Project Grit: an Applied Research Study Conducted in an Alternative School Program to Promote Alternative Behaviors to Violence

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PROJECT GRIT: AN APPLIED RESEARCH STUDY CONDUCTED IN AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL PROGRAM TO PROMOTE ALTERNATIVE BEHAVIORS TO VIOLENCE

A Dissertation
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Educational Leadership
in the Department of Education
The University of Mississippi

by

JAMES R. HOWINGTON, JR.

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ABSTRACT

Students in the Anniston School District are placed in the alternative setting (i.e., the Avery Alternative Center) for fighting and violence more than any other disciplinary infraction. The disproportionality of students of color and minority groups enrolled in the alternative setting for fighting is also alarming. Why is this happening? Why does student conflict often end in physical aggression and violence, especially the disputes involving minorities? What can stop the violence? Stakeholders in the Avery Alternative Center created Project GRIT to help answer these questions by incorporating research-based practices and interventions designed to strengthen conflict resolution skills in participants and support positive relationships among students. Interventions included Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) instruction and Restorative Practices (RP) counseling to support student behavior. Teachers taught the Overcoming Obstacles™ SEL curriculum weekly in classrooms. The curriculum integrated the five SEL competencies: self-management, self-awareness, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness (CASEL, 2020). Individual and group RP coaching and counseling sessions were also conducted at the administrative level. The RP sessions provided opportunities to put the SEL skills learned in the weekly lessons to the test by bringing together the students who had fought to repair the harm done and promote positive relationships. The program evaluation results indicated Project GRIT was successful in strengthening conflict resolution skills among participants and positive relationships among the students. Findings indicated that social-emotional learning and restorative counseling interventions can be effective implications for practice when working to reduce violence and improve student behavior.
DEDICATION

To my beloved wife Brandy, my rock throughout this academic journey. I could not have accomplished this without your selflessness and sacrifices. Thank you for standing by my side through this challenging journey and for being my partner in every sense of the word. I am forever grateful for your love and support. I can’t wait to see what God has in store for us in the future. Thank you for loving and encouraging me, even on my most difficult of days.

To my beautiful daughter Anniston, your beautiful smile brings light to my darkest days, and I am blessed to be your dad. I hope this achievement serves as a testament to the endless possibilities that exist for you in this life. Always believe in yourself, and let your light shine bright. You are going to change the world. I love you as big as all the fish in the sea, Sweetheart.

To my son Avery, who inspires me daily, your curious mind and inquisitive nature is a constant reminder of the importance of pursuing knowledge. I hope this dissertation serves as an example of the rewards of hard work and perseverance. Reach for the stars. It is better to aim high and miss than to aim low and hit. You are going to do great things. I am proud to be your dad, and I love you, Son.

To my mother and father, I am blessed to be your son. Your unwavering love and support served as the wind in my sail. I am forever grateful. Thank you for believing in me. I hope I have made you proud. I miss you, Dad. I know you smiling down. I love you both with all my heart.

To my sis, you were always there when I needed lifting up. You always knew exactly what I needed to hear. The laughs we shared during our late night texts kept me anchored in my endeavor. You’ve helped me more than you will ever know. You’re the best, and I love you big.
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

SEL  Social and Emotional Learning
RP   Restorative Practices
ASD  Anniston School District
AAC  Avery Alternative Center
UNESCO United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization
CDC  Center for Disease Control and Prevention
CASEL Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning
IIRP International Institute for Restorative Practices
OCO  Overcoming Obstacles™ Social-emotional Curriculum
EBD  Emotional and Behavior Disorder
SS-SSTP Second Step: Student Success through Prevention Program
GSE  General Self-efficacy
HRQOL Health-Related Quality of Life
WHO  World Health Organization
PRISMA Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses
PPS  Pittsburg Public School
PERC Pursuing Equitable and Restorative Communities
PG   Project GRIT
GRIT Grow, Renew, Impact, and Transform
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my advisor, Dr. Davis, and my dissertation committee, Dr. Cabrera, Dr. Deschaine, and Dr. Winburn, thank you for your invaluable support and guidance throughout this endeavor. Your expertise and dedication have been instrumental in helping me achieve this academic milestone. I appreciate each of you.

To Cohort 6, thank you for your unwavering support and encouragement these last few years. The laughs, struggles, and triumphs we have shared and endured together have helped us press forward through all adversity. I cherish each of you and the lifelong friendships we've made. I wish you all the best life has to offer. We did it! You’ll always be my Ride or Die.

To my school family, I must acknowledge your dedication and commitment to our program, without which this dissertation would not have been possible. Your contributions and support were invaluable to the success of this project. Most importantly, your efforts changed the stars for many of our students. You were a light in the darkness. You provided hope for the hopeless. You have touched the lives of many, including mine. Always remember the importance of what you do and the impact you have on children daily. Thank you for your passion in serving our students and going all in for our program. You are amazing. You are Rock Stars!
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

During my very first week as a teacher, I had to break up a fight. During breakfast in the cafeteria, I heard a loud commotion and turned to see a band of students circling two boys fighting. I quickly ran toward the group shouting commands to stop and move back. When I reached the brawl, the two students had each other in a headlock, trying desperately to subdue the other and throwing jabs each time the opportunity presented itself. Through sheer determination, I forced my way through the crowd and broke the students up, though this took great effort. Another teacher finally arrived, and we escorted each student to the principal's office.

During the investigation, I understood this was not the first altercation between the two students. The students had a history of conflict with one another. The students were from "different sides of the tracks". They both lived in low-income, poverty-stricken neighborhoods where verbal and physical abuse was common in the home and community. The students had extensive disciplinary records involving profanity, bullying, insubordination, fighting, physical aggression, and disrespect to staff.

Colleagues of mine often described the students as unfriendly, uncaring, and violent. Other witnesses to the fight explained how the boys did not have many friends because they were mean. Some said the boys were nothing but trouble. The school counselor rolled her eyes and just shook her head when informed about the fight, not the least bit surprised.
By all accounts, the entire school had written the boys off, and many were quite pleased with not having to deal with them for the three days of suspension they were given. There was no counseling. There was no support. There was no parent conference. The consequence was merely punitive. I still remember the teacher who helped me break up the fight saying, "At least we won't have to deal with them for a few days." It was then I realized nothing in college had prepared me for this.

**Statement of the Problem**

The problem explored in this applied research is the high number of students being sent to the Avery Alternative Center for infractions involving violence on school campuses. Violence in schools is not uncommon, and it takes many forms. School violence is any real or implied threat or action (physical, psychological, sexual, bullying, or cyberbullying) intended to harm or cause someone to feel threatened or intimidated in school or school-related events. Factors such as poverty and crime, community and environment, poor academic performance, exposure to drugs, alcohol, and domestic abuse, media and video game influences, gang affiliation, mental health disorders, and access to weapons are risk factors associated with violent offenders (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2019). Participation in and exposure to school violence can create long-term physical and mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, substance abuse, fear, obesity, homicide, and suicide (Preventing Youth Violence | Violence Prevention | Injury Center | CDC, n.d.).

Acts of violence in school are becoming more extreme and severe. Pre-pandemic fighting in schools has declined since the late 1990s. However, recent data indicates the number of school-related fights since the full reopening of schools from Covid 19 (the 2021-2022 school year) has substantially increased, along with the number of Active Shooter Events in schools and
universities (Preventing Youth Violence | Violence Prevention | Injury Center | CDC, n.d.). In the same year, 193 Active Shooter Events occurred on PK-12 campuses nationwide, killing 59 and wounding 138 others, making it the worst year for gun violence in schools (Everytown, 2022).

School violence remained ever-present during the "virtual-learning era" of the pandemic (i.e., in the blind and unprecedented attempt of schools to transition teacher instruction and student learning from in-person to virtual). Many educators endured hostility from students through verbal threats made online. In a survey of more than 14,000 educators and administrators, 50% reported wanting to quit teaching or change jobs, and 33% reported being verbally threatened or harassed during the pandemic (McMahon et al., 2022).

Pre-pandemic and post-pandemic, students engaging in school violence often face harsh consequences for their actions. Many districts implement a "zero-tolerance" policy for severe and violent behaviors or actions in schools (i.e., students having weapons on campus, having or using drugs on campus, or participating in violent activities like fighting or bullying). Some districts have extended policies to include an array of other minor behavior (Maxime, 2018).

At a minimum, students are typically suspended from school for a set number of days for fighting, although some districts place students in alternative schools on the first offense. Hemez et al. (2020) suggest harsh, punitive measures excluding students from school lowers test scores and raise the likelihood of the student dropping out before graduation while increasing the risk of incarceration and involvement in the criminal justice system (i.e., the school-to-prison pipeline).

In some cases, only punitive measures are implemented through suspensions with little to no support in behavior counseling with the student (Hemez et al., 2020). As a result, a continuous cycle of rule-breaking followed by suspension becomes common practice until the process completely spirals out of control. When it does, it is always the student who suffers the
most. Why do schools continue to use discipline as punitive measures instead of as opportunities for behavior improvement and growth?

**Description of the Problem**

The central focus of this action research with program evaluation study is the vast number of students being sent each year to the alternative school for fighting. I serve as the principal at the Avery Alternative Center (AAC). Our alternative school program serves the academic and behavioral needs of students in the Anniston School District (ASD) who have been suspended from their site schools. Students are assigned a set number of days to serve before being allowed back to their site school. Due to the nature and severity of some infractions, some students are enrolled in the AAC for the year. In essence, we are a "second chance" school where students can continue working towards graduation credits or grade promotion instead of being expelled entirely and forced to repeat the grade the following year.

In ASD, students are sent to the alternative school more for fighting than any other behavior infraction. The problem of practice (i.e., the high numbers of students being sent to the alternative school for fighting) must be addressed to establish and strengthen students' critical life skills (conflict resolution, relational, self-management, social awareness, decision-making, self-awareness, etc.) needed to understand and accept diversity, empathize with others, and promote social acceptance (Collaborative for the Academic et al., 2022; Scherer, 1992). Students lacking these skills tend to be reactive instead of proactive when faced with adversity. Reactions to stimuli (good or bad) are developed early in children and often replicate behaviors seen in the home and surrounding environment (Rymanowicz, 2015; Scherer, 1992).

To better understand this phenomenon, one must first understand the diversity in demographics within the community we serve. In reviewing the cultural diversity of our student
population, one can better understand the challenges we face in programming. The data is essential in planning instructional support to target each student's individual social and emotional learning (SEL) needs.

The Anniston School District (ASD) comprises an elementary, middle, high, and alternative school (AAC). The Mississippi Succeeds Report Card (2020) reported that during the 2018-2019 school year, the ASD was labeled a "B" district. About 38.1% of students scored proficient in English, with 58.6% showing growth, and 51.2% scored proficient in Math, with 67.6% showing growth (SchoolStatus, 2020). The graduation rate is 87%.

Approximately 117 teachers serve over 1600 students in the district in Pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade, equaling a 14:1 student/teacher ratio. In the ASD, 67.5% of students receive free or reduced lunches. Nearly 53% of students are African American, 42.9% are White, 2.9% are Hispanic, 0.9% are multiracial, 0.2% are Asian, and less than 0.1% are Native American. Gender is split in the ASD at 50% male and 50% female. The ASD spends approximately $9,085.75 per student on educational resourcing. About 21.6% of students with ASD enroll in advanced courses. Over 12% of students are chronically absent, missing 10% or more of their time enrolled (SchoolStatus, 2020).

The population of Anniston, Mississippi is 7,610. Since the year 2000, the city has grown 13.9%. It is 51.6% female and 48.4% male. The racial makeup of Anniston is 55.9% white, 40.3% black, 2.5% Hispanic, 0.8% mixed race, 0.4% Asian, and 0.1% American Indian. The median resident age is 29.1 years old, and the median household income is $54,373. The percentage of residents of Anniston living in poverty in 2019 was 18.9% (city-data.com, 2019).

It is essential to note the community of Anniston also supports a private K-12 academy. The Valley Learning Academy (VLA) charges an annual tuition averaging about $6,700 per
student. Most students attending VLA come from prominent white-collar families in the community. Because of the high cost of tuition, only wealthy and affluent parents can afford to send their children to VLA. Of the nearly 700 students enrolled, only 3% are minority students in the VLA.

In contrast, ASD (a public K-12 school district) accepts and educates all students living within the community. Whereas the student makeup of the ASD is racially and academically diverse, the VLA student population is predominantly white and high-achieving. The competition over student enrollment has created a contentious relationship between ASD and VLA.

**Justification of the Problem**

As stated earlier, students are sent to the AAC more so for fighting than for any other reason each year. The ASD implements "zero tolerance" for school violence (fighting), weapons, and drugs. Students in grades 6th through 12th engaging in school violence are sent to the AAC on the first offense. Elementary students are given more grace before being sent to the AAC (i.e., a three-strike policy). This directly correlates to the high number of students we enroll for violence. While our staff at the AAC has no control over which students are sent to us and why, we do have control over how and what we teach them while they are with us.

In the last four years, students of color have made up most of the alternative school population (See Figure 1). One hundred thirty-eight students were enrolled in the AAC in the four-year survey. Of the 138 total enrollment for fighting, 128 students were African American (n = 92.8%). Literature indicates minority students and students with disabilities are suspended at disproportionate rates, including enrollment in alternative education programs (Bradshaw Catherine et al., 2010; Gregory et al., 2010; Morris & Perry, 2016; Wald & Losen, 2003). It
should be noted March 2020 through July 2021 was affected by the global pandemic (i.e., Covid 19), and the ASD (including the AAC) had record low numbers of in-person enrollment as many students continued the virtual option.

**Figure 1**

*Multi-year Analysis of Enrollment in the Alternative School for Fighting by Race and Gender.*

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*Note:* B/M = Black male; B/Fm = Black female; H/M = Hispanic male; H/Fm = Hispanic female; W/M = White male; W/Fm = White female (SchoolStatus, 2021).

In the local school district, students of color quickly resort to violence when facing conflict in school. More often than not, the conflict is primarily intraracial, not interracial. All middle and high school students know the "zero-tolerance" district policy on school violence. Yet, most minority students seem unfazed by the consequences of fighting (i.e., out-of-school suspension and alternative placement). Why is fighting occurring among minority groups in our local district, and what can be done to help reduce school violence from an alternative school standpoint? Chapter Two discusses key findings in the literature regarding the topics in question.
Significance

The findings in this applied research with program evaluation support districts and schools in establishing a better understanding of the critical issues leading to fights and violence among students and how alternative school programs can intervene with students sent for fighting to improve behavior and help reduce violence in schools. In implementing the action plan within the alternative school setting, the study assists in bridging a gap between research and practice. Research supports the use of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Restorative Practices (RP) to improve student behavior (Collaborative for the Academic et al., 2022; International Institute for Restorative Practices [IIRP], 2022), yet little is known on the effect SEL and RP have on student behavior and learning through implementation in an interview alternative school setting.

The action plan in this applied research study puts research-based theories regarding SEL and RP to the test as interventions to address the problem of practice. The findings are discussed in detail in Chapters Four and Five. The program goal is to improve student behavior and achievement through strengthening individual capacity and organizational practice regarding SEL while reducing recidivism and violent incidents upon our students' re-entry to their site schools. The findings presented in this study serve as a guide for districts in establishing and strengthening SEL competencies to support student learning, behavior, and success. Additionally, this study engages students, staff, and the community in an overall endeavor to help build social and self-awareness, unity, empathy, and conflict-resolution skills in our children. Lessons learned from the study support district practice and policy regarding program interventions to combat bullying and physical aggression among students.
Purpose Statement

This study aims to determine if the interventions implemented to equip students with the necessary social and emotional skills successfully improved behavior, achievement, and overall school culture. The research utilizes the methods of applied research with program evaluation design. The action plan, designed to address the problem of practice, includes the implementation of a program to improve violent student behavior through participation in Project GRIT in the alternative school setting. The plan is being implemented in AAC for 12 to 18 months.

Using a program evaluation design, the qualitative and quantitative data collected in the study helps to assess program quality of the elements of the action plan. Formative and summative assessments includes surveying, observing, and interviewing stakeholders and participants. SEL teams in the alternative center meet regularly to review data to identify areas for support and promote consistency and fidelity within the program's implementation.

The research presented in the literature review, along with stakeholder input and collaboration, guided the program development of an action plan to address the problem. Stakeholders participating in this research include teachers, students, principals, counselors, behavior specialists, parents, community members, and students. The stakeholders researched and developed evidence-based interventions (i.e., elements having shown successful in building school culture, supporting student behavior, and strengthening student life skills) to guide action plan development and interventions.
Research Questions

The following research questions will help guide the program evaluation to collect summative data to help determine how each of the elements of the program are performing, as well as, the formative data to target areas for program improvement.

1. Following participation in Project GRIT, did students taking the “exit survey” average above 2.5 on the Likert scale responses?
   1. A. Did the life-skills instruction (i.e., the Overcoming Obstacles™ curriculum) establish and strengthen intrinsic conflict-resolution skills within participants?
   1. B. Did Restorative Practices (i.e., coaching and counseling sessions) help repair harm done in student-to-student relationships caused from violence or bullying?

2. How can Project Grit be improved to have more of an impact on the reduction of in-school violence?
   2. A. How can life-skills instruction be improved to better support student learning and growth in SEL competencies?
   2. B. How can RP sessions be improved to strengthen student relationships?

The research questions help guide the study in measuring if the program was successful in improving the problem of practice discussed in this chapter (i.e., to reduce the number of students enrolled in the alternative school for school violence) and are assessed through a variety of measures (i.e., observation, surveying, and interviewing). Chapter two discusses a review of current literature supporting the problem of practice. The findings from the literature review help establish the foundation for the evidence-based interventions embedded in the action plan. Chapter three describes the action plan elements in detail.
CHAPTER TWO

Review of Research

Introduction

The review of research presents significant findings regarding studies focused on issues related to violence in schools (i.e., the problem of practice). Due to the social, emotional, psychological, and behavioral needs of students in the Anniston School District (as described in Chapter One), the review of research focuses on these two areas to understand and attempt to address the problem of practice.

The first section (i.e., Indicators of Violence) in the review discusses the underlying indicators of school violence. Research on why school violence happens supports an understanding of the varied and complex issues embedded at the core of school violence. This research is used to develop a plan of action to address the specific issues causing school violence within the Anniston School District and to interpret and present the program evaluation results.

The second section (i.e., Prevention of School Violence) describes the research regarding past program interventions and offers solutions schools have undertaken to address the same problem of practice. Through this sharing of knowledge, we learn from the success and failures of other studies. This assists in the development of our action plan by using elements and interventions that have been field-tested, thoroughly evaluated, and had success in reducing violence in school within other programs.

The findings discussed here provide important information about the underlying causes of school violence and implications for practice to help prevent violence in schools. The
elements and interventions discussed in the review of research will guide program and action plan development as we work to improve student behavior and reduce violence in school. The evaluation methods presented in the review of research will also assist in guiding the program evaluation to determine the success of and areas for improvement for Project GRIT.

**Indicators of School Violence**

Karakus (2022) reviewed research to determine the causes of school violence and suggestions for preventative solutions for incidents between 2000 and 2022. In total, 42 articles discussing the causes of school violence and solutions for prevention were reviewed. Using the content analysis method, the findings were coded into two main themes: reasons for school violence and prevention.

The results of the content analysis were categorized into four themes, including gender inequality (Social injustice and unequal treatment of women), personal factors (Age, mood, psychology, background, family size, socioeconomic status, single-parent homes, etc.), school organization (Fair, clear, and consistent rules and procedures), and assessment/evaluation (Stress and anxiety caused by traditional, rule-oriented, standardized testing) as underlying factors influencing school violence (i.e., main-theme one).

In the discussion of the second central theme, the results determined that teacher and staff dedication and commitment, active listening to understand student problems, collective efficacy and collaboration of staff, behavioral data collection and monitoring, early and targeted behavioral interventions for struggling students, high-quality training and support for the team, and the strengthening of social-emotional competencies in students (i.e., self-management, self-awareness, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, social awareness, and self-management) were critical areas to improve and strengthen to help prevent violence in schools.
Karakus (2022) explained that while bullying is often one-sided, long-lasting, and involves someone being harmed (i.e., victim vs. offender), peer conflict is mutually exclusive and can often be resolved and effectively addressed through peaceful and effective communication.

The results of the research review concluded that Restorative Practices (RP), Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), supportive teacher-student relationships, and teacher efficacy were all practical implications for practice to promote positive school culture and climate and to help prevent violent behaviors in schools (Karakus, 2022).

**Prevention of School Violence**

This section discusses research supporting the two elements of the action plan. The first element of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) seeks to establish and strengthen the intrinsic life skills needed to maintain positive relations. Research on Restorative Practice supports the second element attempting to address school violence by building and strengthening relationships aimed at repairing the harm done (International Institute for Restorative Practices [IIRP], 2022).

**Social and Emotional Learning**

Social and Emotional Learning is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions (Collaborative for the Academic et al., 2022). Students often resort to violence because they lack the SEL skills needed to effectively handle peer conflict and many other forms of adversity (Maxime, 2018; Smith & Low, 2013).

Durlak et al. (2011) examined 213 school-based social and emotional learning (SEL) programs. The study included more than 270,000 elementary through high school students
participating in teacher-led SEL programs. The study analyzed the impact of each of the different SEL programs on student behavior and learning. The findings indicated SEL programs in schools have many positive effects on school culture, student behavior, and academic success, including an 11-percentile point gain in achievement. The SEL skills (i.e., self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness) were positively impacted. At the same time, conduct problems and emotional distress (i.e., behavior referrals, fighting, peer conflict, etc.) were reduced. The findings also indicated that student exposure to the SEL program curriculum improved academic performance and student achievement overall (Durlak et al., 2011).

Taylor et al. (2017) found similar results in the meta-analysis of 82 school-based Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs. The study determined social-emotional skills, attitudes, and mental health of more than 97,000 children were improved due to the SEL interventions and instruction. The results from the meta-analysis were coded and categorized by effect size. The effects of the SEL instruction were felt in kindergarten through 12th grade. The younger children (the ones with more prolonged exposure to the SEL instruction) tended to have more long-term benefits, including greater empathy and understanding of others' feelings, more growth in intrinsic social awareness skills, more positive and longer-lasting positive relationships with others, and more academic success. The findings indicated significant positive effects across all sub-groups of SEL categories ($p < .05$). Additionally, the study noted participants shared similar benefits and gains regardless of socioeconomic status, race, gender, or location.

Nelson et al. (2009) studied three-tier behavioral models and used a cohort longitudinal design to assess how much a three-tier model achieved expected outcomes. Support and interventions implemented in the study by tier were: Universal level (tier 1) – Behavior and
Academic Support and Enhancement, Selected level (tier 2) – First Step to Success, and Indicated level (tier 3) – Multi-Systemic Therapy. A total of 407 children in grades K-3 participated. Results support that universal-level interventions help prevent the onset of behavior problems among low-risk children. Students in the selected level grouping (i.e., children at risk for Emotional & Behavioral Disorder, EBD), having participated in SEL intervention, indicated positive gains in social skills and reduced problem behavior sustained over time. Though there were gains in social skills and reduced problem behavior for the tier three students (i.e., students with EBD), they were not statistically significant because of variability (low and varied treatment fidelity across participants was noted as influencing variability). The results also suggest that research-based three-tiered (Universal, Selective, and Indicated) interventions produce similar positive outcomes when integrated within behavior models. The report noted that though there was improvement and gains in student behavior through the three-tier interventions, there were no notable improvements in student academics.

Espelage et al. (2015) studied a 3-year randomized clinical trial of the Second Step: Student Success Through Prevention (SS-SSTP) Middle School Program. The program aimed to reduce bullying, physical aggression, and peer victimization among students with disabilities. Teachers implemented 41 sixth- to eighth-grade lessons focused on SEL skills, including empathy, bully prevention, communication skills, and emotion regulation. The study noted a gap in research regarding the best bully-prevention efforts to reduce bully perpetration and peer victimization among students with disabilities. To address this gap, the study evaluated the impact of the Second Step SEL program. The lessons are scripted and highly interactive, incorporating small group discussions and activities, class discussions, dyadic exercises, whole-class instruction, and individual work. Lessons are supported through an accompanying DVD.
that contains media-rich content, including topic-focused interviews with students and video demonstrations of skills. The study initially hypothesized that direct instruction in the areas of self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, problem-solving, and relationship management would serve as a vehicle to reduce bullying, victimization, and fighting over time for students with disabilities. The results concluded that the SS-SSTP significantly reduced the number of bullying instances among students with disabilities over the 3-year study. However, fighting and victimization did not show significant changes after the implementation of the results. The study stressed a reduction in bully perpetration through SEL programming.

Coelho et al. (2017) studied the impact of a Social and Emotional Learning program, Positive Attitude, before and after implementation in middle school education. The study applied the SEL program to 472 seventh to ninth-grade students and 146 students in control groups. Overall, there were 628 participants aged from 11 to 17 years. Self-report questionnaires were administered before and after the intervention. The results indicated significant intervention gains in three of five social-emotional competencies, namely increases in social awareness and self-control and decreases in social anxiety levels. Girls revealed more significant social cognition improvements and greater social isolation and anxiety reductions than boys. Intervention students with lower social awareness pretest scores profited more than the controls. According to the study, these results indicate that the intervention improved middle school students' social and emotional competencies, supporting the cross-cultural generalization of social-emotional learning programs' efficacy.

Newman-Carlson and Horne (2004) studied the effectiveness of a bully prevention program counselors may use to modify teachers' knowledge and use of bullying intervention skills, teachers' self-efficacy, and students' classroom bullying behaviors. In the "Bully Busters"
program, participants (sixth, seventh, and eighth-grade teachers in a public school in the United States) attended three training sessions and participated on a support team. The training consisted of seven modules, each focusing on specific goals: module 1 – Increasing Awareness of Bullying, module 2 – Recognizing the Bully, module 3 – Recognizing the Victim, module 4 – Interventions for Bullying Behavior, module 5 – Assisting Victims (Recommendations and Interventions, module 6 – The Role of Prevention, and module 7 – Relaxation and Coping Skills.

The findings indicated that the treatment program effectively increased teachers' knowledge/use of intervention skills, personal self-efficacy, and self-efficacy related to working with specific types of children and reduced classroom bullying as measured by disciplinary referrals.

The report noted that teachers who participated in the bully prevention program gained additional knowledge of anti-bullying intervention skills explicitly designed for preventing bullying, intervening with the bully, aiding the victim, assisting the bully and the victim, using resource-related interventions, and increasing students' awareness of bullying and victimization. The study implied that implementing anti-bullying programs like the Bully Busters program in schools can improve student behavior regarding bullying and social-emotional skills for students.

Haraldstad et al. (2019) studied the role of general self-efficacy (GSE) and bullying concerning health-related quality of life (HRQOL). This was a cross-sectional study of 723 adolescents (12-18 years old) attending schools selected using randomized cluster sampling. HRQOL was measured using the two global questions from the Olweus bullying questionnaire. Multiple regression analyses were performed to explore how bullying, bullying, and GSE were associated with variations in self-reported HRQOL. Of the 723 adolescents, 13% reported being bullied, and more boys than girls said they had bullied others. Both being bullied and bullying others were associated with lower HRQOL. Being bullied was associated with the lowest
HRQOL scores in the findings. Higher self-efficacy was associated with better HRQOL. Self-efficacy contributed significantly to predicting variation in HRQOL. The study concluded that being involved in bullying as a victim or a bully is associated with lower HRQOL. The association between GSE and HRQOL indicated that self-efficacy might be a resource for increasing HRQOL among adolescents. The findings highlight the importance of targeting self-efficacy beliefs as an intervention strategy to improve GSE and HRQOL in adolescents involved in bullying.

Losinski et al. (2019) employed a thematic review approach to examine the effects of discriminatory behaviors on children and youth and on school-based practices employed to redress such behaviors. The results imply that schools can act as change agents to curb the negative experiences youth have with discrimination, hateful speech and actions, and harassment and that schools can successfully address these issues through their use of positive behavioral interventions and supports, social and emotional learning programs, bully prevention programs, and interventions designed to influence discriminatory behaviors and biased attitudes positively. Findings state that schools can provide more equitable experiences and educational outcomes through programs and interventions designed to reduce bullying, harassment, racism, and discrimination.

Barboza et al. (2008) studied risk factors associated with bullying behaviors among a representative sample of adolescents aged 11-14. Information collected from the Health Behavior in School Children Cross-National Survey was used to model the relationship between bullying and media effects, peer and family support systems, self-efficacy, and school environment. The results suggest that bullying increases among children who watch television frequently, lack teacher support, have been bullied, attend schools with unfavorable environments, have
emotional support from their peers, and have teachers and parents who do not place high expectations on their school performance. The results support the contention that bullying arises out of deficits in social climate but that social support systems mediate bullying behavior irrespective of the student's racial/ethnic characteristics, parental income levels, or media influences. The results suggest that bullying is not simply an individual response to a particular environment but is a peer-group behavior. The study concludes that limiting television viewing hours, improving students' abilities to access family support systems, and improving school atmospheres are helpful interventions to modify bullying behavior.

The findings from the SEL review of research support the implementation of social-emotional instruction and learning to develop and improve students' intrinsic skills to help them make better choices, maintain positive relationships, build empathy, and resolve conflict peacefully (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). While SEL instruction promotes students' developmental capacity to understand SEL competencies, Restorative Practices (RP) provide an opportunity to practice these acquired skills and values (Fronius et al., 2019; Zehr, 2015).

**Restorative Practices**

Implementation of Restorative Practices (RP) in school has also made a significant impact in addressing school violence by building and strengthening relationships aimed at repairing the harm done (International Institute for Restorative Practices [IIRP], 2022). Restorative circles, practices, and transformative justice all equate to a clear purpose: to explore harm done and work to repair the damage done to rebuild and strengthen relationships (Thorsborne et al., 2018; Zehr, 2015). Regardless of what name it goes by, restorative practices have gained popularity in communities and schools and are being used to help improve peer conflict resolution skills and improve school culture and student behavior (Latimer et al., 2005).
Fronius et al. (2019) defined restorative justice as "a growing social movement to institutionalize non-punitive, relationship-centered approaches for avoiding and addressing harm, responding to legal and human rights violations, and collaboratively solving problems." In short, restorative practices are about discussing conflicting issues and feelings to address them positively before they escalate. In the review of research on restorative practices in schools, many positive implications for practice regarding RP were reported. These findings included that RP can improve school climate, improve achievement, reduce behaviors linked to fighting and violence, and reduce student absenteeism.

Latimer et al. (2005) conducted a review of research. The methodology undertaken included reviewing numerous studies on restorative practices, coding and categorizing the data and using descriptive statistics to analyze the findings. The categorical indicators for analysis included victim and offender satisfaction, recidivism, and restitution compliance. They were used to code the findings to determine the effectiveness of the studies on restorative justice. Multiple effect sizes were coded for program analysis between participation in a restorative justice program and the four outcomes (recidivism, victim satisfaction, offender satisfaction, and restitution compliance). The findings from the review of research were reported as statistically significant in each of the four outcomes. The research findings indicate that therapeutic justice program interventions are more effective in positively impacting the four outcome areas (i.e., increased victim and offender satisfaction, increased compliance/restitution, and decreased recidivism of offense) than with mere punitive, consequential actions (imprisonment, probation, etc.).

Lodi et al. (2021) also found that Restorative Practices (RP) can improve student behavior and reduce school disciplinary issues, along with student suspensions and violence. The
methods used in the meta-analysis included the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines and flow diagram. In total, 900 schools and over 22,000 participants were involved in the data analysis and surveying. The criteria for review included a publication date of literature between 2010 and 2021, a population of students between 6 and 18, literature published in English only, and articles directly accessible or easily retrieved with permission from the author. There were 34 articles that met the criteria for the meta-analysis. Study results also indicated that proactive and positive conflict management and resolution strategies became standard practices among students and schools. This directly impacted the daily school environment, resulting in positive gains and improvements within the school culture. As a result, harmful and unwanted behaviors and issues were reduced (i.e., bullying incidents, violence, misbehavior, etc.).

Augustine et al. (2018) reported similar results in their study on the effectiveness of the Restorative Practices (RP) program utilized within the Pittsburg Public School (PPS) system. Beginning in 2014, the PPS implemented an initiative called Pursuing Equitable and Restorative Communities (PERC) to address the multiple areas of concern stemming from a district stakeholder survey report indicating that many parents, students, and staff perceived that the district was not safe for students or staff, there were disparities regarding consistency and equity in discipline, and the disciplinary practices utilized within the district continued to have lasting effects on the minority and economically disadvantaged students. Through a randomized controlled trial, 44 schools were studied (22 schools participated in the PERC interventions, the treatment group, and 22 schools did not participate, the control group). The findings indicated that the teachers bought into the restorative practices and interventions. The teachers perceived PERC helped improve the overall school climate and reduced the suspension and disparity rates.
of underprivileged students. Teachers indicated that PERC helped strengthen teacher-student relationships also, giving students another system of support to lean on when dealing with conflict or other school issues. Positive and safe learning environments were also reported. The report also noted that students were suspended less frequently, and alternative school enrollment was lower than in prior years.

In conclusion, the research of literature discussed here supports program implementation of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), along with Restorative Practices (RP), to address the problem of practice (i.e., the high number of students being sent to the Avery Alternative Center for infractions involving violence on school campuses). The action plan elements developed and implemented to address the problem of practice and a description of the program evaluation measurements to assess program quality are discussed in Chapter Three.
CHAPTER THREE

Methods

Introduction

Chapter Three presents the methods used in this applied research study and an overview and description of the action plan. The chapter concludes with the methods used to evaluate the action plan's success and make recommendations for improving the action plan. The action plan seeks to address the problem of practice by reducing violent behaviors resulting in students having to attend the Avery Alternative Center.

The chapter begins with a presentation of the collaborative process undertaken by our team to develop the action plan to support the social-emotional needs of students suspended for fighting. The development section provides a description of the programming team, a review and timeline of the planning, and an analysis of the data review, which guides action planning of elements. Next, each action plan element (i.e., Project GRIT) is described and explained. Through high-quality instruction in SEL competencies (i.e., Overcoming Obstacles™ curriculum) and intensive coaching sessions grounded in Restorative Practices (RP), the program's goal, implemented through the action plan, is to improve student behavior and reduce recidivism in alternative placement for fighting. The objective, process, timeline, parties involved and resources needed for implementation are presented for each action element.

The program evaluation process helps paint a more thorough picture of implementing student interventions and the research-based remedies used in the program. The components of
each action plan element, assessment methods, and the collaborative effort put forth in program development are discussed. The research questions guiding the evaluation are:

1. Following participation in Project GRIT, did students taking the “exit survey” average above 2.5 on the Likert scale responses?
   1. A. Did the life-skills instruction (i.e., the Overcoming Obstacles™ curriculum) establish and strengthen intrinsic conflict-resolution skills within participants?
   1. B. Did Restorative Practices (i.e., coaching and counseling sessions) help repair the harm done in student-to-student relationships caused by violence or bullying?
2. How can Project Grit be improved to have more of an impact on reducing in-school violence?
   2. A. How can life-skills instruction be improved to support student learning and growth in SEL competencies?
   2. B. How can RP sessions be improved to strengthen student relationships?

The remainder of Chapter Three describes the collaborative process involved in developing the action plan to address the problem of practice, discusses the action plan elements and implementation process, and details the applied research and program evaluation model used to assess program success.

**Development of the Action Plan**

The staff identified the problem of practice in the fall of 2020 with a review of three-year enrollment data to the AAC. Fighting or physical aggression is the top behavioral infraction resulting in student placement annually to the alternative school. Recidivism is also concerning because some students return multiple times yearly for fighting, and the repeat offenses continue disrupting the learning environment in the site schools. Project GRIT (PG) was developed and
implemented by an internal team of stakeholders who play an essential everyday role in the Avery Alternative Center (AAC), the alternative school serving the Anniston School District (ASD). The PG team included five general education teachers, two special education teachers, one secretary, one school counselor, the principal, and the behavior specialist. In October 2020, the PG team began analyzing the historical enrollment data to determine the factors causing students to be enrolled in the AAC.

As the AAC's principal, I recorded data over the years, charting the different causes students were enrolled in the alternative school. I could have emailed the team the information in a file and continued establishing a plan of action. Due to the collaborative nature of applied research, I decided to engage my staff in the process, beginning with defining our problem of practice and increasing collective teacher efficacy in the program's implementation. Goddard et al. (2000) describe collective efficacy as the perceptions of teachers in a school who believes they can organize and execute the courses of action required to support students and promote change. If I could influence and strengthen collective teacher efficacy across our team, we would significantly improve student behavior and achievement (Bandura, 1997; Goddard et al., 2000; Ross & Gray, 2006).

As reported above, school violence (i.e., fighting) was the top infraction resulting in student placement in the AAC (see Table 1). Teachers knew fighting was the top infraction causing students to be placed in the AAC, but were astonished to find the level of the problem presented in Table 2.
Table 1

**Aggregate Two-Year Data Analysis of Alternative School Placement.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>Violence (physical)</th>
<th>Violence (non-physical)</th>
<th>Other Infractions</th>
<th>Total Enrollment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2018-2019</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019-2020*</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: *By March 2020, the coronavirus had reached Anniston, MS. The ASD implemented virtual learning for the remainder of the school year, March through May (SchoolStatus, 2020).

Table 2

**Disaggregate Two-Year Data Trends Regarding AAC Placement for Violent Offenses.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>Black Male</th>
<th>Black Female</th>
<th>Hispanic Male</th>
<th>Hispanic Female</th>
<th>White Male</th>
<th>White Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18-19</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-20</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: The total number of Black students (n = 56) is quite disproportionate in comparison to the total number of White (n = 6) and Hispanic (n = 0) students sent to the alternative school for fighting in the four-year analysis (SchoolStatus, 2020).

Current ASD policy enforces "zero tolerance" for fighting. It mandates alternative school placement for any student who engages in violence while in school, on the bus, or attending any school-sponsored event. The duration of placement in the alternative school varies based on different factors. First offenders engaging or participating in a fight, severe bullying, or some other form of school violence usually are assigned between 30 and 45 days to serve in the AAC.
for the first offense. In more severe cases, placement duration in the alternative school is quite long (45 or more days).

Though students are suspended from school for one to three days until a due process hearing can be scheduled and conducted, most students involved in violent offenses in schools or at school-sponsored activities are allowed to continue their education in the alternative placement. Only in the most severe cases, when the act or offense is so extreme in measure or when the safety of students and staff in the alternative school is put at risk, is the student expelled from school altogether.

Our data analysis generated much discussion and program reflection among our team. It also created cause for concern. In hindsight, our team knew minority students were sent to the AAC more than other races. We also knew that minority students typically had higher rates of out-of-school suspensions. In this critical discussion, we had a breakthrough, ah-ha moment of clarity! Our data revealed one significant, underlying factor supporting the high suspension rates and alternative placements, specifically among minority groups in the district. In ASD, minority students often resort to violence and physical aggression in response to peer conflict or other negative stimuli than any other racial group. The findings also suggest that girls are as apt to fight as boys in the minority group. Now that this critical data was in hand, our team had to decide what we could do to help address the issue and improve behavior.

Other reasons students had been enrolled in the AAC included substance abuse, bringing weapons on campus, flagrant disrespect for staff, insubordination, disruption of the educational process, and truancy. The findings in our data review have a direct correlation to trends in the literature indicating that students who have deficits in social and emotional competencies engage more often in risky behaviors, which negatively impact their success and achievement in school.
as well as life (Collaborative for the Academic et al., 2022; Durlak et al., 2015; Nelson et al., 2009).

The PG team researched evidence-based solutions to address the problem of practice (i.e., the alarming number of students being sent to AAC for fighting). The review of research supported interventions in Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Restorative Practices (RP) to incorporate as “best practices” in reducing violence in schools (Collaborative for the Academic et al., 2022; Durlak et al., 2011; Smith & Low, 2013; Sorgenfrei & Davie, 2021; Thorsborne et al., 2018; United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2019). Our team decided SEL and RP would be the two foundational elements of our action planning to address our problem of practice.

The concept of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) was established in collaboration during a meeting held at the Fetzer Institute in 1994 by a group of teachers, researchers, and child advocates concerned with the growing number of issues negatively impacting student behavior, achievement, mental health, and performance in school. The goal of the Fetzer Group was to discuss strategies and interventions to reduce the negative impact on health, achievement, and behavior caused by disparities in social and emotional competencies. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) was established during the session to promote positive, research-based SEL interventions for schools, districts, and communities to utilize to support and promote positive behavior, health, achievement, and performance in students (Collaborative for the Academic et al., 2022; Durlak et al., 2011).

SEL incorporates many attributes (self-awareness, relationship skills, self-management, responsible decision-making, and social awareness) that students and adults need to manage everyday issues (Collaborative for the Academic et al., 2022; Durlak et al., 2011). Unfortunately,
several barriers can affect student mastery of these competencies, often leading to student aggression: abuse and neglect, mental and physical disabilities, domestic violence, poverty, drug and alcohol dependency, truancy, poor achievement in school, low self-esteem, gang influences, and emotional issues (Goldstein et al., 1994).

Wachtel (2013) defines Restorative Practices (RP) as the social science of restoring or repairing any harm done between individual or communal relationships to improve and build healthier relationships and communities. In educational settings, restorative circle sessions (i.e., group sessions designed to address root causes of underlying issues creating dissension and conflict between individuals in order to talk out the issues and promote peaceful resolution and positive relationships) have proven successful in reducing violence and bullying in schools (Fronius et al., 2019) RP compliments SEL competencies well by allowing students opportunities to take what they have learned from SEL instruction and interventions and put it to practice by addressing the cultural needs of schools, building and promoting healthy relationships, repairing harm by improving behavior, and promoting peaceful conflict resolution in schools (Collaborative for the Academic et al., 2022; International Institute for Restorative Practices [IIRP], 2022).

Our team titled our program "Project GRIT." We decided our students needed grit to improve their behavior and academic success. Duckworth et al. (2007) define grit as courage, resolve, and character strength. Our team began giving the Grit Scale survey to alternative school students during the 2020-2021 school year (see Appendix 1). The survey results from the Grit Scale share many common themes among students who took it. Findings indicated that most students had little concern about completing or finishing work, gave up quickly, often quit tasks
when they became too complex, and had few life goals. To combat these issues, establishing and strengthening grit within our AAC students seemed the answer.

Promoting the essential life skills needed to persevere through hardships became our endeavor (i.e., establishing and supporting grit within students). All students, especially those in the alternative program, face problems and have setbacks occasionally. Our data analysis results suggested that the students sent to the alternative school typically struggle to handle conflict and manage their emotions appropriately and peacefully. Each action plan element developed for our program revolved around one centralized theme: The GRIT Mindset (see Table 3).

Table 3

**The GRIT Mindset.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project GRIT</th>
<th>Principles &amp; Purpose</th>
<th>Key Vocabulary</th>
<th>SEL Competencies Involved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>G = Grow our Mindset</td>
<td>…means “looking in-ward” to reflect on self-concepts, knowing one’s triggers, and working to improve one’s self-control</td>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>Self-Awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gratitude</td>
<td>Self-Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R = Renew our Focus</td>
<td>…means initiating a perceptual shift from internal to external, focusing on others and their beliefs and needs, shift from &quot;I&quot; to &quot;We.&quot;</td>
<td>Respect</td>
<td>Self-Awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Relationships</td>
<td>Self-Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Social-Awareness Relationship Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I = Impact ourselves, peers, and community</td>
<td>…means knowing our actions and words influence and affect others, striving to make choices that will promote positive change, helping others, choosing kindness</td>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>Social Awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Influence</td>
<td>Relationship Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Responsible Decision-Making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T = Transform our Future</td>
<td>…means using words efficiently to describe one’s stance without hurting others, initiating thought before response, understanding it is okay to disagree, knowing all actions have consequences</td>
<td>Tactfulness</td>
<td>Responsible Decision-Making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Thought</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Description of the Action Plan

This section describes each element of the action plan in detail. The description, clear goals, timeline, responsibilities, and related costs are presented for each element (see Table 4). The section concludes with the program evaluation synapsis, an analysis explaining what measures will be undertaken to evaluate the overall success of the program as well as areas for improvement.

Table 4

Descriptors of Element One.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Responsibilities</th>
<th>Costs</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Over-Coming Obstacles SEL</td>
<td>To establish and strengthen SEL competencies among participants</td>
<td>October 2020 through February 2023</td>
<td>The teachers will co-plan the lesson on Monday and will teach the lesson on Wednesdays.</td>
<td>Time (1 hour of planning; 1 hour for instruction): $52/hr. x 2hrs x 7 teachers = $728/week*</td>
<td>Likert Surveys, interviews, observation, Descriptive Statistics pre/post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum Instruction</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *The average hourly cost to school systems for professional services is $52 (Davis & Fowler, 2020, p. 28). The total cost for planning each week is approximately $520/week.

Element One

The first element in our action plan aims to establish and strengthen the essential life skills within students to promote the internal conceptualization of social awareness, self-awareness, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness. To teach these intrinsic skills and SEL competencies, our team selected the Overcoming Obstacles™ (OCO) curriculum as our guide in instructional programming (Arnold-Berkovits et al., 2021; Collaborative for the Academic et al., 2022; Overcoming Obstacles™, 2022; What Works Clearinghouse, 2022).
Multiple facets of OCO fit our specific program needs. Research (Arnold-Berkovits et al., 2021; Overcoming Obstacles™, 2022) has shown that OCO programs improve student outcomes in many areas, including decision-making, stress management, goal setting, conflict resolution, peer and adult communication, and problem-solving. It is a free curriculum, CASEL-approved, and easy to implement. The instructional lessons and activities designed within the curriculum address all five competencies of SEL and have proven successful in helping students develop the skills needed to self-manage their emotions, empathize with others, voice feelings appropriately, resolve conflict peacefully, know and regulate emotional triggers, build and maintain positive relationships, and improve decision-making (Collaborative for the Academic et al., 2022; Overcoming Obstacles™, 2022; What Works Clearinghouse, 2022).

Table 5 describes the curriculum of the Overcoming Obstacles™ element. The lessons and skills presented in each course centered on the five social-emotional learning competencies (i.e., self-awareness, self-management, relationship skills, social awareness, and responsible decision-making). Our staff began teaching the OCO curriculum in January of 2021, starting with the “Confidence Building” lesson. Our staff met every Monday after students had left to review and discuss the upcoming OCO lesson for the week. Teachers discussed the SEL objectives for the lesson and co-planned activities incorporating GRIT and the SEL competencies for the week. Weekly SEL instruction occurred on Wednesdays from 10:30 a.m. until 12:00 p.m. in each classroom. Each teacher followed the specific OCO school-level curriculums (elementary, middle, or high school) and incorporated at least one supporting group activity also provided within the framework. All students participating in the OCO program received weekly SEL instruction.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Skills</th>
<th>Lessons</th>
<th>SEL Competencies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January</td>
<td>Confidence Building</td>
<td>Giving and Earning Respect, Identifying Strengths, Establishing What is Important, Improving Well-Being, and Developing Personal Power</td>
<td>Self-Awareness, Self-Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Understanding Nonverbal Communication, Listening, Listening Critically, Speaking Responsibly, and Communicating Constructively</td>
<td>Relationship Skills, Social Awareness, Responsible Decision-Making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April</td>
<td>Setting and Achieving Goals</td>
<td>Identifying Goals, Setting Priorities, Developing a Positive Attitude, Accessing Resources, and Learning to Be Assertive</td>
<td>Self-Awareness, Social-Awareness, Self-Management, Relationship Skills, Responsible Decision-Making</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* The information was retrieved from *Overcoming Obstacles™* (2022).
To provide time to discuss and collaborate, weekly schedules were adjusted to allow additional planning time for staff on Monday afternoons after the students were dismissed. Teachers were given about one hour to review and discuss the previous lesson's survey data and plan for the upcoming Wednesday lesson. By allocating time for staff to review data and co-plan together beforehand, high-quality instruction and engagement of students was expected during each weekly lesson. The allocation of time for instruction, on top of the allocated time for planning the SEL curriculum (one hour for planning and one hour for instruction per week), doubled the total opportunity costs to $728/week regarding element one in program implementation (i.e., OCO planning and instruction).

**Element Two**

Components of element two include a description, goal, responsibilities, costs, and evaluation measures (see Table 6). Due to the increased numbers of students fighting upon returning to in-person school, our team realized that more than SEL instruction is needed to change student behavior. In January 2022, our leadership team (i.e., the counselor, principal, and behavior specialist) began the implementation of Restorative Practices through coaching and counseling sessions. The evaluation of element two lasted from January 2022 until February 2023.
Table 6

Descriptors of Element Two.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Timeline</th>
<th>Responsibilities</th>
<th>Costs</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Restorative Practices</td>
<td>To offer opportunities for the victim and offender to “repair the harm” done and strengthen relationships</td>
<td>January 2022 through February 2023</td>
<td>The principal, counselor, and behavior specialist led RJ coaching and counseling intervention sessions.</td>
<td>Time (1 hr. long session daily): $52/hr. x 5 sessions/week x 3 staff = $780 *</td>
<td>Likert Surveys, interviews, observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching and Counseling Sessions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The opportunity cost for the restorative coaching sessions is $780 per week (Davis & Fowler, 2020).

The goal was to provide intensive, restorative counseling and coaching sessions among students sent for fighting to provide opportunities to strengthen student relationships and repair any harm caused by fighting or bullying among students. Research findings support using RP in education to repair harm, restore relationships, provide effective leadership, strengthen civil society, improve human behavior, and reduce crime, violence, and bullying (International Institute for Restorative Practices [IIRP], 2022). RP ideology aligns directly with the purpose of Project Grit (PG) by providing opportunities to practice the essential life skills taught during SEL instruction to effectively resolve conflict peacefully without resorting to violence. In short, students could practice the skills taught during weekly SEL instruction during the coaching and counseling RP sessions.

The leadership team took notes during intake interviews with the parent and the student regarding any information that was shared, offering further insight into the fight. The following day after intake, the initial counseling sessions began with students individually as we conducted interviews to get to the root of the issues (i.e., what caused the fight). Each leadership team member took notes based on the student's responses to determine the root of the problem. During
these individual sessions, the leadership team asked restorative questions during the coaching sessions to gather more information (see Appendix 2). Our team called these sessions “level one” sessions.

Restorative statements were also utilized during the individual level one session to help students verbalize internal feelings and to help effectively communicate their emotions (i.e., I feel _______ when you say/do _______). The formative counseling sessions not only provided vital information as to why the student had fought but also assisted the leadership team in building rapport with the student by establishing trust. By getting students to start talking about their issues, we were better able to help them understand how their actions had affected not only themselves but how they had affected others as well.

The duration and frequency of level-one sessions were dependent on several factors. Student assent and parental consent were also acquired during intake. Those who chose to opt out did not participate in the RP counseling and coaching sessions. Student willingness to communicate and openly discuss the issues at hand greatly influenced each session. On average, level one sessions occurred one to three times in frequency per student, usually lasting 45 minutes to an hour in duration for each session.

The counseling team would discuss each level-one session to decide if and when to bring the victim and offender together for focused-group counseling (i.e., restorative circles). Once the team and students involved felt they were ready to move forward with group counseling, the victim and offender were brought together in a neutral setting (most likely the counselor's office) to discuss their issues and any underlying concerns which would continue causing dissension between the two groups or students.
Students were informed of the rules and guidelines governing the level two sessions. Students were called to speak or respond and needed permission to speak out of turn. They were encouraged to listen to understand. Our purpose was to help strengthen and repair relationships. We also hoped the restorative sessions would help teach the students essential life skills through face-to-face conflict resolution practice sessions.

**Program Evaluation Design**

Program evaluation will assess each element of the action plan. A central question and a summative and formative sub-question help guide the program evaluation. The research questions help determine if Project GRIT (PG) succeeded in achieving its goal, as well as targeting areas for improvement in each program element. Various assessment methods will provide triangulation to increase the trustworthiness of the data.

**Data Collection Plan**

For each research question and the sub-questions, the methods used in the evaluation are discussed under each heading. The summative (Did the plan achieve its goal?) and formative (How can the plan be improved?) data to be collected for each of the research questions is presented. Details are presented on methods of data collection, how the data will be analyzed, and criteria for determining the level of program success, along with areas for program improvement. Copies of assessments, protocols, consent forms, and any other measurement referenced in the study are provided in the appendix.

The quantitative data was intended to indicate if the overall program and the elements achieved goals. The purpose of qualitative data was to connect the action plan implementation and the measured outcomes. The program evaluation data provided a better understanding of
why and how the program was successful through personalized feedback from stakeholders (i.e.,
teachers, students, and staff).

**Central Question 1**

Central Question 1 asked, “Following participation in Project GRIT, did students taking
the “exit survey” average above 2.5 on the Likert scale responses? This data determined if the
goal of equipping students with the necessary social and emotional skills to improve student
behavior, achievement, and overall school culture was attained. In addition, as part of the exit
process, interviews are held with students to gauge the program's impact on them. Once the
students return to their site school, survey data from the site teachers will assess changes in
behavior.

**Sub-question 1. A.**

Sub-question 1.A assessed whether the life-skills instruction (i.e., the Overcoming
Obstacles™ curriculum, OCO) established and strengthened participants' intrinsic conflict-
resolution skills. The participating students answered a post-OCO lesson survey (see Appendix
2) after each weekly activity to answer this question. Likert scales (quantitative) and open-ended
questioning (qualitative) were included in the post-lesson surveys of teachers and students. Each
post-lesson survey assessed the lesson's strengths, weaknesses, and areas for instructional growth
and improvement. Each Monday, the staff and administration collaboratively reviewed the
survey data and discussed what went well in the prior week's lesson and what areas needed
improvement. In addition, the administration took field notes during OCO observations to
document student participation and engagement, lesson quality and effectiveness, and help
identify improvement areas. The staff was also surveyed after each social-emotional lesson to
identify the strengths and weaknesses of the lessons (see Appendix 3).
Before returning to the site schools, students completed an exit survey (see Appendix 4). Each student also met with the principal during the exit interview (see Appendix 5) conference; the principal questioned students to determine if and how Project Grit has helped, what skills have been learned, and what choices will be made when faced when he or she faces conflict back at the site schools.

**Sub-question 1. B.**

Sub-question 1. B asks, "Did Restorative Practices (i.e., coaching and counseling sessions) help repair the harm done in student-to-student relationships caused by violence or bullying?" to obtain its goal of improving student-to-student relationships. During the level-one coaching sessions, the students answered the restorative survey (see Appendix 6). They counseled the leadership team (i.e., the principal, counselor, and behavior specialist) to begin the restorative process of repairing the harm caused by the fighting and violence. The leadership team also scripted field notes during each session with students to document student perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and emotions throughout the restorative coaching process.

During the level-two coaching session, the victim and offender were brought together to discuss the incident to repair the harm and strengthen the relationship; the leadership team continued to chart notes during the process, observing the verbal and non-verbal cues and behaviors exhibited. The leadership team also made notations in their conclusion regarding how practical the restorative session was for each student and group.

Additionally, each student (before returning to the site school) who participates in the Restorative Practice (RP) coaching sessions submitted a post-RP survey (see Appendix 7) to indicate how the restorative coaching sessions helped them and if he or she felt it helped them repair and strengthen relationships.
Site teachers submitted a questionnaire assessing if they noticed a change in the student's behavior before and after their participation in PG while at the alternative school (see Appendix 8). This tool provided helpful information from the perception of classroom teachers who had daily contact and interaction with the PG students after returning to the site school. The feedback indicated that student behavior and decision-making improved after participation in PG. All students enrolled in the AAC submitted parent consent forms allowing the student to participate in Project GRIT or not (see Appendix 9).

**Central Question 2**

Central Question 2 asked the formative question, "How can Project Grit be improved to have more of an impact on reducing in-school violence?" Data from the teacher and student surveys, exit surveys and interviews, restorative coaching and counseling sessions, and observation field notes provided the critical information needed to help determine how the program can be improved. The results provided areas for improvement in our programming.

**Sub-question 2. A.**

Sub-question 2. A asks, “How can life-skills instruction be improved to better support student learning and growth in SEL competencies?” The student and staff post-lesson surveys provided areas for growth and improvement regarding the social-emotional competencies. Additionally, the data from the exit interview conference and the student exit survey were used to answer this question. The information also provided critical areas where continued instructional support is needed, and additional instructional time should be added.

**Sub-question 2. B.**

Sub-question 2. B asks, “How can RP sessions be improved to strengthen student relationships?” The post-restorative surveys and interviews provided data to guide improvement
recommendations. In addition, the leadership team's observation and counseling session notes added descriptors of how to improve restorative coaching sessions. Finally, data from the exit interviews will be used to improve the RP sessions.

Conclusion

Project Grit (PG) is a research-driven action plan to help address the problem of the practice of students resorting to violence and bullying when dealing with peer conflict. The mission of PG is to incorporate social-emotional learning and restorative coaching and counseling to promote grit and help students develop the necessary skills to resolve conflict peacefully and maintain positive relationships. The goal is to improve student behavior and reduce the number of students sent to the AAC for fighting and violence.

Extensive stakeholder input and collaboration were initiated in the plan development. A formative and summative program evaluation was conducted to assess program quality and areas for improvement. Triangulation of data implemented through various quantitative and qualitative measures assessed what program elements were working and helped us identify critical areas for improvement.
CHAPTER FOUR

Results

Introduction

This chapter presents the program evaluation results conducted on Project GRIT, an effort to address the high number of students being sent to the Avery Attendance Center (AAC) for infractions involving violence and fighting. Based on the program evaluation, the response to each research question is presented.

Project GRIT was designed to improve student behavior by teaching social-emotional skills and engaging in restorative counseling and mediation sessions with students in alternative schools for violent offenses. The importance of addressing the problem of practice was critical to strengthen and support the critical life skills (i.e., self-management, self-awareness, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness) needed within students to help them better understand and accept diversity, empathize with others, and promote social acceptance (Collaborative for the Academic et al., 2022; Scherer, 1992).

Best practices, taken from the review of research, to support addressing the problem of practice were employed in the action plan elements. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Restorative Practices (RP) interventions were planned and implemented within the alternative school program. Research studies (Karakus, 2022; International Institute for Restorative Practices [IIRP], 2022; Collaborative for the Academic et al., 2022; Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017) have shown that SEL and RP can strengthen the intrinsic life skills needed within
students to successfully and appropriately self-regulate emotions, promote positive relationships, and help resolve conflict peacefully among peers.

A program evaluation was designed to assess the program elements. The research questions focused on how each element performed and data analyses for program improvement (formative assessment). The research questions were:

2. Following participation in Project GRIT, did students taking the “exit survey” average above 2.5 on the Likert scale responses?
   1. Did the life-skills instruction (i.e., the Overcoming Obstacles curriculum) establish and strengthen intrinsic conflict-resolution skills within participants?
   1. B Did Restorative Practices (i.e., coaching and counseling sessions) help repair the harm done in student-to-student relationships caused by violence or bullying?
3. How can Project Grit be improved to have more of an impact on reducing in-school violence?
   2. How can life-skills instruction be improved to support student learning and growth in SEL competencies?
   2. B How can RP sessions be improved to strengthen student relationships?

The data from the program evaluation for Project Grit is organized and discussed according to each central question and the summative and formative question sub-headings for each. To protect the confidentiality of participants, pseudonyms are used to prevent the identifiable personal information of the participants.
Participants

Planning for Project Grit (PG) began in October 2020. Classroom implementation of the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum (i.e., element one of the action plan) began in January 2021. It continued through February of 2023 (program implementation for element one lasted approximately 22 months, not counting June or July during summer break). The participants in the study included students enrolled in the alternative school for fighting in grades 6 through 12 (see Table 7.)

Table 7.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>Black Male</th>
<th>Black Female</th>
<th>White Male</th>
<th>White Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20-21</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-22</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-23</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In total, 109 students in grades 6th through 12th participated in the program because of violent behavior between October 2020 and February 2023 (N = 109). The demographics of the 109 students attending the alternative school for fighting and participating in PG were quite disproportionate: 46.7% were black males (n=51), 46.7% were black females (n=51), 1.8% were white males (n=2), and 4.5% were white females (n=5).

Overcoming Obstacles™ (OCO) was the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum stakeholders implemented to strengthen student life skills. In addition to the SEL instructional curriculum, Restorative Practices (element two of the action plan) were utilized with students enrolled for fighting and violence. The purpose of the SEL and RP interventions
was to support student growth in self-management, self-awareness, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness to equip and strengthen the skills needed to practice peaceful conflict resolution techniques, ultimately improving overall student behavior while reducing violence in schools.

The Overcoming Obstacles curriculum was implemented in the alternative school from October 2020 through February 2023. The teachers and staff in the Avery Attendance Center (AAC) met on Mondays after school to plan the OCO lesson for each week. The OCO lesson was taught on Wednesdays for approximately one hour in two classrooms. The students were divided by gender into the two classrooms for the lessons. The female staff (four teachers and one counselor) co-taught the girls' group, and the male staff (four teachers and one administrator) co-taught the boy group.

By assigning the students by gender, more in-depth discussions occurred about gender-specific issues commonly affecting our students. The staff proactively planned for and monitored student behavior closely during each lesson. Doing so was critical as most fights and violent incidents resulting in alternative placement were homogeneous (i.e., girl vs. girl; boys vs. boy). The team assigned seating for students for each OCO lesson to purposely create spacing and distance between the students who had fought one another back in their site school.

Thorough planning was vital to successfully implementing the OCO curriculum each week. Due to the influx (at times) of students enrolled for fighting throughout PG, managing and monitoring student behavior was challenging. However, the team understood the importance of grouping the students with conflict during lessons to establish positive peer relationships and strengthen the individual life skills needed to promote peaceful conflict resolution and repair the
harm caused by violence. Because the team was steadfast in planning and monitoring behavior, there were no behavioral incidents or altercations among students for Project Grit.

Students were not always assigned the same number of "days to serve" at Avery Alternative Center (AAC) disciplinary hearings. The more violent the offense a student committed, the longer the placement at the AAC was for the student. During the study, students were typically enrolled between 30 and 45 days on average; however, some students were assigned longer alternative placements ($n > 45$). Students assigned to more extended placements participated in more social-emotional activities than those assigned shorter placements in the alternative school. When enrolling students in the alternative school participating in PG, careful attention was undertaken to establish program confidentiality and protect any identifiable student information.

**Findings**

The study utilized a program evaluation to assess each element and answer the guiding research questions. Central question one (and two sub-questions) focused on a summative data assessment to evaluate program performance overall, as well as the specific elemental components of the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) instructional curriculum and the Restorative Practices (RP) coaching and counseling sessions. Central question two (and two sub-questions) focused on a formative data assessment to analyze how the program can be improved overall and, more specifically, identify independent areas for improvement in SEL and RP interventions. Data triangulation helped promote the trustworthiness of the findings as various assessments (both qualitative and quantitative) were conducted.
Central Question One

Central question one asked if the students who participated in Project Grit averaged 2.5 or higher on the exit survey (see Appendix four) upon leaving AAC and returning to regular classrooms. The survey results averaged 3.24 across the sample of 102 students, .74 points above the 2.5 goals. This indicates that Project Grit met the goal of equipping participants with the necessary social-emotional skills to improve behavior, achievement, and overall school culture was attained.

The exit survey data reflected the student's perception of the effectiveness of the OCO instructional curriculum in establishing and strengthening intrinsic life skills (i.e., the social-emotional competencies). The student selected a score of 1 (ineffective), 2 (slightly effective), 3 (moderately effective), or 4 (highly effective) in response to each question. A response of two or higher indicated that the student believed the program had helped them grow in the specific social-emotional competency. The mean scores of each item of the survey responses were used in evaluating program success and effectiveness of element one of the action plan, Project Grit. Mean scores greater than 2.5 on the exit survey indicated program success. Table 8 shows the mean scores for each of the ten questions in the exit survey and the overall effectiveness rating.
Table 8.


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Mean (M)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support Growth in the Five SEL Competencies</td>
<td>3.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthen Intrinsic Conflict Resolution Skills</td>
<td>3.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Think Before Responding</td>
<td>3.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognize Triggers</td>
<td>3.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support De-escalation Skills</td>
<td>3.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manage Feelings and Emotions</td>
<td>3.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving Decision-Making Skills</td>
<td>3.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maintain Positive Relationships</td>
<td>3.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop Respect for Self</td>
<td>2.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop Respect for Others</td>
<td>3.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Effectiveness of OCO Lessons</td>
<td>3.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The survey responses were collected before students left the alternative school ($n = 102$).

The average scores for the ten life-skill categories indicated that students perceived the lessons as slightly or highly effective in strengthening and growing intrinsic social-emotional skills. The findings were grouped into increments of .5 to scale the data and assess program effectiveness. Scoring below 2.4 indicated that the program was ineffective in strengthening social-emotional life skills. Scoring between 2.5 and 2.9 indicated slight effectiveness of the program. Scoring between 3.0 and 3.4 indicated the program was moderately effective, and scoring between 3.5 and 4.0 indicated that the program was highly influential in supporting participants' growth of life skills.

The average collected from participants for each of the ten life skill categories was 2.5 or higher. No scores were recorded below 2.5 in the sample in any life-skill categories surveyed.
This indicated that the program was at minima slightly effective. In total, 25 participants scored the program as slightly effective (25%). There were 44 students whose scores indicated the program was moderately effective (43%), and 33 responses indicated that the program was highly influential in supporting and growing intrinsic life skills (32%). The findings of the exit survey indicate that 100% of the students who participated in Project GRIT found the program effective in supporting and strengthening the intrinsic social-emotional skills needed to effectively manage conflict peacefully, manage feelings and emotions, maintain positive relationships, and develop respect for self as well as others.

Sub Question 1. A.

Sub question 1.A. asked if the life-skills instruction and curriculum (i.e., Overcoming Obstacles) established or strengthened intrinsic conflict-resolution skills within participants. The answer is yes. This was supported by the quantitative results of the exit survey and the qualitative data collected from participant interviews. The exit interviews (see appendix five) were conducted with Project GRIT participants before returning to site school. The qualitative feedback provided a thick description to help assess overall program success. Before the interviews, the participants answered open-ended questions on a questionnaire asking students to list their favorite and least favorite Overcoming Obstacles (OCO) lesson, describe what they liked or did not like about it, and explain why. The questionnaire also asked students to explain if they felt the program helped establish or strengthen the skills needed to manage conflict in the future. "What would you do if" scenarios were included, and familiar situations involving conflict with peers were described. The students were asked to explain how they would handle each situation described and what actions they would take if faced with the issue.
The purpose of the interview was to provide an opportunity for each participant to share feelings and thoughts on Project GRIT, what they had learned, and what skills they had developed. During the interview, the principal and counselor met with students individually to review and discuss the items in the questionnaire and their responses. While interviewing students and discussing their answers, the researchers cited evidence from student responses supporting that the life skills needed to peacefully resolve conflict, promote positive relationships, and reduce violence to improve behavior, achievement, and culture in schools had been supported and strengthened through the program.

A total of 40 student interview responses were analyzed. The researchers looked for similarities in the student responses. Overall, patterns and themes emerged and were categorized to understand the program's impact better. There were a total of three themes identified by the researchers overall.

The first theme identified was that participation in Project GRIT helped the students recognize and self-identify individual psychological and emotional triggers, causing the student to quickly escalate to anger, lose self-control, and engage in a verbal altercation and physical aggression. This self-acknowledgment of emotional triggers was an essential first step in supporting and strengthening individual self-awareness and self-management among the participants.

One participant, "Eddy," admitted he was quick to violence when others made fun of or picked on him about his family. He stated he "…was ready to fight when someone checked my family. I do not care who you are…If you said something about my family, I was going to fight you". A second participant, "Sarah" explained that being bullied about her body size caused her feelings and emotions to rise, saying, "I get picked on because of my weight sometimes. I do not
like it, and most of the time, I get so mad I start crying and I hit whoever said it." Another student “Tommy” reported he became violent when others would bully him about his clothing stating “People talk about me a lot, and I get mad. I get bullied a lot... they make fun of my clothes because I wear my brother’s old clothes.”

Responses were mixed. However, several common factors were expressed by participants. Many students agreed that “embarrassment” (n = 24), “bullying” (n = 34), “underachievement” (n = 5), “unfair treatment” (n = 29), “frustration” (n = 14), “peer and social pressure” (n = 36), “family matters and treatment” (n = 19) and “being misunderstood” (n = 28) were common emotional triggers causing feelings of anger and acts of aggression.

A second theme identified was that participation in Project GRIT helped students acknowledge the importance of reflecting before reacting when faced with a conflict (i.e., self-management, responsible decision-making, and social awareness). The findings supported that Project GRIT was effective in strengthening participants’ inner ability to first reflect on a situation when faced with conflict, then consider viable options, along with possible consequences or outcomes, before taking action to address an issue (i.e., social awareness, responsible decision making, and relationship skills).

When interviewed, “Sarah” questioned why "...people made fun of others? Do they do it because they do not like themselves...or something about themselves? If so, what can I do to try to help them?" She knew being bullied about her weight was one of her triggers. Instead of getting angry and upset, she tried to find a way to help others internally deal with self-respect issues.

"Eddy," knowing he is triggered when others talk badly about his family, expressed that if he would "...stop and think before I fight. Is it worth it? Why should I care what they
say...does it matter? They just want to make me mad. I should not let them get to me like I do.”

Eddy realized he should not allow others to ignite his emotions and questioned if fighting was the best solution to address the bullying.

A similar admittance was shared by "Tommy." He explained that in the past, when others bullied or made fun of him, he would bully and make fun of them right back. When asked how he would handle similar conflicts in the future, he stated, “I would try to see what was wrong first and why the other person was mad. Maybe I said or did something, and if I did, I need to fix it.” Tommy realized that stopping to reflect on a conflict in the future would give him time to consider alternatives to violence.

Additional supporting evidence noted in student responses highlighted meaningful Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) competency indicators such as Self-Reflection” (n = 36), “Asking Why?” (n = 33), and “Alternative Action” (n = 35), perceived by students as key focus areas to address when faced with conflict. Self-reflection supports the internalization of emotional triggers to promote self-awareness and self-management. Asking why there is conflict and identifying the root causes thereof promotes social awareness and relationship skills. Consideration of alternative action to violence strengthens and supports self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness.

The third theme identified was that Project GRIT helped support and equip students with conflict resolution skills to manage and respond to challenging situations non-violently. "Eddy," further explained, "...If I know the person is just trying to cause problems with me and make me mad, I just need to walk away. I must talk to an adult if they keep messing with me." He realized that fighting would not solve his problems, and he offered alternative options when faced with the issue in the future. "Sarah" realized she could help others dealing with issues of self-respect...
by “...If I can talk to those saying mean things to me without getting mad or hitting them, I may help them. They must be dealing with issues, too... that is why they say mean things to me. I should not get mad; I should help or find someone to help." When "Tommy" was asked to share what he learned through participation in Project GRIT, he stated, "I feel better about how I will handle things. I will not let others get me down or make me mad. If someone messes with me and bullies me, I will try to stay calm, walk away, and talk to a teacher to get help." Although each response was unique to the individual being interviewed, the overall program findings indicated that participants agreed that Project GRIT was effective in supporting and strengthening the intrinsic conflict resolution life skills within participants needed to promote positive and supportive relationships.

Additional information was collected and analyzed from post-lesson surveying the weekly Overcoming Obstacles (OCO) lessons (see appendix two). The information derived from the weekly student survey and administrative field notes taken during the observation was charted and analyzed to further assist in the program evaluation of Project GRIT. The results indicated that students perceived the social-emotional curriculum lessons as essential and effective in strengthening the SEL competencies (i.e., self-management, self-awareness, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and self-awareness) needed to support peaceful conflict resolution skills.

The OCO curriculum was implemented in four SEL units: Confidence Building/Goal Setting, Communication, Decision-Making, and Resolving Conflicts. While the sample size is small (n = 18) in this data collection, the findings indicate that the SEL unit on “Resolving Conflicts” was perceived as the most important among the participants enrolled long enough in the alternative setting to participate in all four of the SEL curriculum units. The SEL unit on
“Resolving Conflicts” ranked the most important ($M = 3.67$), the unit on “Communication” ranked second most important ($M = 2.44$), the unit on “Decision-Making” ranked third most important ($M = 2.28$), and the unit on “Confidence Building/Goal Setting” ranked the least important ($M = 1.61$) among the students surveyed.

The alternative school staff ($n = 10$) also completed weekly surveys (see appendix three) to assess for strengths and weaknesses of the SEL lessons. The staff reviewed and discussed the survey results after each lesson and categorized the data individually by SEL unit title (i.e., Resolving Conflicts, Decision-Making, Confidence Building/Goal Setting, and Communication). The survey data indicated overall that the staff perceived the effectiveness of SEL lessons from highest to lowest as: “Resolving Conflicts” ($M = 3.80$), “Communication” ($M = 2.60$), “Decision-Making” ($M = 2.30$), and “Confidence Building/Goal Setting” ($M = 1.40$). The data collected from the student and teacher weekly lesson surveys indicated that the SEL unit on “Resolving Conflicts” was the most effective and essential SEL unit covered within the Overcoming Obstacles curriculum. Both data collections indicated that the “Confidence Building/Goal Setting” unit was the least important and least influential SEL unit covered in the Overcoming Obstacles curriculum.

**Sub question 1. B.**

Sub question 1.B. asked if the Restorative Practices (RP) coaching and counseling sessions helped repair the harm to student relationships due to bullying or violence. Overall, the supporting evidence indicated the answer to sub-question 1.B. to be yes, student relationships were improved, and harm done due to violence or bullying was repaired. The qualitative data collected from the RP counseling sessions and the RP post-survey (see appendix seven) allowed
participants to voice individual thoughts, feelings, and perceptions on how much Project GRIT helped improve peer-to-peer relationships and repair the harm caused by bullying and violence.

Students enrolled in the Avery Alternative Center (AAC) for fighting and violence (in which student assent and parental consent were attained) participated in the RP counseling sessions \( (n = 32) \). The participants answered the RP counseling questions (see Appendix Six). The responses were discussed in a private conference involving only the individual student and the counseling team (i.e., the principal and counselors). The questions were selected to generate participant reflection on how the fight affected not only those directly involved but also how others (i.e., students who witnessed the fight, teachers who tried to intervene, family members of those involved, communities and organizations in which the participant lives and serves) were indirectly affected by the violence.

32 students participated in the RP counseling sessions. There were 14 one-on-one fights in which 28 students participated (i.e., A vs. B). One fight involved four different students (i.e., AB vs. CD). In total, there were 15 fights and 32 fighters that participated in the RP counseling sessions.

First, the students were asked to describe the fight in their own words. All participants admitted they had been involved in a fight and that violence had occurred. Student responses varied in that participants described no one fighting similarly. All students interviewed reported being the victim in the fight; the others involved were the aggressors. In all interviews, no student willingly accepted responsibility for instigating or initiating the fight.

Students were asked to describe how they felt before and during the fight and how they currently felt at the time of their interview. All students interviewed reported “feeling angry” when questioned about how they felt before and during the fight. Two students reported “being
scared and angry” (M = 6%) during the conflict. Fifteen students reported feeling angry (M = 47%) during the interview. During their interview, 17 students no longer felt angry with the others involved (M = 53%)

Many patterns emerged when students were asked how the fight had directly affected those involved. Several students indicated “feelings of remorse” (n = 21) for fighting. Many students (n = 29) reported “external consequences” (i.e., being grounded, loss of computer, loss of cell phone, extra chores added). In contrast, all students (n = 32) reported "internal consequences,” listing alternative school placement as the worst consequence for their participation in the fight and school violence.

Students were asked to reflect on how the incident affected others indirectly. Many participants (n = 24) reported “disappointment from family” due to their involvement in the violence and placement in the alternative school, "indirect physical injury" to staff or other students who tried to intervene to stop the fight (n = 5), and “increased contention within communities” because the students involved lived in the same neighborhood (n = 16).

Students were asked to explain the hardest thing to deal with and what they should do to make things right. One student responded,"...it has been hard to look at or talk to my parents. I know they are upset with me about what happened. I must make better choices and not fight when I become angry to make things right."

Another student reported, "I am afraid to leave my house. I think they are still mad and still want to fight. I did not do anything and wanted it to stop. I think talking to them about it and what happened would help, but I am afraid to."
Some participants ($n = 4$) reported they “were no longer mad...but don’t know how to make things right.” Some students ($n = 2$) also reported, "I do not care about making it right. I'm over it. I do not like them and never want to talk to or mess with them again."

During the interviews, students were asked to explain how they knew the other person(s) was angry or upset before the fight. Findings ($n = 30$) identified “non-verbal communication” (i.e., aggressive body language, giving mean looks, standing or walking around in an agitated manner) as a top indicator of conflict and aggression.

One student reported, "I could tell by the way she was glaring at me and the looks her friends gave me that she was mad. I did not even know why. She started walking my way, so I started walking toward her..." Another reported, “…she was across the room, punching her fist in her hand like she wanted to fight and kept pointing in my direction...."

When students were asked what they could have done differently, participants reported: "walking away" ($n = 29$), "telling a teacher" ($n = 23$), and "ignoring the student" ($n = 20$) as possible actions they could have taken instead of reacting in anger and resorting to violence. Results from the level one interview also indicated that many students ($n = 30$) felt talking things out with the others involved in the conflict was the best way to make things right and repair relationships.

The second level of the Restorative Practice (RP) counseling sessions required those who participated in the fighting to come together for a group conference with the principal and school counselor. The level-two group counseling sessions allowed those involved in a fight to come together and discuss the issues that had resulted in violence. The findings indicated that the level two group RP sessions “improved student relationships” ($n = 30$), “promoted peaceful conflict resolution” ($n = 30$), and “strengthened social-emotional skills” ($n = 29$).
Not only did the group sessions allow students to talk about the conflict, but students were also better able to understand the thoughts and feelings of the others involved. Many students (n = 26) reported “misinformation or misunderstanding” as agents influencing conflict. The group counseling sessions also identified “peer instigation” (n = 30) and, as common indicators, further escalating the conflict.

Students (n = 29) identified in the counseling sessions that “social media posts” were often the leading cause of in-school conflict among students interviewed. A common theme identified was that students often used social media platforms to post mean things or untrue information about students. Others would reply or comment, which often created more misinformation and caused students to become upset or angry. The online conflict would escalate and spill over into schools the following day when students were in classrooms or areas together.

One participant reported, "I felt angry when I saw what was posted...there was a post online saying they were going to fight me because someone else had said I was running my mouth talking about them, but I did not...I did not say anything about that girl. The other girl lied to me to her friend because she does not like me, and she wants us to fight..." Another student reported, "I am deleting all of my accounts. There is nothing but drama... everybody lies about everything... just to make trouble and cause problems that make everyone want to fight each other."

The Restorative Practice counseling sessions created opportunities for the students who had fought one another to come together and talk about their issues. In doing so, the counseling team guided session discussions to support and assist the participants in appropriately voicing their issues and feelings with one another. Overall, the findings indicated that the Restorative Practices implemented within the individual and group counseling sessions successfully repair
student relationships. The sessions also helped strengthen conflict resolution skills within participants and helped identify critical factors influencing and escalating student conflict.

Central Question Two

Central question two asked how Project GRIT can be improved to have more of an impact on reducing school violence. The exit survey data results indicated that the lessons on Conflict Resolution \((n = 3.38)\) from the Overcoming Obstacles curriculum, along with the Restorative Practices counseling sessions, were perceived by students to have the most impact on improving behavior and reducing violence. The weekly review and discussion of post-lesson survey data with staff indicated that Continued research on and implementation of best practices, incorporating new and engaging research-based interventions in social-emotional instruction and restorative counseling, are recommended to continue to support overall program success in reducing school violence.

The findings indicate Project GRIT could be improved by extending additional support services and counseling to the community and family groups. One student reported in the exit interview when asked about family counseling, "...I wish my mom were in counseling. She needs counseling too. We all do. We all need to go to counseling together. If we did, maybe things would get better at home." The student continued to explain that her mother was always mad and abusive (verbally and sometimes physically when the money ran out. The stress of living in poverty on a fixed income often created conflict and violence within the family, which sometimes fell over into the school setting. Other students often bullied her about being poor and said mean things about her family to her in school. The student admitted the counseling she received in Project GRIT had helped her better regulate and manage her emotions and actions.
She perceived that family counseling might do the same and help improve their situation in the home.

Observations made during student interaction in the weekly SEL lessons and the exit survey data also provided areas for program improvement. In our SEL lesson planning early on in the program, the team felt that even though the students who had fought each other would be in the same room during each lesson, they would be kept separated and not allowed to interact or participate in activities together during the lessons. To our surprise, there were many instances in which, after a couple of weeks of SEL instruction and restorative counseling, students who had previously fought one another were requested to be allowed to team up and work together during SEL activities. In most cases, permission was granted, and the students who once fought each other now engaged in weekly SEL and team-building activities.

Future program improvements could intentionally group students with conflict to participate in collaborative team-building exercises or activities. With careful planning and close supervision, the SEL group activity would provide opportunities (similar to the group Restorative Practice counseling sessions) for the rival students to test the SEL foundational knowledge by having them work together in the SEL activity for a common goal. The students would have to put aside their differences and work together as a team to complete the SEL activity. Careful planning and judgment must be used to prioritize student safety during these interventions, and the staff must remain close to monitor behavior and step in if necessary.

**Sub question 2. A.**

Sub-question 2.A. asked how the life-skills instruction could be improved to support student learning and growth in SEL competencies. While the program evaluation data indicated overall program success and achievement, the results also highlighted areas for growth and
improvement. The quantitative exit survey scores identified "develop self-respect" as the lowest-ranked social-emotional growth category ($n = 2.68$) in the Likert survey (see Table 8). The survey data indicated that though gains were made in strengthening self-respect among participants, the gains made were slight, as perceived by the participants. Additional and continued reinforcement in individual student counseling and whole group classroom instruction in the SEL area of self-respect would benefit participants and support continued program improvement and student growth in the area of self-respect.

Another growth area ($M = 1.40$) indicated by the teacher and student post-lesson survey results revealed “Confidence Building/Goal Setting” as an area for future program improvement. The students and teachers perceived the SEL lessons of self-respect, goal setting, and confidence building to be the least practical lessons to support SEL growth within the students. Future program implications should incorporate more instructional support to reinforce these competency areas, along with supplemental SEL activities and other resources to strengthen intrinsic skill development.

**Sub question 2. B.**

Sub question 2.B. asked how the Restorative Practice counseling sessions could be improved to strengthen student relationships. When students were asked in the post-Restorative session survey (see appendix seven) to provide ways to improve the restorative coaching and counseling sessions, the responses indicated a need for additional support in “parental and family counseling” ($n = 13$), along with community engagement and interaction through a “mentorship” ($n = 10$) program were ideas to consider for improving the Restorative Practice counseling element of Project GRIT.
Observations noted by the counseling team revealed that though students perceived Project GRIT to be effective in strengthening conflict resolution and improving student relationships, more should be done to promote intrinsic self-respect through Restorative Practices in the future. There was much discussion in the sessions on building positive relationships with others. However, little time was spent promoting self-respect individually with students. This lack of support indicated in the student interviews and observations was also supported in the exit survey data (see sub-question 2. A.), indicating "self-respect" as the least supported or adequate SEL competency in Project GRIT.

In one particular interview, a student commented that he felt he had grown in respecting others, but he still had little self-respect for himself. He shared, "...it is hard to have much respect for myself when my mom does not respect me. She always talks down to me. She does not care about me. All I am is a problem for her. She is always bringing me down." It was difficult for the counseling team to listen as the child talked about his lack of self-respect because his mother does not respect or care much for him either. Particular effort was made to counsel the child daily intentionally. However, though the team continued to reassure the child how important he was and how we must care for him each day, our efforts had little effect on improving the low self-esteem he had for himself, influenced by the hurtful and despairing words of his mother.

Our counseling team realized early on that we were unprepared for such situations. There were several sessions in which students shed tears as waves of feelings and emotions poured out from them unconditionally. Not having the answers, we could only hold space and listen. In such situations, our team felt we had failed our students by not having the answers or solutions to fix
the internal conflict our students were fighting. We even considered giving up and revising our programming.

We pressed forward cautiously and slowly began to realize that in these critical sessions, when we did not have words or answers to give, we were unknowingly providing the best solution in our silence. The students did not need a fix. They did need us to provide options or offer up solutions. All that was needed was for someone to listen. We were providing exactly what the students needed without even saying a word. The students just needed to get it out. With just our presence, we were a sounding board where students could let down their guard and release all of the pent-up frustrations, troubles, hurts, and fears they had walled up deep inside for so long; we were serving a purpose and providing the answer.

This was the most potent revelation our counseling team experienced in all of Project GRIT. Too often, as educators, we become so solution-driven and fixated on problem-solving that we are blinded by what is needed. It became clear that, sometimes, the best answer we can give is our presence, not our words. Sometimes, all we need to do is listen.
CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

The problem of practice explored in this applied research study was the high number of students sent to the Avery Alternative Center (AAC) for infractions involving violence on school campuses. Project GRIT was developed and implemented in the alternative school to reduce violence by strengthening the social-emotional skills of participants to promote peaceful conflict resolution and support positive student relationships. As discussed in Chapter Four, the findings indicate that students and staff perceived Project GRIT to successfully strengthen conflict resolution life skills and support positive peer relationships among participants.

Research questions guided the study in assessing the effectiveness of Project GRIT. Central question one utilized summative data assessment to evaluate program performance overall. The program goal identified in central question one was attained. The mean score of the Likert exit survey scale averaged .74 points higher than the 2.5 goals ($n = 3.24$). The findings indicate that students who participated in Project GRIT perceived the program as "moderately effective" in strengthening the social-emotional life skills needed to improve behavior, achievement, and overall school culture.

Sub questions 1. A. and 1. B. asked if the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) instructional curriculum and the Restorative Practices (RP) coaching and counseling sessions strengthened conflict resolution skills and improved student relationships individually. The data collected from the exit interviews, restorative counseling sessions, and SEL post-lesson
surveying indicate that both summative questions are yes, conflict resolution skills were strengthened, and student relationships improved from Project GRIT participation.

Central question two focused on a formative data assessment to analyze how the program could improve for future application. Sub questions 2. A. and 2. B. analyzed the individual action plan elements (i.e., the social-emotional curriculum and the restorative counseling sessions) to see how the programming could be improved. The data collected from the exit survey, student interviews, post-lesson surveys, and observations indicate improvements could be made to Project GRIT by providing more SEL instruction in the area of "self-respect," as this SEL category ranked the lowest \( n = 2.68; \) \textit{“slightly effective”}, identified in the student exit surveys and the post-lesson teacher surveys. Additionally, the findings support that the program could be improved by expanding elements to include a parental and community engagement component to support families and create opportunities for community mentorship.

This chapter discusses the findings and results from the study in depth. Limitations of the study are also identified. Finally, implications and recommendations for practice and future research conclude the chapter.

\textbf{Analysis}

School violence (i.e., fighting) is the top infraction resulting in student placement in the Avery Alternative Center \( (M = 64\%) \). The students struggle to appropriately manage their feelings and emotions to employ peaceful conflict resolution. Instead, the students in the district and community often resort to violence and fighting.

Upon reflection on the high number of students enrolled for fighting, I wanted to know why the students tended to react aggressively and violently when faced with conflict. In my research, patterns emerged in the literature review findings and the students placed in alternative
schools for fighting. The common factors in literature (Karakus, 2022; United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2019) identified poverty and crime, low socio-economic status, inequality and inequity, social injustice, large family size, single-parent homes, drug or alcohol abuse, gang affiliation, domestic abuse and neglect, poor mental health, community and environmental factors and poor academic achievement as agents influencing and associated with violence in youth.

The factors indicated in the literature review were also factors identified in the students enrolled in the alternative school for fighting and violence. Most students were simply products of their environment, exhibiting "learned behavior." Many students were impoverished and lived in neighborhoods where violence was common. When conflict arose, a "flight or fight" mentality took control. The students could not self-regulate or self-manage themselves when emotions and feelings escalated. Since fighting and violence were the standard methods of addressing conflict at home and in communities, the students reacted the only way they knew how. The students were limited in their ability to employ the social-emotional life skills (i.e., self-management, self-awareness, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness) needed to understand diversity, talk about the issues, empathize with others, and resolve conflict peacefully (Collaborative for the Academic et al., 2022; Scherer, 1992).

Because violence and aggression were common responses of our alternative students when faced with conflict, and research (Collaborative for the Academic et al., 2022; International Institute for Restorative Practices [IIRP], 2022) indicates SEL and RP help to improve behavior and reduce violence, the leadership team focused much attention to promoting and strengthening conflict resolution skills through the implementation of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) life-skill instructional curriculum and Restorative Practice counseling. Our leadership team (i.e.,
principal, counselor, teachers, secretary, and behavior specialist) understood from researching the problem of practices (i.e., the high number of students sent to alternative schools for violence) that there was a deficit in students' abilities to resolve conflict peacefully and appropriately.

Social and Emotional Learning

Project GiRT incorporated two key program elements, supported by the research, to improve student behavior and help reduce violence (i.e., Social and Emotional Learning and Restorative Practices). Element one of the action plan utilized classroom instruction to establish and strengthen the five Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) competencies (i.e., self-management, self-awareness, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness) within participants.

The SEL instructional curriculum (i.e., Overcoming Obstacles™) taught each week helped set the foundation for the desired social skills among the participants. The leadership team chose the curriculum because the instructional lessons and activities designed within the curriculum addressed all five competencies of SEL, and studies (Collaborative for the Academic et al., 2022; Overcoming Obstacles™, 2022; What Works Clearinghouse, 2022) supported that the instructional curriculum has had success in helping students develop the skills needed to self-manage their emotions, empathize with others, voice feelings appropriately, resolve conflict peacefully, know and regulate emotional triggers, build and maintain positive relationships, and improve decision-making.

During program development, I asked the team how we should divide up students into classes for the SEL lessons. Many teachers raised concerns about the possible consequences of putting students who had fought each other in the same room together for the lessons. Because of
this, they recommended that the students who fought stay separated during the SEL lessons. As we discussed, most staff shared the same concern and were content with separating the different sides of the lessons.

I fully understood their concerns and the possibility of creating more conflict and problems between students if we pulled them together. I also understood how much more powerful lessons could be if we successfully grouped the fighters during the SEL lessons. To do so would take careful planning and continuous supervision of students throughout the lessons and activities.

The team decided to group students by gender. Although most fights had occurred between students of the same sex, grouping students by gender also created opportunities for discussing gender-specific issues. Students who had fought one another were kept separated. The staff was also posted in different room areas to prevent misbehavior or conflict. Before each lesson, the students were reminded of the rules and expectations of the class.

Because great care in planning and supervision was undertaken, the participants engaged in the weekly SEL lessons and activities with peers they usually would have refused to work with. Students who had been sent for fighting often worked together by the end of their assigned placement on activities incorporated into the lessons to promote social skills. The team-building activities and the group restorative counseling sessions, helped students put aside their differences and develop mutual respect for others.

Unexpected evidence also supporting that Project GRIT had lasting effects on strengthening intrinsic social-emotional skills can be found in emails I have received from students who had returned to their site school. During exit interviews, I encouraged the students to reach out if they had any issues or conflicts with peers after returning to their site school.
There were five students who, instead of reacting and responding to conflict with violence, emailed me to report different issues or problems they were having with students in school. Before participating in Project GRIT, these students would last tell a teacher or principal when there was a problem. The students admitted they would have handled the issue through violence and aggression before participating in Project GRIT. Instead, the students reported the problems to a trusted adult so they could be handled appropriately by the school administration. I was proud that the students had chosen a peaceful resolution to address their issue. It also felt good to know the students knew and trusted they could contact me when they had an issue or conflict.

Not only were students contacting me about current issues, but my teachers would also get emails from prior GRIT students. Though students were no longer in the alternative setting with us, critical support systems and relationships of trust had been established. The students knew we cared not only about them but also about their success in life. The continuation of support built on foundations of trust still serves students today who have returned to the site schools. Our staff visits site schools often to check on prior students and continue to correspond via email to reinforce SEL and encourage students.

In my experience with Project GRIT, much of our program's success is due to the staff establishing relationships of trust with students. This is critical in supporting students academically and behaviorally. The staff in the Avery Alternative Center intentionally and purposefully made time to build supportive and trusting relationships with students.
Restorative Practices

Element two interventions of Project GRIT included individual and group counseling (i.e., Restorative Practices) sessions. While the weekly classroom social-emotional instructional learning activities supported students in establishing foundational knowledge and understanding of social-emotional competencies, the restorative counseling sessions provided opportunities for students to self-reflect and discuss the conflicting issues with their rivals in a controlled group setting. With guidance from the counseling team, the group sessions helped students voice their feelings and emotions appropriately with the others involved in the conflict.

Safety was a concern from the beginning. What would happen when we pulled the students who had previously fought together? How were the students going to respond and react? Our counseling team knew guidelines and ground rules had to be set for this to be successful. When students were enrolled in the alternative program, the student and parents were informed of Project GRIT and the restorative sessions. Parent consent and student assent were confirmed before students participated. During the individual sessions, the students were informed of the expectations and rules for the group session. The team explained that only the student holding the "talking piece" had permission to speak during the group session. When someone was speaking, the others were instructed to listen and reflect on the thoughts being shared.

Students were separated across the room to promote safety and instructed to remain seated during the session. The counseling team also stationed themselves between the students. The students were encouraged to use the skills learned during the SEL classroom activities and to speak and respond appropriately (verbal and non-verbally) when sharing thoughts and feelings (i.e., self-management, self-awareness, relationship skills, social awareness, and responsible decision-making) during the session.
During the first individual sessions, students reflected on their internal feelings regarding the issues that had led to violence. Each student had to analyze how the violence impacted not only themselves directly but also how others were impacted indirectly. The students could share their feelings with their rivals during the group session.

Due to the steps, the team took to promote safety, the restorative sessions were conducted peacefully. Overall, the sessions were successful in helping students to voice their issues appropriately and were influential in strengthening positive relationships. Many students agreed that "misinformation or misunderstanding" (n = 26) and "peer instigation" (n = 30) were the root causes of much of the originating conflict leading to violence.

In many cases, social media platforms (n = 29) were used for peer instigation and spreading misinformation to escalate student conflict further. During student enrollment in the alternative school, many parents admitted they were unaware that their child had accounts and was communicating online through different social media applications. Many parents also admitted that they do not regularly check their child's phones or other smart devices to monitor behavior or communications online and through text messaging. Some parents even admitted they had no prior knowledge that their child was involved in or having conflict with another student.

Research (Gentile et al., 2014) indicates that parents who mitigate screen time and proactively monitor children's media usage, including improved health, sleep, academic performance, and prosocial behaviors, can benefit children. A pattern emerged during Project GRIT, indicating that many of the alternative students enrolled for fighting were mainly unsupervised by parents regarding social media, text messaging, and other forms of digital
communications. Had the parents taken more action in proactively monitoring the child’s media usage, the violence could have possibly been averted and addressed peacefully.

Many students asked during exit interviews if they could remain at the alternative school instead of returning to the site school. Many students reported less drama and distraction at the alternative school, and some reported alternative school staff as more caring and supportive than other schools. Though most students returned after serving the assigned placement days, some students (with the support of site schools and parents) placement was extended. This was only in certain circumstances where all stakeholders agreed it was in the student's best interest.

For example, we enrolled many students who had extensive records of problematic behavior and absenteeism in their site school. Some students were often two or three grades behind academically as well. Common factors affecting each student were a distaste for traditional school, apathy towards learning and education in general, and frequent conflict with peers, teachers, and staff. In allowing these students to continue in the alternative program, our team provided instructional support to help graduate six "lower 25th percentile" students throughout Project GRIT. These students had voiced their intention to quit school if forced to return to the traditional learning environment. For these students in particular, not only did Project GRIT provide behavioral support, it provided a critical alternative in supporting students' academic needs, resulting in the graduation of six youths deemed students at risk of failing and dropping out of school. Because our staff in the alternative center had created foundational relationships of trust and support, even the most challenging and downtrodden students experienced social-emotional growth and academic success from participating in Project GRIT.
Limitations

A limitation influencing the applied research study and the findings center on the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on educational practice, instruction, engagement, learning, behavior, and achievement in schools worldwide and, more specifically, in the Anniston School District (ASD). The Coronavirus pandemic forced the ASD to close its doors to on-site, in-person learning in late March through May 2019-2020 school year. A hybrid remote teaching and learning system was developed and implemented for the remainder of the school year. Students completed packets of worksheets, virtual learning activities, and coursework if the internet was accessible at home.

Students had the option in the 2020-2021 school year to attend school in person (using masks and social distancing was mandated inside buildings) or participate virtually through online learning. Approximately 40% of students opted to participate through virtual, online learning during the 2020-2021 school year rather than return to in-person learning, tagged with mask and social distancing mandates (SchoolStatus, 2023). In the 2021-2022 school year, all school buildings in the ASD were reopened, and students were instructed to return to face-to-face, in-person instruction. Virtual and online learning was no longer offered in the 2021 - 2022 school year.

Student enrollment in the alternative school was one area impacted by the pandemic. Since nearly half of the student population in ASD opted to participate in virtual learning during the 2021 – 2022 school year, there were few behavioral incidents resulting in alternative school placement. The number of students assigned for fighting to the AAC in 2021-2022 was the lowest ever recorded ($n = 13$) annually. However, the following year when all students returned to in-person learning (2022 – 2023), a new record was set for the highest number of students
annually enrolled in the AAC for fighting \((n = 63)\). It became evident, by the sharp increase in alternative school enrollment numbers, that the pandemic had created social, emotional, physical, behavioral, and psychological health issues and concerns in students and needed to be addressed. Social-emotional learning and student counseling are needed now more than ever. Project GRIT successfully improved conflict resolution skills and peer relationships among participants. The program provided mental health aid through intensive counseling services for many students dealing with issues stemming from the pandemic.

**Recommendations**

Much was learned from the program implementation of Project GRIT. Consistent with the literature review discussed in Chapter Two, the program results of Project GRIT indicate Social and Emotional Learning and Restorative Practices to help promote positive student relationships and peaceful conflict resolution. Because many students resort to violence due to limited capacity of intrinsic life skills (i.e., the five SEL competencies) needed to effectively handle peer conflict and many other forms of adversity appropriately (Maxime, 2018; Smith & Low, 2013), Project GRIT sought to establish and strengthen these life-skills within participants while also working to improve student relationships and repair the hurt caused by violence.

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) life skills (i.e., self-awareness, self-management, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness) were strengthened in participants. At the same time, student misbehavior and conflict (i.e., behavior referrals, fighting, and peer conflict) were reduced. Based on the findings in this study, there are recommendations for future practices and program implications. I do not assert the implications for practice identified here as proven strategies to work in all practices.
**Relationships.**

Relationships are crucial to understanding and supporting student behavior. The foundation of trust and respect are vital components that must be established between staff and participants. This is a process, as trust and respect in relationships are not built overnight. Daily efforts should be endeavored by teachers to establish and strengthen relationships with students. By getting to know the students, staff can empathize and better understand the underlying issues causing misbehavior and other issues. Solutions and interventions cannot be developed until the root causes of the unwanted behaviors have been determined. The underlying issues affecting student behavior are best identified through intentional and supportive relationships between teachers and students.

Early in the planning stage of Project GRIT, I contacted Dr. Dorothy Espelege, a leading author on Social and Emotional Learning, to get her thoughts on how our team can best support and work to improve student behavior. In contrast, students are enrolled in our program. In our correspondence, Dr. Espelege replied, "I think instilling meaning and purpose in the lives of youth that have found themselves in alternative settings is critical. They are in these settings because systems fail them...including families, communities, policymakers, and oppressive educational systems. I also believe that having a trusted adult that believes in you unconditionally is critical!" (Espelege, personal communication, 2022). Project GRIT embraced relationship-building with students. Teachers and staff understood that many alternative school students were exposed to diverse issues influencing negative behavior outside of school (i.e., poverty, domestic abuse, violence, crime, and gang affiliation). In establishing trust and support as our foundation for the project, our team encouraged student buy-in and participation in Project GRIT, strengthening the intrinsic life-skill knowledge in SEL competencies. As discussed in the
findings, the students perceived Project GRIT was effective in supporting students in developing respect for self and others, improving emotional self-regulation and self-awareness, establishing empathy for others, strengthening decision-making skills, and promoting healthy identities.

**Parental and Community Engagement.**

Parental involvement would benefit students and programs addressing student aggression and violence. Partnerships between the school and parents can be created to collaborate, share information, and discuss intervention solutions. Parents, as well as students, would benefit from family counseling sessions in programming. Students and families would benefit from program extensions. Counseling in youth and family mental health provides students and families with comprehensive support services they may be limited to outside the school setting. The additional counseling helps to offset the influx of student misbehavior and aggression initiated by and stemming from the pandemic.

Many students shared concerns about internal conflict within their homes during the exit interviews. Some students reported a need for family counseling. These students felt their situation outside of school would improve if their parents participated in family counseling. Family counseling was reported as an area to include to improve Project GRIT. Roy and Giraldo-Garcia (2018) explain that parents who play an active role in supporting the social-emotional intelligence in their children at home and in schools not only support the child's academic success but also help prepare them for success in the world and life. School programming incorporating parental involvement and counseling promotes and supports student success and achievement.

Creating opportunities for community engagement within programming fosters positive school culture and community improvement. Research (Randolph & Johnson, 2008) shows that
community support through school-based mentoring programs promotes student achievement and improves SEL skills, especially relationship skills. Community members willing and able to participate in social-emotional activities like guest speaking or student mentoring provides the community with opportunities to engage in school activities. Community engagement also allows students to build positive and supportive relationships with community members outside school.

When schools provide opportunities for community members to engage in goal-setting, planning, and decision-making, a foundation of trust is created, and multiple perspectives from various stakeholders are shared (Great Schools Partnership, 2019). Through power sharing, historically underrepresented and marginalized groups have a platform for voice, agency, and action to openly share their concerns, discuss the issues, and problem-solve together in equitable community engagement. Schools must intentionally "break down barriers" (i.e., race, gender, religion, language, economically disadvantaged) hindering community participation. Community engagement such as this helps school leaders empathize with diverse community members to develop and support equitable procedures and policies to serve all stakeholders in the organization.

Organizational Change.

Research (Durlak et al., 2011) indicates that implementing social-emotional learning at the organizational level promotes and strengthens positive school culture and peaceful conflict resolution skills. SEL in schools can boost student achievement and academic success. I contacted Dr. Joseph Durlak, a Social and Emotional Learning expert and author, to learn more about SEL implementation and programming. In our correspondence, I asked what he perceived as the most critical factor in supporting social-emotional learning in school programs. Dr. Durlak
responded, "I think your experiences have already highlighted an important issue regarding SEL programs. Unless the organization continually supports the program, it will not achieve its intended effects. I suggest you start reviewing the literature on implementation science, which has grown tremendously in recent years." (Durlak, personal communication, 2022).

In researching implementation science, I came across systemic SEL. Systemic SEL is implemented in all organizational levels, PK through 12th grade, and incorporates social-emotional learning into the instructional curriculum and organizational programming. Implementing systemic SEL promotes student growth in the five competencies of SEL (i.e., self-management, self-awareness, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and social awareness) and further improve positive student relationships, behavior, and culture across the organization (Mahoney et al., 2021). Though Project GRIT was implemented in an alternative school setting, the findings support that SEL and restorative practices helped strengthen "life skills" to improve behavior, strengthen relationships, and resolve conflict peacefully.

Research (Karakus, 2022) indicates that similar programming on a larger organizational scale would benefit and support many more students. Social-emotional instruction, programming, and restorative practices to repair and strengthen relationships harmed by violence benefit school programs). The program benefits derived from Project GRIT include establishing supportive and trusting relationships between students and staff, improved positive school culture and student relationships, and improved student behavior, achievement, and decision-making. SEL and restorative programming benefits the general educational setting when implemented, improve positive school culture, and promote positive conflict resolution. When implemented on a grander scale, the benefits to student behavior and relationships would impact more students and programs at the organizational level.
Organizational change should also include frequent policy reviews and revisions. It is recommended that policy supporting "zero tolerance" practices be reviewed and revised to incorporate research-based practices to support and strengthen the intrinsic life skills which influence positive and negative student behavior. Instead of mere punitive consequences (i.e., out-of-school suspension or expulsion), supportive interventions through extensive social-emotional skill-building and restorative counseling can provide critical support to improve misbehavior, promote student growth, and reduce alternative placements and suspensions (Karakus, 2022). Such revisions in policy support behavioral interventions developed and implemented in schools to strengthen the intrinsic skills in students needed to manage emotions, feelings, and additional issues appropriately and peacefully. Determining the underlying issues influencing unwanted behaviors, then identifying and supporting non-violent responses to conflict are crucial steps in improving student behavior and reducing school violence.

**Conclusion**

If I only knew then what I know now, I would have been more equipped as a new teacher to support the two students who had fought the first week of school in my first year of teaching. As I described in the introduction of this dissertation, the signs were obvious. The boys were exposed to violence at home and in the community. They were often abused and bullied by others. They lived in poverty and came from broken homes. With so much stacked against them, their aggressive behavior directly resulted from the adverse childhood experiences and environmental issues they were exposed to daily (Rymanowicz, 2015; Scherer, 1992). Fighting was all they knew, and the boys felt they had to fight to survive.

I often think back and wonder what could have been done differently. The boys desperately needed encouragement, support, counseling, empathy, and compassion. Instead of
receiving the individualized social and restorative support they needed, they only received a three-day suspension from school. The institution providing eight hours daily of haven to protect the boys from outside danger and violence simply dismissed them back into the fray, where violent and traumatic experiences continued tightening their grip, further strengthening violent and aggressive behavior within the boys.

Safety must be prioritized for all who enter school doors. There are rules, procedures, and policies which must be followed, and there are consequences when rules are broken. However, there are things we must consider regarding student discipline. Do the disciplinary measures for student misbehavior incorporate behavioral support and intervention to help identify and address the underlying issues influencing the negative behavior, or is only punitive action employed, such as suspension? What steps are taken to help strengthen intrinsic SEL "life skills" (i.e., self-management, self-awareness, responsible decision-making, relationship skills, and self-awareness) within offenders? Are our support systems in place to promote positive school culture and help repair harm done in student relationships when violence occurs?

Suppose we continue disciplining students through arbitrary and antiquated procedures without identifying and addressing the root issues influencing negative behavior. In that case, we neglect our children and hinder their success in school and life. Schools must resolve to fully support and strengthen the social-emotional growth of skills needed effectively and appropriately manage daily struggles in life. Disciplinary measures such as out-of-school suspension and expulsion do little to improve the behavior. The practice typically results in low test scores, increases student dropout rates, and increases the risk of incarceration and involvement in the criminal justice system (Hemez et al., 2020).
Above all else, one critical factor had the most significant impact on the overall program success of Project GRIT. The relationships created with students, built on trust, provided the foundation for success. Without this critical component, Project GRIT would have failed. Students must know you care before they care what you know. Great teachers understand this concept. These educators have a love for children and a passion for their success, not only in school but also in life. These are the teachers that students come back to visit years after graduation to say thank you. These are the difference-makers.

Our children deserve better. With so many negative factors influencing students today, we must support students academically and develop and strengthen the social-emotional life skills needed. We must promote peaceful conflict resolution to end violence in schools. We must support restoration and youth mental health by providing counseling services for those affected by trauma and hurt by violence. Nevertheless, we must establish relationships and gain their trust before we can do any of this. This is where it must start.
References
REFERENCES


APPENDIX ONE

The Grit Scale

Here are a number of statements that may or may not apply to you. There are no right or wrong answers, so just answer honestly, considering how you compare to most people. At the end, you’ll get a score that reflects how passionate and persevering you see yourself to be.

1. New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones.
   - Very much like me
   - Mostly like me
   - Somewhat like me
   - Not much like me
   - Not like me at all

2. Setbacks don’t discourage me. I don’t give up easily.
   - Very much like me
   - Mostly like me
   - Somewhat like me
   - Not much like me
   - Not like me at all

3. I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.
   - Very much like me
   - Mostly like me
   - Somewhat like me
   - Not much like me
   - Not like me at all

4. I am a hard worker.
   - Very much like me
   - Mostly like me
   - Somewhat like me
5. I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.

- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

6. I finish whatever I begin.

- Very much like me
- Mostly like me
- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

7. My interests change from year to year.

- Very much like me
- Mostly like me
- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

8. I am diligent. I never give up.

- Very much like me
- Mostly like me
- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

9. I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest.

- Very much like me
Mostly like me
Somewhat like me
Not much like me
Not like me at all

10. I have overcome setbacks to conquer an important challenge.

Very much like me
Mostly like me
Somewhat like me
Not much like me
Not like me at all

Note. The Grit Scale (Duckworth, 2022).
APPENDIX TWO

OCO: Weekly Student Survey

Date: ________________________

Lesson Topic: _____________________________

1. What social-emotional competency or competencies were taught in the lesson today?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

2. What did you learn from the lesson today?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

3. How does the lesson relate to you and the reason you are enrolled at the AAC?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

4. How will you use what you’ve learned today moving forward?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

5. What would you like to know more about regarding the lesson?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

6. How would you rate the lesson (1 = unimportant; 4 = very important)?

   Circle your answer:  1    2    3    4

7. What could be done to improve today’s lesson?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
APPENDIX THREE

OCO: Teacher Survey

1. What objectives were covered in the lesson today?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

2. What activities were included in today’s lesson?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

3. Were students engaged or unengaged? How do you know?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

4. What were strengths of the lesson?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

5. How can the lesson be improved?

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

6. Do you feel you effectively planned for the OCO lesson this week? Explain and cite evidence.

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

7. How would you rate the effectiveness of the lesson in growing students this week (1 = ineffective; 4 highly effective)?

   Circle your answer:  1    2    3    4

Provide evidence:

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
APPENDIX FOUR

Student Exit Survey

Date: ___________________

Length of Project GRIT Participation (days): ________________

**Social and Emotional Learning (SEL): Overcoming Obstacles™ (OCO) Instruction.**

1. Over-all, how would you rate the effectiveness of the OCO lessons in supporting your growth in the five SEL competencies: self-awareness, responsible decision making, relationship skills, social awareness, and self-management? (1 = ineffective; 4 highly effective).

   Circle your answer: 1  2  3  4

2. How would you rate the effectiveness of the OCO lessons in helping you establish and strengthen intrinsic conflict-resolution skills? (1 = ineffective; 4 highly effective).

   Circle your answer: 1  2  3  4

3. How would you rate the effectiveness of the OCO lessons in helping you think before you act? (1 = ineffective; 4 highly effective).

   Circle your answer: 1  2  3  4

4. How would you rate the effectiveness of the OCO lessons in helping know and recognize your triggers and what sets you off? (1 = ineffective; 4 highly effective).

   Circle your answer: 1  2  3  4

5. How would you rate the effectiveness of the OCO lessons in helping successfully deescalate a situation or your feelings when you become upset or angry? (1 = ineffective; 4 highly effective).

   Circle your answer: 1  2  3  4
6. How would you rate the effectiveness of the OCO lessons in helping you better manage your feelings and emotions? (1 = ineffective; 4 highly effective).
   Circle your answer:  1  2  3  4

7. How would you rate the effectiveness of the OCO lessons in helping you make better choices and decisions? (1 = ineffective; 4 highly effective).
   Circle your answer:  1  2  3  4

8. How would you rate the effectiveness of the OCO lessons in helping you establish and maintain positive relationships? (1 = ineffective; 4 highly effective).
   Circle your answer:  1  2  3  4

9. How would you rate the effectiveness of the OCO lessons in helping you develop respect for yourself? (1 = ineffective; 4 highly effective).
   Circle your answer:  1  2  3  4

10. How would you rate the effectiveness of the OCO lessons in helping you develop respect for others? (1 = ineffective; 4 highly effective).
    Circle your answer:  1  2  3  4
APPENDIX FIVE

Student Exit Interview Conference

1. What was your favorite lesson? Why?
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

2. What was your least favorite lesson? Why?
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

3. Did participation in the OCO lessons help you learn the skills you need to resolve conflict peacefully next time you disagree with someone or are faced with an issue? Explain.
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

4. The next time you are faced with an issue or conflict at school, what steps will you take instead of fighting?

5. In our lessons, we discussed knowing your triggers. What are some of your triggers? Why is knowing your triggers important?

6. Why is having a trusted adult important? Do you have an adult you can talk to when facing an issue? Who are some adults you can talk to when you have a problem or conflict at school?

7. When peers instigate conflict, it usually causes things to escalate. How can you avoid these situations? What can you do when another student or group of peers try to instigate conflict between you and another person?

8. Usually before a “big thing” like a fight occurs, there are a bunch of “little things” that happen first. Why is recognizing the “little things” important? Why is it better to take action when things are “little” than when situations they become a “big” issue?
What Would You Do If…

9. A friend told you they overheard another group of girls/boys saying mean things about you and your family during lunch?

10. Someone comes up to you at recess angry and yelling at you saying they heard you were talking about them and you know this is not true.

11. You witness someone being bullied on the school bus, but the driver or monitor does not see what is going on.

12. Some of your friends are trying to instigate a fight between two other students in the classroom while the teacher is in the hallway with another student.

13. You see a social media post about someone saying they are going to fight another student the next day at school.

14. You walk into the restroom and see a group gathered around two students about to have a “10 second fight”.

15. You go to sit down at the lunch table by a friend and someone else jumps in front of you and sits down in the seat where you were going to sit.

16. You are about to sit down at your desk, but another student comes running in late and bumps into you hard, knocking you down, and causes the classroom to burst into laughter.
APPENDIX SIX

Restorative Questions for Level One RP Sessions

To help those involved:

What happened?

What were you thinking of at the time?

What have you thought about since?

Who has been affected by what you have done?

In what way have they been affected?

What do you think you need to do to make things right?

To help those affected:

What did you think when you realized what had happened?

What impact has this incident had on you and others?

What has been the hardest thing for you?

What do you think needs to happen to make things right?

APPENDIX SEVEN

Restorative Coaching and Counseling Participant Survey

• Did restorative coaching help you while you were at the AAC? How?

• How did talking about your problems make you feel?

• What did you learn about yourself from participating in the counseling sessions?

• How did you feel about the level one restorative coaching sessions overall?

• Who else was hurt by your actions? How does this make you feel?

• If you could go back to that day, what would you do differently?

• Do you feel the coaching sessions were effective in repairing the harm done?

• Do you feel the coaching sessions were effective in strengthening relationships?

• How did talking about your feelings with the other student(s) involved make you feel?

• Do you feel you now have the skills to handle conflict resolution peacefully next time you are faced with an issue?

• What is the greatest strength of the restorative counseling sessions?

• What areas can be improved to make the restorative counseling sessions better?

• Are there any unresolved issues or concerns we need to address?

• What is your support plan for when a conflict presents itself when you are back at the site school? Who will be your supporting adult?

• How can you take what you’ve learned and apply it back at your school to help reduce violence?

• What else do you need to be successful in handling conflict appropriately in the future?
APPENDIX EIGHT
Post GRIT: Site Teacher Survey on Student Behavior

Date ____________________

1. How would you describe the student’s behavior after returning back to class?

2. Would you say the student’s behavior has improved or become worse since returning? Why?

3. Have you noticed any other differences in the student since his return?

4. How does the student respond when faced with conflict in the classroom?

5. Have you noticed an improvement in the student’s academic achievement?

6. Would you say the student’s time spent participating in Project Grit was worthwhile? Why or why not?
APPENDIX NINE

Parent Consent and Student Assent Form, Individual Instruction Plan

Student Name: __________________________________ Date Entered: __________________
Length of Assignment:_____________________ Present Exit Date:______________________

Academic Program
The student will receive instruction, tutoring, and guided practice in the following subjects:

________________________________________________________________________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic strengths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic weaknesses</td>
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The objectives taught will be the same as those in the class being taught at the home school. All work will be returned to the home school teachers for grading and recording. AAC teachers do not assign grades.

Behavior Program
Individual and group counseling and activities will be utilized to assist the students in the following behavioral goals:

________________________________________________________________________________

AAC staff will be made aware of why a student has been sent to AAC. Each student will receive counseling by the AAC leadership team regarding appropriate conduct at school. Restorative coaching and counseling sessions (individualized, group, and victim/offender) will also be conducted to repair the harm and improve/strengthen student relationships to promote peaceful conflict resolution skills. Weekly classroom activities and social-emotional instruction will establish and support positive behaviors and skills needed for success upon return to the site school. The activities are designed to help students develop appropriate social and decision-making skills and the self-discipline needed in order to function successfully in the school and work environment through group and individual work. Participation is voluntary, but highly encouraged.

_____ Yes, my child may participate in the activities. _____ No, my child may not participate

Student/Parent:______________________________ Date:___________________
School Administrator:_________________________ Date:___________________
School Counselor: ______________________________ Date:___________________
DR. JAMES R. HOWINGTON, ED.D.

K / 12
EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

EXPERTISE
Curriculum and Instruction
School Safety and Security
Program and Policy Evaluation
Culture and Team Building
Social-Emotional Learning
Restorative Practices

CERTIFICATES
Practicing Administrator
MS Department of Education AAAA, 468
Doctoral Level Certification (May 2023)
TN Department of Education Teaching/Administrative Certification
LA Department of Education Teaching/Administrative Certification
Crisis Prevention Institute
Civilian Response to Active Shooter Event
Youth Mental Health and Support
Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (Ethics in Research, Responsible Conduct of Research Involving Children)

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2020 - 2023
University of Mississippi
Doctorate in Educational Leadership
3.9/4 GPA

2010 - 2012
University of Southern Mississippi
Master of Educational Leadership
3.9/4 GPA

2004 - 2007
University of Mississippi
B. Ed. in Secondary Education
3.7/4 GPA

WORK EXPERIENCE
2018 - Present
Optional Learning Center Principal
Senatobia Municipal School District (SMSD)
Continued education for K/12 students suspended or expelled from their home school for behavior infractions. Peer mediation and conflict resolution support. Social-emotional learning and instruction (CASEL.ORG). Restorative Justice Intervention (RIU.P.EDU). Serving nine K/12 schools within two separate districts. Helped support academic achievement through graduation for many lower 25th percentile students with behavior issues and special needs.

District Safety and Security Director
SMD
Co-writer of the District Re-Opening Plan regarding the return to in person learning following the Covid19 pandemic. Civilian Response to Active Shooter Events (CRASE) certified trainer of staff and programs. Crisis Response Institute (CPI) interventions for behavior management, restraint, and de-escalation trainer. District safety auditor and reporter. District safety liaison to the school board, MDE, and US. Department of Education. Compliance director and program evaluator. School-based mental health support agent.
nSide School Safety Platform Grant Writer/Technical Point of Contact

Writer and awardee of a MS Dept. of Education grant to strengthen integral safety and security measures across the district (5 separate sites/schools). The web-based platform allows collaboration with outside LEOs and First Responders in the event of an emergency by use of shared geospatial technology and application. The safety platform provides multi-level mapping (including street view perspective), cloud-based drill documentation, and remote "lockdown" application through smart devices across the district.

Building and Grounds Safety Inspector, Asbestos Management

General inspection of building and grounds, including asbestos management. Annual auditing and assessment of safety components and reporting.

Instructional Leadership and Curriculum/Community Development

Experience and collaboration in "best practices" and interventions for program implementation to strengthen and support high-quality instruction.

Leadership experience in training teachers and administrators in Fundamental Five, Leverage Leadership 2.0, Peer Coaching and Mentoring, Climate and Culture Building, De-escalation, Crisis Response, Data-Driven Instruction, Instructional Rounds, etc.

Community engagement and support in establishing a student facilitiated "clothes closet" to serve the surrounding community. Collaboration with local businesses and health services to provide for free services for low-income, needy families.

A community-supported mentorship program for supporting students with behavioral needs and community service projects to provide opportunities for students to give back.

Achievement and welcome rallies to build excitement about student and staff accomplishments and success.

Dissertation


School-based Mental Health (SBMH) Grant Writer and Project Director

Researched and developed the federal SBMH grant application, submitted, and is the awardee of more than $5,000,000, to be allocated over the next five years, to support and strengthen positive mental health and awareness in schools by increasing access to more therapists, specialists, and counselors. Allocations also made for mental health training, resources, and support.

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Program Implementation Director and Procurer of Funding

Researched and developed multi-SEL curriculums, action plans, and program evaluation to use in all grade levels across the district (i.e., Positive Action, Overcoming Obstacles, BaseEd, EverFi, Habitudes, SSIS-SEL, Review 360, Edgenuity, etc.) with the goal of strengthening life-skills and SEL competencies (i.e., self-management, relationships, self-awareness, social awareness, and responsible decision making).

Restorative Practices (Coaching and Counseling Sessions)

Expertise in "best practices" of Restorative Justice to heal the hurt, strengthen positive relationships among students and families, and reduce school violence. Our applied research with program evaluation yielded high results for Project Grit (SEL and RI) in supporting conflict resolution and reducing violence.

Achievements & Accomplishments

Assistant Principal/Support Staff of the Year, 2014, HHS.

Acquisition of multi-level grants for school safety, improvement, student and community counseling, and social-emotional learning.

AASA Leadership Award Recipient, University of Mississippi, 2021

Sayle Lilly Trice "Inspire" Educational Leadership Award, University of Mississippi, 2021

Distinguished Partner and Service Recognition, nSide School Safety Summit Presenter, 2022

Distinguished "School of Innovation" Recipient, NAEA National Conference, 2021-2022
**Affiliations**

- National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP)
- Mississippi Association of Secondary School Principals (MASSP)
- National Alternative Education Association (NAEA)
- Educational Leadership (EL)
- Association of Aspiring School Superintendents (AASA)
- Mississippi Association of School Superintendents (MASS)
- Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
- Association of American Educators
- National Education Association
- Mississippi Professional Educators

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**Career Experience (other)**

- Assistant Principal (9-12)
  Hancock High School, Hancock County, Kiln, MS
  (2014-2018)

- Administrative Intern, Coach, Teacher (6-8)
  Southaven Middle School, DeSoto County, MS
  2012-2013

- Teacher, Coach, PBIS Director (K-6)
  Crenshaw Elementary School, North Panola, MS
  2011-2012

- Interim Athletic Director, Coach (multi-sport), teacher, Department Chair, bus driver
  Independence Middle and High School, Tate County, MS
  2007-2010