classroom*. The results were shared by the identification of themes from teacher and student focus groups, evidence of the pre and post Youth Risk Behavior Survey data, and the disciplinary incidents as well as the positive behavior point system. In Chapter 5, the overarching question for this study will be answered as it relates to the results shared by each sub question. Interpretations of the findings in connection with the literature, limitations of the study, implications of the findings for equity and recommendations for future studies will be shared.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the study was to monitor the effects of students' connectedness and sense of belonging through the implementation of a social emotional framework with sixth-grade males at Duckton Middle School. The study was intended to monitor discipline data, positive behavior system, and at-risk behavior with sixth-grade males as a result of the implementation of *Responsive Classroom*. Previous studies have revealed that students who experience a sense of belonging in educational environments are more motivated, more engaged in school and classroom activities, and more dedicated to school (Hallinan, 2008; Osterman, 2000; Way, 2011). Moreover, students who felt that they belonged to learning environments reported higher enjoyment, enthusiasm, happiness, interest, and more confidence in engaging in learning activities, whereas those who felt isolated reported greater anxiety, boredom, frustration, and sadness during the academic engagement that directly affects academic performance (Furrer & Skinner, 2003).

With the presence of increased student connectedness and a social emotional learning framework, sixth-grade males at Duckton Middle School will have more opportunities to be successful academically and behaviorally. The presence of advocates and a positive peer group would help limit behavioral incidents and they will be more likely to be successful academically when they are engaged in the school and community (CDC, 2009).

The study intended to monitor the effectiveness of the implementation of the social emotional learning framework, *Responsive Classroom*, at Duckton Middle School. The study assumed that the framework would be implemented with fidelity. As a result, the implementation aimed to reduce student discipline and at-risk behavior. Additionally, increased student connectedness and sense of belonging for sixth-grade males would increase as a byproduct of

intentional and consistent implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* framework through advisory lessons. One of the improvement strategies in the study was to implement *Responsive Classroom* Advisory meetings three times a week. The meetings would provide a space and structure for teachers to support middle school students, both individually and as a group, as they develop their sense of self and identity in connection to their relationships with peers (*Responsive Classroom, 2020*). The significance of these *Responsive Classroom* Advisory meetings was to build student to student affiliation, energize and re-engage students, reflect and recalibrate on goals, extend learning through themes that promote social emotional health, support academic growth, strengthen advisor-advisee relationships, and develop social skills development and communication (*Responsive Classroom, 2020*).

Social and emotional learning was used for improvement across the system, not just merely to address at-risk behaviors at Duckton Middle School. While the utilization of social and emotional learning was intended to reduce at-risk behaviors and improve the mental health for students, the impact could be greater when a systemic approach is integrated as a framework across all aspects of the educational system from the how the district office is structured to how instruction in individual classrooms is presented (Taylor et al., 2017). The study intended to provide students at Duckton Middle School a safe and secure setting in order to have the most conducive learning environment for academic and emotional success. More importantly, the impact of the study could allow school districts to have the opportunity to engage in high quality educational opportunities that promote positive outcomes for all students regardless of race, ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation and other potential differences among each other (CASEL, 2020). Although this study was specifically related to Duckton Middle

School, it has the potential to affect national efforts to increase student connectedness and reduce participation in unhealthy behaviors.

Summary of the Findings

The implementation of *Responsive Classroom* yielded positive results when analyzing disciplinary incidents with sixth-grade students compared to other grades at Duckton Middle School. For the entire school year, sixth-grade made up 20% of the discipline referrals schoolwide, as compared to 33% for seventh grade, and 47% for eighth grade. Additionally, sixth-grade students had the lowest number of discipline incidents each month with the exception of two, in which they were tied with the lowest. Based on conversations with the administration and *Responsive Classroom* action team, this is a direct result from sixth-grade students participating in the social emotional framework. While there was a significant increase in April, this was a result of all students returning to in person learning five days a week compared to the previous months when students were alternating days for blended learning. Of the 354 discipline incidents recorded, 40 were from sixth-grade males comprising 11.2% of all referrals schoolwide. This compares to 77 incidents from seventh grade males, 21.7% and 123 from eighth grade males at 34.7%. The remaining 32.4% of incidents were from females. Sixth-grade students received a higher percentage of merits than seventh and eighth grade. However, sixth-grade received the second highest percentage of demerits compared to seventh and eighth grade. This is attributed to utilizing positive behavior system to correct sixth-grade behavior rather than resulting in punitive discipline measures.

The focus groups provided clarity and understanding that students appreciate having a safe space to voice their opinions and develop relationships with both adults and peers. Overall, students expressed their approval of utilizing homeroom groups as a common ground to discover

and explore topics of interest that result in academic and behavioral success. Students discussed their appreciation for having a place to express their opinions, their desire to become more connected at school, and how good they feel when teachers genuinely ask about their lives.

The results from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey are inconclusive. There was not significant change in data from the pre- to the post-survey.

Interpretation of the Findings

The interpretation of findings for this study are organized by the sub questions guiding this study. The interpretation of each sub question leads to answering the overarching question.

Study Question #1

What effect does implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional learning framework have on student behavior as measured by disciplinary referrals was the first study question analyzed in this study. Discipline incidents were affected by *Responsive Classroom*. There is concrete evidence that sixth-grade incidents were lower than any other grade level. These results connect to the understanding the importance of moving away from punitive measures to address behaviors. Policies have proven to have negative effects academic progress and behavior (Cornell, 2015), nonetheless, more schools are adopting these practices instead of less punitive methods. Punitive discipline practices impact student's success academically and emotionally. While the goal of these discipline policies in schools was to create a safe learning environment with specific structure and order (Kline, 2016), it has proven to be unsuccessful and more harmful to the academic success of students (Hodge, 2020). When sixth-grade students are receiving less punitive consequences as a result of *Responsive Classroom*, they are spending more time in the classroom with the teacher which results in positive gains.

Study Question #2

The second study question of the study was what effect does implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional learning framework have on student connectedness as measured by student and teacher focus groups. Students identified school belonging in the form of relationships with school faculty as a major reason to remain in school as opposed to dropping out (Slaten et al., 2015). This connection is a direct correlation of the relationships created during *Responsive Classroom* implementation. When students are provided with opportunities to connect with other students, they have the capacity to build self-confidence and engage in meaningful activities; these are factors linked to a student's sense of belonging (Ritchie & Gaultier, 2018). Students, during implementation, were able to express themselves, develop relationships with peers in the classroom community, and have critical conversations in a safe place monitored by an adult advocate. The relationship between school belongingness and mental health is influenced by positive mental health in the primary years and resulting in a sense of belonging after the transition to the secondary level (Vaz et al., 2014). The student focus groups concluded that intentional activities to enhance the transition from elementary to secondary school helped move to sixth-grade. There is a presence of improved academics and social and emotional well being when there is an existence of positive climate and culture. Likewise, there are negative associations that present themselves when the climate and culture are negative (Dernowska, 2017; Gonzalez, 2020). The climate of the school appeared to be positive based on the teacher and student focus groups. Despite the demands from COVID-19, there was an overwhelming sense of positivity regarding the development of classroom culture within the small classroom settings.

Study Question #3

The last sub question of the study was what effect does implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional learning framework have on mental health as measured by the Youth Risk Behavior Survey. The data collected provided evidence that students are exploring risk behaviors and are in need of exposure to a social emotional framework. Studies have found that students who engage in extracurricular activities report a higher sense of school belonging compared to their peers (Blomfield & Barber, 2010; Waters et al., 2010). The data collected from the YRBS indicate that students are connected to extracurricular activities and have become more connected throughout the school year. School connectedness is a term used to describe a person's relationship to school. It is the student's belief that their friends and adult advocates care about them as individuals as well as what they are learning (Hurd et al., 2015).

Overwhelmingly, male students in the focus group agreed with the importance of having an adult advocate that cared about their well-being. With school being an obligatory feature of most young persons' lives, this relationship is influential in determining their overall school experience (Gowing & Jackson, 2016). The research is clear that an adult advocate present in a students' life will make an impact on their schooling.

Students who have a higher sense of student connectedness may feel an increase in sense of belonging which improves social skills and self-identity leading to lower risk behavior and higher academic success (Oldfield et al., 2018). Students felt comfortable sharing their opinions and their sense of identity when connected to their homeroom group. By adopting interventions or a social emotional framework, schools can focus on forming strong relationships with peers and teachers to combat mental health difficulties and meet students' social and academic needs (Oldfield et al., 2018). More importantly, teachers were able to recognize the need for additional

support from a school counselor or community partners when students expressed their social emotional needs within the advisory lessons.

Research that explored belonging has found that those with a high sense of belonging are more prone to positive attributes such as wellbeing, increased self-esteem, and positive mood (Begen & Turner-Cobb, 2015; Newman et al., 2007), improved memory (Haslam et al., 2010), positive life transitions (Haslam et al., 2010; Iyer et al., 2009), and reduced stress (Newman et al., 2007). Benefits connected with belonging, from the implementation of *Responsive Classroom*, whether it be to a peer group, school environment or community, have been found to have enduring effects (Walton & Cohen, 2011; Walton et al., 2012). A study by Anderman (2003) found that teachers play a significant role in predicting the sense of school belonging students feel and found that when teachers can encourage mutual respect among peers and provide a safe instructional environment for students there is a stronger sense of school belonging. The more connected students felt to their teachers in particular, the less likely they are to engage in health-risk behaviors: cigarette smoking, drinking to the point of getting drunk, marijuana use, suicidal ideation, sexual behaviors, and weapon-related violence (McNeely & Falci, 2004). The answers to the sub questions have paved the way to answer the overarching question.

Overarching Question

The overarching question that guided this study was what effect does the implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* Social Emotional Learning framework have on student connectedness for sixth-grade males at Duckton Middle School. School connectedness is a term used to describe a person's relationship to school. It is the student's belief that their friends and adult advocates care about them as individuals as well as what they are learning (Hurd et al.,

2015). The implementation of *Responsive Classroom* has aided in the development of adult advocates with our sixth-grade students as they transitioned to middle school. With school being an obligatory feature of most young persons' lives, this relationship is influential in determining their overall school experience (Gowing & Jackson, 2016). The implementation, regardless of the effects of COVID-19, has assisted the development of relationships, the creation of a positive culture in homeroom classrooms, and the creation of safe places for students to have a voice and express their personal options free of ridicule and negativity. Students who have a higher sense of student connectedness may feel an increase in sense of belonging which improves social skills and self-identity leading to lower risk behavior and higher academic success (Oldfield et al., 2018).

By adopting interventions or a social emotional framework, schools can focus on forming strong relationships with peers and teachers to combat mental health difficulties and meet students' social and academic needs (Oldfield et al., 2018). With the current trends in education and the increased isolation that has occurred as a result of COVID-19, the implementation of a social emotional framework at Duckton Middle School was a positive first step in addressing the needs of transitioning sixth-grade males. Transformative social emotional learning seeks to promote equity and excellence among children, young people, and adults (Jagers et al., 2019).

Limitations

COVID-19, resulting in a blended learning environment, reduced the amount of time *Responsive Classroom* was provided to students. Rather than providing *Responsive Classroom* three times a week, it was provided once a week until April and then increased to two times a week. Another limitation came from the transition to developing community among sixth-grade

rooms when they were in blended environment versus when they were brought back to the classroom 100% of the time.

Additionally, not all sixth-grade teachers were trained in *Responsive Classroom* and lacked buy-in. There was one teacher that changed the delivery of *Responsive Classroom* and developed their own implementation schedule. After reflection of the time period, *Responsive Classroom* action team members were not given enough time to model and conduct on-boarding and coaching.

Implications of the Findings for Practice

Implementation of *Responsive Classroom* provided evidence that smaller class sizes and groupings made establishing relationships more conducive in the sixth-grade homeroom classes. Smaller class sizes were possible as a result of required blended learning environments due to requirements set by the state for COVID-19 restrictions. With the onset of smaller class sizes, providing opportunities for students to have choice and voice gave them ownership in their educational journey. Every student deserves an advocate and every teacher deserves a coach. This was made possible during the implementation of *Responsive Classroom*. Sixth-grade students had adult advocates to connect with during the school day. These relationships were created based on experiences during advisory lessons. During the study, teachers were provided with partners, from the *Responsive Classroom* action team, to help with implementation of the social emotional framework.

Based on the findings from this study presented to the strategic leadership team and administration, the decision was made to continue with implementation of the social emotional framework, *Responsive Classroom*, during the 2021-2022 school year. Moreover, there was a decision to expand the implementation of the *Responsive Classroom* advisory lessons to each

grade level, sixth through eighth. The *Responsive Classroom* action team met to discuss vertical articulation needs to successfully implement various themes and lessons that were applicable to each grade level. Additionally, the administration and strategic leadership team decided that all staff members, including the encore teachers, would have their own homeroom to help develop relationships and be a part of the continued implementation of *Responsive Classroom*.

Implications of the Findings for Equity

The study of the implementation of *Responsive Classroom* provided a clear focus on the importance of transition plans for students moving from elementary to middle school. Creating an intentional plan for all students is important to promote a successful transition between grade levels. Transition plans will provide students with necessary supports for students to be successful academically and socially.

Disciplinary incidents were reviewed during the study in an effort to determine ways to decrease the number of incidents by sixth-grade males. While there was not a clear determining factor addressed in the study, there are implications from these findings that provide understanding of the necessity for teachers and administrators to participate in professional development on discretionary versus non-discretionary discipline. It is essential that the administrative team consider professional development and further research on the disproportionality of discipline referrals. Principals and teachers who are more likely to remove students lead to reductions in reported rates of minor student misconduct. However, this deterrence comes at a high cost. Removal of students generate more juvenile justice complaints and reduce high school graduation rates for all students in their schools. Students who committed minor disciplinary infractions in a school with a team who was considered harsh on punishment suffer additional declines in attendance and test scores. Additionally, administrative teams exhibiting racial bias in their disciplinary decisions also widen educational gaps between White and Black students (Sorenson

et al., 2021). Onboarding and coaching on discretionary and non-discretionary discipline referrals will benefit all stakeholders. This training is integral to further enhance the implementation of social emotional framework that can effectively address all students in an equitable manner.

Recommendations for Practice

Based upon the findings of this study, I recommend that the implementation of the social emotional framework of *Responsive Classroom* continue at Duckton Middle School.

Additionally, the framework should be expanded to seventh grade with the intention to expand school wide within two years. The first action step needed to make this implementation sustainable is for the leadership in the school to make social emotional learning a focus and priority. Without this focus, the fidelity of such implementation will not be present. For example, the walkthrough tool that was created for the administration to determine the level of consistency teachers were providing with the *Responsive Classroom* advisory lessons. While we know administration can only give feedback on what is observed, the number of walkthroughs conducted were minimal and did not provide enough information to be useful for data collection. For this implementation to continue with positive results, it will be integral for the administration to be more visible during *Responsive Classroom* advisory time, provide timely and critical feedback to teachers regarding their observations, and follow-through with needed supports and onboarding for teachers.

The second action step I would recommend would be for all teachers and staff members to receive relevant and effective professional development by the Center for Responsive Schools on social emotional learning and the *Responsive Classroom* framework rather than relying on trained teachers to provide their own onboarding. After training, the *Responsive Classroom* action team would coach teachers throughout this process of school-wide implementation and

embedding SEL practices in their classroom. This is the most effective way to build a consistent school wide culture of the importance of infusing social emotional learning throughout the school day rather than in isolation.

The third action step would be for Duckton Middle School to be a part of vertical articulation with the elementary schools in the Duckton township. The students will have the ability to experience a focused social emotional learning framework K-8. Rather than working in isolation, action teams from each school should plan together to outline what SEL looks like at each grade level. This articulation practice will provide opportunities for stakeholders to intentionally plan for and improve transition plans for each student.

Finally, the Youth Risk Behavior Survey was a tool useful for collecting pre and post data. I would recommend narrowing the focus of questions when conducting the survey in the future. Additionally, I recommend providing more detailed information to staff and parents on the developmental appropriateness of the YRBS. This will help eliminate unnecessary concern when disseminating the survey to students.

Recommendations for Future Study

Based on the recommendations for practice, there is a need for longitudinal research that explores a K-12 social emotional framework and its effects on graduates. This research would explore how graduates would be characterized if given an opportunity to experience a social emotional framework during their entire K-12 school career. This research should address discretionary versus nondiscretionary discipline practices and the impact of social emotional frameworks in the long-term. Specifically, the research should consider discipline practices at the school level and its effects on attendance, grades, and graduation rates.

Considering how learning environments have changed based on COVID-19 and mandates for school closures, blended learning opportunities were put in place for 2020-2021 school year. Future research should explore the effects of students' mental health and social emotional well-being while working in remote learning environments where isolation from peers occurs daily. With the onset of COVID-19, it is important for school systems to pivot and recognize how schooling can impact the students and adults in the building as a result of blended, hybrid learning environments.

Conclusion

There are several conclusions that can be deduced from the study of the implementation of *Responsive Classroom*. With regard to discipline, sixth-grade students are receiving less punitive consequences as a result of participating in *Responsive Classroom*. Since they are receiving less punitive consequences, they are spending more time in the classroom with the teacher rather than time away from the classroom which results in positive gains with attendance and grades. The second conclusion relates to students' connections at school. *Responsive Classroom* provided students with an increased comfort level to share their opinions. They were comfortable sharing their own sense of identity when connected to their homeroom group. When students were provided with opportunities to connect with other students, they had the capacity to build self-confidence and engage in meaningful activities; these are factors linked to a developing a positive sense of belonging (Ritchie & Gaultier, 2018).

During the implementation of *Responsive Classroom*, students were able to express themselves, develop relationships with their peers in the classroom community, and have critical conversations in a safe place monitored by an adult advocate. By adopting interventions or a social emotional framework, schools can focus on forming strong relationships with peers and

teachers to combat mental health difficulties and meet students' social and academic needs (Oldfield et al., 2018).

The implementation of *Responsive Classroom* has aided in the development of adult advocates with our sixth-grade students as they transitioned to middle school. The data collected provided evidence that students are exploring risk behaviors and are in need of exposure to a social emotional framework. The implementation, regardless of the effects of COVID-19, has assisted the development of relationships, the creation of a positive culture in homeroom classrooms, and the creation of safe places for students to have a voice and express their personal options free of ridicule and negativity.

Critical to the findings of this study is the importance of smaller class sizes. When given a lower teacher to student ratio, the impact of social emotional success is apparent. Students are able to create lasting relationships with their teachers that affect their academic and behavioral success as a sixth-grade student who is transitioning to secondary education (Tian et al., 2017).

Everyone deserves a coach. Teachers, regardless of their years of experience, deserve a coaching experience. The opportunity to provide coaching through the implementation of a social emotional framework will impact not only the students but the adults that connect with the students on a daily basis. Coaching opportunities will have a positive impact on student's emotional, behavioral, and academic success.

Scholarly Practitioner Reflections on Leadership

The journey through the EdD program has taught me lessons that I never expected to learn on a personal level. Perseverance is the key to success. I am grateful that I have lived through situations that have pushed me to reach beyond my comfort zone. I have experienced stress in my personal life during this journey. I have sacrificed relationships with family and

friends in order to successfully tackle the EdD program. I have ended a long-term personal relationship. The experience has taught me the importance of trust and forming relationships based on mutual respect. I have recognized the importance of self-trust as well. I am the only one responsible for my own success. While the experience has been more than difficult at times, the resolution has brought me opportunities to thrive not just survive.

Professionally, I have experienced turmoil during transition accompanied by resolution with new opportunities. With each opportunity, my dialogue with the administration at Duckton Middle School perpetuated critical conversations with teachers who needed coaching opportunities. As a result of the data collected, the principal has assigned each staff member with a group of students to create an advocacy relationship. Ultimately, the experience determined the effectiveness of having a staff member assigned to a number of students to ensure their successful transition behaviorally and academically.

Establishing trust, boundaries, and time management are key takeaways in my development as a leader through this program. When it comes to trust, I have recognized the importance of not only creating trusting relationships with key stakeholders but establishing a level of self-trust is most important. Trust is the cornerstone of all relationships and impact the success of stakeholders involved in education. To be a successful leader, it is vital to establish trust with your community. Establishing boundaries to create a work-life balance is integral for personal and professional success. Creating boundaries and modeling this for staff and students is a key example of how leadership can impact growth and development of students and staff. It has taken me 40 plus years to figure out the importance of creating and maintaining health boundaries and came to fruition through this program. Time management has been a key factor in my development as a leader. When the program started, I knew it would take sacrifices to be

successful. What I have found to be key is the understanding of how important managing my time has been to complete this goal. As a leader, you have to model what you expect of your staff.

I set a goal of obtaining my doctorate many, many years ago however, I always let others' dreams come before my own. The biggest accomplishment in my growth as a leader is recognizing the importance of not allowing others to determine my own personal and professional success. As a leader you have a vision and a goal, and no matter the circumstances, the situations, or obstacles, you put forth the time, energy and effort to make the dream a reality.

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APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
4N-64 Brody Medical Sciences Building · Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office 252-744-2914 · Fax 252-744-2284 ·
rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/

Notification of Initial Approval: Expedited

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: [Krystal Tyndall](#)
CC: [Travis Lewis](#)
Date: 3/19/2021
Re: [UMCIRB 20-002923](#)
A SENSE OF BELONGING: EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF A SOCIAL EMOTIONAL FRAMEWORK ON STUDENT CONNECTEDNESS WITH SIXTH GRADE MALES

I am pleased to inform you that your Expedited Application was approved. Approval of the study and any consent form(s) occurred on 3/19/2021. The research study is eligible for review under expedited category # 6&7. The Chairperson (or designee) deemed this study no more than minimal risk.

As the Principal Investigator you are explicitly responsible for the conduct of all aspects of this study and must adhere to all reporting requirements for the study. Your responsibilities include but are not limited to:

1. Ensuring changes to the approved research (including the UMCIRB approved consent document) are initiated only after UMCIRB review and approval except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All changes (e.g. a change in procedure, number of participants, personnel, study locations, new recruitment materials, study instruments, etc.) must be prospectively reviewed and approved by the UMCIRB before they are implemented;
2. Where informed consent has not been waived by the UMCIRB, ensuring that only valid versions of the UMCIRB approved, date-stamped informed consent document(s) are used for obtaining informed consent (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found under the Documents tab in the ePIRATE study workspace);
3. Promptly reporting to the UMCIRB all unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others;
4. Submission of a final report application to the UMCIRB prior to the expected end date provided in the IRB application in order to document human research activity has ended and to provide a timepoint in which to base document retention; and
5. Submission of an amendment to extend the expected end date if the study is not expected to be completed by that date. The amendment should be submitted 30 days prior to the UMCIRB approved expected end date or as soon as the Investigator is aware that the study will not be completed by that date.

The approval includes the following items:

Name	Description
Focus Group Protocol.docx	Data Collection Sheet
Krystal Tyndall Proposal 11_8_20 FINAL.docx	Study Protocol or Grant Application
Parental Consent Tyndall 3 16 21.docx	Consent Forms
Script and Survey Tyndall 3 11 21.docx	Surveys and Questionnaires
Script and Survey Tyndall 3 11 21.docx	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Student Assent Form Tyndall 3 16 21.doc	Consent Forms

APPENDIX B: EASTERN COUNTY APPROVAL

<p>Eastern County School System Institutional Review Board Program Research, Dissertation, and Data Collection Application</p>	
<p><i>Part I: Required for All Applications</i></p>	
<p>List below all who will be coordinating or directing the research activity: Krystal Tyndall, Doctoral Candidate at East Carolina University (Krystal Tyndall will facilitate all data collection and analysis remotely off campus.) Bridget Grady (Collaborative Inquiry Partner)</p>	
<p>Title/role related to research activity: Sense of Belonging: Examining the Impact of a SEL Framework on Student Connectedness with Sixth-grade Males</p>	<p>Contact Name(s): Krystal Tyndall</p>
<p><i>Part II: Complete for All Applications</i></p>	
<p>Research Type:</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Dissertation <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Action Research <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Survey</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p>	
<p>Has approval for this research activity been granted through the associated university or other institute of higher learning's institutional review board?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes (Attach Copy to Application)</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No – Explain why approval has not been granted or why approval is not required for the associated research activity.</p> <p>IRB Approval will be conducted in the fall of 2020 after the proposal is defended. IRB Approval will be forwarded upon receipt.</p>	

Description of Research Activity:

The focus of practice: Sense of Belonging: Examining the impact of a social emotional framework on student connectedness with sixth-grade males, will utilize a mixed method approach using quantitative and qualitative research design. *Responsive Classroom*, a social emotional framework, will be implemented and utilized specifically to address student connectedness with sixth-grade males. By using this unique improvement tool, the researcher, along with the school improvement team of Duckton Middle School, will be able to build knowledge around the causes and effects increased discipline incidents and mental health referrals after collecting data and using this data to make refinements regarding the implementation of the social emotional framework (Crow, Crawford, & Spaulding, 2019). The Plan-Do-Study-Act model will be applied to drive three action research cycles for this study. The scholarly practitioner will be making connections from the data collected along the way and share this data with the school improvement team. In the first step of plan, stakeholders will work together to determine causes and possible interventions related to the issue of student's sense of belonging. In the do stage, the researcher will implement the SEL framework of *Responsive Classroom* to engage sixth-grade males in making connections within the school. As part of the study stage, qualitative and quantitative data will be collected and analyzed to determine the effectiveness of the program. Focus groups will be conducted, YRBS data will be collected, and mental health and discipline data trends will be identified. Finally, the act stage will determine what necessary changes in practices will need to occur as a result of the research collected (Crow, Crawford, & Spaulding, 2019).

Targeted Students, Staff, or Group:

Sixth-grade males are the primary targeted students, however, surveys and focus groups will be conducted with all students that are being taught through the *Responsive Classroom* social emotional framework. Teachers who have been trained in the RC model will be part of the staff focus group.

Identified Need for Research Activity:

Discipline rates and mental health assessments have been on the rise over a three-year trend. The strategic planning team has chosen *Responsive Classroom* as an SEL framework to begin creating strong advocates in the building. As part of the schools' goal, ever so students gain a better sense of connection. This study will determine the implications of the program implementation through a various of studies and surveys including focus groups and the YRBS survey.

Connection to Eastern County School System’s Strategic Plan: (Include goal, strategy, and action step supported by this implementation)

OCS GOAL 4: Every student in the Eastern County School System is healthy, safe, and responsible.

4.1: Implement programs and activities to enhance safe and respectful school environments.

A. Promote participation in professional development activities

related to national service learning standards

B. Increase the number of schools implementing a research-based behavioral program

I. Standardize an online district-wide process for students to identify an adult advocate at the elementary, middle and high school levels – utilize pictures of actual school staff, instead of clip art, for ease of identification in lower grades.

J. Utilize student advocacy survey information and process for identifying advocates for students who don’t feel that they currently have one.

4.4: Implement programs to decrease school violence and crime in schools.

d. Investigate the feasibility of accessing mental health resources to support students during the academic day.

Specific Targeted Standards or Goals: (e.g., North Carolina Standard Course of Study, 21st Century Skills, State and District Goals, Effective Schools Correlates, North Carolina Professional Teacher Standards, etc.)

- Every student in Duckton Middle School is healthy, safe, and responsible. SMS teachers and staff will know every student well is a strategic goal for Duckton Middle School. Additionally, the school will develop and implement consistent, intentional, and ongoing plans to support student transitions for grade-to-grade and level-to-level. (5134)

How are the results of this research activity expected to improve learning and teaching in the Eastern County School System?

Students who feel connected and safe in the building achieve.

Maslow (1942) believed that there are five basic human needs and ranked them in priority.

One of those needs in the hierarchy is love and belonging. Friendly and intimate relationships that help individuals identify with a group or groups are essential needs. (Hale, A. J., Ricotta, D. N., Freed, J., Smith, C. C., & Huang, G. C. (2019) Students who have a sense of belonging and feel connected to their school are more than likely to engage in healthy behaviors and succeed academically. Students who belong are more likely to graduate from high school and develop the skills and knowledge they will need to succeed in their professional and civic lives. Student belonging is defined as “the extent to which [they] feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment” (Goodenow, 1993, p. 80). On the other hand, students who feel less connected to their school community are more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors. These unhealthy behaviors include, but are not limited to, increased substance abuse, habitual smoking, and increased risk for mental health challenges such as depression and anxiety (Peterson & Skiba, 2001

<p>How will findings be shared with the Eastern County School System? Dr. Beth Folger will receive information collected as she is on the board committee. As instructed, I will share the information collected with all necessary parties. Information will be shared with the strategic planning team of Duckton Middle School. If applicable, the township elementary schools will receive information to promote a stronger transition. The township elementary schools are already participating in RC.</p>	
<p>Expected Outcomes: Decreased discipline incidents Increased positive behavior points Decreased mental health referrals Decreased bullying reports</p>	<p>Expected Evidence: YRBS Survey Pre and Post Data Educators Handbook Discipline Reports LiveSchool Data Mental Health and At-Risk Referral Incidents</p>
<p>Research Base: Specific source references (include dates) and short explanations of how they support the program or practice. In 2016, injury deaths, to include suicide, homicide, unintentional injury, and intent that is undetermined, for persons aged 10–19 years comprised 70% of all deaths in this age range (Curtin, Heron, Miniño & Warner, 2018). According to the 2017 High School Youth Risk Behavior survey for North Carolina, 27.7% of boys were involved in a physical fight twelve months before the survey was conducted. 14.9% were bullied on school property. 20.3% of boys indicated that they felt sad or hopeless. 11.3% of boys seriously considered suicide and 10.3% planned to commit suicide (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). Social and emotional learning can be an approach used to create learning communities that are full of inclusivity, consideration, healthy habits that support all stakeholders to reach a level of performance that meets their full potential. For SEL to be implemented systemically, fostering an equitable learning environment is that the focus. This is when all parties feel valued and respected, individuals’ interests are affirmed, and cultural values, personal identifies, and family backgrounds are considered. (CASEL.org. 2020). While the approach of social and emotional learning will reduce at-risk behaviors and improve the mental health for students and staff, the impact is greater when a systemic approach is integrated as a framework across all aspects of the educational system from the how the district office is structured to how instruction in individual classrooms is presented (Taylor, Oberle, Durlak & Weissberg, 2017).</p>	
<p>Timeline for Research Activity: Study to be conducted 20-21 school year</p>	

Part III: Complete for All Applications.	
Title/Topic:	Hypothesis or Research Question:
<p>Sense of Belonging: Examining the Impact of a SEL Framework on Student Connectedness with Sixth-grade Males</p>	<p>Students will gain a sense of belonging and an increased connection to students and adults in the building by participating in the social emotional framework thus decreasing discipline incidents for sixth-grade males.</p>

Itemize the steps that will involve OCS students, staff, and/or facilities:		
Description/ Actions	Explain evidence to be collected	Date(s)
<p>Researcher will meet remotely with administrator and counselor regularly to discuss implementation schedule.</p> <p>Counselor on campus will conduct focus groups and surveys.</p> <p>I will work remotely to collect data, analyze research, and present findings.</p>	<p>Focus Groups will be coded for themes to identify sense of belonging and student connectedness related to student engagement, school climate and culture, teacher influence on attainment, males and discipline rates, and <i>Responsive classroom</i> program implementation results</p>	<p>Each action cycle will occur every nine weeks. The collection of information will be shared before the next cycle begins.</p>

Part IV: Complete for All Applications.

Narrative:
Summarize the research topic and plans for implementation and gathering evidence.
The design of this study is to determine the effects of implementing the social-emotional framework, a curriculum designed by *Responsive Classroom*, on sixth-grade males regarding student connectedness and sense of belonging. The study will determine, if implemented with fidelity, that the implementation of the framework will increase students' connectivity thus decreasing the number of discipline incidents and youth at-risk behaviors. Evidence will be collected via action research: three cycles of collecting discipline data, Youth Risk Behavior Surveys and mental health risk assessments.

Will student or teacher data be shared with or collected by any 3rd party or outside agency?
 Yes No
If yes, to whom and how will the 3rd party or outside agency utilize this data?
NA
What will be done with the data at the conclusion of the project? (Should be obtained in writing from the 3rd party or outside agency.)
The data collected will be shared with the *Responsive Classroom* action team, the Strategic Leadership Team, and administration. Information shared will determine the continuation of program implementation.
Specifically describe how individual students' and or teachers' safety, welfare, privacy, and confidentiality (including data) will be protected.
Surveys will be conducted anonymously and with permission from parents. Teachers will participate in focus groups and be conducted by an inquiry partner that doesn't conduct evaluations. All names will remain confidential from the study when information is shared with the appropriate personnel.

<p>Approved: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No (please see comments below) Date: <u>8/20/20</u></p> <p>IRB #: <u>6700827</u></p> <p>Comments:</p>
<p>IRB Review Team Comments, Questions or Recommendations: Approved by Lisa Thompson on 8/20/20</p>

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT



Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Information to consider before taking part in research that has no more than minimal risk.

Title of Research Study: A Sense of Belonging: Examining the impact of a social emotional learning framework on student connectedness for sixth-grade males

Principal Investigator: Krystal G. Tyndall (Person in Charge of this Study)
Institution, Department or Division: East Carolina University/Duckton Middle School
Address: 2522 Siloam Road, Mt. Airy, NC 27030
Telephone #: 919-369-3226
Study Coordinator: Bridget Grady (On-site Coordinator)
Telephone #: 910-326-3601

Researchers at East Carolina University (ECU) and Duckton Middle School study issues related to society, health problems, environmental problems, behavior problems and the human condition. To do this, we need the help of volunteers who are willing to take part in research.

Why am I being invited to take part in this research?

The purpose of this research is to find ways to build student's sense of belonging at school, so they make health choices socially, emotionally, and academically. You are being invited to take part in this research because you are a teacher at the school who has been trained in *Responsive Classroom*/sixth-grade student. The decision to take part in this research is yours to make. By doing this research, we hope to learn how to equip our sixth-grade students with the most optimal learning environment, so they are successful throughout their middle school career.

If you volunteer to take part in this research, you will be one of about 12/300 people to do so.

Are there reasons I should not take part in this research?

You should not take part in this research if you become no longer connected to Duckton Middle School.

What other choices do I have if I do not take part in this research?

You can choose not to participate.

Where is the research going to take place and how long will it last?

The research will be conducted at Duckton Middle School. You will need to come be present at school, in the PDC/Homeroom class 6 times during the study. The total amount of time you will be asked to volunteer for this study is 3-4 hours over the next 12 months.

What will I be asked to do?

You will be asked to do the following: Students will take part in pre and post surveys utilizing the Youth Risk Behavior Survey. Students will also be a part of focus groups. Every nine weeks, students will be invited to participate in the survey and/or the focus group. Teachers will be asked to volunteer for a focus group where they discuss the implementation process of *Responsive Classroom* framework. The focus groups will last no more than an hour at a time with demographic information collected before the start of the group. Questions that will be asked during the focus group will relate to student connectedness, risk behaviors observed at school, discipline rates, and ways to increase student belonging as part of the implementation of *Responsive Classroom*. Teachers may be asked about needs for professional development, implementation strategies, and any effects from the advisory lessons. Focus groups will be recorded in order to transcribe the dialogue and to identify themes from the discussion. All recordings and notes will be deleted and/or destroyed by May 15, 2022.

What might I experience if I take part in the research?

We don't know of any risks (the chance of harm) associated with this research. Any risks that may occur with this research are no more than what you would experience in everyday life. We don't know if you will benefit from taking part in this study. There may not be any personal benefit to you, but the information gained by doing this research may help others in the future.

Will I be paid for taking part in this research?

We will not be able to pay you for the time you volunteer while being in this study.

Will it cost me to take part in this research?

It will not cost you any money to be part of the research

Who will know that I took part in this research and learn personal information about me?

ECU and the people and organizations listed below may know that you took part in this research and may see information about you that is normally kept private. With your permission, these people may use your private information to do this research:

- People designated by Carolina Middle School
- People designated by Eastern County Schools

How will you keep the information you collect about me secure? How long will you keep it?

Information will be stored in one drive that is password protected. Recordings and photographs will be stored in one drive that is password protected. All information will be destroyed by May of 2022 at the culmination of the study presentation.

What if I decide I don't want to continue in this research?

You can stop at any time after it has already started. There will be no consequences if you stop and you will not be criticized. You will not lose any benefits that you normally receive.

APPENDIX D: INFORMED ASSENT

Dear _____,

I would like to invite you to take part in a focus group (small discussion group) about school connectedness and safety on _____ at 2:45 in the sixth-grade counseling center near Mrs. Starlin's room. The focus group should last no longer than one hour, and refreshments will be provided. The focus group will provide an opportunity for you to find out about the research I am conducting to find ways to help students have a better sense of connectedness and belonging to Duckton Middle School. Additionally, we are gathering some advice to share with rising sixth-graders. More background information will be sent to those confirming attendance before the focus group begins.

Your views will be used to help the school understand ways we can help students become more connected and will be shared anonymously with our strategic leadership team to make decisions about how to help students be successful during their middle school career.

If you would like to take part in the focus group on _____ after school, please let me know by completing the bottom portion of this letter and returning this sheet to your homeroom teacher by _____. You can get a ride from your parent/guardian or use our after-school bus transportation. The focus group will be finished by 4pm.

Sincerely,

Ms. Tyndall

Student Name: _____ Grade: _____

Homeroom Teacher: _____

_____ I would like to participate in the focus group on March 12th and will have my parent/guardian pick me up at 4pm.

_____ I would like to participate in the focus group on March 12th and will ride the afterschool bus.

_____ I respectfully decline the invitation.

Parent Signature

Date

APPENDIX E: FOCUS GROUP INFORMATION FORM

Thank you for participating in today’s focus group. Please complete the following information while we wait to begin. All information will remain confidential.

- 1. Student Name: _____
- 2. Grade: _____
- 3. Gender: Male Female
- 4. Race: Black White Hispanic Multi Other
- 5. Age: _____
- 6. How many years have you attended Duckton Middle School? _____
- 7. How many years have you attended school in Eastern County? _____
- 8. How many different schools have you attended since Kindergarten? _____
- 9. Did you participate in the rising 6th grade orientation at Duckton Middle School:
 Yes No
- 10. Have you ever repeated a grade in school since Kindergarten? Yes No
- 11. Do you participate in clubs after school at SBMS? Yes No
- 12. If yes, please list them:

- 13. Do you participate in sports at SBMS? Yes No
- 14. If yes, please list them:

- 15. Do you participate in any activities outside of school? Yes No
- 16. If yes, please list them:

17. If you answered no to the previous three questions, please indicate why:

18. Who resides in your house? _____

19. Do you have an adult advocate at school that you feel comfortable talking with?

a. Yes No

20. Do you have an adult advocate outside of school that you feel comfortable talking with?

Yes No

APPENDIX F: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Title of Study: Sense of Belonging: Examining the Impact of a social emotional learning framework on student connectedness with sixth-grade males

Date & Time of Focus Group: TBD

Location of Focus Group: Sixth-grade Conference Room

Facilitator: Bridget Grady

Note Taker: Erin Holland

Focus Group Participants (Names or Identifiers): TBD

Introduction Text

My name is Krystal Tyndall and I will be the facilitator for today's focus group. The purpose of this focus group is to learn more about the ways you feel connected to the school. All of you have been asked to participate because you are sixth-grade students. It is our expectation that your opinions and experiences will help us learn more about ways that *Responsive Classroom* will help you get more connected at school. After the conclusion of the focus group, the information we discussed will be categorized into themes and topics before being shared anonymously with the strategic leadership team. They will then take that anonymous focus group information and use it to help them better deliver their program. Your personal information will not be connected to the results of this focus group.

I am passing around a consent form. By signing this form, you are agreeing to participate in the focus group. If you feel uncomfortable for any reason signing this form, you are free to leave at any time. Please take a moment to read it over.

Before we begin, first I would like to introduce you to our note taker, Bridget Grady, who will not be participating in the focus group in any way, but merely helping to ensure we are

accurately capturing your responses. We will also be recording the session in order to accurately transcribe the dialogue. I would like to go over a few ground rules for the focus group. These are in place to ensure that all of you feel comfortable sharing your experiences and opinions.

Ground Rules:

1. *Confidentiality* – Please respect the confidentiality of your peers. As facilitator, I will only be sharing the information from this focus group anonymously.
2. *One Speaker at a Time* – Only one person should speak at a time in order to make sure that we can all hear what everyone is saying.
3. *Use Respectful Language* – In order to facilitate an open discussion, please avoid any statements or words that may be offensive to other members of the group.
4. *Open Discussion* – This is a time for everyone to feel free to express their opinions and viewpoints. There will be no right or wrong answers.
5. *Participation is Important* – It is important that everyone’s voice is shared and heard in order to make this the most productive focus group possible. Please speak up if you have something to add to the conversation!

Thank you, now let’s begin.

Questions to be Asked, Listed Fully and in Order

1. If you could pick one emoji to describe your connections with peers and/or adults in the building, what would it be and why?
2. Can you identify an adult advocate at school that you feel comfortable talking to about issues?
3. How often does an adult greet you or ask how you are doing?
How often would you like to be asked how you are doing?

4. What activities are you involved in at school? If you are not, what is stopping you from joining a club or activity?
5. On a scale of 1-5 (1 not involved and 5 very involved), how involved are you in school? In your community? Describe your answer.
 - 5a. Could also ask, are there certain times when you feel safe at school?
 - 5b. Are there certain times when you feel less safe or unsafe at school?
6. How would you describe the environment at school? How would you describe how you feel in your classes?

Conclusion Text

Thank you for participating in today's focus group. As a reminder, I will be sharing the information learned during this session anonymously with the strategic leadership team in order to help improve the implementation of the program. If you think of any additional thoughts or comments that you would like to share, please contact me at krystaltyndall@gmail.com. Have a great remainder of your day!

APPENDIX G: YOUTH RISK BEHAVIOR SURVEY

This survey is about health behavior. It has been developed so you can tell us what you do that may affect your health. The information you give will be used to improve health education for young people like yourself. **DO NOT** write your name on this survey. The answers you give will be kept private. No one will know what you write. Answer the questions based on what you really do. Completing the survey is voluntary. Whether or not you answer the questions will not affect your grade in this class. If you are not comfortable answering a question, just leave it blank.

The questions that ask about your background will be used only to describe the types of students completing this survey. The information will not be used to find out your name. No names will ever be reported. Make sure to read every question. Fill in the ovals completely. When you are finished, follow the instructions of the person giving you the survey.

Thank you very much for your help.

Directions

- Use a #2 pencil only.
- Make dark marks.
- Fill in a response like this: A B D.
- If you change your answer, erase your old answer completely.

1. How old are you?

- A. 10 years old or younger
- B. 11 years old
- C. 12 years old
- D. 13 years old
- E. 14 years old
- F. 15 years old
- G. 16 years old or older

2. What is your sex?

- A. Female
- B. Male

3. In what grade are you?

- A. 6th grade
- B. 7th grade
- C. 8th grade
- D. Ungraded or other grade

4. Are you Hispanic or Latino?

- A. Yes
- B. No

5. What is your race? (Select one or more responses.)

- A. American Indian or Alaska Native
- B. Asian
- C. Black or African American
- D. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- E. White

The next 4 questions ask about safety.

6. When you ride a bicycle, how often do you wear a helmet?

- A. I do not ride a bicycle
- B. Never wear a helmet
- C. Rarely wear a helmet
- D. Sometimes wear a helmet
- E. Most of the time wear a helmet
- F. Always wear a helmet

7. When you rollerblade or ride a skateboard, how often do you wear a helmet?

- A. I do not rollerblade or ride a skateboard
- B. Never wear a helmet
- C. Rarely wear a helmet
- D. Sometimes wear a helmet
- E. Most of the time wear a helmet

F. Always wear a helmet

8. How often do you wear a seat belt when riding in a car?

A. Never

B. Rarely

C. Sometimes

D. Most of the time

E. Always

9. Have you ever ridden in a car driven by someone who had been drinking alcohol?

A. Yes

B. No

C. Not sure

The next 2 questions ask about violence-related behaviors and experiences.

10. Have you ever been in a physical fight?

A. Yes

B. No

11. Have you ever seen someone get physically attacked, beaten, stabbed, or shot in your neighborhood?

A. Yes

B. No

The next 2 questions ask about bullying. Bullying is when 1 or more students tease, threaten, spread rumors about, hit, shove, or hurt another student over and over again. It is not bullying when 2 students of about the same strength or power argue or fight or tease each other in a friendly way.

12. Have you ever been bullied on school property?

A. Yes

B. No

13. Have you ever been electronically bullied? (Count being bullied through texting, Instagram, Facebook, or other social media.)

A. Yes

B. No

The next 3 questions ask about attempted suicide. Sometimes people feel so depressed about the future that they may consider attempting suicide or killing themselves.

14. Have you ever seriously thought about killing yourself?

A. Yes

B. No

15. Have you ever made a plan about how you would kill yourself?

A. Yes

B. No

16. Have you ever tried to kill yourself?

A. Yes

B. No

The next 4 questions ask about cigarette smoking.

17. Have you ever tried cigarette smoking, even one or two puffs?

A. Yes

B. No

18. How old were you when you first tried cigarette smoking, even one or two puffs?

- A. I have never tried cigarette smoking, not even one or two puffs
- B. 8 years old or younger
- C. 9 years old
- D. 10 years old
- E. 11 years old
- F. 12 years old
- G. 13 years old or older

19. During the past 30 days, on how many days did you smoke cigarettes?

- A. 0 days
- B. 1 or 2 days
- C. 3 to 5 days
- D. 6 to 9 days
- E. 10 to 19 days
- F. 20 to 29 days
- G. All 30 days

20. During the past 30 days, on the days you smoked, how many cigarettes did you smoke per day?

- A. I did not smoke cigarettes during the past 30 days
- B. Less than 1 cigarette per day
- C. 1 cigarette per day
- D. 2 to 5 cigarettes per day
- E. 6 to 10 cigarettes per day
- F. 11 to 20 cigarettes per day

G. More than 20 cigarettes per day

The next 2 questions ask about electronic vapor products, such as JUUL, SMOK, Suorin, Vuse, and blu. Electronic vapor products include e-cigarettes, vapes, vape pens, e-cigars, ehookahs, hookah pens, and mods.

21. Have you ever used an electronic vapor product?

A. Yes

B. No

22. During the past 30 days, on how many days did you use an electronic vapor product?

A. 0 days

B. 1 or 2 days

C. 3 to 5 days

D. 6 to 9 days

E. 10 to 19 days

F. 20 to 29 days

G. All 30 days

The next 2 questions ask about other tobacco products.

23. During the past 30 days, on how many days did you use chewing tobacco, snuff, dip, snus, or dissolvable tobacco products, such as Copenhagen, Grizzly, Skoal, or Camel Snus? (Do not count any electronic vapor products.)

A. 0 days

B. 1 or 2 days

C. 3 to 5 days

D. 6 to 9 days

E. 10 to 19 days

F. 20 to 29 days

G. All 30 days

24. During the past 30 days, on how many days did you smoke cigars, cigarillos, or little cigars?

A. 0 days

B. 1 or 2 days

C. 3 to 5 days

D. 6 to 9 days

E. 10 to 19 days

F. 20 to 29 days

G. All 30 days

The next 2 questions ask about drinking alcohol. This includes drinking beer, wine, flavored alcoholic beverages, and liquor such as rum, gin, vodka, or whiskey. For these questions, drinking alcohol does not include drinking a few sips of wine for religious purposes.

25. Have you ever had a drink of alcohol, other than a few sips?

A. Yes

B. No

26. How old were you when you had your first drink of alcohol other than a few sips?

A. I have never had a drink of alcohol other than a few sips

B. 8 years old or younger

C. 9 years old

- D. 10 years old
- E. 11 years old
- F. 12 years old
- G. 13 years old or older

The next 2 questions ask about marijuana use. Marijuana also is called pot or weed. For these questions, do not count CBD-only or hemp products, which come from the same plant as marijuana, but do not cause a high when used alone.

27. Have you ever used marijuana?

- A. Yes
- B. No

28. How old were you when you tried marijuana for the first time?

- A. I have never tried marijuana
- B. 8 years old or younger
- C. 9 years old
- D. 10 years old
- E. 11 years old
- F. 12 years old
- G. 13 years old or older

The next question asks about the use of prescription pain medicine without a doctor's prescription or differently than how a doctor told you to use it. For this question, count drugs such as codeine, Vicodin, OxyContin, Hydrocodone, and Percocet.

29. Have you ever taken prescription pain medicine without a doctor's prescription or differently than how a doctor told you to use it?

A. Yes

B. No

The next 2 questions ask about other drugs.

30. Have you ever used any form of cocaine, including powder, crack, or free base?

A. Yes

B. No

31. Have you ever sniffed glue, breathed the contents of spray cans, or inhaled any paints or sprays to get high?

A. Yes

B. No

The next 4 questions ask about sexual intercourse.

32. Have you ever had sexual intercourse?

A. Yes

B. No

33. How old were you when you had sexual intercourse for the first time?

A. I have never had sexual intercourse

B. 8 years old or younger

C. 9 years old

D. 10 years old

E. 11 years old

F. 12 years old

G. 13 years old or older

34. With how many people have you ever had sexual intercourse?

- A. I have never had sexual intercourse
- B. 1 person
- C. 2 people
- D. 3 people
- E. 4 people
- F. 5 people
- G. 6 or more people

35. The last time you had sexual intercourse, did you or your partner use a condom?

- A. I have never had sexual intercourse
- B. Yes
- C. No

The next 2 questions ask about body weight.

36. How do you describe your weight?

- A. Very underweight
- B. Slightly underweight
- C. About the right weight
- D. Slightly overweight
- E. Very overweight

37. Which of the following are you trying to do about your weight?

- A. Lose weight
- B. Gain weight
- C. Stay the same weight
- D. I am not trying to do anything about my weight

The next question asks about eating breakfast.

38. During the past 7 days, on how many days did you eat breakfast?

- A. 0 days
- B. 1 day
- C. 2 days
- D. 3 days
- E. 4 days
- F. 5 days
- G. 6 days
- H. 7 days

The next 4 questions ask about physical activity.

39. During the past 7 days, on how many days were you physically active for a total of at least 60 minutes per day? (Add up all the time you spent in any kind of physical activity that increased your heart rate and made you breathe hard some of the time.)

- A. 0 days
- B. 1 day
- C. 2 days
- D. 3 days
- E. 4 days
- F. 5 days
- G. 6 days
- H. 7 days

40. On an average school day, how many hours do you spend in front of a TV, computer,

smart phone, or other electronic device watching shows or videos, playing games, accessing the Internet, or using social media (also called "screen time")? (Do not count time spent doing schoolwork.)

- A. Less than 1 hour per day
- B. 1 hour per day
- C. 2 hours per day
- D. 3 hours per day
- E. 4 hours per day
- F. 5 or more hours per day

41. In an average week when you are in school, on how many days do you go to physical education (PE) classes?

- A. 0 days
- B. 1 day
- C. 2 days
- D. 3 days
- E. 4 days
- F. 5 days

42. During the past 12 months, on how many sports teams did you play? (Count any teams run by your school or community groups.)

- A. 0 teams
- B. 1 team
- C. 2 teams
- D. 3 or more teams

APPENDIX H: WALKTHROUGH TOOL

Item	Observed	Not Observed	Comments
All/almost all students respectfully interact with classmates.			
Students are engaged in interesting and meaningful work. The lesson and tasks are active and interactive.			
The teacher uses reinforcing language rather than general praise to specifically and descriptively identify positive behaviors and participation of individuals, groups and/or whole class.			
The teacher interactively models and/or provides clear directions, expectations, and reminders to support the learning and participation of the students and prevent student misbehavior.			
The teacher is facilitating all of the provided lesson with the students (i.e., PPT is projected, all components presented).			
The teacher provides student feedback and encourages student-to-student feedback, discussion and/or collaboration.			

