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Evidence-based Social-Emotional Learning and its Influence on Teachers' Perception of Student Behavior: An analysis of RULER and the Anchors of Emotional Intelligence

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Evidence-based Social-Emotional Learning and its Influence on Teachers' Perception of Student Behavior: An analysis of RULER and the Anchors of Emotional Intelligence

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to assess the extent by which an evidence-based Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) program influenced teachers' perception of students' behavior in a small and diverse PK – 8 school district in Westchester County, NY. Specifically, the researcher evaluated the Anchors of Emotional Intelligence and the RULER framework to determine its impact on school climate as viewed from the perspective of staff in the district. Prior to commencing the study, the researcher recognized the negative staff narrative around student behavior in the district as a significant problem of practice that was observable, actionable and high leverage.

This mixed-methods study utilized a school climate survey adapted from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) along with an SEL scale adopted from the RULER framework. The study, however, leaned heavily on the qualitative component, interviewing 11 tenured teachers in the district and analyzing this data with that obtained from both the school climate survey and SEL scale. As of the 2018-2019 school year, Pocantico Hills Central School District consisted of 322 students and 49 staff members. All staff completed the school climate survey.

While the study found that the Anchors of Emotional Intelligence and its RULER framework was not shown to have a significant impact on improving student-behavior, staff perception was favorable, viewing its implementation as a needed resource to support teachers' ability to effectively understand and address challenging behavior. While staff did not report a significant change in students' behavior, there was a collective belief that behavior would improve with sustained commitment and fidelity of implementation. Additionally, further research on teachers Social-Emotional Competencies (SEC) was recommended.

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Amongst the growing research on Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Emotional Intelligence (EI) in general are the critical emotions of gratitude and pride. It is, in fact, these emotions we often feel when we recognize the impact that an organization, individual or group of individuals have had in support of our successful journey that we otherwise would not have been able to accomplish on our own (DeSteno, 2018). And, in the spirit of this study on Emotional Intelligence, it is with immense gratitude that I want to thank the University of Arkansas and its Ed.D. program in providing an accessible and affordable Ed.D. program without compromising rigor or reputation. Entering this journey, I never expected to feel the level of connection with the University and pride in considering myself a Razorback. I am grateful.

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have obtained by pursuing my doctorate regionally. I am proud to have been part of this cohort and amongst such a fine and intelligent group of educators. Yes; I am grateful.

DEDICATION

While there are many that encouraged and supported me through this journey—family, friends and colleagues—there is but one that I dedicate this dissertation—my wife, Ana. Since the day we met I have been a graduate student, and through each journey, with each degree, you have been patient and supportive. You recognized and understood the value in my pursuit of this terminal degree in my profession, and provided me with the necessary time and space to effectively engage in the coursework and the subsequent research and writing. The sacrifices you made in affording me the opportunity to pursue this degree were never lost on me. I am so very grateful—always and forever.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of an evidence-based social-emotional learning (SEL) framework, specifically the RULER framework and its Anchors of Emotional Intelligence, on staff's perception of student behavior. Unlike research-based, an evidence-based SEL program has been explicitly tested for efficacy whereas research-based SEL programs are constructed from an existing theory, approach or idea but its outcomes have not been explicitly tested (National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development, 2018, p. 4).

Teachers' perceptions of student behavior influence the climate of a school community. Classroom management, individual relationships with students, and philosophies on what constitutes acceptable classroom behavior can vary greatly from teacher to teacher. Additionally, institutional policies on student discipline including a building's Code of Conduct or student referral procedure may influence teachers' perceptions of student behavior. Teachers' collective characterization of students' behavior reflects their individual skills and philosophies as well as the institutional policies of the building. As such, teachers' perceptions, their narratives, and anecdotal reports may provide a more meaningful indication of a shift in student behavior and school climate rather than isolated quantitative data such as shifts in student referrals. Often, such quantitative studies assume that everyone shares the same skill set, and referrals or reports of student behavior are uniform and consistent amongst educators. The quantitative data used to interpret and analyze disciplinary trends in a building neglect the individual—and often discretionary—choices made by teachers when referring students for problematic behavior. However, evidence-based Social Emotional Curriculum (SEC) may

influence teachers' perception of student conduct by shifting adults' mindsets and growing individual skill sets to effectively manage students' behavior. In turn, this may influence the collective narrative of student behavior and school climate in a building.

Specifically, this study was intended to assess the extent to which the implementation of the RULER framework influenced teachers' perceptions of student behavior at Pocantico Hills. The Anchors of Emotional Intelligence through the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence provides a framework by which schools nurture and support a healthy school climate, providing students with the tools to recognize and regulate their emotions and thus, improve student behavior in a school building. The framework is intended to support students' emotional intelligence to better manage conflict resolution, support more empathetic and positive relationships, and reduce students' stress. The Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence touts its framework as an evidence-based approach for integrating social and emotional learning into schools through its RULER model. The demonstration of pro-social skills through a RULER approach, an acronym that teaches students to recognize, understand, label, express and regulate individual emotions, is rooted in research and provides specific resources to help support students' emotional intelligence (EI). Aside from the RULER acronym, the framework includes three important resources—a Mood Meter, Meta-Moment, and Blueprint for Solving Problems.

The ability to support, nurture, and educate a school community around emotional intelligence is critical in redefining cultural norms and perceptions that best meet the needs of the students the school serves. Staff's perceptions of student behavior and accountability are a reflection of their emotional intelligence and such perceptions influence their narrative of their school's culture (Bennett, 2017). Most often, the implementation of an SEL program assumes staff prepossess a high level of EI competency and a strong commitment to its use in promoting

pro-social behaviors. This study, however, sought to assess the extent by which a well-articulated implementation of an evidence-based SEL program influenced staff's perceptions of behavior. As such, a thoughtful evaluation of RULER was critical in gaining a greater understanding of staff's perception of student behavior.

This study was significant in helping to assess the extent to which a purported evidence-based SEL framework has a positive influence on staff's perception of student behavior. Emotional Intelligence is multifaceted and complex. The study did not seek to suggest that staff's EI was solely defined by their perceptions of student behavior. Rather, this study sought to explore the extent to which an SEL program may influence the process by which staff recognize and interpret students' behavior in the building in ways that may be characterized as more positive than prior to the implementation of the SEL program.

Such a study provides further scholarly research on the role of EI in shaping a positive school culture. An evaluation of the program within its delivery at Pocantico Hills can potentially further reinforce its claim of evidence-based success. Specific to the community of Pocantico Hills, its evaluation provides a level of credibility to the school community as thoughtful steps around its implementation and evaluation communicate the responsiveness of addressing cultural challenges at Pocantico.

Problem Setting and Context

Pocantico Hills Central School District: affluent and diverse.

Pocantico Hills Central School District—a preK - 8 school district in Westchester County, NY—maintains an enrollment as of the 2019-2019 school year of 322 students with an incredibly diverse demographic that has long enjoyed superior financial resources as a result of

its strong connection to the Rockefeller family. The district represents one the highest per pupil expenditures in the country. The online journal *24/7 Wall St* noted in 2015 that:

The Pocantico Hills Central School District in New York spends a whopping \$61,029 per student, the most of any district. Conversely, the Graham Public Schools district in Oklahoma spends roughly one one-hundredth of the Pocantico Hills spending just \$648 per student — the least of any district.

The 2017-2018 school budget of \$30,242,460 serves 340 students in the District and passed with 223 YES votes and 81 NO votes (Pocantico Central School District, 2017). The proposed 2019-2020 budget was \$31,574,065 including a budget to budget increase of 1.75% from the prior year (Pocantico Central School District, 2019). Thus, despite some pockets of significant poverty within the district, financial resources remain a source of strength for this tiny and ethnically diverse district. Table 1.1 below provides the ethnic composite of students at Pocantico as reported to the New York State Education Department for the 2018-2019 school year.

Table 1.1

Ethnicity at Pocantico: 2018-2019

Ethnicity	Percent
White	40.0
Asian	17.9
Hispanic or Latino	22.1
Black or African-American	14.5
Multi-Racial	5.2
American Indian	0.3

Source: <https://data.nysed.gov/profile>

The original architect of the district—John D. Rockefeller Jr.— offered residents of three nearby districts a plot of land opening the existing district—Pocantico Hills Central School District—in 1932 (Kostich, 2017). Famed banker and philanthropist David Rockefeller who passed away on March 20, 2017, was the oldest living descendant of John D. Rockefeller. His

desire to carve out the district out in 1932 captured a diverse ethnic and socio-economic demographic. Pocantico Central School District captures some of the most affluent sections of Westchester Country, including Tarrytown, Briarcliff and Pleasantville while also serving students from the ethnically diverse Westchester Hills Condominiums as well as a predominately African-American public housing unit called Pocantico Park—both of which are located in Elmsford. Additionally, New York Medical College is included in the District, and as such, a number of children of Indian and Asian medical students attend Pocantico Hills. Thus, the ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of the district coupled with its rich school budget place this school district in a unique and distinct role of demonstrating the impact that high quality education can have in ensuring social and economic mobility and healthy race relations.

Recent history of Pocantico Hills Central School District

The researcher's arrival as the new principal at Pocantico Hills in July, 2017 was met with a common narrative of a "scarred" staff that has experienced a lack of stability and strong leadership for many years. The district experienced six superintendents from 2008 to 2020. The superintendent that was hired in July 2016 enjoyed strong ties to the district as a former longstanding and highly regarded high school principal of a nearby district that receives students from Pocantico. However, despite an initial desire to renew her contract and remain with the district, she announced her intent to retire in the spring of 2018 indicating that she would retire after her three-year contract was finished on June 30, 2019. Hence, the superintendent's decision prompted me to reconsider my commitment to the district and explore a district office leadership role in another district. I, too, departed in July, 2019 to become a Director of Human Resources at Brewster Central Schools—a much larger district of 3,000 students where I now oversee all personnel operations. This is a position that is often viewed as a next step toward the

superintendency. However, these unexpected changes have only further added to the narrative of administrative turnover and lack of support from the Board of Education. Yet another new superintendent began in July, 2019 along with the former interim principal being appointed again to the principalship in August, 2019.

Given Pocantico's uniqueness as a preK - 8 school district, graduating 8th grade students have a choice of attending one of three neighboring and high performing high schools—Sleepy Hollow, Pleasantville, or Briarcliff. The superintendent from 2016 – 2019 was previously the high school principal of Sleepy Hollow for 22 years. Prior to her arrival, the tumult and turnover in the superintendency at the district level created a situation whereby there was an interim principal for the three years prior. Again, upon my departure, he was again appointed principal in August, 2019.

In an effort to provide further context to this sordid narrative, prior to the 2015-2016 school year, the longstanding principal, was removed by the superintendent and placed in a different role, eventually forcing his resignation from the district. However, as the principalship has evolved from daily manager to instructional leader, this principal's leadership seemed to reflect that of a daily manager and not an instructional leader. This information was gleaned from the narrative shared by the superintendent who had hired me to begin in July, 2018. She had a longstanding relationship with the prior principal since she was the prior high school principal of Sleepy Hollow High School—a partner high school of the district. Thus, the community has lacked the knowledge and understanding specific to the role of the principal. Simply, most community members have struggled to fully understand what a principal is and does as an agent of change.

Given the historical narrative of the district and the blurred lines between the superintendency and principalship, the community neglects to understand the distinct roles that are inherent in each position. The Superintendent had long shared the title “Principal,” a reality not communicated until after my appointment as the new principal in July, 2017. Additionally, the small size of the district created challenges in nurturing a culture that respects boundaries and understands levels of leadership that are inherent in a healthy organization’s chain of command. Staff and families often solicit information from the Superintendent on matters that are best addressed by the building principal. The lack of consistent leadership created a culture that has been scarred and neglectful of the needs of its students, staff, and families, contributing to narratives around student discipline and contentious staff-parent and administrator-parent interactions. As a result, a culture of suspicion, hostility, and defensiveness long defined the climate of the district. Moreover, organizational systems that are inherent in healthy school districts have been broken or virtually nonexistent. This was evidenced by a lack of articulated policies and procedures that help to define a healthy organizational system, including disciplinary practices and policies.

Problem Statement

Pocantico has lacked a functional system that is well defined and universally understood by staff and parents when identifying and addressing questionable student behavior in the building. This problem of practice resided in the informal theory that the use of the RULER framework may have an impact on teachers’ perceptions of student behavior by helping to support a system that can better define and address student behavior in the building. This informal theory suggested that the use of RULER may improve the culture of the school by establishing a common understanding of student behavior and appropriate disciplinary responses

that include promoting, redirecting and assessing students' behavior. Thus, this problem of practice was largely shaped by how teachers understand student behaviors as defined through an SEL framework.

Research indicates that schools that lack a strong commitment to an evidence-based SEL program view student behavior and accountability from a punitive perspective, often reporting poor or unwanted student behavior that must be addressed with formal disciplinary action from a school administrator (CASEL, 2018; Williford & Wolcott, 2015). Research indicates that an SEL framework that is implemented with fidelity in a school improves staff's ability to redirect unwanted behavior with fewer formal disciplinary referrals (Brackett, 2018; Bridgeland & Hariharan, 2013; CASEL, 2018; Durlak, Weissberg, Roger & Gullotta, 2015; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Often, there is an assumption that teachers inherently possess social-emotional competencies (SEC) upon entering the profession. Teacher preparation programs, however, neglect developing these skills in aspiring educators, and as a result, teachers may lack the expertise necessary to cope and manage student behaviors in effective ways. Thus, teachers' SEC may influence an effective implementation of an SEL program (Tom, 2012).

The ability of teachers to model high levels of SEC and possess a strong philosophical commitment to the important role of EI in shaping student behavior is critical in a successful implementation of an SEL program. Buchanan, Gueldner, Tran, and Merrell (2009) note:

Teachers need to have high SECs as well as right beliefs and perceptions to make a difference in their students' learning. All teachers should go through a screening test before entry into the teaching profession and be given SEC training even if they are merely relief teachers in the classes. This is to ensure that teachers have the right mindset in preparing their students for the 21st century (p. 69).

The need for training suggests an important skill set that is often missing in teachers' perceptions of students' behavior and their ability to positively influence behaviors in their work with students.

This problem reflects the interaction between staff and students as well as staff and principal. In part, organizational systems that have lacked clarity have translated into systemic issues related to how student behavior is seen, managed and addressed. As a result, contrasting perspectives on preventing and addressing student behavior have had a negative impact on narratives of the school's climate at Pocantico. As a result, the staff culture of Pocantico as it relates to student behavior has long lacked a shared belief around perceptions of student behavior and accountability.

The abounding negative narratives around the school's student climate are largely influenced by how teachers perceive student behavior in the building. Staff's beliefs are largely a reflection of their SEC that, in turn, influence their perceptions of behavior and views of student accountability. A crime and punishment model that emphasizes punitive consequences has long been the model of correcting perceived questionable student behavior at Pocantico. This, however, has done little to improve teachers' perceptions of their students' behavior. Rather, most often, staff have viewed behavioral interruptions as elevated behaviors in need of immediate administrative intervention and the desire for strong disciplinary consequences. Phone calls to the principal's office to address such classroom behavior as noncompliance of a student to complete an assignment during instruction are but one of many examples that have given indication for a need to shift staff perceptions around addressing and redirecting student behavior in the building.

Both instructional and systemic organizational issues must be addressed to shift perceptions of student behavior and subsequent measures of accountability when there is a need to address questionable behavior. Cultivating a climate of emotional intelligence that improves staff's SEC is seen as a necessary step in improving perceptions of students' behavior. The extent to which these challenges were directly observable had been validated through the formal and informal observation process of instruction, including review of past written evaluations of staff that had neglected any meaningful and constructive feedback on practice. Moreover, the organizational systems specific to procedures, policies, and cultural expectations of student conduct lacked consistency, transparency, and history. Simply, prior to the 2017-2018 there were no formal records of disciplinary decisions entered into a central student depository such as a student information system. As a result, numerous anecdotal observations and situational experiences illustrated a staff that has unclear and unrealistic expectations regarding disciplinary measures. Minor student infractions were presented as major crises and matters of urgent response creating a culture of mistrust and misunderstanding. This reflects the organization's cultural and systemic dysfunction that, in turn, created a perception of a lack of discipline and lack of clarity over what constituted disciplinary action amongst staff.

The implementation of RULER provided an opportunity to directly observe the impact of the program on staff's perceptions of student behavior. An effective implementation and subsequent evaluation of RULER lent itself to an opportunity to reshape the school's Code of Conduct and disciplinary policies within the building specific to the reporting of behavior and collective responsibilities of staff. These were observable features of the study that allowed the researcher to further identify any shifts in staff's perception of student behavior with a greater emphasis on emotional intelligence and specifically, the commitment to RULER. In so doing,

this study provided an opportunity for Pocantico Central School District to demonstrate its investment and commitment to SEL and assess its impact on staff's perception of student behavior.

The RULER framework was adopted by the Board of Education at Pocantico Hills upon recommendation from the Superintendent, recognizing the need to transform a school culture that had previously paid little attention to students' emotional well-being. This reflects an actionable problem of practice. Its impact on shifting staff's views of student behavior would ultimately indicate its success. Narratives of a scarred school climate existed prior to my arrival as the new principal. The decision to implement RULER was largely a result of a perceived need to better address concerns of students' behavior in the building in an attempt to improve the school's climate. Again, the District had previously relied largely on a traditional punitive "crime and punishment" model to address behavior with little attention or credence given towards the important role of conflict resolution and emotional regulation. Thus, the framework provided an opportunity to educate students, staff and parents around the growing necessity of school discipline to not only be a reactive measure of accountability measured through consequences of behavior but rather an understanding that students need specific tools to effectively engage in pro-social behaviors to deescalate conflict and demonstrate a readiness to learn. Teachers must possess high levels of SEC to effectively engage students in these SEL practices.

Emotional Intelligence: Its Impact on Broader Strategies for High Leverage Improvement

The study is intended to assess the extent to which an SEL framework, specifically RULER, may improve staff's perceptions of student behavior in the building. Perceptions of student behavior have a strong influence on climate, particularly as seen from the perspective of

teaching staff who have the most direct interactions and impact on students' daily experience in a school building. The ability to manage student behavior, build healthy relationships with students and feel supported by the administration may be seen as the foundation of a healthy school climate. Indeed, if high quality instruction and successful implementation of critical initiatives are to be successful in a school building these elements must exist. The successful implementation of an evidence-based SEL program may provide the necessary tools to support these foundational teacher behaviors while mitigating perceptions of critical judgment that staff may have towards improving such skills as classroom management, soliciting administrative support and building healthy student-teacher relationships.

In concert with the prior Superintendent, the Board of Education at Pocantico Hills adopted the following Guiding Principles:

- Joyful and passionate teaching and learning should set the tone for our school environment.
- Collaborative teams must promote personal accountability, broad skill exposure, and cohort understanding and acceptance.
- Perseverance and determination are essential characteristics of student growth and should be fostered thoughtfully and with support.
- Community partnerships provide opportunities to promote communication and global awareness.
- A strong sense of ethics must ultimately come from within, and we must develop and nurture that growth. (Pocantico Hills Central School District, District Vision Statement, 2017, para. 2)

An in-depth study of EI at Pocantico supported these broad and ambitious statements defined in these Guiding Principles. Joyful and passionate teaching, strong collaboration, student perseverance, healthy community partnerships and strong ethics cannot exist without healthy student-teacher interactions. And, such interactions are a result of teachers' perception of students' behavior. These perceptions are driven by their ability to successfully manage student behavior.

Mintrop (2016) shares, “Leadership at the local level is largely about making the best out of rather adverse circumstances” (p. 23). Shifting the narrative around the student climate of Pocantico was a high leverage problem of practice since much of the staff narrative about Pocantico resided in students’ behavior in the building. Addressing the climate was essential before other important initiatives, such as pedagogy, could be addressed. Mintrop (2016) goes on to note that “Changing behavior involves knowledge and skill, attention, motivation, and setting priorities and goals. But most of all, it involves shared meanings, interpretations, expectations, norms, values, rituals, and routines that are largely tacit and subconscious” (p. 118). It is here that the researcher believed the use of an SEL program would support the growth of shared meanings, expectations, norms and routines as it related to students’ behavior in the building.

Previously, these shared meanings did not exist and as such, adversity around how student behavior was managed and supported had influenced a climate that needed significant improvement. Affecting such change required a shift in teacher norms and values that ultimately could represent the sustainable change that benefited students and improved staff’s perception of student behavior. In part, an unhealthy climate was created by the District’s lack of stable and strong leadership that did not clearly communicate expectations and consistent actions of student accountability that were universally understood amongst staff and parents.

Thus, a shared vision of the school’s culture must be defined and articulated before any programs or initiatives could be fostered to improve the school’s climate. The use of an SEL framework provided an opportunity to define a vision for a healthy school culture through an objective means of articulating necessary values and expectations while mitigating the potential

for staff perceptions of administrative judgement around prior staff values. Additionally, Mintrop (2016) notes:

From their understanding of the problem, leaders already know what the unwanted behaviors are or where existing behaviors set limits. But they do not know how to dislodge these behaviors, what to replace them with, and what learning processes need to unfold in people...When educational leaders become designers, they first need to know what people need to learn or unlearn. (p. 120)

The “unlearning” largely resided in a perception that behaviors would improve with stronger and more consistent consequences around perceived negative behaviors. In an attempt to “dislodge” these beliefs, staff learning around emotional intelligence provided a critical catalyst to support teachers’ understanding of students’ needs and had the potential to provide them with the healthy skills needed to influence the daily management of students’ behavior. While there were multiple and intersecting layers to this problem, the study sought to determine if the use of the RULER framework would improve teachers’ perceptions of behavior and create more consistency in shared understandings of student behavior in the building.

Research Questions

Given that the purpose of this study was to examine the impact an evidence-based SEL program has on staff’s perceptions of student behavior and accountability the following questions were the focus of this study:

1. How does the implementation of RULER influence staff perceptions of student behavior?
2. What role does Emotional Intelligence have in addressing student behavior?
3. How do changes in the organizational system as it relates to policies and procedures specific to communication and student discipline influence staff’s attitudes around student behavior?

4. How does staff's perception of student behavior influence how they characterize the school's climate?

Overview of Methodology

The study was pragmatic in nature and drew on multiple methodological approaches and theoretical perspectives. Grounded theory approaches research from the perspective of inductive inquiry and identifies research problems from the participants' perspectives. Interpretivism, or anti-postivism, is the theoretical perspective that informs this study. Given that this study sought to explore staff's perceptions, one must argue that meanings are not fixed but revised based on one's experience. As such, meanings are often derived from participants' social interactions within the school organization. Thus, their actions are influenced by their interpretations of these social interactions within the school system. Simply, staff interpretations of phenomena within the organization inform their perceptions, influencing their actions, behaviors, and beliefs. With this in mind, a phenomenological approach described how staff experienced the rollout of an evidence-based SEL program, specifically the RULER framework.

While much of this research was driven by a qualitative approach, specific quantitative measures provided process data to inform the study. Thus, a mixed methods approach was used, relying largely on the qualitative component. As far as the quantitative element, New York State had endorsed the U.S. Department of Education's school climate survey, encouraging school districts to utilize this survey to assess their school climate and make informed decisions to improve the safety, engagement and overall environment of a school community. The survey consists of four groups—students, instructional staff, non-instructional staff and families. The study utilized the instructional staff component of the survey to provide a baseline of data to analyze in concert with staff interviews. It is important to note that the use of a formal school

climate survey has shown to be an effective tool for studying teachers' perception of school climate (Johnson, Stevens & Zvoch, 2007; Shindler, Jones, Tayler & Cardenia, 2016).

Given the descriptive nature of SEL in addressing beliefs around staff's perceptions of student behavior, a mixed-methods descriptive design was most suitable. In part, an evaluation of the program utilized both a case study approach along with a time-series design. A case-study honors the context of this initiative and the need for an in-depth description and understanding of RULER's intended outcomes. Moreover, a time-series design allows this in-depth description to be further contextualized with data that can be analyzed and shared over time. This was particularly important given the Board of Education's need to see "deliverables" with respect to initiatives that are underway and data on student discipline.

Descriptive case studies tend to be the most practical designs in studies that utilize a program and have the need to balance qualitative and quantitative data. RULER's Mood Meter resource provided the opportunity for practical and influential quantitative data to satiate the Board's appetite for "deliverables," while constructing an objective narrative through a case study design. Given the contrasting and vociferous perspectives around the school climate and approaches to school discipline, a descriptive case study provided the necessary in-depth exploration for an effective evaluation. Moreover, as Fitzpatrick et al. (2011) notes, it allows the evaluator to "make use of [my] observational and reflective skills to obtain a greater understanding of the case at hand" (p. 391).

Additionally, the use of a time series design allowed existing information to be used over a predetermined period of time to make future recommendations and considerations for next steps. This approach was particularly relevant in the given context because it allowed the researcher to potentially demonstrate trends over time. Given that so much of this initiative was

rooted in staff perception, it would be critical to demonstrate if any potential positive trends could be reported through such predetermined timeframes.

Additionally, a well-designed evaluation on the Anchors of Emotional Intelligence or RULER afforded a critical opportunity to inform leadership decisions that had the potential to affect meaningful change within the organization and school community of Pocantico Hills Central School District. Given the nature of the program as a social-emotional framework that provides flexibility in its implementation within the context of a school's needs, the necessity of a formative assessment was critical in steering, adjusting and modifying its delivery. The credibility of RULER rests in the nature of such formative assessment, as the feedback and assessment were regularly revisited to assess its overall effectiveness. Most importantly, however, was the necessity of identifying the measured goals of the program to ensure a well-designed evaluation in measuring its success.

Positionality

Given this problem of practice and the need to solicit genuine anecdotal data from staff to describe their view of students' behavior, my role as school principal was particularly sensitive. Indeed, embedded in my leadership and supervisory role as school principal was the reality of my positional power. Thus, I had to consider and plan for the reality of my role as principal while I sought to solicit authentic data from staff. As such, how the study was defined and articulated to staff had the potential to influence the objectivity of the data that was solicited.

Researchers role. Although at the time of the study I was a second-year principal at Pocantico Hills, I was in my 8th year as a building principal, having spent the six years prior to Pocantico leading an elementary and middle school in Cold Spring, NY. I believe much of my past success was a result of a strong school culture where character education and SEL was

embraced as an important school value and embedded into our curriculum and instructional practice.

Entering my 22nd year as an educator, I spent my first 10 years as a middle school social studies teacher before becoming an elementary assistant principal and soon thereafter, an elementary and middle school principal. Most recently, as a result of the superintendent's decision to retire from Pocantico, I decided to resign and assume a district-level leadership role in a large school district—Brewster Central Schools—as the Director of Human Resources. During my 22 years as a teacher and administrator I have earned three graduate degrees—an MA in educational policy, an MA in history and an MS in educational administration. Additionally, I hold an advanced certificate in School District Leadership.

During my six-year tenure as principal in Cold Spring, NY, I introduced Second Step, an evidence-based SEL program endorsed by CASEL, that provided an articulated curriculum that ensured consistency in the explicit teaching of pro-social skills. Additionally, I regularly used Pride Surveys to assess the school's climate and help inform my leadership work. Thus, my experience in leading this work prepared me for such a contextualized research study.

Assumptions. Based on my experience, information gleaned from my entry plan into the District and my educational background, there were five primary assumptions made entering into this study. First, teachers' perception of student behavior influences descriptions of a school's climate. This assumption is based on the premise that research indicates that schools reporting a negative school climate and culture report higher levels of disciplinary referrals. Second, the study assumed that present perceptions of students' behavior are largely negative. Anecdotal feedback during my transition into the district and subsequent entry plan suggested that teachers believed discipline needed to be improved. Third, the implementation of an SEL program would

improve teachers' skillset to address behavioral interruptions. Although SEL programs are intended to build pro-social skills and students' ability to demonstrate self-regulation and healthy decision-making, staff's exposure to this work has the potential to improve their own EI as they take steps to teach these skills to their students. As such, teacher-student relationships improve and with it, teachers' perceptions of students' behavior. Fourth, when teachers believe that their students are compliant to their directives, perceptions of behavior are positive. This premise was based on the fact that classroom management is a key disposition and foundational skill within the profession for success as a teacher (Danielson, 2007). Finally, clear and explicit procedures associated with disciplinary referrals are necessary for teachers to feel supported. This was based on the premise that administrative follow-up with referrals are necessary for teachers to feel supported.

Definition of Key Terms

ACEs—An acronym for adverse childhood experiences and a reference to the joint CDC—Kaiser Permanente study that researched the long-term health and wellness impact of toxic stress on children using a 10-point scale.

BEDS—An acronym for the Basic Educational Data System used to report to the state education department in New York. Information includes such data as ethnic demographic information, students on free and reduced lunch and disciplinary reporting.

Behavioral Interruptions—Classroom level infractions of rules that largely require interventions and communication by the classroom teacher.

Discipline—The actions, policies and procedures enacted by teachers and administrators that seek to address questionable student behavior that is most often in violation of the student Code

of Conduct and may require a formal process by which the behavior is documented, and the student is held accountable.

EI—An acronym for emotional intelligence that refers to students and educators’ capacity to recognize, understand and manage individual emotions.

Emotional Regulation—The ability to manage emotions to reflect actions that are socially responsible and advantageous towards learning and student achievement.

RULER—An acronym used within the Anchors of Emotional Intelligence that provides a skill set for students and staff to recognize, understand, label, express and regulate individual emotions for the purposes of improving student achievement.

NYSED—An acronym for the New York State Education Department.

SEC—An acronym for social-emotional competencies that references the skills and behaviors of staff that reflect Emotional Intelligence in their work with students.

SED—An acronym for Stated Education Department specific to New York State.

SEL—An acronym for social-emotional learning that references the process through which students and staff develop and apply the necessary skills to effectively manage emotions, show empathy for others and support healthy interpersonal relationships.

School Climate—The perceived quality of school life that is largely based on stakeholders—students, staff and families—experiences. Such experiences are influenced by the stated and unstated norms, values, relationships, instructional practices and organizational structures within a school community (NSCC, 2018).

School Culture—The routines, rituals, values, and norms that characterize the day to day interactions of students and staff within the school building.

TA—Teaching Assistant. Requires certification from New York State. Teaching Assistants may provide direct instruction to students under the supervision and direction of a classroom teacher.

Organization of Dissertation

Chapter 2 provides the reader with a contextualized review of literature related to this problem of practice. Research on emotional intelligence and school culture is intended to ground the reader in the research specific to this study. The use of this literature informed the researcher in their work as a scholar-practitioner, helping to identify the problem as high leverage and actionable.

Chapter 3 provides a description of the researcher’s methodology, including a detailed explanation for the use of a mixed-methods approach that uses both qualitative and quantitative research methods. The methods used to obtain the data from the study is described along with an explanation of the sample used to collect the qualitative data. Moreover, the rationale for the use of each method is further described, including the use of a purposeful sampling of participants for interviews. The data collection methods used in the study detail the trustworthiness of the data along with the limitation and delimitations associated with the data. Simply, Chapter 3 provides the theoretical perspective that justifies the rationale for the study, describing the methods necessary to effectively address this problem of practice.

Chapter 4 takes the reader through the research findings, detailing specific themes that emerged from the data. Each theme is discussed in detail in relation to the data. Qualitative data derived from interviews (Appendix E) shaped much of the findings that emerged. These findings were presented in relationship to the results from the Instructional Staff Survey (Appendix B) and the Social and Emotional Scale (SEL) for Teachers (Appendix A) obtained from the Anchors of Emotional Intelligence.

Chapter 5 provides the reader with analysis and discussion of these findings before finishing with Chapter 6 and its conclusions and recommendations. This dissertation ends with a personal reflection from the researcher, noting the unique challenges of this problem of practice that were inherent in leading this initiative as an agent of change.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

It's up to us to launch an emotion revolution by systemically integrating SEL into schools" (Brackett, 2018).

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of a research-based social-emotional learning (SEL) framework on staff's perception of student behavior. Given that the Anchors of Emotional Intelligence and its RULER framework was the specific SEL program being implemented at Pocantico Hills, the research from the program's founder, Marc Brackett, founding director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, was particularly salient in considering this problem of practice. While this research provided a critical frame in considering both the implementation of the program and its evaluation, additional research on the influence of EI in shaping school culture informed the study. This included research on the impact of EI on staff behavior and instructional practices. Additionally, given the study's goal of assessing perceptions of student behavior, seminal research on student disciplinary practices informed this work. Because the study is in part an evaluation of a specific program, critical literature on program implementation and evaluation was explored.

Traditional research engines aside, the work of the Collaborative for Academic, Social-Emotional Learning (CASEL) notes an abundance of research sharing the importance of evidence-based social-emotional learning (SEL) as a critical component to students' school success. Additionally, the Anchors of Emotional Intelligence is steeped in research that includes numerous published articles on the success of the program on their website ei.yale.edu. Finally, guidance from the New York State Department of Education's publication *Social Emotional Learning: Essential for Learning, Essential for Life* released in August 2018 provided meaningful research to inform this problem of practice.

Review of the Literature

The following sections provide topic areas used to understand the influence of EI on staff's perception of student behavior including the definition of social-emotional learning and emotional intelligence, influence and impact of SEL in schools, emotional intelligence and teacher behavior, effective disciplinary practices, research on RULER and approaches to program implementation and evaluation.

Research on EI was largely informed through three main organizations that served as valuable compendiums of scholarly research—the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and the Wallace Foundation. Additionally, the New York State Education Department informed the research to help further contextualize the study specific to the identified Problem of Practice. Finally, search engines such as EBSCO and ProQuest were used. Table 2.1 below provides a summary of the various research types used to guide the literature review and inform the study.

Table 2.1

Sources of literature reviewed

Type of Source	Number
Peer Reviewed Articles	31
Non-Peer Reviewed Articles	3
Scholarly Books	18
Scholarly Book Chapters	5
Dissertations	1
NYSED	5
Documentary Film	1
BoE Minutes	6
Research Organizations	9
Congressional Legislation	1

Definition of Emotional Intelligence and Social-Emotional Learning

The Collaborative for Academic and Social Emotional Learning (CASEL) defines SEL as the process by which students and adults acquire and apply necessary skills to understand and manage emotions, demonstrate empathy towards others, maintain healthy relationships and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2018). CASEL is the leading organization comprised of distinguished scholars and educators that provides national leadership and guidance on SEL in schools. The work of CASEL represents a commitment to SEL in schools that validates EI as a significant intelligence that can and should be developed in students. Moreover, Brackett notes:

A key premise of the field of emotional intelligence is that, used wisely, all emotions—both positive and negative—become resources we draw on to inform our decisions, support our well-being and help us achieve our goals ... [helping] us to make predictions, become energized, and—ultimately—survive and thrive (Brackett, 2018).

Additionally, Mayer, Salovey, Caruso and Sitarenios (2001) contend that emotions provide information and context to relationships, dividing EI into four main categories—perceiving emotions, using emotions to facilitate thought, understanding emotions and managing emotions to sustain healthy relationships. Moreover, they state, “EI ... refers to an ability to recognize the meaning of emotions and their relationships and use them as a basis in reasoning and problem solving” (Mayer et al., 2001, p. 234).

Increasingly, school districts have embraced the growing research on the positive benefits that well-implemented SEL programs have on the culture of a school community. Such benefits extend beyond the school community to address the larger concerns regarding mental health and the overall wellbeing of the general population (Greenberg, Domitrovich, Weissberg & Durlak, 2017). Critical to the effective implementation of SEL in schools is training staff to interact with

students in ways that promote competency in areas of emotional regulation and healthy decision-making (Greenberg et al., 2017; Jones & Doolittle, 2017). Jones and Doolittle (2017) make clear that “if adults lack SEL skills themselves or suffer from stress or poor physical and mental health, their ability to support their students’ SEL may be severely compromised” (p. 9). Aside from the benefits SEL has on at-risk students in a building, the benefits of a universal SEL program have the potential to impact the norms, behaviors and attitudes of an entire school community (Greenberg et al., 2017).

In 2018, NYSED adopted the following SEL benchmarks in New York State through the New York State Safe Schools Task Force:

1. Develop self-awareness and self-management skills essential to success in school and in life.
2. Use social awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships.
3. Demonstrate ethical decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts.

(NYSED, 2018, p. 1)

Along with these recommended benchmarks, SED provided further guidance at each level of the K – 12 continuum offering a more detailed explanation for each goal including “identifying and managing one’s emotions” (NYSED, 2018, p. 2).

Influence and Impact of SEL in Schools

Sklad, Diekstra, Ritter, Ben, and Gravesteyn (2012) provide a seminal meta-analysis of 75 published studies that measured the effectiveness of universal social-emotional school programs. The analysis confirmed positive outcomes of school-sponsored SEL programs in seven major categories including, social skills, anti-social behavior, substance abuse, positive self-image, academic achievement, mental health and prosocial behavior. Moreover, the meta-analysis confirmed the significance of a high-quality framework for implementation that translated into greater benefits in each of these seven categories. Additionally, Weare and Nind

(2011) noted that “High quality implementation included having a sound theoretical base, well defined goals, strong focus and explicit guidelines, thorough training and quality control, feedback on intervention effects, and consistent staffing” (p. 45). This research provides a potentially helpful framework when considering the implementation of a selected evidence-based SEL program such as RULER.

Ultimately, the politics of educational policy is rooted in students’ academic achievement. And with this reality in mind, since the 1990s schools have increasingly recognized the important relationship between SEL and academic achievement. Indeed, the last 10 years has produced substantial research on SEL. Previously, it was most often viewed as a hidden curriculum in schools and classrooms. With the advent of evidence and research-based curriculum, SEL has become a critical component of a student’s educational program, allowing teachers to operationalize its use in their classrooms. And, given its use and varied programs and frameworks, the need for ongoing and rigorous evaluation is as necessary as that of traditional academic curriculum (Frey, Fischer & Smith, 2019, p. 7).

Durlak, Dymnicki, Taylor, Weissberg, and Schellinger, (2011) confirm this reality in their meta-analysis of 213 studies that captured 270,034 students in grades preK through 12. Their extensive review of SEL’s impact on academic achievement showed an overall 11 percent gain in achievement for those students immersed in a universal SEL program compared to those without any exposure. Durlak et al. (2011) note:

Another important finding of the current meta- analysis is that classroom teachers and other school staff effectively conducted SEL programs. This result suggests that these interventions can be incorporated into routine educational practices and do not require outside personnel for their effective delivery. It also appears that SEL programs are successful at all educational levels (elementary, middle, and high school) and in urban, suburban, and rural schools, although they have been studied least often in high schools and in rural areas. (p. 417)

A more recent meta-analysis from Taylor, Oberle, Durlak, and Weissberg (2017) reviewed 82 school-based social and emotional interventions capturing 97,406 students from kindergarten through high school of various racial and demographic backgrounds. The analysis found that students exposed to high quality SEL programs performed 13.5 percentile points higher than their peers in the control group based on grades and test scores drawn from academic records.

Given the abundance of such research, increasingly states have moved towards the establishment of state SEL benchmarks, recognizing the influence SEL has on student achievement. Linda Darling-Hammond notes in the foreword to *Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning: Research and Practice* (2015) that she has “no doubt that the survival of the human race depends at least as much on the cultivation of social and emotional intelligence, as it does on the development of technical knowledge and skills” (ii).

As such, New York’s recently adopted *Social Emotional Learning: Essential for Learning, Essential for Life* (NYSED, 2018) states, “There is also evidence that explicitly teaching [SEL] skills can have a wide-ranging impact on the students’ development” (p. 6). This extensive memo provides guidance to school districts by summarizing the recent research on SEL, outlining its need in schools and providing guidance on its implementation. Additionally, the infancy of SEL benchmarks are referenced, noting the work of the School Climate and Student Engagement Workgroup of the New York State Safe Schools Task Force. Effective SEL, however, is rooted in teachers’ ability to embrace and effectively model strong emotional intelligence traits in their classrooms and in their daily interactions with students.

Emotional Intelligence and Teacher Behavior

The work of teachers is highly complex and stressful, placing them at risk for poor social-emotional wellbeing. Understanding a staff's emotional intelligence is critical in a successful implementation of any SEL program (Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Teacher competency influences their relationship with students that in turn drive the fidelity of SEL implementation. Schonert-Reichl (2017) further emphasize the importance of teachers' SEL competency stating:

Classrooms with warm teacher-child relationships promote deep learning among students. Children who feel comfortable with their teachers and peers are more willing to grapple with challenging material and persist at difficult learning tasks. Conversely, when teachers poorly manage the social and emotional demands of teaching, students demonstrate lower performance and on-task behavior (p. 139).

Teachers' beliefs, values and philosophy around student discipline often influences the extent to which a program is implemented with the fidelity needed for its success. My working theory contends that teachers' SEC influences their perceptions of student behavior and their responses to questionable behavior. Those teachers with a lower EI tend to view discipline from a traditional punitive model whereas those with a higher EI demonstrate a greater willingness to embrace SEL and adopt progressive approaches to student behavior.

As such, teachers' SEL competencies are important for three reasons. First, teachers' SEL influences their relationship with students. Second, teachers' level of EI influences their ability to model emotional regulation for their students when faced with stressful situations. Finally, teacher SEL practices influence their daily classroom organization and management. Students learn from the way in which teachers manage their emotions, remain focused on the instructional goals of a lesson and utilize different strategies when faced with adversity and frustration (Jones, Bouffard & Weissbourd, 2013).

Ultimately, it is the quality of relationships that teachers cultivate with their students that are linked to positive student outcomes. A 2016 study of 70 Israeli teachers focused on the

development of their Social-Emotional Competencies concluding that as teachers became increasingly aware of students' EI competencies a greater awareness of their underlying behavior became more apparent, resulting in growing skills to better address their students' needs (Dolev & Leshem, 2006, p. 84). Unfortunately, few teacher-preparation programs provide explicit instruction in these skills for pre-service teachers. As a result, most educators must learn and grow these skills through professional development once in the classroom. Research in this area remains limited. Nonetheless, these critical teacher-student relationships may be characterized within various theories including attachment theory, self-determination theory and developmental theory. These various theories guide the design of SEL programs (Williford & Wolcott, 2015).

Attachment theory describes the importance of warmth and sensitivity in student-teacher relationships, self-determination theory emphasizes strong connections between students and teacher that cultivate independence, and finally, developmental theory considers the contextual factors inherent in a classroom environment and larger school culture that have an impact on student-teacher relationships (Williford & Wolcott, 2015). Relationships can be particularly complex in diverse school districts where teachers may be working with students from significantly different cultural and social-economic backgrounds. Educators' ability to understand their students' cultural norms and cues, albeit complex, are essential in building a healthy rapport with students (Benn, 2018).

Specifically, teachers using RULER are expected "to model the effective regulation of a range of emotions and to deliver emotion-related content through the teaching of a sophisticated feeling words vocabulary" (Brackett, Reyes, Rivers, Elbertson and Salovey, 2012, pp. 230-231). The RULER framework emphasizes the need to target adults' SEL competencies in the first year

of its implementation before using its resources with students. Marc Brackett, founding director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and developer of the RULER framework notes, “RULER starts with shifting *adults’* mindsets about emotions, followed by training on explicit skills—building educators’ own emotion vocabulary and enhancing their emotion-regulation skills” (Brackett, 2018, p. 15).

The program introduces four main resources to utilize with students with the intent to expand their emotional vocabulary and recognize and regulate their emotions. The School Charter, Mood Meter, Meta-Moment and Blueprint serve as the main components of the program that must be understood by staff before utilizing with students. Unlike other SEL programs, RULER does not provide a scripted curriculum. Although lessons on each of the resources previously mentioned are provided at various grade levels—lower elementary, upper elementary and middle school—the goal of RULER is to truly embed SEL into teachers’ instructional practice well beyond isolated classroom lessons in EI. For this reason, RULER and its Anchors of Emotional Intelligence have developed online training and community of scholar-practitioners that educators are encouraged to complete. This professional development is intended to educate and emphasize the value and necessity of adults growing and modeling their own EI if building and classroom implementation is to prove successful.

Thus, a positive impression of an SEL program along with a belief that the program will provide the teacher with practical skills to support their daily work with students is critical for a successful implementation. Often, this is influenced by their individual philosophies and beliefs on student discipline. Unfortunately, research on the impact of SEL increasing staff’s EI is limited. Only one study has been conducted indicating a positive impact that prevention and SEL programs have on teachers’ EI. Domitrovich et al. (2016) conducted a study assessing the

impact of two prevention programs—one with an SEL component. Findings suggested that an SEL program can have a positive impact on teachers’ beliefs and perceptions (Domitrovich et. al, 2016). Nonetheless, research has shown that an overwhelming percentage of teachers—95 percent—have indicated that SEL is critical to educating the whole child (Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013). Additionally, NYSED (March, 2019) emphasizes in its *Social Emotional Learning: A School Guide to Systemic Whole School Implementation* that “It may take months before adults are changing their practice. They may, however; be changing how they think about their practice” (p. 35).

Furthermore, the *National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development: A Research Agenda for the Next Generation* notes the gap in research specific to teachers’ SEL competencies stating:

A central concern of research for the next generation is to better understand what educators ... need to know and do to promote the optimal social, emotional and cognitive development for all children across developmental periods and contexts—as well as understand the conditions and contexts that best support adult learning and promote educator well-being (p. 31).

This requires adults to possess a high level of Emotional Intelligence if the fidelity of implementation of SEL practices in a building is to exist. Simply, the abundance of research demonstrating the critical role educators play in shaping positive outcomes for students, the skills, mindsets, behaviors and values of teachers are imperative.

Despite only a single study on the impact of SEL programs on teachers’ EI, strong teacher SEL competencies have shown to have a strong impact on student outcomes. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) note:

Socially and emotionally competent teachers know how to manage their emotions and their behavior and also how to manage relationships with others. They can manage their behavior even when emotionally aroused by challenging situations. They can regulate their emotions in healthy ways that facilitate positive classroom outcomes without

compromising their health (p. 495).

As such, students' perception of teacher support increases motivation and investment in learning. Students feel less alienated and less likely to engage in anti-social behavior.

Research on SEL, however, stresses the importance of teacher commitment to EI. Collie, Shapka, and Perry (2011) demonstrated the positive impact school climate has on teachers' commitment to SEL. Conducting research of 664 public school teachers from British Columbia and Ontario in Canada their study concluded positive gains in teachers' general and future professional commitment to SEL.

The challenge, however, is the effective implementation and commitment from staff when implementing SEL in schools where the culture may not yet be positive, and teachers may report lower levels of teacher efficacy. Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, Elbertson, and Salovey (2012) studied the impact of RULER and its effective implementation to produce positive outcomes. Effective implementation relies on the quality of lessons conducted by teachers and the attitudes of staff, specifically their buy-in to SEL as a critical component to their daily practice. Research is abundant regarding the need for SEL to be implemented with fidelity if schools are to experience significant improvement in student behavior and achievement. However, fidelity and buy-in are not synonymous and further research on teachers' EI as a precursor to effective implementation needs to be pursued in this area. The authors note, "Delivery style is vital to SEL programs because they require teachers to deliver the lessons in an effective manner, consistent with the program's philosophy and goals" (Reyes et al., 2012, p. 84). Implementation quality can be difficult to operationalize and as such, fidelity of implementation often relies on teacher training and frequency of lessons. The quality of teachers' delivery of such lessons remains a challenging component to assess and reflects a gap in the literature (Reyes et al., 2012,

p. 85). Nonetheless, teachers' beliefs in the importance of SEL has a significant impact on student success (Brackett et al., 2012).

Effective Disciplinary Practices

Given the necessity of teachers' commitment to SEL for measured success in schools, shifts in philosophy to school discipline have evolved to represent more progressive approaches to addressing unwanted student behavior. Ultimately, effective SEL implementation supports a culture in which students can make appropriate decisions irrespective of adult supervision. The text *Discipline with Dignity*, now in its fourth edition, has served as a seminal work in transforming teachers approach and philosophy to disciplinary practices. Curwin, Mendler and Mendler (2018) note:

A student who loses her temper needs to be taught ways to calm herself and use appropriate language to express frustration. Too often, schools punish students by removing privileges or placing them in a contained setting without teaching more acceptable alternatives and providing opportunities for practice. (p. 54)

Indeed, such approaches have increasingly identified restorative practices rooted in SEL as effective measures in reducing Code of Conduct violations. NYSED notes the important role of restorative practices as schools successfully implement social-emotional learning within their school climate and culture. NYSED's implementation guide states, "Addressing student misconduct with restorative practices promotes students' acquisition of, and practice in using, all five social emotional core competencies" (NYSED, March 2019, p. 40). Such guidance has its roots in the 2015 federal adoption of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that establishes the government's perspective and approach to school discipline. The abundance of research indicating glaring disparities in disciplinary practices between white students and students of color, particularly male students from disadvantaged backgrounds is highlighted and such

legislation was an outcome of the Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning Act of 2009 (H.R. 4223).

Given SEL's goal of promoting positive decision-making, the role of school disciplinary practices, particularly those of non-white students, is relevant. Teachers' perceptions of student behavior and expectations of accountability, particularly in a diverse school district such as Pocantico Hills, is an important component of this problem of practice. In their case study of a high performing high school with a diverse ethnic and social-economic demographic in the suburbs outside a large midwestern city, Lewis and Diamond (2015) share their findings on differential approaches to disciplinary practices stating:

The problem with the current system is that rules are too often just selectively applied to those students who are deemed more in 'need' of punishment, or who do not have the resources to defend themselves or question the rules. (p. 80)

Thus, the role of SEL in promoting equity in school discipline is an important component of the research literature. Increasingly, "policymakers and practitioners are recognizing that exclusionary disciplinary practices don't improve the quality of children's educational experience" (Gregory & Fergus, 2017, p.122) and efforts towards more progressive practices provide an opportunity to "focus on repairing the harm that violations to collective norms do to relationships and communities" (Lewis & Diamond, 2015, p. 81). This was particularly relevant to my problem of practice as the principal at Pocantico Hills where descriptions of students' behavior were often driven by race, ethnicity and/or socioeconomics.

Research on RULER

Various evidence-based SEL programs exist that support students' EI competencies demonstrating a positive impact on decision-making, healthy relationships and improved behavior in school. The decision to identify and commit to an evidence-based SEL program and

lead its effective implementation requires a comprehensive review of its research findings. Such knowledge of the research specific to RULER is a critical component in its implementation and evaluation. Indeed, the leader's knowledge of the research informs this problem of practice.

RULER's theory of practice contends that "when adults and children use RULER components and practice the skills in daily interactions, all stakeholders develop their EI and improve the emotional climates in classrooms, schools, homes, and communities (Nathanson, Rivers, Flynn & Brackett, 2016). The RULER skills are intended to become embedded into the daily norms, routines and explicit values that become inherent within a school's culture.

Brackett et al. (2012) provide a tool for practitioners and researchers to assess teachers' beliefs on SEL, identifying three key domains—comfort, commitment and culture—that are critical towards a successful implementation of RULER. They note:

Although SEL content can integrate seamlessly into core academic curricula, teachers who have low expectations for these efforts or who feel uncomfortable teaching the content at the outset will be less likely to implement the programs with quality and fidelity" (Brackett et al., 2012, p. 231).

As such, implementation of the Anchors of Emotional Intelligence includes an online user group that includes coursework on emotions and emotional intelligence in addition to a resource library. The SEL Scale for Teachers established through Marc Brackett's work at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence provides scholar-practitioners with a useful tool in the decision-making process as school leaders balance necessary adaption of the program with the fidelity of its implementation.

The theory and practice behind emotional literacy is articulated in RULER's seminal work *Creating emotionally literate classrooms: An introduction to the RULER approach to social and emotional learning* (2012). It is within this work that Marc Brackett and his team at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence provide an overview of emotional literacy, define and

describe the critical resources within the RULER framework—the School Charter, Mood Meter and Blueprint and introduce the Feeling Words Curriculum (Brackett, Kremenitzer, Maurer, Carpenter, Rivers, and Elbertson, 2011).

Effective Program Implementation and Evaluation

Given that the RULER framework is the SEL program being used as a lens to assess teachers' perception of student behavior, the broader research on effective program implementation and evaluation is relevant. As such, clearly identifying the theory behind RULER is a significant factor in its implementation and evaluation. Bickman (1987) shares the significance of such work in any program evaluation noting:

Stakeholders may not know the program theory or ... their theory may be 'a vague notion or hunch' or 'may be nothing more than a few simple assumptions about why the program should work' because they are not well trained in social science theory or research. (p. 6)

Moreover, program theory in evaluation argues that "The process of developing program theory should, therefore, rely on a combination of input from stakeholders, theories and research from relevant social science studies, and the evaluators' knowledge and expertise" (Bickman, 1987, p. 162).

While Chapter 3 discusses the details of the research methods employed in this study and the specifics related to the implementation and evaluation of RULER, it is important to note that descriptive case studies tend to be the most practical and often used designs in evaluation that seek to balance the need for qualitative and quantitative data. Given the contrasting and vociferous perspectives around school climate and approaches to discipline at Pocantico, a descriptive case study provides the in-depth exploration necessary for an effective evaluation. As *Program Evaluation: Alternative Approaches and Practical Guidelines* note, such an

approach allows the evaluator to “make use of observational and reflective skills to obtain a greater understanding of the case at hand” (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2011, p. 391).

The implementation of any SEL program requires a systematic rollout that does not often occur naturally (Durlak, 2015). The infancy of SEL implementation is likely to experience positive shifts in climate reflected in teachers’ shifting mindsets rather than students’ growth in social emotional competencies (NYSED, 2019, p. 35). As such, strategic monitoring of a program’s goals being met, recognizing that its implementation often exists along a continuum where adaptations are common and may be necessary to improve outcomes. Moreover, effective and sustainable professional development provide opportunities for multiple stakeholders that may have difficulty collaborating with one another to achieve the same goals (Durlak, 2015).

Simply, at the core of RULER’s success is the quality of its implementation, most often a result of teacher buy-in and the frequency of its use in their daily practice (Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, Elbertson, & Salovey, 2012, p. 91). High-quality implementers have been shown to have a greater impact on such student outcomes as social competence, problem-solving and emotional literacy (Reyes et al., 2012). It is important to note, however, the challenges associated with an effective implementation of a program.

Durlak and DuPre (2008) note, “Transferring effective programs into real world settings and maintaining them there is a complicated, long-term process that requires dealing effectively with the successive, complex phases of program diffusion” (Durlak & DuPre, 2008, p. 329). As such, school leaders must balance the realities of adapting programs to their context while ensuring key components are implemented with fidelity. And, each of these must be measured and assessed during implementation of a program (Durlak & DuPre, 2008, p. 341). Identifying

the key components of RULER that are critical to its success are essential in “finding the right mix” of fidelity and adaptation (Backer, 2002; Durlak & DuPre, 2008).

Conceptual Framework

Questions and concerns around a school’s culture and climate are most often rooted in students’ behavior—real or perceived—and the consistency and manner by which students are held accountable for inappropriate behavior. Most often those within an organization—staff and parents in particular—view these challenges from the mere perspective of technical fixes that are believed to improve behavior rather than a deeper understanding of an organization’s social and emotional health and well-being. It is this work that is far more adaptive and transformative in nature and requires a greater level of thoughtful leadership to initiate sustainable change. Thus, a school’s commitment to SEL may influence staff’s perceptions of students’ behavior, serving as a catalyst in improving a school’s culture. The concept map below attempts to illustrate these intersections between adaptive and technical changes.

Organizational systems that are philosophically aligned with sustained, clearly articulated professional development on SEL practices influence students’ behavior in school. However, teachers pre-existing beliefs, values and skills influence their perceptions of student behavior. As SEL practices are adopted mindsets may need to shift to help reframe perceptions of student behavior and disciplinary practices. Specific to the RULER framework, this study seeks to explore its impact on teachers’ perception of student behavior, utilizing three critical resources of the framework—The Blueprint, Mood Meter, Meta-Moment. Figure 2.1 provides a concept map illustrating these intersecting and related organizational components.

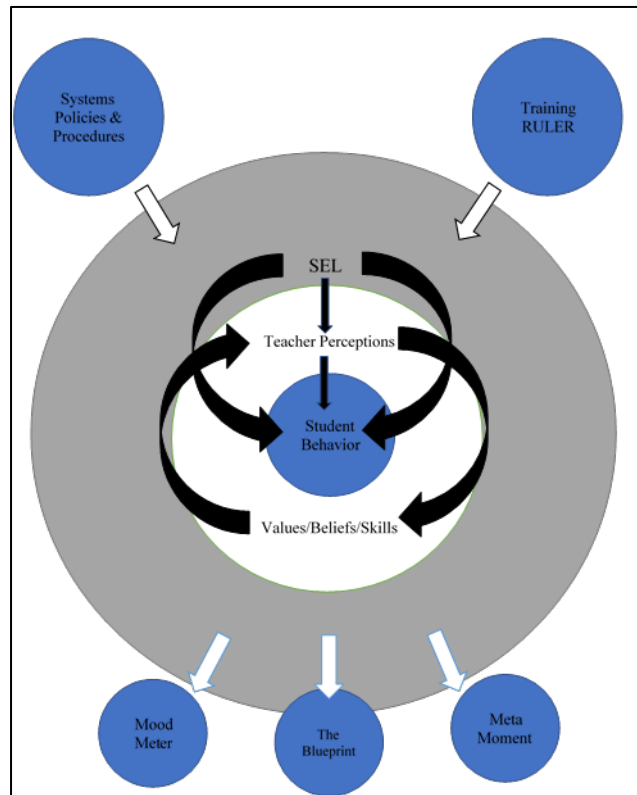


Figure 2.1. Concept map showing the relationship between components of RULER.

The ability to craft shared values and rituals within an organization to create a universally shared vision is daunting; it requires both technical expertise and political savvy. Mintrop (2016) shares, “Leadership at the local level is largely about making the best out of rather adverse circumstances” (p. 23). A school’s commitment to SEL reflects a willingness to identify shared values and establish norms of behavior that influence a shared vision. Such work is complex given the philosophical differences that may exist amongst educators and stakeholders within a school community. Perceptions of students’ behavior are often informed by such individual philosophies. And, such frames of reference are often influenced by adults’ social and emotional wellness and an organization’s existing systems, procedures and policies. In part,

evidence-based SEL programs seek to redefine longstanding reactive practices to student discipline, recognizing the growing research on EI as a proactive approach to improving student behavior in a building.

The problem of practice specific to perceptions of student behavior and the identification of an SEL program by the Board of Education has been a critical component of the District's goals and guiding principles. Pocantico Hills's adoption of its "Guiding Principles" by the Board of Education includes the following statements:

- Joyful and passionate teaching and learning should set the tone for our school environment.
- Collaborative teams must promote personal accountability, broad skill exposure, and cohort understanding and acceptance.
- Perseverance and determination are essential characteristics of student growth and should be fostered thoughtfully and with support.
- Community partnerships provide opportunities to promote communication and global awareness.
- A strong sense of ethics must ultimately come from within, and we must develop and nurture that growth (Pocantico Central School District, 2017, para. 2).

Broad in scope, such language communicates behaviors of students and staff as "joyful and passionate," while identifying the need for "perseverance and determination" as important student behaviors. As such, these "Guiding Principles" point to the recognition of EI and SEL in nurturing a school community that embraces "a strong sense of ethics."

More specifically, the Board's commitment to school climate, student accountability and social-emotional learning needs have been at the forefront of discussion items. A commitment

to “Continue to grow and nurture emotional intelligence among staff and students to foster a healthy school climate that develops ethical learning, responsible decision-making and positive risk-taking, respect, cooperation, conflict-resolution and resilience" was communicated in the three-year plan that was identified and shared with the Board of Education during a special presentation on May 8, 2018.

The presentation communicated a three-year strategic plan to effectively meet this goal, including an initial focus on systems, process and adult learning during the 2017-2018 school year, a commitment to transfer the organizational systems and adult learning to reflect student practices for the 2018-2019 school year and an opportunity to assess, refine and celebrate the systems and practices that support a culture of emotional intelligence during the 2019-2020 school year.

Leadership approaches, organizational systems and staffs’ EI all have an influence on SEL. Within each of these important variables, various attributes are interrelated, including the establishment of rituals and routines within a building, the necessity of streamlined procedures, the importance of hiring and onboarding, transparent communication, and visibility and accessibility as a building leader. Additionally, components of growth mindset and grit are critical in nurturing an emotionally intelligent school. The special presentation shared with the Board of Education, and noted above, communicates these interrelated variables that are necessary for a successful implementation of RULER.

Mintrop (2016) notes, “Changing behavior involves knowledge and skill, attention, motivation, and setting priorities and goals. But most of all, it involves shared meanings, interpretations, expectations, norms, values, rituals, and routines that are largely tacit and subconscious” (p. 118). Affecting such change moves behaviors to a level of tacit and

subconscious behaviors that ultimately come to represent the high leverage sustainable change that benefits students.

As a result, various theories may influence staffs' perceptions of student behavior and their understanding and long-term commitment to SEL practices. Given the use of RULER as the program being evaluated that informs this study, Yale's Anchors of Emotional Intelligence (2013) is the core theory influencing this study. However, research on restorative justice, discipline with dignity and implicit bias all have an influence on this work, as it has an impact on teachers' perception of student behavior and their ability to effectively manage it.

A growing understanding of emotional intelligence and the importance of SEL as an embedded practice in teachers' instruction influences staffs' ability to manage student behavior and create common understandings of accountability. Thus, the important work of EI must be defined and articulated before an SEL program such as RULER can be effectively utilized and influence staff's perceptions of student behavior. Mintrop (2016) notes:

From their understanding of the problem, leaders already know what the unwanted behaviors are or where existing behaviors set limits. But they do not know how to dislodge these behaviors, what to replace them with, and what learning processes need to unfold in people...When educational leaders become designers, they first need to know what people need to learn or unlearn. (p. 120)

At Pocantico, staff have historically seemed to neglect or ignore the root cause of students' questionable behavior, failing to understand the underlying factors contributing to it.

As a result, there are two theoretical perspectives in the social sciences that help to inform this study—systems thinking and growth mindset. Peter Senge's (2006) classic *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* informs the important role of organizations as learning communities and the needs of moving past traditional beliefs that culminates into the "fifth discipline" — a systems thinking approach to leadership.

School organizations rely heavily on systems and procedures that often reflect the stated and unstated values and beliefs of the school community. The organizational systems embedded in a school community may contribute to the ongoing challenges and problems articulated by members of the community. Nonetheless, organizational members may be intent on holding on to these procedures and thus, perpetuating the very challenges and frustrations they seek to overcome. A study of staff's perceptions of student discipline cannot be adequately researched without acknowledging the role, influence, or impact pre-existing systems may have on perpetuating the problem. *The Fifth Discipline* posits an organization's need to move past ingrained assumptions and generalizations about how members of the community may view their reality towards a systems approach of shared-learning that transforms an organization.

Additionally, theories on growth mindset and grit influence this problem of practice and the subsequent research that informs this study on Emotional Intelligence. Carol Dweck's (2006) *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* and more recently, Angela Duckworth's (2016) *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance* influences the development of staff and students' EI as well as leadership behaviors necessary to support complex change. Growth mindset and grit is particularly relevant to the implementation of RULER and the realities and challenges associated with adult learning.

Given Pocantico's diverse student demographic, growing research on poverty and resilience also informs this study. New research has begun to increasingly recognize the implicit bias often associated with isolated emphasis on grit with students from disadvantaged backgrounds, ignoring the reality of structural components of poverty that those from privileged backgrounds do not have to overcome. This growing research argues that there has been an over reliance on highlighting these important soft skills with students from disadvantaged

backgrounds, suggesting that such soft skills as grit, perseverance, and resilience are too simply purported to be values that those children from disadvantaged background need to develop to grow their Emotional Intelligence and enjoy greater school success (Gorski, 2017; Goodman, 2018).

Recognizing the structural view of poverty and its impact on students, grows a greater dialogue, providing students with more equitable access to resources to support their success. The impact of poverty and reframing the traditional view of grit beyond the perspective of those who hold privilege is increasingly gaining attention in such works as Paul Gorski's (2018) *Reaching and Teaching Students in Poverty: Strategies for Erasing the Opportunity Gap*, Steven Goodman's (2018) *It's Not About Grit: Trauma, Inequality and the Power of Transformative Teaching* and James Redford's documentary film (2018) *Resilience: the Biology of Stress and the Science of Hope*. This growing research provides an important theoretical perspective that is necessary in working with staff as they work with a diverse population of students. As such, this growing research provides an important theoretical perspective that is necessary in working with staff as they work with a diverse population of students.

There are patterns of behavior in the building that are ineffective in addressing student behavior, and consequently, some behaviors need to be unlearned by staff and parents, while others need to be embraced. However, such learning cannot begin without considering the relationship of these various theories that influence a shared vision of student behavior and the importance of emotional intelligence in shaping such behavior.

Summary

This literature review was written to further explain the influence EI and an evidence-based SEL program has on influencing staff's perceptions of student behavior. The research that

informs this study was further explained through the organization of subheadings including, a definition of EI and SEL, the influence and impact of SEL in schools, EI and teacher behavior, effective disciplinary practices, current research on RULER and an overview of effective program implementation and evaluation. Thus, the literature review reflects applicable research that guides and informs this study.

The conceptual framework is intended to further contextualize the problem of practice. An overview of important theories that have informed the research further clarifies the decisions that informed the study. Larger theories on systems thinking and growth mindset that help evaluate RULER's impact on teachers' perception of student behavior are shared. Additionally, a concept map provide a visual representation of the overall design of the research study with the intent to illustrate key concepts and their relationship to one another (Boomberg & Volpe, 2016, p. 131).

Following this chapter is Chapter 3—Inquiry Methods—that details the methodology that guided this study. Chapter 3 provides a rationale for the study, a review of the problem setting and context, a discussion of the research sample, and a detailed explanation of the methods that informed the study.

Chapter Three: Inquiry Methods

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of a research-based social-emotional learning (SEL) framework, specifically the RULER framework and its Anchors of Emotional Intelligence, on staff's perception of student behavior. Staff's perceptions of student behavior and accountability are a reflection of their emotional intelligence often informing their perceptions of student behavior and disciplinary practices (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Brackett et al., 2012, Schonert-Reichl, 2017). Such perceptions influence their narrative of a school's culture (Bennett, 2017). As such, a thoughtful evaluation of RULER was critical in gaining a greater understanding of staff's perception of student behavior. The study was significant in helping to assess the extent to which a purported evidence-based SEL framework has a positive influence on staff's perception of student behavior.

The study draws on multiple methodological approaches and theoretical perspectives. Given the pragmatic nature of the study due to its goal of improving the climate specific to student disciplinary practices, a mixed-methods approach was used in the collection of qualitative and quantitative data for analysis. The researcher relied largely on a phenomenological approach in an attempt to describe how staff experienced this particular initiative—the rollout of an evidence-based SEL program. Grounded theory, however, was also used to approach the research from the perspective of inductive inquiry and identify research problems from the participants' perspectives. Interpretivism, or anti-positivism, is the theoretical perspective that informs this study. Given that this study sought to explore staff's perceptions, I needed to recognize that meanings are not fixed but may be revised based on participants' experience. As such, meanings are often derived from participants' social interactions within the

school organization. Specifically, staff's actions, behaviors and beliefs were believed to have the potential to be influenced by their interaction with the RULER framework prior to commencing the study.

The questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. How does the implementation of RULER influence staff perceptions of student behavior?
2. How do changes in the organizational system as it relates to policies and procedures specific to communication and student discipline influence staff's attitudes around student behavior?
3. What role does teachers' Emotional Intelligence have in addressing student behavior?
4. How does staff's perception of student behavior influence how they characterize the school's climate?

With these research questions in mind, Chapter 3 is organized to provide an overview of the methodological approach used to conduct this study beginning with a rationale and review of the problem setting and context. The chapter evolves to explicitly communicate the research sample and data sources before detailing the data collection methods. The methods of data analysis follow, including a discussion of trustworthiness and limitations and delimitations. Each of these sections are organized through subheadings, concluding with a summary of Chapter 3.

Rationale

The research design of this study assumed a phenomenological mixed-methods approach. Given that the study largely relied on the subjective experience of teachers—their perception of students' behavior—the interview protocol (Appendix C) reflected a phenomenological approach

with the goal of understanding teachers' experience. Quantitative data was necessary to further support an accurate and credible context to the problem setting. For instance, it was necessary to examine and analyze disciplinary referrals to develop a rich description of staff's beliefs and perceptions around student behavior. Thus, the quantitative data in the study provided a baseline to support, guide and enhance the data collected after RULER had been rolled out to staff and students.

The qualitative data was necessary because Pocantico Hills Central School District represents a relatively small population comprised of approximately 320 students and 50 teaching staff. With a small population to draw data from, the qualitative findings that were secured from the interview participants had the potential to provide a rich description of the larger population and thus, support the analysis and conclusions reached from the study. The individual experiences at Pocantico Hills provided meaningful insight into the larger context of the school district. Perceptions of student behavior can best be examined and analyzed from a qualitative approach that allows participants the ability to share their experiences to determine patterns that may reflect shared beliefs, perceptions, behaviors or values. The research questions related to staff's perceptions of behavior and the impact of SEL were best answered through a qualitative approach, specifically semi-structured interviews. Additionally, the qualitative findings secured from the study can be compared to the quantitative data to increase reliability and validity of the study and thus, gave greater credence to the analysis and conclusions found in the study, particularly given its small size.

Given the descriptive nature of SEL in addressing beliefs around staff's perceptions of student behavior, a mixed-methods descriptive design was most suitable. In part, an evaluation of the program utilized a case study approach. A case-study honors the context of this initiative

and the need for an in-depth description and understanding of RULER’s intended outcomes. Moreover, such an approach allowed this in-depth description to be further contextualized with data that was analyzed and shared over time. This is particularly important given the Board of Education’s need to see “deliverables” with respect to initiatives that are underway and data on student discipline.

Descriptive case studies tend to be the most practical designs in studies that utilize a program and have the need to balance qualitative and quantitative data. RULER’s Mood Meter resource provided the opportunity for practical and influential quantitative data to satiate the Board’s appetite for “deliverables,” while constructing an objective narrative through a case study design. Given the contrasting and vociferous perspectives around the school climate and approaches to school discipline, a descriptive case study provided the in-depth exploration necessary for an effective evaluation. Moreover, as Fitzpatrick et al. (2011) note, it allows the evaluator to “make use of [my] observational and reflective skills to obtain a greater understanding of the case at hand” (p. 391).

Additionally, the use of a time series design allowed existing information to be used over a predetermined period of time to make future recommendations and considerations for next steps. This approach was particularly relevant in the given context because it allowed the evaluator to demonstrate trends over time. Given that so much of this initiative was rooted in staff perception, it was critical to demonstrate if any potential positive trends would be reported through the predetermined timeframes.

Problem Setting/Context

At the start of the 2018-2019 school year, Pocantico Hills Central School District—a preK - 8 school district in Westchester County, NY—included an enrollment of 322 students. As

shared in Chapter 1, the financial resources of the District have been notable, including a school budget for the 2018-2019 school year of \$31,031,090 that was passed with 63 YES votes and 26 NO votes (Pocantico Central School District, 2018). Despite a student demographic that includes 21 percent of children on free or reduced lunch, and classified as economically disadvantaged, the financial resources remain a source of strength at Pocantico.

Unlike other neighboring districts in Westchester and Putnam County, Pocantico students arrive from seven neighboring zip codes, representing parts of seven different neighboring communities. As a result, unlike neighboring public-school districts where students often have shared experiences with one another outside of the building through various community activities, students at Pocantico do not enjoy such shared experiences. The sense of community is entirely defined by the interactions students and families have with one another through the experience at Pocantico.

The district captures some of the most affluent sections of Westchester Country, including Sleepy Hollow, Briarcliff and Pleasantville while also serving students from the ethnically diverse Westchester Hills Condominiums as well as a predominately African-American public housing unit called Pocantico Park—both of which are located in Elmsford. Additionally, New York Medical College is included in the District, and as such, a number of children of South and East Asia medical students attend Pocantico Hills. Thus, the ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of the district coupled with its rich school budget place this school district in a unique and distinct role of demonstrating the impact that high quality education can have in ensuring social and economic mobility and healthy race relations. Despite universal full-day preK and graduating 8th grade students having a choice to attend one of three high

performing public schools, the longstanding dysfunction of the community, has made it difficult for the District to emerge as a beacon of equity and excellence.

This is due in large part to a lack of sustained leadership at Pocantico Hills for more than 12 years. Considerable administrative turnover has existed at both the superintendency and the principalship, including six superintendents in 12 years. The superintendent who hired me announced her resignation from the District in June 2018 effective at the termination of her contract on June 30, 2019. After my Board appointment as the new principal in May, 2017, three new trustees joined the five-seat Board of Education. The President of the Board of Education, who had recruited the superintendent who hired me, unexpectedly resigned in March 2018 due to ongoing conflict with these new Board members who sought greater decision-making on the daily nuances of the District. This contributed to the Superintendent's decision to not renew her contract and retire from the District in June 2019. Thus, the 2019 -2020 school year marked the seventh Pocantico superintendent in 12 years.

Further contributing the complexity and malaise of the District is the historical struggle of the Board of Education to recognize the role and responsibility of the principalship. The Superintendent has long held the dual title Superintendent/Principal— a reality that was not shared with me until after my appointment and arrival as the new principal of Pocantico Hills. Prior to my arrival, a prior superintendent, upon pressure from the Board of Education, had placed the Director of Curriculum and Technology in the position of interim principal, forcing the prior longstanding principal to resign. The Superintendent retired shortly thereafter. As a result, the only recently appointed Director of Curriculum became the interim principal for three years under three superintendents before transitioning back to his original assignment as Director of Curriculum and Technology upon my arrival in July 2017. After my decision to depart the

district and communicate my resignation in May, 2019 this individual was again appointed Principal and Instructional Leader in late August, 2019. The sordid narrative can go back even further with an earlier superintendent who was released upon the Board's discovery that he had plagiarized his entire dissertation and was never awarded his Ed. D from the University of Virginia where he had claimed to possess it.

Because of its size and the lack of a traditional sense of community, research into the district as an outsider can be problematic. There is no local newspaper that reports on school issues for Pocantico nor are Board meetings videotaped and archived on the District's website. Rather, only audio recordings are archived. As such, it is difficult to glean critical information about the District as an outsider. Rather, I arrived largely on the strong belief that the superintendent's reputation as a highly regarded prior principal of Sleepy Hollow High School represented a critical step for the District in moving toward normalcy and credibility. She had been named Outstanding Regional Administrator of the year by the Empire State Supervisors and Administrators Association (ESSAA) in 2012. Additionally, she has served as the president of the Regional Association of School Administrators (RASA). Her arrival as the superintendent on July 1, 2016 provided me with the belief that I would work closely with a highly regarded administrator who was determined to move the district forward. Her rhetoric of "I believe this is the district that can truly demonstrate the power education can have on leveling the playing field for all students in a diverse school system" deeply resonated with me and led me to resign from my tenured principalship at Haldane Central School District in Cold Spring, NY, a community I had loved, and accept a position as the new principal at Pocantico Hills.

Given the context and history, a scarred climate has resulted that has included narratives around student discipline and contentious staff-parent and administrator-parent interactions. As

a result, suspicion, hostility, and defensiveness has defined the climate of the district. Moreover, organizational systems that are inherent in healthy school districts had broken down and become virtually nonexistent. Evidence of this has been a lack of articulated policies and procedures that help to define a healthy organizational system, including disciplinary practices and policies.

This reality led to a request from the Board of Education in May, 2018 to provide an update on disciplinary practices along with a five-year review of referrals. In part, the outcome led to the decision to move forward with a Discipline Committee to better assess our present policies and more clearly define and articulate our practice moving forward. Grounding our work in both RULER and its Anchors of Emotional Intelligence along with the philosophy and approach identified in *Discipline with Dignity*, a new Plain Language Code of Conduct was drafted by the Discipline Committee as a result of its work in July and August of 2018.

The Committee further refined protocols and procedures for staff regarding discipline, including the use of the District's student information system—eSchool Data—to track and identify discipline trends and responses. This information was deliberately rolled out to staff for a full 1/2-day professional development prior to the start of the 2018-2019 school year. Additionally, the Committee organized a full week of activities to transition students back to school and clearly articulate expectations of behavior. The community was kept apprised of this work through the Principal's summer newsletter and daily updates sent electronically to families during the first week of school. The new Plain Language Code of Conduct was sent to families requesting signatures.

Student rollout of RULER began in 2018-2019 with the institution of Mood Meter Mondays. The purpose of the Mood Meter was to capture students' emotions at the beginning of the week, to begin to better address behavior, and to provide a more objective narrative of the

student culture at Pocantico. Implementation of the program, however, was largely driven by the perceived need to better address concerns of students' behavior in the building. The RULER framework provides an opportunity to educate students, staff and parents around the growing necessity of school discipline to not only be a reactive measure of accountability measured through consequences of behavior but rather an understanding that students need specific tools to effectively engage in pro-social behaviors to deescalate conflict and demonstrate a readiness to learn.

Research Sample and Data Sources

This research study followed a non-experimental design that included a purposeful sample. The sampling was purposive because it consisted of the researcher's own staff whom meet an established criterion to be selected, specifically, tenured staff members with five or more years in the District. While a convenience sample would have allowed the researcher to take a non-random sample of the staff, a purposive sampling was most prudent given that much of the culture and climate of the district as it relates to perceptions of student discipline appeared to be a result of a perceived history of experience that can only be gleaned through a sample of staff with a minimum of five years of experience in the District. Given the researcher's intent on understanding perceptions of student behavior and its influence on school climate as a phenomenological study, it was necessary for participants to construct meaning from their own experiences. As such, the use of this sampling was appropriate and necessary.

The study's school is a PK - 8 building with 315 students. A survey (Appendix B) was disseminated to the entire teaching staff to solicit the views, beliefs, and perceptions of the staff. New York State had released a pilot school climate survey endorsed by the U.S. Department of Education through the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments that districts

are encouraged to utilize with their communities (NYSED, Oct. 2018). Such quantitative data allowed the researcher to assess the staff's view of school culture and specifically their perspective on student discipline. The survey was disseminated to staff in the spring to help analyze the impact of RULER on perceptions of student behavior. Additionally, RULER provides a *Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Scale for Teachers*— (Appendix A) an additional source of valuable quantitative data that allowed staff to provide specific feedback on RULER.

In terms of the quantitative component of the study, a purposive sampling of eleven individuals that met the established criteria and were seen to have a strong influence in shaping the culture and climate of the building were purposefully selected to be interviewed (Appendix E). It was important to note that in the spring of 2019 Pocantico consisted of a faculty of 49 teaching staff. Thus, a selection of 11 represents 22.4% of the faculty population. Teacher leaders, specifically the five-grade level “team leaders” participated in the interviews. These individuals held titled positions within the school organization and received an annual stipend of \$3,200 per the Pocantico Hills Teachers’ Association (PHTA) contract. Their duties included acting as a liaison between staff and administration to help set and facilitate regularly scheduled team meetings.

Pocantico represents a small community and trust has yet to permeate a school community that has experienced regular leadership turnover. As a result, ethical and political concerns for the qualitative sample include the potential for conjecture. Pocantico has yet to embrace norms of behavior that reflect professional conduct in other districts and as such, staff have often floated statements to community members that undermine school initiatives.

Certain community members have been vociferous voices at Board meetings, often making statements that are inaccurate but stated as truth during public comment. Unfortunately, the Board of Education has elected to conduct its business by allowing public comment to occur at the beginning of the meeting, rather than at the end, and further allowing comment to extend beyond the 3-minute Board policy for public comment, frequently upending the agenda and unnecessarily contributing to vitriol and conjecture. It was critical that I guarded against such behavior having an influence on the feedback of the selected participants. Simply, it was essential that the information gained from the participants reflected their own personal experience, and they were not influenced by outside families electing to make provocative statements in a public forum.

Participants were encouraged to sit down and discuss these potential realities prior to partaking in the interviews. In part, the decision to select a purposive sample ensures that all participants were tenured staff members. As such, unnecessary angst of reprisal was eliminated. Tenure laws in New York state are exceptionally strong and once tenured arbitrary reprisal by management directed at a tenured staff member is nonexistent. While building and nurturing trust with the staff was a priority, this structural reality was also a helpful reminder.

Data Collection Methods

This mixed-method study sought to solicit qualitative and quantitative data using a variety of methods to provide a deep and rich understanding of this problem of practice and the analysis necessary to determine meaningful conclusions, guiding my future work as a scholar-practitioner. Figure 3.1 provides a table summarizing these methods along with the type of information necessary specific to each research question.

Table 3.1

Types of Information Needed

Type of Information	What does the research/leader require?	Source of Data	Type of data collected	What method of data collection is required?
1. How does the implementation of RULER influence staff perceptions of student behavior?				
Theoretical		Teachers	Quantitative	Surveys
Demographic	Years of Service of Staff & Grade Level(s)	School Records	Quantitative	Surveys
Perceptual		Teachers	Qualitative	Interviews
2. How do changes in the organizational system as it relates to policies and procedures specific to communication and student discipline influence staff's attitudes around student behavior?				
Contextual	Discipline Policies/Procedures (Plain Language Code of Conduct)	School Records	Qualitative/Quantitative	Student Discipline Referrals Logged into Student Information System
Contextual	Discipline Policies/Procedures (Plain Language Code of Conduct)	School Records	Qualitative	Rich description of Plain Language Code of Conduct
3. What role does teachers' Emotional Intelligence have in addressing student behavior?				
Theoretical	Research Literature	School Records	Quantitative	Discipline Reports
Perceptual	Observations	Principal's Observations	Qualitative	Reflective Log
Perceptual		Teachers	Qualitative	Interviews
4. How does staff's perception of student behavior influence how they characterize the school's climate?				
Perceptual		Teachers	Quantitative	Surveys
Perceptual		Teachers	Qualitative	Interviews

Quantitative data was collected from both the New York State School Climate Survey (Appendix B) and the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Scale for Teachers (Appendix A) as part of the RULER framework. Baseline data, however, was collected from school disciplinary records in an effort to provide the researcher with an accurate and rich description of the stated problem. My entry plan into the District provided additional anecdotal information to support the data gained from disciplinary records and later shared with the Board of Education during my May 2018 presentation. These records were largely obtained from the two prior principals' files on student discipline as well as an Excel spreadsheet that was created to track student behaviors and disciplinary responses in concert with the guidance counselor. Prior to my arrival, the student information system—eSchool Data—was underutilized as a central depository of student referral data.

Pocantico's institutionalized use of RULER's Mood Meter also provided valuable quantitative data to track students' emotions at the beginning of each week. Two separate variations of the Mood Meter were utilized—one with our PK - 4 students in the elementary wing and the other with our 5 - 8 students in the middle school wing.

Qualitative data was collected through interviews. Interviews allowed the researcher to probe deeper into beliefs and values specific to the impact of SEL in influencing perceptions of student behavior over time. Interviews were open-ended, allowing participants flexibility in sharing personal experiences and perceptions of the program and its impact on student behavior (Appendix C). The goal of the interviews was to solicit views on the impact of RULER in shifting student behaviors over time. As such, the interviews helped to determine the extent to which an evidenced-based SEL program provided staff with the tools to more effectively manage and address student behavior.

Data Analysis Methods

The quantitative data was collected in three ways. First, data from the Mood Meters was collected and tabulated to construct a narrative of students' reports of their feelings in the building at the beginning of each week. This data was collected weekly through an Office 365 Form that tabulated responses into an Excel spreadsheet. As a result, objective data on student emotions had been generated each week for the 2018-2019 school year. This data was valuable for the researcher's analysis and conclusions when analyzing staff responses to school climate, views on RULER and interviews with participants. This information was important in capturing a picture of students' view of their experience in the building compared to staff responses of perceptions of student behavior.

Such data tabulation was also relevant in the analysis of data solicited from the school climate survey and SEL scale for teachers (Appendices A & B). However, descriptive statistics provide an opportunity to note trends in responses that were useful during the qualitative component of the study. Simple calculations such as mean, mode and range allowed me to utilize ordinal data to describe the level in which staff perceived there to be challenges with student behavior and the potential influence of RULER in improving student behavior. The school climate survey provided a broader opportunity for quantitative data on student behavior in the building, while the SEL Scale for Teachers allowed me to more closely examine the impact of RULER in influencing student behavior.

Overall, the quantitative methods used in this study were necessary to conceptualize the problem of perceived student behavior in the building. As such, the quantitative data collected informed the qualitative component, providing an opportunity to further explore specific trends that may be gained from the survey information collected. The coding of participants' responses

transcribed from interviews allowed for a deeper analysis of staff's perceptions, experiences and values in addressing and managing student behavior, in addition to the impact of RULER in addressing and improving student behavior.

Trustworthiness

A mixed-methods approach helped to reduce validity threats using two universal anonymous surveys disseminated to all staff along with a purposeful sampling of interviewees. Again, those interviewed were tenured teachers. The use of surveys and purposeful interviews provided two separate data sources to interpret and strengthen the analysis shared in this dissertation. Additionally, these two approaches helped to ensure that the findings were true to participants' experiences.

Qualitative work is emergent but must be systematic and thorough. Open-ended interviews allowed for "question and answer sequence [to be] abandoned in favor of a more conversational style" (Garton & Copeland, 2010, p. 547). Interviews allowed the researcher to learn in detail the lived experience of the participants – in this case, teachers at Pocantico.

Although a consistent historical narrative was shared with me as the new principal of Pocantico, I needed to be mindful of not allowing these early and informal narratives to predispose my conclusions. Nunkoosing (2005) notes that when exploring the challenges of interviewing as a tool for qualitative research the researcher must work to move beyond what is already known. Failure to do so, compromises the opportunity for the researcher to grow their knowledge and advance their learning through the use of interviews. Thus, the use of interviews was purposeful in allowing participants to draw on their own cultural narratives to make sense of their present situation. The challenge, however, was in assuming that the interview was an exact replication of what the participant lived and experienced (Nunkoosing, 2005). Appendix E

details the interview protocol that was used during the research. Eleven interviews were conducted after school hours lasting approximately 45 - 60 minutes each.

Inherent in the scholar-practitioner model of research is the highly contextualized nature of one's problem of practice. With this in mind, I had to be cognizant and transparent with those biases that could potentially influence data collection and analysis. Indeed, my experience as a school leader has been such that those, I often view to have a lower EI view discipline from the perspective of crime and punishment measured through punitive consequences whereas those I view with a higher EI often recognize the need for a restorative justice model of school discipline. Despite this bias, the literature does suggest that staff EI can predict perceptions of student behavior that in turn influence measures of school climate (Brackett et al., 2012; Johnson, Stevens & Zvoch, 2007; Shapka & Perry, 2011;; Shindler, Jones, Taylor & Cardenia, 2016; Tom, 2012).

Despite numerous safeguards, protections and job security that exist for tenured teachers in New York State, fears of reprisal and disciplinary action often exist amongst teachers. Although tenure ensures safety from arbitrary disciplinary action, such fears exist and present challenges to the solicitation of honest feedback. Informed consent aside, additional assurances were necessary, including acknowledgment of an interviewee's status as a tenured teacher.

This reality aside, Ravitch and Carl (2016) note, "Considerations should be made in relation to how power and authority influence the ways in which a researcher takes in feedback from advisors, peers, inquiry group members, and research participants" (p. 202). Often, staff may be reticent to fully share their view of student behavior and school discipline out of worry as being seen in a negative light by their school principal. Thus, my positional authority lent itself to potential biases in the solicitation of data and needs to be acknowledged as such. Simply,

sometimes employees tell their supervisor what they think he or she wants to hear. However, the foundation of effective leadership is rooted in establishing trusting and respectful relationships. A principal's visibility and accessibility through their daily, genuine interactions with staff and students support a climate of professionalism.

Member checks that further validate interview responses were necessary along with the critical need for thick descriptions of interview analysis to ensure a reliable interpretation of interview responses. The use of prior data from my entry plan, my Board of Education presentation on student discipline at Pocantico and student data from the Mood Meter helped to provide a detailed account that demonstrates explicit patterns of behavior and cultural relationships within the context of the Problem of Practice at Pocantico. Given the mixed-methods design of the study, I was further able to triangulate my findings increasing trustworthiness. Interviews were used with two separate surveys to improve validity while ensuring a rich and robust discussion, analysis and conclusions to this Problem of Practice.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations

Problems of practice are highly contextualized studies and lend themselves to certain limitations that must be addressed. First, this study's design lacks larger generalizability given the highly contextualized nature of the problem. Interventions that may work in this setting may not be transferrable to another school environment. Additionally, conclusions drawn from this study are specific to Pocantico. A duplication of this study elsewhere may reach different conclusions that require different interventions.

A second limitation is the highly sensitive data collection on this topic. Perceptions of student behavior are a controversial and thorny topic of discourse in the District. As previously

discussed, public statements at Board of Education meetings abound, along with unsolicited statements from families in emails to staff and administrators. Statements describing behaviors as “criminal-like,” “untenable” and a “scourge of bullying,” have unfortunately been part of the narrative communicated by parents that largely represent one racial and socio-economic demographic of the community. Although this discourse should not have a limitation on the conclusions drawn from participants’ interviews, the study does have the potential for members of the community to suggest that the researcher was attempting to present a biased view of the impact of SEL on student behavior.

Delimitations

Delimitations restrict the scope of the study. The purposive sampling of only tenured teachers with five or more years of experience in the District represents the first delimitation. This was intended to encourage genuine and honest feedback, and the belief that longer tenured staff have a larger impact on the perceptions of student behavior that influence the climate of the building.

A second delimitation included the decision to collect data from staff and not parents. The decision to not collect data from parents was made to better assess the impact of an SEL program in shaping staff perceptions of student behavior in a building. Thus, the study was specific to researching staff beliefs and behaviors as it related to Emotional Intelligence.

Timeline

Table 3.2

Timeline for completion of study and dissertation defense

Component of Study	Proposed/Anticipated Date
Proposal Defense to Committee	Late February/Early March 2019
IRB Approval	Mid/Late March 2019
Data Collection (Survey/Interviews)	April - June 2019
Data Analysis	July - September 2019
Conclusions and Dissertation Prepared for Defense	September - November 2019
Dissertation Defense	January 2020

Summary

The overall methodological design of the study was a mixed-methods phenomenological descriptive case-study. The quantitative data collected provided context to the problem, allowing me to determine the scope of the problem and use descriptive statistics to influence areas that were determined to need more robust discussion during the interviews. Thus, the qualitative component allowed me to delve deeper into staff's perceptions, providing opportunity to share personal experiences that may have contributed to their perceptions. Additionally, the qualitative component allowed participants to share reflections on their colleagues' beliefs and perceptions of student behavior in the building.

Prior to commencing the study, I understood that the responses solicited from the qualitative and quantitative measures may not have matched the anecdotal feedback that was provided during entry into the district. Indeed, the study's theoretical assumption that building EI in staff would improve perceptions of student discipline and overall school climate may have been challenged. In addition, I had to acknowledge that the extent to which effective

professional development on EI was the catalyst for improved perceptions of student discipline may have been questioned. In other words, committed leadership that merely takes an active role in student culture and provides opportunities for staff feedback may be enough to improve perceptions of student behavior. However, framing the study around an evidence-based SEL program allowed the researcher to make conclusions on its impact on perceptions of behavior without raising the potential angst of perceived judgment staff may hold regarding their skill set to manage behavior.

Chapter Four: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to examine the effect of an evidence-based social-emotional learning (SEL) framework, specifically the RULER framework and its Anchors of Emotional Intelligence, on staff's perception of student behavior. The researcher and scholar-practitioner viewed this problem of practice as actionable and high-leverage given the influence of student behavior on the climate of the school community. Moreover, the study provided an opportunity to assess an evidence-based SEL program and determine its effectiveness. The researcher believed that such a study would provide important insight into decision-making specific to mitigating problematic student behaviors while taking steps to improve the climate of the building.

While this chapter presents the qualitative and quantitative data obtained from this study, it is essential to begin with the presentation of data that informed the researchers decision to pursue this study and determine its relevance as a high leverage and actionable problem of practice. Simply, the data obtained from the study must be presented and analyzed within the context of discipline and emotional intelligence prior to commencing the study and the subsequent formal collection of data. As such, data from disciplinary records, a critical memo and formative data collected weekly from students' self-identification on the Mood Meter, a critical resource within the RULER framework, are presented to provide the reader with a richer description and context to this Problem of Practice. As previously noted, data collected from the Mood Meter was important in capturing a picture of students' view of their experience in the building compared to staff responses of perceptions of student behavior.

After presenting this information, this chapter focuses on the findings collected from the study, beginning with a school climate survey adopted from the U.S. Department of Education's School Climate Survey. This survey was disseminated to all instructional staff. With 100 percent participation (49 respondents) this survey provided critical quantitative data. Additionally, the researcher obtained qualitative data obtained from 11 in-depth interviews. Emerging themes are noted below and subsequently presented in this chapter. Finally, an SEL Scale for Teachers, a survey provided through the Anchors of Emotional Intelligence framework, was administered to staff and is presented at the end of this chapter.

Five major themes emerged from the interview data:

1. The majority of interview respondents noted the impact of SEL in developing teachers' capacity and skills to more appropriately and effectively respond to challenging behaviors.
2. The majority of interview respondents did not feel that the ritualization and systemic implementation of SEL practices have yet to significantly improve student behavior in the building.
3. When asked to identify specific student behaviors that were problematic in the building the theme of students respecting staff members and appropriately walking in the hallways emerged. Some associated the perceived lack of respect by students towards staff members as "verbal abuse."
4. The majority of interview respondents cited the establishment of clear policies and procedures regarding student discipline, including referrals to the office as a positive step in addressing student behavior.

5. The majority of interview respondents noted an improved climate in the building, but cited external factors, specifically parents' behavior, as having an adverse impact on staff feeling secure and supported.

Contextual Data

Disciplinary Data

Systems for behavioral referrals had not been explicitly communicated to staff prior to the 2017-2018 school year. Rather, various behaviors that would generally fall within the responsibility of the classroom teacher were reported through a system of completing a carbon copy "Pocantico Inappropriate Behaviors and Harassment" form and submitting it into a mailbox in the office. These referrals were maintained in various hardcopy files with different individuals—secretary, guidance counselor, interim principal—without any streamlined procedure for maintaining disciplinary records of students. Upon discovery of this system in October, an email was sent to staff communicating changes to this system (Appendix F). Such communication serves as a critical incident that necessitated a change in procedures. The excerpt below illustrates the infancy of such procedural change:

There are general disciplinary issues that arise in any classroom that should be effectively managed, those that require a conversation with myself as the principal to potentially foster greater weight with the child, and those that require a form of progressive discipline as per an egregious violation of the Code of Conduct (Appendix F).

Per the Board of Education's request and Superintendent's directive, an executive session was held in April, 2018 to communicate and discuss student behaviors in the building and provide the Board with data on past disciplinary referrals. Given the inconsistency of procedures in reporting and memorizing disciplinary referrals to the office, only those elevated responses subject to student suspensions were shared with the Board in Executive Session. Table 4.1 summarizes five years of student suspensions at Pocantico.

Table 4.1

Five Year Suspension Trends

School Year	Out of School Suspensions (Total Days)	In School Suspensions (Total Days)	Number of Students (Out of School)
2017 - 2018	12	13	2
2016 - 2017	2	3	2
2015 – 2016	24	18	4
2014 – 2015	10	11	6
2013 – 2014	16	2	12

During this five-year period, three separate individuals occupied the position of principal with an individual appointed as an interim from the 2014 – 2015 school year through the 2016 – 2017 school year. Following the 2013 – 2014 school year, the longstanding tenured principal was relinquished of his duties, reassigned pre-K principal, and subsequently retired at the conclusion of the 2015 – 2016 school year.

The student population at Pocantico has remained relatively constant through the years, ranging from 310 to 340 students at any given time. A transient population tends to exist, largely due to the subletting of residences at the Westchester Hills Condominiums. Disciplinary data during this five-year period reflects students in grades PK – 8 and illustrates few individual student suspensions during this period. Statistically speaking, from 2015 – 2016 through the 2017 – 2018 school year less than 2 percent of Pocantico students were suspended from school. A significantly larger number of students were suspended during the 2013 – 2014 school year. This number, however, still reflects a relatively smaller percentage of the overall student population. Again, this data reflects information obtained from various files and sources due to the lack of streamlined procedures. Only data from the 2017 – 2018 school year can be assumed

to be accurate, as it reflects the actions of the researcher and scholar/practitioner conducting the study.

Additionally, viewing this data from the perspective of a PK – 8 building may be of importance, as it assumes no student in the early grades was suspended. Unfortunately, the number of students suspended prior to the 2017 – 2018 school year do not indicate grade levels. However, assuming suspensions were solely in the middle school (Grades 6, 7 and 8), with a student population of approximately 120, the percentage of students being suspended becomes larger. In essence, Pocantico’s already small n is reduced further and can have a significant impact on the perception of student behavior in the building.

Mood Meter Data

A critical component of the Anchors of Emotional Intelligence and its RULER framework is the use of its Mood Meter. The Mood Meter (Figures 1.1 and 1.2) allows students to identify their emotions with the goal of becoming more self-aware of their feelings, utilizing the four colored quadrants to distinguish emotions across a continuum of physical energy and mental pleasantness.

Mad Worried Upset Scared	Excited Cheerful Joyful Hyper
Lonely Sad Bored Tired	Good Relaxed Calm Happy

Figure 4.1 Elementary Mood Meter: PK – 4

Enraged	Nervous	Optimistic	Ecstatic
Annoyed	Mad	Pleasant	Cheerful
Dis- appointed	Sad	At Ease	Content
Lonely	Tired	Relaxed	Calm

Figure 4.2 Middle School Mood Meter: 5 - 8

As students grow their emotional vocabulary, their ability to more effectively address their feelings improves. The framework contends in its research that students in classrooms that have integrated RULER and its resources, such as the Mood Meter, have higher reports of emotional competence by their teachers. (Brackett, Rivers, Reyes and Salovey, 2010, p. 218).

As a result of the presentation in executive session to the Board of Education in April, 2018, a Discipline Committee was formed comprised of teacher representatives to review policies and institute new structures for referring student behavior to the principal's office. The committee sought to marry progressive approaches to discipline with its emotional intelligence initiative and specifically, the adoption of the Anchors of Emotional Intelligence framework.

The decision was made to institutionalize students use of the Mood Meter and record every child's feeling at the beginning of each week. Data was entered by classroom teachers at the elementary level (PK – 4) whereas students in the middle school self-entered their emotion given their access to a personal device. Additionally, the decision was made to provide middle schools students (5 – 8) with a more expansive emotional vocabulary—providing four identified emotions for each colored quadrant. Data was recorded each Monday over the course of the 2018 – 2019 school year. Tables 4.2, 4.3 and 4.4 illustrate the percentage of students' reporting in each quadrant of the Mood Meter prior to commencing interviews with participants in April, 2019. 3,674 responses were recorded for elementary students spanning eight classrooms in grades PK – 4.

Table 4.2

PK – 4 Mood Meter Student Responses: 2018-2019

Mood Meter Quadrant	Total # of Responses	Percent of Total
Red (High Energy, Low Pleasantness)	113	3.1
Blue (Low Energy, Low Pleasantness)	666	18.1
Yellow (High Energy, High Pleasantness)	1380	37.5
Green (Low Energy, High Pleasantness)	1521	41.3

Students in the elementary school overwhelmingly reported feelings in the pleasant quadrants with 78.8 percent of elementary students reporting feelings in the yellow or green quadrants.

Table 4.3 illustrates the percentage of middle school students reporting within each quadrant of the Mood Meter. 2,122 responses were recorded for middle school students in grades 5 - 8. The “blue” quadrant—representing the feelings tired, lonely, disappointed and sad—were further disaggregated to determine the percentage of middle school students within the blue quadrant that were reporting to be tired. This is noted in Table 4.4.

Table 4.3

Grades 5 – 8 Mood Meter Student Responses: 2018-2019

Mood Meter Quadrant	Total # of Responses	Percent of Total
Red (Enraged, Nervous, Annoyed, Mad)	236	11.1
Blue (Disappointed, Sad, Lonely, Tired)	977	46.0
Yellow (Optimistic, Ecstatic, Pleasant, Cheerful)	303	14.3
Green (At Ease, Content, Relaxed, Calm)	606	28.6

Table 4.4

Aggregated “Blue” Mood 5 – 8 Student Responses: 2018-2019

Blue Quadrant	Total # of Responses	Percent of Total
Disappointed	60	6.1
Sad	66	6.8
Lonely	164	17.0
Tired	687	70.3

Findings reveal that 46 percent of middle school students reported feelings each Monday in the blue quadrant. Although 42.9 percent of middle school students reported feelings in the pleasant quadrant (yellow and green), further disaggregation of the data (Table 4.4) shows that 70.3 percent of students within that 46 percent reporting in the blue were students identifying as tired. This presents as a seemingly unsurprising finding given that the data is being recorded on

Monday mornings and seems to correlate to the sleep and energy levels most often associated with adolescents' physical development. With "red" feelings accounting for 11.1 percent of students' responses, findings suggest that given the emotional roller coaster of adolescents during their middle school years, middle school students at Pocantico during the 2018 – 2019 school year felt relatively positive about school.

Presentation of Findings

The contextual data noted above provided a snapshot of the District's organizational health. Specifically, it sought to illustrate the procedures and policies related to systems associated with the accountability of student behavior as well as students' general feelings in the district—an indication of its student climate. Such data helped to inform the methods used to conduct the study. A presentation of this mixed-methods study, including interview data, staff school climate survey data and SEL teacher survey data is presented in the rest of this chapter.

School Climate Survey Data

Adapted from the U.S. Department of Education's School Climate Survey, 49 full-time staff members at Pocantico completed the survey in the spring of 2019 during a Superintendent's Conference Day; in essence, a day dedicated to professional development. While all staff members participated in the survey, staff members could potentially collaborate during grade level team meetings before responding to survey questions.

The survey adopted 31 questions (Appendix B) from the larger and broader survey developed by the U.S. Department of Education in concert with the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). In December, 2018 New York State issued a statement on its SED website encouraging districts to adopt a formal school climate survey to be disseminated to staff, families and students (New York State Education Department. December 2018, *New York State*

School Climate Survey Pilot). Per the Board of Education's directive, the broader survey was adapted by the researcher who identified those questions determined to be most relevant to the community of Pocantico.

At the time of the survey, Pocantico staff consisted of 39 full-time teaching staff, including related service providers (guidance counselors, speech and language teacher) and 10 teaching assistants. Again, the adapted survey results represented 100 percent participation. Additionally, at the time the survey was taken 29 staff members had 10 or more years of experience working at Pocantico while 20 staff members had less than 10 years of experience at Pocantico. These were the only two demographic variables identified on the survey. This was a purposeful decision by the researcher. Given the small sample size, the researcher was careful not to include any additional demographic information such as gender, grade level taught or subject area so as to better protect each respondents' anonymity.

Questions specific to students' behavior, discipline, and social-emotional learning were present in the survey. Specific findings from the survey were used to later provide prompts to interview participants during the qualitative component of the study. Responses to the survey were collected on a four-point Likert Scale. The 31 questions identified on the survey can be categorized into four dominant themes—SEL, student behavior, staff agency and climate, and disciplinary procedures and beliefs (Table 4.5 below).

Table 4.5

Survey Question Alignment with School Climate Categories

Category	Social Emotional Learning (SEL)	Staff Agency and Climate	Disciplinary Procedures and Beliefs	Student Behavior
Description	<i>District's commitment in embedding SEL practices into its culture and climate</i>	<i>Reflections of staff's perception of experiences and perceived ability to have a voice in their work and larger school community</i>	<i>Staff's perception on disciplinary practices, both stated and unstated, when addressing student behavior in the building</i>	<i>Problematic or unwanted behavior that presents a risk to the academic and social-emotional program in the building</i>
Survey Question	4, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 28	5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 21, 32	2, 3, 11, 19, 20, 27, 29, 30, 31	13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18

Question 16, “The following types of problems occur at this school often: student verbal abuse of teachers,” served as a prompt to solicit further perspective and clarity from interview participants during the qualitative component of the study discussed in the next section. In instances that reflected a general split of faculty responses—approximately half responding in agreement or strong agreement and half responding in disagreement or strong disagreement—questions were further disaggregated to determine if responses were strongly driven by one of the two demographic variables—years of service or teaching staff versus teaching assistants. These variables were found to not have an effect on responses. For instance, question 16 was further disaggregated based on years of service to determine if staff’s tenure at Pocantico had an influence on their perception of students’ verbal abuse of teachers. Figures 4.3 and 4.4 below illustrate that this demographic data did not show any significant difference in staff’s responses specific to the perception of students’ verbal abuse of staff.

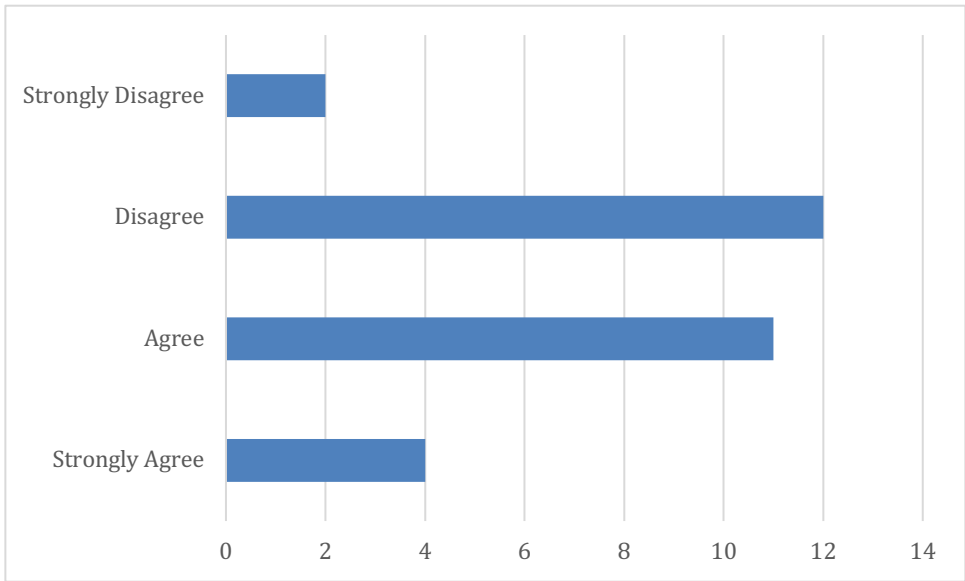


Figure 4.3. Teachers' Perception of Verbal Abuse (10 or more years of experience)

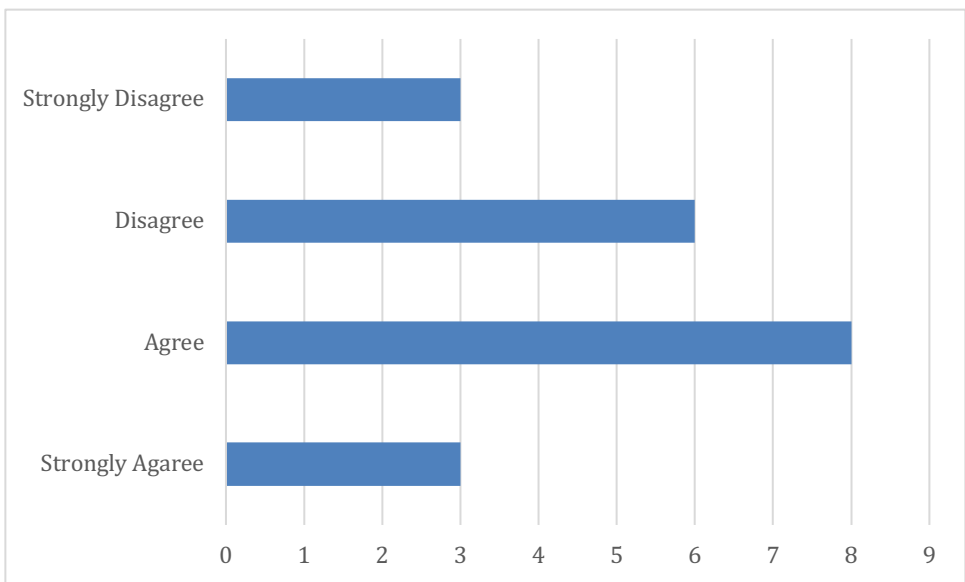


Figure 4.4. Teachers' Perception of Verbal Abuse (Less than 10 years of experience)

These figures illustrate that when disaggregating the data based on years of service at Pocantico both subgroups were approximately divided in their responses to students' verbal abuse—15 and 14 with ten or more years of experience (52 versus 48 percent) and 11 and 9 (55 versus 45 percent) with less than 10 years' experience. As an entire staff, 26 (53 percent) agreed or

strongly agreed that verbal abuse of teachers was a problem at Pocantico while 23 (47 percent) disagreed or strongly disagreed. This data, collected prior to commencing interviews, helped to steer discussion during the 11 in-depth interviews that were collected from April through May, 2019.

Interview Data

The goal of the researcher during these interviews was to capture the broad but nuanced experiences of each participant and provide the reader with an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of each participants experience while developing a thorough context to this problem of practice. Interviews were conducted with the intention of providing opportunity for each participant to share their own experience. As a result, quotations taken from interview transcripts are intended to capture the variety of experiences while recognizing common themes and consistent findings amongst participants' responses. Table 4.6 below summarizes each participants tenure area, teaching assignment, years of service in the district, and teacher-leadership role.

Table 4.6

Staff Participant Demographics

Participant	Tenure Area	Teaching Assignment	Grade(s)	Years of Service	Teacher-Leadership Role
A	Common Branch (PK - 1)	Early Childhood	PK	17	Team Leader
B	Art	Art	(PK – 8)	12	
C	Music	Music	(PK – 8)	13	Team Leader
D	Math	Math (algebra)	(7 – 8)	8	EI Committee
E	Common Branch (1 - 6)	Early Childhood	1	17	Team Leader
F	Science	Science (Living Environment)	(7 – 8)	21	Team Leader
G	Teaching Assistant Level III	Math	(5 – 8)	12	
H	Common Branch (1 - 6)	ELA and Social Studies	6	21	Team Leader

Table 4.6 Cont.

Staff Participant Demographics

Participant	Tenure Area	Teaching Assignment	Grade(s)	Years of Service	Teacher-Leadership Role
I	Special Education (K – 8)	Elementary Special Education (Co-Taught)	3 - 4	16	Team Leader/ Union President
J	Guidance	Middle School Guidance	5 - 8	20	EI Committee Member
K	Common Branch (1 – 6)	Therapeutic Support Classroom (TSC) Teacher on Special Assignment (TOSA)	(PK – 8)	11	EI Committee Member

Participants were interviewed in the spring of 2019 from April 11, 2019 to May 22, 2019. Interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Again, a purposive sampling of 11 individuals were selected as interview participants. As Table 4.6 illustrates, each participant was a tenured staff member. All team leaders in the district were interviewed—six in total—along with five additional staff viewed to have a critical voice in shaping the narrative around staff climate in the building. In the spring of 2019 Pocantico’s total instructional staff—teachers and teaching assistants—was 49. Thus, 11 interview participants represented 22% of the faculty population.

Following standard questions to solicit general information from each participant noted in Table 4.6, the researcher began by soliciting participants’ definitions on emotional intelligence, discipline and climate (Appendix C). 10 of 11 participants demonstrated a strong conceptual and working definition of emotional intelligence, indicating a strength of the professional development instituted during the 2017 – 2018 school year that first introduced faculty to the research on EI. Table 4.7 provides an excerpt of each participant’s response.

Table 4.7

Participant Definitions of Emotional-Intelligence

Participant	Excerpt
A	So emotional intelligence, I think for me it's the process to which children are acquiring knowledge and skills and how are able to, um, manage those emotions.
B	Um, being aware of your emotions and how you deal with them. So-um, so if you come in, and you're having a great day, and you're happy to be here, then I think that correlates to how you teach.
C	Emotional intelligence is understanding, um, the control that you have over your own feelings or how to coach yourself on your own feelings, so, um, uh, how, helping kids understand where someone else is coming from and how they feel in one situation and how it relates to what somebody else feels in, in the same situation or a different situation ...
D	Um. I, I think it's, what I look at is, um, how we are all able to recognize what we're feeling at any time, that all different emotions are, are valid, and how we regulate them, um, you know, deal with them, um, and try to change so that you can be the best you can be.
E	Um, for now, the way that I describe emotional intelligence is a child being able to, or an adult, being able to identify a feeling when they feel it and almost name it. So that they can place it on a mood meter, so they can then use a strategy to, to help with that feeling. Or to embrace that feeling more.
F	In my simplified world, I think that it, it is being aware of how emotions interact and create a lens for you to interact with the work around you. All right. So different emotions elicit different responses for what could be exactly the same circumstances at different times.
G	To me, emotional intelligence is the most important intelligence. Because we're emotional human beings. ... You know? And I ... And I think we often look at school in a purely academic light, whereas the kids who are emotionally intelligent, to me, I think of the stand out kids. Um, am I allowed to name names?
H	When you, you know, it's your daily interactions and how you're emotionally responding to it, but it's also about how you respond to situations that don't always go your way too. It's like, I mean, there's just, there's so many layers to it, (laughs) ...

Table 4.7 Cont.

Participant Definitions of Emotional-Intelligence

Participant	Excerpt
I	Emotional intelligence? So, uh, we've been digging into this work a lot this year, but I think it's for students to be able to um, acknowledge their feelings in a moment. And being intelligent about that and being able to identify and name the feeling their having. And then learning strategies, if it's you know, if they're in the red or yellow. But learning strategies how to address those red feelings.
J	Um. I think I, emotional intelligence is, uh, from a student perspective I think, and a staff perspective, it's our, um, understanding and ability to ... it's our understanding and ability to, um, to modify or, or, or understand our own behavior and our, our own feelings at how our feelings influence our behavior.
K	W-with the work we have, it, it's helped me understand that it is a definition of your feelings. It is how you are, uh, handling your emotions, understanding your emotions, controlling your emotions, um, on any given day in every, every given situation. We, as human beings are continuously feeling, um, differently throughout the day and it is just recognizing that, understanding it and, and controlling it, understanding how to control it.

Definitions of EI largely focused on the ability to manage or regulate emotions with 8 of 11 respondents including some language that spoke to self-regulation and management of emotions. Furthermore, 7 of 11 respondents included the word “feeling” in their working definition. However, an important characteristic of emotional intelligence, and specifically the RULER framework, is the ability to grow emotional vocabulary thereby effectively labeling one’s emotions. Two of 11 respondents included this in their response. Participant I noted, “And being intelligent about that and being able to identify and name the feeling their having” and Participant E shared the importance of “being able to identify a feeling when they feel it and almost name it.” This information is relevant as it provides necessary context to the findings that

emerged from the interview data. Following is a discussion of each theme that emerged from the interviews conducted during the study.

Theme 1: The majority of interview respondents noted the impact of SEL in developing teachers' capacity and skills to more appropriately and effectively respond to challenging behaviors.

This finding is highly significant given the growing research on teachers' skill set and SEC to effectively manage student behavior. The majority of participants (10 of 11) noted that the RULER framework and broader SEL initiative provided opportunities to grow teachers' skills to better address behavior. Responses suggested an overall buy-in for this work and recognition of its value as educators. Interview participants expressed this in the following ways:

I really feel like the things that I've learned from, from EI, like this Meta-Moment. Let's stop and think, is that necessary? ... I mean I do see it working in my classroom, and I, I've been using a lot of different strategies. (Participant C)

Here participant C shows recognition of how specific language from RULER has supported their own understanding of EI as well how the framework provides strategies that promote the development of EI in their classroom. Participant D offered a similar experience, "Now I have a, a broader vocabulary of feelings that I use with kids and, and myself." Another teacher recognized that things have changed in terms of teachers' efficacy towards working with their students who exhibit emotionally-based behaviors:

I think it's gonna take time. But I think that our, the way that we address the children who are in, you know, either crisis or exhibiting behaviors that we don't want, our ability to work with them has changed a lot. (Participant H)

These three examples from participants illustrate positive sentiments about how EI has informed their inaction with their students in ways that are more positive.

Sharing the value in how such social-emotional competencies might mitigate referrals to the office, Participant E noted, "And then as SEL has advanced and evolved and grown, I think

that it becomes more of, uh, ‘What can I do in class to deal with the problem before I write it up?’” Also considering the relationship between SEC and disciplinary referrals, participant H shared, “Um, I think we lost this simple knowledge that we probably all once had of reasons why to bring a child to the principal and reasons not to.”

When asked to consider the intensity of the professional development on EI, particularly given the other curricular and instructional initiatives colleagues were charged with embracing Participant G stated, “It has not felt weighty, and to be honest I think it needs to be more weighty.” This seems to imply SEL’s critical role in supporting teachers’ work with students in their classrooms.

While many interview participants noted specific resources within the Anchors of Emotional Intelligence that helped to grow students’ emotional vocabulary such as the Mood Meter and Meta-Moment, the majority of participants discussed this learning within the larger context of SEL. Some shared their growing understanding of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and its impact on student learning (Felitti V.J., Anda R.F., Nordenberg D., Williamson D.F., Spitz A.M., Edwards V., Koss M.P., Marks J.S., 1998, pgs. 245 - 258). Participant C, for instance, stated:

Um, I think it’s, it’s, I think it’s, I think it’s changed over the 17 years that I’ve been here. Um, you know, if I look at the, the population of children that we have, there’re a lot of children who, who are often on that red. Who are you know, maybe needing referrals to the office. Whereas when I first came, maybe I was just young and naïve, but there felt like fewer children came with, with high ACE scores. (Participant C)

Further illustrating this point Participant I shared, “And I think, I think we all need to remember too, that we have more students in crisis in this building than I think we’ve ever had.”

Participant K, a staff member on special assignment, and charged with a newly developed therapeutic classroom for students struggling with emotional regulation, reflected on the ACE study stating:

But just understanding that and knowing it, you approach the child differently, and you, and you ... it just creates a sense of understanding why you are seeing certain behaviors. A child is coming into the building looking exhausted. Okay, well are they ready to have a math book...

Participant H shared:

I think in the first, I don't know, first 10 years, I don't, I don't know if it's I just don't remember (laughs), but it doesn't seem that I've dealt, I mean there's always a, a couple of kids—That's always a challenge, and you handle differently and kid, you know, something different. But I-I'm finding that that seems to be the norm more, and there's more of those kids that need like that more social emotional learning. They need more help guiding their behavior. Um, but I've seen that trend sort of increase. Um, I think...

Participant H continued by sharing reflections on how society has changed and perceptions of positional authority that in the participant's view have subsided over time. More importantly, however, was participants larger view of SEL and its particular need for students who might be defined as "at-risk."

The ACE study indicates that one in eight individuals are likely to have an ACE score of 4 or higher and in turn, an exponentially greater likelihood of developing any number of negative health and wellness issues later in life. Often, the nature of the interview itself lent it to discussing this study and reminding participants of this statistic. When asked if Pocantico might have more students than the statistical average with ACEs at four or higher, five participants explicitly indicated that they believed this was likely the case, and thus, the necessity of SEL as an even more important skill set for staff to adopt.

Some indication of potential implicit bias either directly from the participants themselves or referencing the larger community seemed to be present in several responses. For instance, Participant D, reflecting on the changing needs of the students during her tenure stated:

... like I'd hear it from parents or I'd hear it from kids. Not too many parents but, um, about, you know, well Pocantico was never like this. And I think, and when you, you know, sometimes I don't want to engage in those conversations because it brings up other things. (Participant D)

Seemingly compartmentalizing students of a certain race and ethnicity, Participant H, when discussing her experience with parental involvement shared, "You know, and you look at s-, you know, some of the Pocantico Park kids where the parents sometime don't even show up at meetings. And they don't participate in the same way." Pocantico Park is a section 8 housing development of largely African-American families. However, Participant G's bias seemed to be most evident in this exchange with the researcher:

Participant G: And we understand that certain children, um, from different social and economic backgrounds, certain racial backgrounds, do not have as much. It's almost like we as a school, um, apologize for it by allowing certain behaviors to continue. Um—

Researcher: Such as?

Participant G: Uh, such as don't hold them accountable. And to me, that's the worrying thing because an African American kid, or a Hispanic kid, who is allowed to steal and behave in certain ways within one framework, then they get out into high school at higher levels where they are accountable for such behavior, um, they haven't been taught that that's not acceptable.

Although participants overwhelmingly recognized the importance of SEL, and its use as a skill set in managing behavior, its impact on improving the actual behavior of students in the building was not yet seen. As a result, the second theme emerged.

Theme 2: *The majority of interview respondents did not feel that the ritualization and systemic implementation of SEL practices have yet to significantly improve student behavior in the building.*

Participants acknowledged during their interviews that Pocantico's work with SEL was a new initiative and still in its infancy. Despite expressing positive sentiments around the work, few participants indicated that SEL had an impact on altering and improving students' behavior in the building. Those that did (2 of 11 participants) were primary classroom teachers, who shared their experience with growing students' ability to more readily demonstrate impulse control during times of potential emotional dysregulation.

During the interview each participant was explicitly asked to identify questionable student behaviors in the building that needed to be adjusted or improved. Every participant identified behaviors most readily defined as behavioral interruptions (Curwin et. al., 2018), sharing such behaviors as general disrespect directed at the classroom teacher (talking back to a teacher or talking while the teacher is instructing), running and shouting in the hallways and refusal to engage in academic work during instruction. Participants largely isolated these student behaviors to middle school students (9 of 11 participants) and specifically, noted such behavior as being particularly prevalent with students in 5th and 8th grade during the 2018-2019 school year (7 of 11 participants).

Most every participant noted that the more elevated behaviors, largely associated with physicality, were likely isolated to a handful of students across the PK – 8 continuum. Participants frequently used the language "I hear" to describe these behaviors, indicating that this perception was through word of mouth and hearsay from colleagues and not an actual experience of the participant nor one that was necessarily witnessed or seen firsthand. In fact, six of the eleven participants used the language "I hear" during their interviews. Below notes some of the more salient comments indicating that SEL had not yet had an impact on altering students' behavior.

So, have we seen dramatic changes this year? I don't think so. But I also see, you know, we're on a continuum, and I think it helps them look, if that's the light, you've helped them look towards the light. (Participant F)

I really haven't noticed it to be honest. Um, I'm not sure what I would see different, I haven't noticed that there's been a, a change because of it, to be honest. (Participant H)

So, I don't know that their behaviors have changed. But I think what has changed is the staff's ability to a, to talk to kids that are um, exhibiting, unwanted behaviors. Um, I, you know, this is our second year doing it and I, I think it's gonna take time. But I think that our, the way that we address the children who are in, you know, either crisis or *exhibiting* behaviors that we don't want, our ability to work with them has changed a lot. (Participant I)

But I think our teachers helping coach students to a better place, our teachers recognizing, which they are now, where kids are emotionally before the day kicks off is really important. We're there but I'm not sure that our teachers are very good at moving them yet. (Participant J)

Despite the view that SEL had not yet had an impact on improving behavior in the building,

Participant I seemed to provide a particularly striking reflection on the work's importance.

I'm gonna say again, I don't know if it's changed behaviors, but I think it's changed a child's ability to express what they're feeling in a moment. ...

Like, I, I said. It's in its infancy stage. But I think that people are starting to see, there is a more positive impact in how we're discipling students today.

The commitment to this work was married to updated disciplinary procedures and policies that sought to align actual practices of formal discipline to larger SEL concepts and theories. The importance of clarity within these new practices was evident in participants responses leading to theme 3.

Theme 3: *The majority of interview respondents cited the establishment of clear policies and procedures regarding student discipline, including referrals to the office, as a positive step in addressing student behavior.*

Each participant was asked during the interview, "RULER and SEL aside, have there been any technical or systems changes specific to policies and procedures that have had an impact on students' behavior in the building—positive or negative?" Every participant noted

changes to disciplinary procedures specific to referring a student's behavior to the office as a critical change, some of whom (5 of 11 participants) noted the early email to staff (Appendix D) as a critical moment in redefining disciplinary procedures at Pocantico. Some participants noted seemingly routine procedures that had been adjusted related to scheduling that, in turn, had an impact on the order of the building and students' subsequent behavior. Participant D, with the fewest years of service of those interviewed, reflected on the lack of routines prior to the 2017-2018 school year sharing:

I think routine has been a big change. There really hasn't been much since I've been here. ... I, I don't want to use the term loosey-goosey but that's how, when I first got here—that's how I saw it as. (Participant D)

Others noted the institution of certain structural routines such as dismissal procedures as having an impact on behavior. For instance, Participant A, a PK teacher, referenced different times that middle school students transitioned in the building providing them with limited interaction to the primary students in the hallways. Participant A shared:

And I think it's much better. It's like it, they're used to, it used to be pretty chaotic before ... But now I think we do a good job of kind of, you know, letting us go out at different times that they're going out. (Participant A)

Participant B, on the other hand, reflected on recent changes to dismissal procedures:

... there's a routine of dismissal. I think up until you came here, there was no procedure. The bell rang, everybody just left the building all at once. I know that little kids, um, talking to the, primary teachers, that little kids were getting pushed and shoved by the upper, middle-school kids because they just kind of all—(Participant B)

These responses illustrate staff perspectives on those procedural shifts that were viewed favorably in supporting a more orderly school culture with clearer expectations at key times in the building.

Others further emphasized such shifts in expectations that were viewed as providing greater clarity to procedures when addressing students' behavior and referring problematic

behaviors to the office. For instance, Participant C emphasized the greater responsibility for classroom teachers to communicate behaviors to parents:

Um, I think they have changed based on the system. We have tried to instill the ownership of student behavior and getting to know kids a little more in that respect, rather than it constantly being an outside situation. Um, I think that there's, there's a need to communicate home more regularly and it should come from the classroom teacher before it's coming from guidance or administration and I think we've cut out on the whole back log of, you know, referral slips getting mailed home three months after the kid has gotten writ—, written up and then frustrating a parent who's hearing about it three months after the fact. (Participant C)

Participant J vocalized frustration with past experiences that left staff feeling unsupported and confused offering:

I—I think there was a number of years where it was very much, kind of, sink or swim, and kind of, follow what you believe to be the right way to go. And there wasn't a uniform, kind of, procedures to follow, or even just, I guess that sense of support ... there's also a kind of a—a sense of understanding with the student as well, because, you know, if I see my classmate doing something inappropriate, and there was a response to it, now I've also learned that, that's not acceptable. (Participant J)

Such comments seem to reflect the longstanding frustration and helplessness felt by staff when addressing student behavior. A sense that no established or clearly communicated procedure regarding student accountability existed prior the implementation of RULER seemed to contribute to such experiences.

Finally, others noted specific procedures put in place, albeit developed in concert with EI practices, but a reflection of a more formalized disciplinary procedures. This included newly defined and introduced systems such as Restorative Hour and referral to the Therapeutic Support Classroom (TSC). The Discipline Committee's development of "Restorative Hour," a more progressive approach to the traditional after school detention, was noted by Participant G. The committee formalized this procedure in the spring of 2019 and communicated its philosophy, structure and process to staff and parents. Participant G noted its impact:

You know, and I think some of the, the work that, you know, I had talked to [reference to staff member responsible for its supervision] about the Restorative Hour, and um, kind of being responsible for your actions in a way that you're making kind of, you're repairing what you've done. (Participant G)

Similarly, Participant H reflected on the impact of TSC as a newly developed procedure to better support and manage problematic behaviors:

Uh, I think that with the um, TSP program in place, with the help that we have of, um, [reference to elementary counselor] now, who we didn't have until you guys came. You and Carol [Superintendent] came, um, a child shutting down in a classroom is an immediate referral to the principal. It used to be, um, but now we have a place for that child to go and um, we have a series of strategies to use with that child before they ever have to go to you. (Participant H)

As such, each participant noted the inception of each of these new programs offering its perceived effectiveness as a result of EI practices drawn from the RULER framework.

Throughout the interviews, the question of specially identifying behaviors was discussed, with participants being prompted to provide specifics. Again, "I hear" was a comment used by five staff members throughout the interviews and as such, prompting staff to identify their own experiences with students' behavior was essential. Moreover, as shared in the prior section of this chapter a staff climate survey was administered to the faculty prior to commencing these interviews. While this data was shared in the prior section of this chapter as part of the quantitative data obtained in this study, half of responding staff indicated that the "verbal abuse of students towards staff" was a problem at Pocantico in this survey.

Theme 4: *When asked to identify specific student behaviors that were problematic in the building the theme of students respecting staff members emerged. Some associated the perceived lack of respect by students towards staff members as "verbal abuse."*

Participants often needed to be prompted to provide specifics around disrespectful behavior, frequently noting experiences outside their classroom. When prompted, staff largely

noted that a relatively small group of students might be characterized as “verbally abusive of staff.” Participant J, the middle school guidance counselor, provided the following perspective:

I do think there’s a general empowerment of our kids right now. That the, Pocantico is a unique place. So, I think a few kids that feel empowered can really influence the minds of teachers here. So, you have four or five kids that are not, they’re, that we’re having a tough time disciplining that can often, it, like in-influence an entire narrative throughout the district that’s just not accurate.

Nonetheless, a perception around student respect in the building was evident in all participants’ responses.

The intersection of staffs’ skill set and individual dispositions and values when working with a diverse student population has layers of complexity. Pocantico’s submission of the annual BEDS report, the Basic Educational Data System, that is submitted each year to SED from every school district in New York State to Albany reported Pocantico’s demographic as follows: 40 percent white/Caucasian, 17 percent African-American/Black, 20 percent Latino, 20 percent Asian and 3 percent mixed. This information was formally shared during a 2018 presentation to the Board from the Director of Curriculum as a precursor to a presentation on student assessment and achievement data (Pocantico Hills Central School District, Board of Education November 20, 2018. 3.A. *K – 8 and High School Assessment Report*).

This ethnic demographic data is important to understand within the context of staff’s perceptions of student behavior. For instance, Participant G, the only TA interviewed in the study, shared:

Um, I think, I think the school has always battled with student behavior because, um, this school, to me, seems to, um, apologize a lot. We, we walk a very fine line where certain behaviors are accepted and other kids see those behaviors as accepted, so they behave in such a manner. (Participant G)

Participant G continues by specifically discussing the behavior of “...an African-American kid, or a Hispanic kid, who is allowed to steal ...” and is previously quoted in the section discussing

theme 1. As a result, the individual dispositions, experiences and approaches to managing student behavior can vary significant from one individual to another.

With this common theme around the perception of “respect,” middle school students were most often the focus of participants’ responses. Participant B, the art teacher in the district, was careful to note the observed behavior of the 5th grade during the 2018-2019 school year.

When asked about verbal abuse of staff the following was shared:

Participant B: I don’t personally experience it. I don’t have any students verbally being that abusive to me. Have I heard it? Yes. I mean, I’ve, I’ve, I have seen children talk to other teachers that’s not appropriate, that it should never be, you know, talk to an adult like that but—

Researcher: Say more. So, what are the things? What type of language--?

Participant B: Um, just clear disrespect and um, you know, foul obscenities, like, just you know, that, that don’t occur in my classroom, but I, I, I, I see them. I, I, you know, witness them. I try and step in, um—

Participant B continued by specifically sharing the behavior of 5th grade students across the hallway from her classroom. When prompted to provide further detail on the observed behavior she offered, “When a student, any one of the teachers directly trying to talk to the student, the student will, you know, walk away or slam books down, slam lockers closed, say things that shouldn’t be said in school.” Such experiences, often shared as observations of students’ behavior, helped to further illustrate a theme of students lacking respect for staff.

Several participants referenced a historical narrative around failed disciplinary approaches and procedures. Participant F was particularly adamant about this perspective. After expressing the belief that most of the problematic behaviors were isolated to middle school students there was an emphasis on the history of discipline at Pocantico:

Yeah, I think it’s absolutely in the middle school student. And, I think part of that is the end product of five years of consequences that were, you know, the, the, the discipline that is, exist, just a part of, because of the approach wasn’t, um, multi-pronged. It wasn’t

holistic. It was, well, here's your consequence for your behavior. And, even at times didn't exist. So, a result of that, I think children interpreted it as it's just a free for all. This is just a joke. I don't need to worry about it because, no matter what I do, it doesn't matter. (Participant F)

Again, middle school behavior seemed to occupy the majority of anecdotal experiences shared by staff when describing questionable student behavior. More importantly, however, was the consistent perspective of students not being held accountable for their behavior as noted by Participant F.

Interestingly, Participant F was careful not to necessarily compartmentalize students' behavior as "verbally abusive." Rather, recognizing differing experiences of colleagues at any given time the following was shared:

I think that, that's a, um, a moving target for some people—verbal abuse maybe. ... So, you know, I think that's part of the problem is what's, what's the boundary that we're going to call this?—I'm just having a bad day too—you're abusing me? (Participant F)

Such a comment may suggest the highly subjective nature of staff's perception of students' behavior, specifically, verbal abuse. Furthermore, Participant F seems to recognize how a staff member's particular emotions in a given moment may influence how the students' behavior is described or defined.

The general sentiments around respect, however, were often associated with external factors, specific to parents' interaction with the school community. Eight of 11 participants, without being asked specifically, shared their experience and perspective on parents' influence on their child's behavior in the building. Participant I offered the following:

Um, I, we're dealing with behaviors that in the 16 years I've been here, and I think this year might have been the most brutal, um, that we've just not had to deal with before. Um, there's a level of empowerment in kids where they feel like they can verbally attack teachers.

Um, and these are teachers who you and I both know are highly qualified educators who will do anything to um, m, you know, make a change and a difference in these kids' lives.

Um, they just, they say horrible things to the teachers. They, and, it feels like there's no consequence but it's not that the district isn't putting a consequence, it's that their behaviors are being supported or, you know, by their parents. And that makes it difficult to make change. (Participant I)

Such consistency in comments around staffs' experience with parents' influence on the narrative around student behavior. The fifth and final theme emerged from the interviews.

Theme 5: *The majority of interview respondents noted an improved climate in the building, but cited external factors, specifically parents' behavior as having an adverse impact on staff feeling secure and supported.*

When asked how students and staff feel in the building all participants indicated that the vast majority of students felt positive about school, indicating emotions on the Mood Meter in the green and yellow quadrants. Similarly, participants indicated that they believed their colleagues also felt positive about their work, although several participants noted feelings of vulnerability using the word "insecure" to describe these feelings. Others explicitly mentioned an improved climate in the building but went on to share narratives of experiences having parents verbalize negative sentiments about the school climate to the Board of Education and Superintendent that participants did not believe reflected how students felt in the building.

When asked, "How would you describe how the majority of students feel in your classroom? In the building? How would you describe how the majority of your colleagues feel in their classrooms?" participants shared positive feelings about their colleagues and students experience in the building. However, eight of 11 participants cited parents as an external variable that had an influence on students' behavior and the subsequent climate of the school community. This was offered without specifically being asked about parents' influence by the researcher. These experiences ranged from participants at all levels and areas of the school community. Participant C noted an experience disciplining a child in her classroom, resulting in

the parent contacting the Superintendent and Board of Education. After explaining how the child had struck a classmate in the classroom she offered:

Participant C: I stripped her of recess. I at least took her outside for recess (laughs), um, but you know, the next time that child misbehaved, I mean, she never did anything that, um, that severe again, um, but the next time you know, I was cautious because I just didn't want to have this mom come back at me and threaten—

Researcher: Did that conversation stay between the two of you? Or did it, did it kind of move up the chain of command?

Participant C: No, it, it went up. It went up. You know, it went from—

Researcher: So, how far up?

Participant C: I think it went to—the Superintendent. I don't think it quite got to the Board. I mean, there are some squeaky wheels that, you know, they don't, they don't agree with what a teacher does so it, just—

Researcher: So, teacher, Principal, Superintendent, Board of Education?

Participant C: Board of Ed. But there are some parents who just go straight to the Board of Ed. And they skip all, you know, they don't even talk to the teacher about it and, you know, get the teacher's perspective.

Furthermore, Participant J, the middle school guidance counselor, shared thoughts on parents' influence in the building.

I do think that there are some parents that are, and I really believe it's, you know, there's a family dynamic here that, you know, you might call it bad parenting but it might be bad parents (laughs) that when they, they think that if they have a problem with an administrator or someone else here or a teacher, they let their voice be heard publicly sometimes and oftentimes, um, I think privately within their own family ...

And I think, but I do think that the pushback here among the few parents that can really push hard, um, it creates a vicious cycle that kids are disrespectful, a teacher feels disrespected, which happens right away in every school district in America, whether anyone wants to say it or not. It's true.

But then there's disciplinary consequences or an appropriate consequence, even a phone call to a parent. And then, you get hit with a wave of, um, pushback from parents that,

that we sometimes or we lose out for lots of reasons, but I think we, um, which then only empowers kids to then be more disrespectful of teachers. (Participant J)

This narrative of parents' behavior and perceived influence with the Board of Education seemed to generate sentiments of staff feeling unsupported around disciplinary decisions and vulnerable to attack, judgement or discipline themselves. The TSC teacher captured this perspective by offering his view of how parents' interaction with the Board and Superintendent had shifted during his tenure at Pocantico.

When I started in-in 2004 as the after-school director, I felt as if there was more of a-a strong relationship between the school and parents. ...

And it was a-a unified relationship, that it was very much working together to connect these behaviors and having open and thoughtful conversation, but very respectful. Over the course of the last 10 years, I, uh, I don't feel that s-, the same way. I feel the relationship has broken, and now it's more of a he said, she said. Or the parent calling already defensive, and defending their child as if the teachers were, you know, uh, making up a story, or just not entirely truthful in it. (Participant K)

The sentiments shared by participants seemed to reflect a vulnerability perhaps best expressed by Participant I:

Um, but I think more than anything it just, uh, it's frustrating when a parent, and I, I know you know this, when a parent has an issue, and they don't bring it to you. And they go above you and there's, there's no chance to talk it through, talk it out, to see eye to eye sometimes. And that's difficult. U, I think faculty's frustration with the turnover in administration, um, it just make you feel insecure, and teachers are like students, we just want to feel safe. We just want to feel um, like everybody's working together. (Participant I)

This vulnerability expressed by Participant I regarding experiences in which parents would readily access the Superintendent and Board with a concern or gripe resulting in frequent administrative turnover seemed to greatly influenced the sense of safety amongst staff.

Interestingly, the comment by Participant I regarding safety seemed to harken to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory by which safety is a basic need an individual must first possess before they can reach self-actualization.

This external variable, parents influence on the school climate, and its emerged finding from these interviews is further discussed and analyzed in Chapter 5. Furthermore, Chapter 5 merges both the quantitative and qualitative data drawn from this study to share conclusions. However, the final data collected in this study was a brief survey drawn directly from the Anchors of Emotional Intelligence.

Social and Emotional Scale for Teachers

The purpose of using this survey (Appendix A) within the study was twofold: first, in part, the study reflects a program evaluation and as such, there is a need to adhere to the implementation of RULER with fidelity. This includes the use of the survey to solicit data from staff irrespective of the larger study presented in this dissertation. The 2017-2018 school year focused on teachers' growing understanding of EI and its body of research. Second, the survey serves as an opportunity to further analyze teachers' SEC measured against the narratives provided in the 11 in-depth interviews and compared to SEL data obtained from the school climate survey.

Again, this survey was adopted directly from the Anchors of Emotional Intelligence, developed by Marc Brackett and the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence (Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, 2017). This 12-question survey was disseminated in June, 2019 in staff mailboxes. 31 of 49 staff responded to the survey, representing 63 percent participation of staff. Responses to the survey were collected on a five-point Likert Scale—strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree—and are summarized in actual numbers show in Table 4.8 below.

Table 4.8

Results: Social and Emotional (SEL) Learning Scale for Teachers

Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Total
My school expects teachers to address children's social and emotional needs.	0	0	1	17	13	31
The culture in my school supports the development of children's social and emotional skills.	0	1	2	21	7	31
All teachers should receive training on how to teach social and emotional skills to students.	0	0	1	15	15	31
I would like to attend a workshop to develop my own social and emotional skills.	0	2	5	15	9	31
Taking care of my students' social and emotional needs comes natural to me.	0	0	3	19	9	31
My principal creates an environment that promotes social and emotional learning for our students.	0	4	0	17	10	30
I am comfortable providing instruction on social and emotional skills to my students.	0	2	5	21	3	31
Informal lessons in social and emotional learning are part of my regular teaching practice.	0	1	5	18	7	31
I feel confident in my ability to provide instruction on social and emotional learning.	0	4	4	19	4	31
My principal does not encourage the teaching of social and emotional skills to students.	15	13	0	1	1	31
I want to improve my ability to teach social and emotional skills to students.	0	1	4	19	7	31
I would like to attend a workshop to learn how to develop my students' social and emotional skills.	0	0	3	21	7	31

Questions focused entirely on the building's commitment to SEL asking teachers to respond to questions that demonstrated their comfort with SEL as an embedded practice in the building and their classrooms as well as a focus on ongoing professional development. Actual responses are further illustrated in a table provided in Appendix H. This data, analyzed in concert with the staff school climate survey data and 11 in-depth interviews, provides further support for conclusions drawn from the analysis of this data in its entirety presented in the next chapter.

Conclusion

This chapter presented findings collected from three separate data points—two quantitative and one qualitative—indicative of a mixed-methods study. Given the small sample size that is inherent in this study the need for rich description from interview participants that can be analyzed in concert with the data collected from the school climate survey and RULER survey was essential. The analysis and conclusions drawn from the data collected from these three areas is presented in Chapter 5.

Chapter Five: Analysis and Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the effect of an evidence-based social-emotional learning (SEL) framework, specifically the RULER framework and its Anchors of Emotional Intelligence, on staff's perception of student behavior. Teachers' perceptions of student behavior influence the climate of a school community. Classroom management, individual relationships with students, and philosophies on what constitutes acceptable student behavior can vary greatly from teacher to teacher. Additionally, institutional policies on student discipline including a building's Code of Conduct or student referral procedure may influence teachers' perceptions of student behavior. Teachers' collective characterization of students' behavior reflects their individual skills and philosophies as well as the institutional policies of the building. As such, perceptions of teachers, their narratives and anecdotal reports, provide a more meaningful indication of a shift in student behavior and school climate rather than isolated quantitative data.

Specifically, this study was intended to assess the extent to which the implementation of the RULER framework influenced teachers' perceptions of student behavior at Pocantico Hills. The Anchors of Emotional Intelligence through the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence provides its RULER framework. Adopting this framework had the potential for Pocantico to further nurture and support a healthy school climate by providing students with the tools to recognize and regulate their emotions and thus, improve their behavior in the building. The Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence touts its framework as an evidence-based approach for integrating social and emotional learning into schools through the RULER model. The demonstration of pro-social skills through a RULER approach is rooted in research and provides

specific resources to help support students' emotional intelligence (EI), including its resource the Mood Meter.

The Mood Meter allows students to identify their emotions with the goal of becoming more self-aware of their feelings by utilizing its four colored quadrants to distinguish emotions across a continuum of physical energy and mental pleasantness. As students grow their emotional vocabulary, their ability to more effectively address their feelings improves. This study, however, sought to assess the extent by which a well-articulated implementation of an evidence-based SEL program, specifically RULER, influenced staff's perceptions of behavior.

Given the descriptive nature of SEL in addressing beliefs around staff's perceptions of student behavior, the pragmatic nature of the study and its goal of improving the climate specific to student disciplinary practices, necessitated a mixed-methods descriptive design. This was particularly important given the Board of Education's need to see "deliverables" with respect to initiatives that were underway as well as past data on student discipline. The study, however, relied largely on a phenomenological approach to describe how staff experienced this particular SEL initiative.

Given that the study largely relied on the subjective experience of teachers—their perception of students' behavior—the research questions reflected a phenomenological approach with the goal of understanding teachers' experience. Quantitative data was necessary to further support an accurate and credible context to the problem setting. For instance, it was necessary to examine and analyze disciplinary referrals to develop a rich description of staff's beliefs and perceptions around student behavior. Thus, the quantitative data in the study provided a baseline to support, guide and enhance the data collected after RULER had been rolled out to staff and students.

Additionally, the qualitative data was necessary because Pocantico Hills Central School District represents a relatively small population comprised of approximately 320 students and 49 teaching staff. With a small population to draw data from the qualitative findings secured from the interview participants provided rich descriptions to support the analysis and conclusions reached from the study. The individual experiences at Pocantico Hills provide meaningful insight into the larger context of the school district. Perceptions of student behavior can best be examined and analyzed from a qualitative approach that provides participants the ability to share their experiences to determine patterns that reflected shared beliefs, perceptions, or values. Additionally, the qualitative findings secured from the study can be compared to the quantitative data to increase reliability and validity of the study and thus, give greater credence to the analysis and conclusions provided in this chapter.

The study was based on the following four research questions:

1. How does the implementation of RULER influence staff perceptions of student behavior?
2. What role does Emotional Intelligence have in addressing student behavior?
3. How do changes in the organizational system as it relates to policies and procedures specific to communication and student discipline influence staff's attitudes around student behavior?
4. How does staff's perception of student behavior influence how they characterize the school's climate?

Each research question is analyzed within the context of the findings that emerged from the interviews as well as with substantive patterns found from the qualitative data, most notably the staff school climate survey (Appendix B). The themes that emerged and were presented in

the prior chapter are further discussed in relation to the relevant literature as an analysis is presented in this chapter through analytic categories.

Thus, while the prior chapter sought to provide the reader with a readable narrative specific to this Problem of Practice, this chapter interprets the themes previously discussed in relation to the research questions that the study sought to answer. Categories of analysis emerge and serve to organize this chapter. Additionally, the study's unique context necessitates a layered synthesis of the findings that are discussed and interpreted in relation to the relevant literature. As such, the research literature presented in Chapter 2 is revisited and interwoven into each categorial analysis. Finally, this chapter concludes with revisiting the original assumptions that were presented in the first chapter of this dissertation prior to commencing the study.

Analytic Category Development

The following five themes emerged from the interview data and were discussed in the prior chapter:

1. The majority of interview respondents noted the impact of SEL in developing teachers' capacity and skills to more appropriately and effectively respond to challenging behaviors.
2. The majority of interview respondents did not feel that the ritualization and systemic implementation of SEL practices have yet to significantly improve student behavior in the building.
3. The majority of interview respondents cited the establishment of clear policies and procedures regarding student discipline, including referrals to the office as a positive step in addressing student behavior.

4. When asked to identify specific student behaviors that were problematic in the building the theme of students respecting staff members emerged. Some associated the perceived lack of respect by students towards staff members as “verbal abuse.”
5. The majority of interview respondents noted an improved climate in the building, but cited external factors, specifically parents’ behavior as having an adverse impact on staff feeling secure and supported.

These five themes were analyzed within the context of the study’s four research questions.

Three analytic categories emerged regarding the influence an evidence-based SEL program has on staff’s perceptions of student behavior. A significant finding that emerged from the themes presented in the prior chapter was the relationship between teachers’ Social-Emotional Competencies (SEC) and the management of student behavior. Thus, the first of three analytic categories presented in this chapter is entitled “The relationship between teachers’ SEC and managing student behavior matters.” Analytic Category 1 addresses themes 1, 2 and 4 that emerged and were presented in the prior chapter. While the influence of policies and procedures was specifically asked during the interviews, its influence on staff’s perception of behavior emerged as a theme. Subsequently, Analytic Category 2, “Effective SEL is married to a school’s policies and procedures” is further analyzed in relation to research question 2. Finally, narratives describing outside influences emerged as a common theme determining the third and final Analytic Category 3, “A school’s climate does not operate in a silo: external factors have an influence.” This final analytic category is discussed within the context of the fourth research question.

Analytic Category 1: Relationship between teachers' SEL and managing student behavior matters

The first two research questions sought to determine the influence of SEL on staff's perception of student behavior. In part, the study was interested in distinguishing between the broad work of SEL as an initiative and the influence of a specific program; in the case of this study, the Anchors of Emotional Intelligence and RULER. In other words, it was important for the researcher to determine the extent to which a specific program influenced staff's perceptions or if any change in perception was a result of broader SEL work. As presented in Chapter 4, three important themes emerged that helped to answer these first two research questions and are noted below.

1. The majority of interview respondents noted the impact of SEL in developing teachers' capacity and skills to more appropriately and effectively respond to challenging behaviors.
2. The majority of interview respondents did not feel that the ritualization and systemic implementation of SEL practices have yet to significantly improve student behavior in the building.
3. When asked to identify specific student behaviors that were problematic in the building the theme of students respecting staff members emerged. Some associated the perceived lack of respect by students towards staff members as "verbal abuse."

Regardless of whether teachers believed student behavior improved in the short-term, SEL seemed to provide teachers with the capacity to address and manage behavior. While teachers appeared to believe that RULER and broader SEL work provided them with an appropriate and effective response to student behavior, the majority did not suggest that it had an immediate and positive impact on improving student behavior in the building. Rather, two

seemingly paradoxical themes emerged—teachers’ capacity and skills to appropriately respond to challenging behaviors as well as the belief that systemic SEL practices had yet to improve behavior.

Despite the juxtaposition between these two themes, staff had a favorable view of the professional development they had received around SEL. These positive sentiments were reflected in staff’s views of specific practices under RULER and such resources as the Mood Meter as well as the broader SEL work that had been introduced, including their growing understanding of the research literature, such as the ACEs study and the text *Discipline with Dignity*.

Such analysis correlates to the research literature. Indeed, research shared in Chapter 2 noted positive gains in teachers’ commitment to SEL from 664 public school teachers in British Columbia and Ontario (Collie, et. al., 2011). A 2013 report for CASEL found that 95 percent of teachers indicated that SEL is critical in educating the whole child (Bridgeland, Bruce and Hariharan, 2013). A later study from Domitrovich et. al. (2016) found that SEL can have a positive impact on teachers’ beliefs and perceptions.

This suggests that staff’s ability to grow their skill set regardless of its immediate impact was viewed favorably. In essence, SEL seemed to provide staff with a growing tool box to feel better equipped to address and manage behavior even when the outcome was not immediately recognizable. Teachers’ perception of an appropriate and effective response was not predicated on the student behavioral outcome. Rather, their perceived growth in skills provided a sense of an appropriate and effective response to unwanted student behavior. In other words, a growing competency in managing problematic behaviors seemed to emerge that provided staff with greater security and confidence in their work.

The need to clarify problematic or unwanted behaviors became an important component of the study and was necessary to illuminate during the interviews. It was important to ascertain the extent to which “perceived behavior” by staff at Pocantico was consistent. Quantitative data obtained from the staff school climate survey indicated that approximately half of staff believed “verbal abuse” was a problem. When this question was further explored during the interviews the theme of “student respect” emerged.

There seemed to be a general sense of a pervasive climate of student behavior that neglected to recognize many lower-level or basic behavioral expectations in the building, such as not running in the hallways and respectful compliance of appropriate staff directives. Teachers’ growing SEC seemed to better equip them with the ability to both respond to these behaviors as well as potentially recognize the root cause. Or more simply, staff seemed to recognize that while such behaviors were frustrating, SEL provided the avenue to teach students how to better regulate their emotions.

Such analysis seems to confirm the research of Marc Brackett and the Anchors of Emotional Intelligence and its focus on teacher education prior to implementation of the program. Indeed, the following quote that was shared in Chapter 2 remains relevant given the study’s findings and is offered again: “RULER starts with shifting *adults’* mindsets about emotions, followed by training on explicit skills—building educators’ own emotion vocabulary and enhancing their emotion-regulation skills” (Brackett, 2018, p. 15).

Such view of teachers’ SEC is further supported from Jennings and Greenberg (2009) who noted that teachers with a high SEC are better equipped to teach their students to interact in more respectful ways. Furthermore, Jennings (2011) indicates that growing teachers’ SEC mitigates burnout, helping teachers better manage the daily stresses of teaching.

It is important to note, however, that the majority of research on SEL has largely focused on student outcomes. Research on teachers' SEC remains limited. This study, however, differs from much of the literature because it recognizes the importance of SEC and the necessary professional development that is critical in an effective implementation of any SEL program. While findings indicated that teachers' perception of student behavior had yet to significantly improve, rather than staff indicating that the program was a failure, they overwhelmingly viewed both the program and the broader SEL work favorably.

A sense of both hope and optimism seemed to emerge. Simply, a belief that student behaviors could improve over time. Data collected from the Social and Emotional Learning Scale for Teachers (Appendix A) further supported this analysis. 26 of 31 respondents either "strongly agreed" or "agreed" with the statement "I want to improve my ability to teach social and emotional skills to students." This indicates a commitment to SEL by staff at Pocantico. Furthermore, this seemed to confirm the guidance offered by NYSED shared in Chapter 2, noting that the infancy of SEL implementation is likely to experience positive shifts in climate reflected in teachers' shifting mindsets rather than students' growth in social emotional competencies (NYSED, 2019, p. 35).

Analytic Category 2: Effective SEL is married to a school's policies and procedures

Policies and procedures reflect a school's values. As presented in the prior chapter, the following theme emerged during interviews: *The majority of interview respondents cited the establishment of clear policies and procedures regarding student discipline, including referrals to the office as a positive step in addressing behavior.*

Indeed, teachers work within a system of established rules and protocols. New York State mandates a Code of Conduct that must be annually reviewed and approved by the Board of

Education (Education Law—Chapter 16, Title II, Article 55 § 2801). Policies and procedures that address student behavior must be explicitly communicated to staff to ensure consistency in a building and overall transparency amongst staff. In essence, the day to day procedural norms that teachers are expected to follow provide a sense of stability and support. Schools operate within a system of procedures, and teachers need to have clarity on these norms of behavior and procedures not unlike their students in the classrooms they serve.

The nature of SEL and its necessary professional development can lend itself to “pie-in-the-sky” perceptions of teachers, particularly with those that need to grow their SEC if SEL is to permeate the climate of a building. Indeed, the work of SEL can be perceived as esoteric in nature whereas policies and procedures in a building provide teachers with the concrete “this is what I do when something happens.” Or simply, the rules for teachers to follow. Thus, a school’s daily procedures and protocols for addressing student behavior must be aligned to its SEL initiative or a disconnect can exist. This remains a weakness in the literature where studies largely focus on SEL or a specific program and neglect to assess its effectiveness in the context of a school’s disciplinary policies and procedures. This study, however, helps to illuminate the relationship between the two. In so doing, it answers the research question that framed this study, “How do changes in the organizational system as it relates to policies and procedures specific to communication and student discipline influence staff’s attitudes around student behavior?”

Through interviews, teachers noted greater clarity in understanding behaviors that should be referred to the office for a disciplinary response. Overwhelming support for SEL amongst those interviewed as well as data collected from the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Scale for Teachers confirmed greater clarity on policies and procedures regarding student discipline.

This suggests that SEL buy-in from staff may be predicated on clear procedures and policies. In other words, staff may only be willing to fully engage in SEL work when they believe that there are policies and procedures in place that support their work in addressing and managing student behavior.

Teachers noted newly adopted disciplinary practices in their interviews that indicated a sense of support. Interview participants often noted how these newly adopted policies and procedures were rooted in SEL practice while holding students accountable for problematic behavior. As evidence, Restoration Hour, a progressive model of afterschool detention that was launched in March, 2019, was referenced by several interview participants as having a positive impact. Restoration Hour holds students accountable for their behavior through a structured afterschool measure that included various resources from RULER, including the Mood Meter and Blueprint.

It seems that recognizing the intersection and relationship between the concrete procedures in a building and the more abstract SEL work improves the staff climate in a building irrespective of any substantial change in student behavior. As a result of these feelings, staff may have been more willing to embrace RULER and the broader SEL initiatives in the building. Ignoring the relevance of institutional policies related to discipline may have resulted in less buy-in for the work.

Analytic Category 3: School climate does not operate in a silo: external factors have an influence

The final theme that emerged from the research data was the impact of parents' behavior on SEL and the overall school climate. Specifically: *The majority of interview respondents noted an improved climate in the building, but cited external factors, specifically parents' behavior as having an adverse impact on staff feeling secure and supported.*

Assessing the impact of RULER on Pocantico's climate was purposeful. Chapter 1 included school climate as a key definition and noted that climate is the perceived quality of school life that is largely based on stakeholders—students, staff and families—experiences. Simply, climate is largely driven by the feelings those hold toward the organization. Culture, however, speaks to the rituals, norms or procedures that characterize the day to day routines in a building. Climate might be seen at the “heart” of an organizational community while culture is the “brain.” Or, culture references “the way we do things around here,” while climate is driven by how people feel about those institutional practices. For instance, a school may adopt a character pledge; the adoption of such routine speaks to the building's culture. How students and staff feel about this organization practice; their buy-in, commitment and intrinsic investment in its practice contributes to the school's climate.

As such, measuring climate is challenging. Moods change and may be influenced by various factors at any given time. This study purposefully focused on teachers' perceptions, providing an evolving narrative of Pocantico's school climate through the voice of its staff. In so doing, research questions were specific to this particular group of stakeholders within the school community. This emerging theme that parents at Pocantico have an adverse impact on teachers' feeling secure recognizes that school climate does not exist in a silo. Parents and families at Pocantico seem to have a substantive role in influencing the climate, despite not living the day-to-day cultural routines of the building in the same way as students, staff and administrators. More research in this area is needed.

Thus, as staff characterize their views of students' behavior and their perceptions of its influence on the climate of the building, it became apparent that their experience with families also influenced how they characterized the school's climate. While staff may have an improved

view of climate as a result of RULER, and the broader SEL initiatives in the building, parents may not yet share these sentiments. Thus, when considering the final research question, “How does staff’s perception of student behavior influence how they characterize the school’s climate?” it is apparent that this external variable is significant. The intersection of various stakeholder’s feelings and perceptions each have of one another influence how each stakeholder group may characterize the climate of the school community. In other words, staff seemed to communicate an improved climate of the building as a result of growing their SEC and having policies and procedures in the building that were aligned to SEL, but also indicated that climate is driven by the behavior and interaction they have with the parents of the children they serve.

Simply, student behavior—perceived or real—is not the only variable that influences the climate of a school building nor are teachers the only stakeholders that have a perception of students’ behavior. Indeed, various stakeholders have an influence on one another and bring differing and in some cases competing perspectives to a school community. Student and staff live within the physical structure of a school community but parents’ perceptions can have a large influence. Each important stakeholder is aware of how another’s emotions and/or perceptions may have an influence on the other.

Summary

The first two research questions sought to determine the influence of SEL on staff’s perception of student behavior. In part, the study was interested in distinguishing between the broad work of SEL as an initiative and the influence of a specific program; in the case of this study, the Anchors of Emotional Intelligence and RULER. In other words, it was important for the researcher to determine the extent to which a specific program influenced staff’s perceptions or if any change in perception was a result of broader SEL work. Additionally, the study

recognized that institutional practices may have an impact on how staff perceive any new initiative. Distinguishing between the organizational procedures and policies at Pocantico and the implementation of the RULER program was necessary. Finally, this study sought to determine how RULER and staff's perceptions of student behavior influenced the climate of the building. School initiatives influence the feelings of those within the organization and such feelings may influence the narrative of a school's climate. Thus, determining the impact of RULER on the school's climate through the perspective of its teachers was a critical component of this study.

Prior to collecting data, the study began with five assumptions that were discussed at the end of Chapter 1 of this dissertation. These assumptions are revisited below before moving to Chapter 6 and providing the reader with a final conclusions and recommendations from this study.

Initial Assumptions

1. Teachers' perception of student behavior influences descriptions of a school's climate.
2. Perceptions of students' behavior were largely negative prior to implementing RULER.
3. The implementation of an SEL program would improve teachers' skill set to address behavioral interruptions.
4. When teachers believe their students are compliant to their directives, perceptions of behavior are positive.
5. Clear and explicit procedures associated with disciplinary referrals are necessary for teachers to feel supported.

Research indicates that schools reporting a negative school climate and culture report higher levels of disciplinary referrals. Anecdotal feedback during the researcher's transition to

the district and subsequent entry plan suggested that teachers believed discipline needed to be improved. Although SEL programs are intended to build pro-social skills and students' ability to demonstrate self-regulation and healthy decision-making, the researcher believed that staff's exposure to this work had the potential to improve their own EI and thus, take steps to teach these skills to their students. This was based on the premise that classroom management is a key disposition and foundational skill within the profession for success as a teacher (Danielson, 2007). Finally, the researcher began the study based on the premise that administrative follow-up with referrals are necessary for teachers to feel supported.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to explore an evidence-based SEL program, specifically RULER, and assess its impact on teachers' perception of student behavior at Pocantico Hills School. The conclusions from this study address the original four research questions. Five significant themes emerged from the data collected that were shared in Chapter 4. These themes were distilled into three analytic categories that were shared and discussed in the prior chapter. Through this evolution three areas of focus emerged to reach conclusions from this study: (a) the impact of teachers' professional development to grow their SEC; (b) the alignment between a school's philosophy and commitment to SEL and its policies and procedures in a building; and (c) the impact of other stakeholders influence on the perceived climate of a school building, parents in particular. Following is a discussion of each conclusion drawn from this study followed by recognition of the limitations and delimitations inherent in this study. Finally, the study concludes with final recommendations and a concluding reflection.

Conclusions from Study

The first two themes that emerged from this study juxtaposed staff's favorable view of SEL, and RULER in particular, in developing teachers' capacity and skills to more appropriately and effectively respond to challenging behaviors with a sense that the ritualization and systemic implementation of SEL practices had yet to significantly improve student behavior in the building. Prior to commencing the study, the assumption that teachers possessed an unfavorable view of students' behavior prior to implementing RULER proved true. However, findings suggested that while the assumption that the implementation of an SEL program would improve teachers' skill set to address behavioral interruptions, it was not predicated on students'

compliance—an assumption that was originally made by the researcher prior to commencing the study.

In other words, teachers' investment in SEC is not dependent upon an immediately favorable outcome. Rather, growing teachers' SEC provided confidence and a sense of expertise in addressing behavior. This conclusion supports prior research that indicates RULER's positive impact on teacher development (Castillo, Fernández-Berrocal & Brackett, 2013, p. 268).

Similarly, the 2016 Israeli study found

The majority of the participants in the study conveyed a strong belief that the training programme had improved their EI competencies and related behaviours, and that these shifts had a positive impact upon their practice. They also noted that the EI training had affected their view of their students and of their role as teachers, as well as impacted their performance as a team and upon the school as a whole (Dolev & Lashem, 2016, p. 86).

Simply, as long as teachers believed they had the knowledge and skillset to address behavior, they had a favorable view of SEL and specifically RULER. Or, more simply, a growth mindset seemed to emerge (Dweck, 2007).

While aligning with existing research, the researcher entered the study on the assumption that if staff did not experience immediate positive shifts in students' behavior, they would adopt a dismissive attitude toward the program, citing it as another failed educational initiative. This was not the case. Rather, optimism around an eventual improvement in students' behavior was present from the findings. This conclusion answered the first two research questions regarding both the specific implementation of RULER and the impact of EI in general in addressing student behavior.

Teachers noted the establishment of clear policies and procedures regarding student discipline, including referrals to the office as a positive step in addressing student behavior. Prior to this study, a lack of uniform procedures had existed. Moreover, those that did exist were

contrary to the research and philosophy of RULER and SEL in general. Thus, a successful implementation of RULER must recognize its relationship with daily procedures and policies that address student behavior. Marrying “the how” with “the what” ensures staff “buy-in.” Such findings and conclusion answered the third question of this study that sought to understand staff’s view around the system of procedures and policies within the organizational system that hold students accountable for their behavior.

RULER is not a scripted curriculum, but rather, a framework by which its philosophy and resources are adopted to the context of a school’s existing procedures and policies. Such policies and procedures must be rooted in the SEL philosophy and research if staff are to experience and recognize the connection between the two. Institutionalizing the use of the Mood Meter, a daily character pledge and redefining the student referral system for student detention with resources from RULER helped teachers recognize that such work was not isolated to their classrooms but rather permeated the culture of the building, and thus, helped to support a more positive climate.

The study’s findings indicated contradictions in how staff defined problematic behavior and the pervasiveness of such behavior. Staff were split in characterizing students’ behavior at Pocantico as “verbal abuse.” Some indicated that challenging behaviors were isolated to a small group of students that had a large impact on the climate of the building while others indicated a pervasiveness of lower-level behaviors that generally were defined as a lack of respect towards adults in the building. Most often staff communicated students being dismissive of directives such as not running or shouting in the halls.

Broader SEL work, specifically staff’s exposure to the ACE study, helped to put some of this in perspective. Thus, the implementation of RULER provided specific skills to staff, but such “buy-in” was effective within the broader scope of research and learning on SEL. In other

words, the implementation of an SEL program at Pocantico needed to recognize the broader scope of learning to provide further context to staff's experiences with students in a building. Marrying RULER with the broader research is just as essential as wedding it to the school's disciplinary policies and procedures.

Finally, as staff noted an improved climate as a result of RULER and broader SEL work at Pocantico, their experience with parents emerged as a significant finding. Measuring climate is complex. Parents interactions with teachers influence how teachers address student behavior. And, parents understanding of initiatives implemented in a building and how students and staff live these initiatives is not the same. Thus, for SEL to permeate the climate of a school community, families must also be willing to grow their understanding to develop a commitment to this work. Such work is far harder and complex, as different norms of behavior often exist for parents who are not held to the same standards of behavior and accountability as staff.

A disconnect between the implementation of RULER in the building and families' understanding and investment in this work was present. Indeed, the language and approach of SEL is starkly different from parents' experience with school disciplinary measures when they were students themselves. Nonetheless, this finding influenced the conclusion made from the final question of the study that sought to assess staff's perception of the impact of student behavior on the climate of the building. Indeed, staff's perception of student behavior was largely influenced and shaped by their personal experiences with parents.

Such conclusions drawn from this study mirrored CASEL's recommendations for effective implementation that includes three important principles when selecting an SEL program:

1. School and district teams should engage diverse stakeholders in the program selection process.
2. Implement evidence-based SEL programs in the context of systemic district and school programming.
3. Consider local contextual factors to better understand your resources and challenges (CASEL, 2012, pgs. 31-32).

Limitations

As noted in chapter 3, Problems of Practice are highly contextualized studies and lend themselves to certain limitations. This study's design lacks larger generalizability given the highly contextualized nature of the problem. The effectiveness of RULER in improving teachers' perception of behavior may not be transferrable to another school environment. Thus, the conclusions drawn from this study are specific to Pocantico. A duplication of this study elsewhere may reach different conclusions.

Finally, the influence, commitment and investment from this researcher should likely be recognized as a potential limitation of the study. Given the researcher's decision to depart from Pocantico Hills and pursue a District Office position in another school district, such transition to new leadership for the staff, students and families, further contributes to its sordid narrative of administrative turnover, and thus, may be seen as a limitation of the study. Leadership matters; if initiatives are to fully take effect and become absorbed into the culture and climate of a school district consistent support for its leadership is often necessary. The departure of both the superintendent and the principal after the 2018-2019 school year may have an impact on the future of this work at Pocantico Hills.

Delimitations

Delimitations restrict the scope of the study. Indeed, this study was specific to measuring staff's perceptions of student' behavior with the adoption of RULER. The purposive sampling of only tenured teachers with five or more years of experience in the District represented the first delimitation. Additionally, a second delimitation included the decision to collect data from staff and not parents. The decision to not collect data from parents was made to better assess the impact of an SEL program in shaping staff perceptions of student behavior in a building. However, the relationship parents have with RULER and SEL in general has an influence on the perceptions of a school's climate. This study focused on researching staff beliefs and behaviors as it relates to Emotional Intelligence. Such delimitations influence some of the recommendations noted below.

Recommendations

The conclusions drawn from this study affords recommendations for future action. The recommendations that follow are specific for leadership decisions for (a) the new Principal at Pocantico, (b) the new Superintendent at Pocantico, and (c) the Board of Education at Pocantico.

Recommendations for the New Principal at Pocantico

Following the researcher's decision to resign in May, 2019 the new principal was appointed in August, 2019. The new principal had served as the Director of Curriculum and Technology at Pocantico for the two years the researcher served as the principal. With the researcher's departure as principal, the newly appointed Principal and Instructional Leader, further reduced the District's already tiny administrative team. Previously, he had been the interim principal for three years. Nonetheless, his longstanding employment in the district in

various roles has allowed for a close intimacy with this recent work as well as the challenges that are unique to this school community. The following recommendations are made:

1. Convene, maintain, share and discuss all student data obtained from the 2018-2019 school year related to RULER and the adoption of RULER and SEL procedures for referrals to the office.
 - a. Utilize monthly faculty meetings, weekly team meetings and monthly committee meetings to ensure this work remains at the forefront to maintain commitment, support and investment in this work.
 - b. The use of the Monday Mood Meter to record students' feelings in the building was institutionalized as a practice during the 2018-2019 school year. This should be maintained and expanded. Such data helped to ensure a minimal standard of staff buy-in for RULER while providing valuable data to help improve the outside community's narrative of Pocantico's school climate.
 - c. Additionally, the implementation of Restorative Hour, and its procedures that utilizes components of RULER, proved an effective measure in connecting staff's commitment to SEL with formal disciplinary practices. These procedures need to be maintained and grown.
2. Effective implementation of RULER cannot happen in isolation. Staff must grow their learning and understanding of broader SEL work, particularly research on progressive disciplinary practices such as Restorative Justice and the impact of toxic stress on students' emotional regulation. Further time dedicated to the ACE study is recommended.

Recommendation for New Superintendent

The new superintendent was introduced to the community in late March, 2019 and officially assumed his new role on July 1, 2019. Arriving from a rural district in western New York, the demographic of Pocantico and the cultural climate of Westchester County in general is likely far different than his prior experience at Alfred-Almond school district where he had previously spent his entire career. The following recommendations are made:

1. Continue to support the work of SEL, mindful of its implementation through an entry plan to the district. Such entry includes scheduling formal time to listen to staff and understand the research, work and initiative around RULER and SEL. This will be critical in helping to maintain its momentum and thoughtfully communicate its impact to the Board of Education.
2. Grow a personal commitment and understanding of the relationship between SEL and student behaviors in a building, along with its evolving and progressive approach to address student discipline. Pocantico has long suffered from dated approaches, largely a result of constant turnover in leadership, and the need to demonstrate a genuine commitment to this work will be essential if it is to become fully absorbed into the climate of the community. Sharing this work with parents will also be a critical component for its success and continuation.

Recommendations for the Board of Education

The Board of Education at Pocantico Hills is a five-member board that had experienced a significant transition in the spring of 2018 following the prior Superintendent's first year at Pocantico Hills. Following the appointment of the researcher as the new principal in the spring of 2017, two new trustees were elected, altering the tone and tenor of the Board of Education.

Several months later the president of the Board of Education unexpectedly resigned, citing disagreement three Board members—two of which were the most recently elected.

If the impact of RULER is to be truly effective, it will ultimately require buy-in and support from this Board of Education that has struggled to understand best practices of instruction and discipline. A formal presentation was provided by the researcher in June, 2019 prior to departure. Well-received at the time, the following recommendations were made:

1. In concert with the newly appointed principal, apprise the new Superintendent of the RULER initiative by reviewing the presentation that was provided in June, 2019 and identify appropriate next steps.
2. Request an update from the principal in the spring, 2020 to further assess the success of RULER and identify areas for continued development.
3. As elected officials, promote the support of RULER and SEL through public comment and assist in the education of parents in the community that might take a contentious tone regarding this work.

Reflection

“However gentle your style, however careful your strategy, however sure you may be that you are on the right track, leading is risky business.”

--Ronald A. Heifetz and Martin Linsky from
Leadership on the Line

There are layers of complexity at Pocantico. This study began with an attempt to construct a clearly visible narrative of its demographic—small, diverse and unique. Again, Pocantico Central School District is a single PK – 8 building that draws from eight neighboring zip codes. Unlike the surrounding districts in the region, it does not serve a community where students leave their building with shared experiences within the same community that they live. Additionally, the Board of Education, does not represent the diverse ethnic, religious or social-

economic demographic of the school community. Rather, as of the 2019-2020 school year, the Board consisted of four Caucasian trustees and one trustee of Asian ethnicity—all of whom would be considered affluent or economically advantaged. During the 2018-2019 school year, two of the five Board trustees no longer had a child in the building.

These layers of complexity contribute to the interaction's families have historically had with one another, the school, its staff, its administration and the Board of Education. No reasonable assessment of any facet of the school climate can ignore the realities of race, ethnicity and class that bubbles below the surface at Pocantico. Parents characterization of students' perceived behavior in the building is often driven by the child's race and socio-economic class. It was only recently under my leadership that a Diversity Committee was formed and began to scratch the surface of such realities, exploring such research as implicit bias and disproportionality. Further work in this area is needed and necessary.

The implementation of a large-scale SEL initiative can be a monumental undertaking, particularly in a school community that had yet to become educated on the research around Social-Emotional Learning. While other districts in Westchester and Putnam counties had been committed to SEL practices and programs for several years, this work was new to the Pocantico community. In essence, Pocantico has been "late to the party." Prior convictions and longstanding values were often challenged, most often by adults; parents in particular. Indeed, Heifetz and Linsky (2002) note, "To lead is to live dangerously because when leadership counts, when you lead people through difficult change, you challenge what people hold dear ... – with nothing more to offer perhaps than a possibility" (p. 1). The staff at Pocantico deserve great praise. They were willing to relinquish many longstanding views around student discipline and grow their knowledge and skillset, believing that it would eventually lead to better outcomes.

This is nothing short of admirable. Indeed, my underlying assumption entering into this study was that without substantive changes in students' behavior, staff would be critical of RULER and SEL in general. This was not the case.

Leaders, however, must weigh the vision and idealism that each hope to bring to fruition with the daily obstacles that can undermine the work and put each leader's future at risk. Heifetz and Linsky (2009) note, "...people resist in all kinds of creative and unexpected ways that can get you taken out of the game: pushed aside, undermined or eliminated" (p. 2). Leadership is risky, and substantive change in organizations that have long been victim to dysfunctional systems have potential perils for the most seasoned and well-intended leader. Balancing the idealism of what and can should be with practical realities and daily obstacles the leader may face present difficult choices. In essence, the leader must ask, "At what cost might I see this work through?" The scholar-practitioner is thoughtful and strategic, using research to influence and inform decision-making. Reality, however, is such that outside influences can impact any well-intended, well-researched and well-implemented initiative. The good work of RULER and SEL in general is dependent upon sustained commitment and universal acceptance of its value and impact. As this study illustrates, substantive gains may not be experienced with the immediacy that one would like or the community might demand. The future literature on SEL should grow in this area, recognizing the potential impact of sustained leadership on embedding SEL into a school's culture and climate. Years of tumult has existed at Pocantico with frequent leadership transitions. While substantive change was made during the implementation of RULER and this subsequent study, sustained leadership is likely necessary if there is to be a lasting impact on the culture and climate of a school community. Sustained leadership, however, requires the support of the community through its Board of Education. Unfortunately, another

transition with the principalship and superintendency may mean that the gains that have been made are precarious at best. I hope not.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Scale for Teachers

Please read the following definition:

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) refers to the development of skills related to recognizing and managing emotions, developing care and concern for others, establishing positive relationships, making responsible decisions, and handling challenging situations constructively.

With this definition in mind, please read the following statements and think about how true each is for YOU.

Rate the extent to which you **agree** or **disagree** with each statement.

YOUR RESPONSES TO THIS SURVEY ARE CONFIDENTIAL

Completely fill in the bubble that corresponds with your response.

Strongly disagree **Disagree** **Neither agree nor disagree** **Agree Strongly** **Agree**

1. My school expects teachers to address children's social and emotional needs.
○ ○ ○ ○ ○
2. The culture in my school supports the development of children's social and emotional skills
○ ○ ○ ○ ○
3. All teachers should receive training on how to teach social and emotional skills to students.
○ ○ ○ ○ ○
4. I would like to attend a workshop to develop my own social and emotional skills.
○ ○ ○ ○ ○
5. Taking care of my students' social and emotional needs comes naturally to me.
○ ○ ○ ○ ○
6. My principal creates an environment that promotes social and emotional learning for our students.
○ ○ ○ ○ ○
7. I am comfortable providing instruction on social and emotional skills to my students.
○ ○ ○ ○ ○
8. Informal lessons in social and emotional learning are part of my regular teaching practice.
○ ○ ○ ○ ○
9. I feel confident in my ability to provide instruction on social and emotional learning.
○ ○ ○ ○ ○
10. My principal does not encourage the teaching of social and emotional skills to students.
○ ○ ○ ○ ○
11. I want to improve my ability to teach social and emotional skills to students.
○ ○ ○ ○ ○

12. I would like to attend a workshop to learn how to develop my students' social and emotional skills.

○ ○ ○ ○ ○

Please write your name here: _____

Bracket, Marc A. (2018) Social and Emotional Learning Scale for Teachers. Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. Retrieved from <http://ei.yale.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Brackett-et-al.-Teacher-SEL-Beliefs-Scale1.pdf>

Appendix B

ED School Climate Surveys

Selected questions have been taken from the ED School Climate Survey noted below. The full survey can be retrieved at

https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/sites/default/files/EDSCLS_Questionnaires_112017.pdf.

ED School Climate Surveys INSTRUCTIONAL STAFF SURVEY

U.S. Department of Education
National Center for Education Statistics

1. How many years have you been working at this school? Mark one response.

- 1-3 years
- 4-9 years
- 10-19 years
- 20 or more years

2. Please identify your role. Mark one response.

- Teacher or Related Service Provider
- Teaching Assistant

Throughout the survey, "This school" means activities happening in school buildings, on school grounds, on school buses, and at places that hold school-sponsored events or activities. Unless otherwise specified, this refers to normal school hours or to times when school activities/events were in session.

How strongly do you agree or disagree with the following statements about this school? Mark One Response

3. At this school, all students are treated equally, regardless of whether their parents are rich or poor.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

4. This school emphasizes showing respect for all students' cultural beliefs and practices.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

5. Staff do a good job helping parents understand when their child needs to learn social, emotional, and character skills.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Strongly Disagree

6. My level of involvement in decision making at this school is fine with me.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

7. Staff at this school have many informal opportunities to influence what happens within the school.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

8. I feel satisfied with the recognition I get for doing a good job.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

9. I feel comfortable discussing feelings, worries, and frustrations with my supervisor.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

10. This school inspires me to do the very best at my job.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

11. People at this school care about me as a person.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

12. I can manage almost any student behavior problem.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

13. I feel safe at this school.

Strongly Agree

- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

14. The following types of problems occur at this school often: physical conflicts among students.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

15. The following types of problems occur at this school often: vandalism.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

16. The following types of problems occur at this school often: sexual assault or dating violence.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

17. The following types of problems occur at this school often: student verbal abuse of teachers.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

This question is about bullying. Bullying happens when one or more students tease, threaten, spread rumors about, hit, shove or hurt another student. It is not bullying when students of about the same strength or power argue or fight or tease each other in a friendly way. Bullies are usually stronger, or have more friends or more money, or some other power over the student being bullied. Usually, bullying happens over and over, or the student being bullied thinks it might happen over and over.

18. I think that bullying is a frequent problem at this school.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

This question is about cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is bullying that takes place using electronic technology. Examples of cyberbullying include mean text messages or emails, rumors sent by email or posted on social networking sites, and embarrassing pictures, videos, websites, or fake profiles.

19. I think that cyberbullying is a frequent problem among students at this school

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

20. Students at this school would feel comfortable reporting a bullying incident to a teacher or other staff.
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
21. Staff at this school always stop bullying when they see it.
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
22. Teachers at this school feel responsible to help each other do their best.
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
23. Teachers at this school feel that it is a part of their job to prepare students to succeed in college.
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
24. This school provides the materials, resources, and training necessary for me to support students' social or emotional needs.
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
25. This school places a priority on addressing students' mental health needs.
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
26. This school places a priority on teaching students' strategies to manage their stress levels.
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
27. This school places a priority on helping students with their social, emotional, and behavioral problems.
- Strongly Agree
 - Agree

- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

28. Staff at this school are clearly informed about school policies and procedures.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

29. Staff at this school recognize students for positive behavior.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

30. School rules are applied equally to all students.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

31. Discipline is fair.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

32. This school effectively handles student discipline and behavior problems.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

33. Staff at this school work together to ensure an orderly environment.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Introduction and Background

Good morning (afternoon). Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. As you know, I am Brent Harrington, and I was appointed the principal of Pocantico Hills Central School District beginning in the 2017-2018 school year. I am also a doctoral candidate at the University of Arkansas in Educational Leadership. I am conducting a mixed methods study that seeks staff perspectives on student discipline and its relationship to school climate. Specifically, I am interested in understanding staff's experience with Emotional Intelligence and its influence on student behavior. There are no right or wrong answers or desirable or undesirable answers. My role in this study is simply as interviewer and researcher.

I recognize that my role as your principal may solicit guarded responses. I want to assure you that your answers are confidential, and no disciplinary action will be taken based on responses. In a moment, I will ask you to please read and sign the non-disclosure and consent agreement. My request for your participation in this study is two-fold. First, in the hopes of eliminating any potential concern of recourse depending on your responses, I want to remind you that you are tenured staff member with favorable end-of-year evaluations. I, however, am a probationary employee and by extension my future status within the organization is not yet certain or guaranteed. Second, it is important to share that you were asked to participate in this study purposefully given your teacher-leader role in the building. As you know, an additional survey was disseminated to the rest of the staff that was adopted from the U.S. Department of Education's School Climate Survey.

Tape Recorder Instructions

As per the consent agreement, this interview will be recorded. The purpose of the recording is to ensure the details of your responses while remaining attentive to our conversation. All comments will remain confidential, and please note, that recording interviews is a routine practice of any qualitative design study. I will be later transcribing this interview for the purpose of coding and analyzing the data that you provide.

Structure

Finally, the interview will take approximately 60 minutes. There are 18 questions, the majority of which are open-ended. I may ask you to further explain a comment or point for the purposes of clarity.

Q1: What is your name?

Q2: What subject do you teach?

Q3: What grade level(s) do you teach?

Q4: How long have you been in your present role at Pocantico?

Q5: How long have you been employed as a teacher at Pocantico?

Q6: How many graduate credits beyond your master's degree have you earned?

Q7: In your own words, how would you define student discipline?

Q8: In your own words, how would you define school climate?

Q9: In your own words, how would you define emotional intelligence?

Q10: Prior to the District's focus on Emotional Intelligence and specifically RULER, how would you characterize students' behavior at Pocantico?

Q11: Are there specific examples that you can share from your own experience that clarify this characterization?

Q12: Since the District's focus on SEL, how would you characterize students' behavior at Pocantico?

Q13: Since the District's focus on SEL, how would you characterize students' behavior in your classroom?

Q14: From your perspective, how would you describe the impact of RULER on students' behavior in the building? In your classroom?

Q15: From your perspective, how would you describe the impact of SEL on students' behavior in the building? In your classroom?

Q16: RULER and SEL aside, have there been any technical or systems changes specific to policies and procedures that have had an impact on students' behavior in the building—positive or negative?

Q17: What student behaviors would you describe as necessary referrals to an administrator? Since the inception of SEL and RULER has your perspective on necessary referrals changed or remained the same?

Q18: How would you describe how the majority of students feel in your classroom? In the building? How would you describe how the majority of your colleagues feel in their classrooms? In the building?

Appendix D

October, 2017 Email to Pocantico Staff

10/11/2017—4:57 pm

All—

I just discovered a pile of “Pocantico Hills Inappropriate Behavior and Harassment Forms” that had been submitted. I’m not entirely clear on the nature and expectation of these forms. I wasn’t even aware of them until yesterday. In reviewing them, a number of which date back to the beginning of the school year, there seems to be submissions for a wide variety of behaviors some of which I might categorize as standard classroom management that do not necessarily require the intervention of an administrator. Others seem more significant, but I had not received any direct communication from the individual to provide me with any context (assuming I had been aware that the form was submitted on the date the issue occurred in the first place).

In the spirit of increased communication and greater transparency, I think we need to better communicate the goal and nature of “discipline” as we continue our collective work together. Certainly, “discipline” has been a common theme from many of you as I have solicited your feedback on the most pressing challenges facing our school community. We have too much good work to do around social-emotional learning during our faculty meetings to spend time discussing traditional disciplinary practices and protocols. I will, however, ask that we please add this as a topic of conversation for our next regularly scheduled team meeting. That said, there are few important points that I want to emphasize.

First, if something is brought to my attention that reflects egregious behavior by a student you should expect that I will follow up, and I will share with you my decision on holding the child accountable. Understand, you may or may not agree with my decision, but they are always rooted in a spirit of restorative justice, progressive discipline and age and context. I generally don’t love the submission of a piece paper without some context and a more specific communication—preferable in person, but minimally in the form of an email. Simply, as it relates to the culture that we want to nurture here we all have a role and we all need to work together. Certainly I will deal with problematic behaviors in our building, but I will not run around with forms entered into a box in a building with merely 320 children as if my role is solely that of what we might expect of a traditional assistant principal. Keep in mind that there are general disciplinary issues that arise in any classroom that should be effectively managed, those that require a conversation with myself as the principal to potentially foster greater weight with the child, and those that require a form of progressive discipline as per an egregious violation of the Code of Conduct. Simply, I want us working together in a spirit of partnership and understanding of these broader ideals and not (without intent) perpetuating a culture of mistrust, judgement or suspicion. Communication works both ways and submitting a piece of paperwork without a conversation with me doesn’t feel like the healthiest way for us to support one another.

With all of that said, please hear me when I say that this is not a judgment of anyone. I understand that this has likely been past practice and people have been told that this is how disciplinary issues should be handled and addressed. I’m now saying as the new principal who has every intention of staying here that we need to relook at this, adjust it and move forward in a way that is both supportive and responsive.

I appreciate everyone’s support in these first few weeks of school. I think we have already begun to work in concert with one another to build a healthier climate here. There’s a lot of good work before us, and I have no doubt that I have inherited a dedicated, passionate and resilient staff.

Thanks and enjoy the evening!

Go Yankees!
Brent

Brent Harrington
Principal
Pocantico Hills Central School District
Sleepy Hollow, NY 10591
(914) 631-2440 ext. 712

Appendix E

Results of School Climate Survey

Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total
Q2: At this school students are treated equally regardless of whether their parents are rich or poor.	2	21	20	6	49
Q3: This school emphasizes showing respect for all students' cultural beliefs and practices.	0	5	22	22	49
Q4: Staff do a good job helping parents understand when their child needs to learn social, emotional and character skills.	0	2	30	17	49
Q5: My level of involvement at this school is fine with me.	1	14	28	6	49
Q6: Staff at this school have many informal opportunities to influence what happens within the school.	3	10	27	9	49
Q7: I feel satisfied for the recognition I get for doing a good job.	0	4	0	17	49
Q8: I feel comfortable discussing feelings, worries and frustrations with my supervisor.	6	15	21	7	49
Q9: This school inspires me to do my very best at my job.	0	9	27	12	48
Q10: People at this school care about me as a person.	0	7	23	19	49
Q11: I can manage almost any student behavior problem.	1	15	21	11	48
Q12: I feel safe at this school.	1	4	30	14	49
Q13: The following types of problems occur at this school often: physical conflicts among students.	12	27	10	0	49
Q14: The following types of problems occur at this school often: Vandalism.	14	29	6	0	49
Q15: The following types of problems occur at this school often: Sexual assault or dating violence.	26	23	0	0	49

Q16: The following types of problems occur at this school often: student verbal abuse of teachers.	5	18	19	7	49
Q17: I think that bullying is a frequent problem at this school.	3	27	15	3	48
Q18: I think cyberbullying is a frequent problem with students at this school.	4	24	18	2	48
Q19: Students at this school would feel comfortable reporting a bullying incident to a teacher or other staff.	4	4	30	10	48
Q20: The staff at this school always stop bullying when they see it.	0	4	23	22	49
Q21: Teachers at this school feel responsible to help each other do their best.	0	3	19	26	48
Q22: Teachers at this school feel that is a part of their job to prepare students to succeed in college.	0	1	27	21	49
Q23: This school provides the materials, resources, and training necessary for me to support students' social and emotional needs.	0	9	27	13	49
Q24: This school places a priority on addressing students' mental health needs.	0	12	29	8	49
Q25: This school places a priority on teaching students' strategies to manage their stress levels.	3	8	28	10	49
Q26: This school places a priority on helping student with their social, emotional, and behavioral problems.	2	10	29	8	49
Q27: Staff at this school are clearly informed about school policies and procedures.	2	11	30	6	49
Q28: Staff at this school recognize students for positive behavior.	0	4	29	16	49
Q29: School rules are applied equally to all students.	2	25	18	4	49
Q30: Discipline is fair.	3	18	24	4	49

Q31: This school effectively handles student discipline and behavior problems.	7	25	15	2	49
Q32: Staff at this school work together to ensure an orderly environment.	0	6	27	16	49

Appendix F

IRB Exemption Document



To: Brent Brian Harrington
From: Douglas James Adams, Chair
 IRB Committee
Date: 04/09/2019
Action: **Expedited Approval**
Action Date: 04/09/2019
Protocol #: 1901169681
Study Title: Evidence-based Social-Emotional Learning and its Influence of Teachers' Perception of Student Behavior
Expiration Date: 03/20/2020
Last Approval Date:

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution's IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

Adverse Events: Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

cc: Ed Bengtson, Investigator