

Original Paper

RULER: A Social Emotional Learning Program's Impact on School Climate

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Abstract

An urban public school system in the northeastern United States implemented the RULER Program, an evidence-based social emotional learning program, into schools in 2014. This case study investigates the impact of the RULER Program on school climate at one pre-K-8 school within that larger urban system. The study sought to determine if there are statistically significant changes in student suspensions, attendance, and academic achievement at that school since the initial implementation of the RULER Program by performing 2-proportion z tests. This study also sought to determine faculty and staff perceptions of school climate at the subject school by performing a descriptive analysis of survey data and coding interview and observation data for themes. The quantitative and qualitative data merge to provide a comprehensive explanation of the impact of a school wide social emotional learning program on school climate.

Keywords

social emotional learning, RULER program, emotional intelligence, emotional literacy, school climate

1. Introduction

Schools have a responsibility to address student behavioral, social, and emotional needs in order to better serve all students. This study provides information to school administrators regarding how a school wide Social Emotional Learning (SEL) program impacts teacher perceptions of school climate and student outcomes in one K-8 urban high-needs school.

Decades of research on emotional intelligence has put a spotlight on SEL, which refers to the process of integrating thinking, feeling, and behaving in order to become aware of self and others, make responsible decisions, and manage one's own behaviors and those of others (Brackett & Rivers, 2014). The RULER Program is based on the theory that individuals' emotions impact life outcomes (Provinci,

2014). Past studies from authors, Klem and Connell (2004) and Howes and Smith (1995), demonstrated that students in emotionally supportive classrooms reported being more engaged, chose more complex cognitive activities, performed better academically, and scored higher on standardized tests (Reyes, Brackett, Rivers, White, & Salovey, 2012).

The program that this study explores is the RULER Approach to Social and Emotional Learning (RULER) (Brackett & Rivers, 2014). RULER is an acronym that represents five interrelated emotional literacy skills: Recognizing emotion, Understanding emotion, Labeling emotion, Expressing emotion, and Regulating emotion (Brackett & Rivers, 2014). RULER is an evidence-based SEL program that uses professional development and the incorporation of emotional literacy instruction into the classroom curricula to improve classroom interactions (Hagelskamp, Brackett, Rivers, & Salovey, 2013). The program was developed by the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and is designed to be integrated into everyday teaching and learning activities (Meyer & Strambler, 2016).

Teaching and learning in schools have strong social, emotional, and academic components (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). Typically, learning is not an independent activity undertaken by one person. Students learn through collaboration with teachers, peers, and families (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). As an integral part of how people learn, emotional processes must be taken into account when schools plan learning experiences for students. The diversity within 21st-century schools makes addressing the emotional needs of students more challenging. Many students lack social-emotional competencies and a cycle of disengagement develops as they progress through elementary, middle, and high schools (Durlak et al., 2011).

The purpose of this case study was to determine how a school wide SEL program impacted school climate at a high-needs urban public school by measuring faculty and staff perceptions of school climate as well as changes in student suspension data, attendance data, and standardized test scores at the PK-8 school since implementation of the RULER Program. The school, located in a large urban school district, implemented the RULER Program, an evidence-based social emotional learning program, in the 2014-2015 school year, as part of a district wide initiative. A positive school climate, a decrease in disruptive student behaviors, and improved academic achievement are desired outcomes of the RULER program. In this study, faculty and staff perceptions of a positive school climate, a decrease in disruptive behaviors as measured by student suspensions, a decrease in student chronic absenteeism, and a decrease in students scoring at the lowest level on the Smarter Balanced math assessment would be indications that RULER had positively impacted school climate and student outcomes. The results of this study inform school leaders and educators of the impact a school wide SEL program can have on school climate and student outcomes.

The central research question guiding this study was, “How does the presence of a school wide SEL program impact school climate?” More specific research questions included:

Quantitative

- 1) Has there been a statistically significant change in disruptive student behavior, as measured by percentage of suspensions, at the subject school since implementation of the RULER Program?
- 2) Has there been a statistically significant change in student attendance, as measured by the percentage of chronically absent students, at the subject school since implementation of the RULER Program?
- 3) Has there been a statistically significant change in percentage of students scoring at Level 1 on the Smarter Balanced math assessment at the subject school since implementation of the RULER Program?
- 4) Do faculty and staff perceive a positive school climate at the subject school three years after the implementation of the RULER Program, as measured by the “Panorama Staff Survey”?

Qualitative

- 1) What are teacher perceptions of school climate as measured by the semi-structured interview data and observation data?

The subject school’s school system partnered with Yale University in 2014 to launch the RULER Program district-wide to “support the social and emotional well-being of students and district staff” (Meyer & Strambler, 2016, p. 2). A 2016 Yale University report to the community stated that students in this school system reported more self-control, had higher grades, fewer absences, were less likely to be suspended or expelled. Those who reported more student-teacher trust also had higher grades and were less likely to be suspended or expelled (Meyer & Strambler, 2016).

The theoretical framework that guides this study relies on three theories: Positive youth development theory, ecological systems theory, and self-determination theory. Environment is a critical factor in education. Positive youth development theory maintains that the needs of youth will be met by creating environments that promote outcomes like student achievement and positive relationships (Brackett & Rivers, 2014). SEL programs emphasize positive learning environments, school climates, and relationship-building. SEL is grounded in positive youth development theory and accepts the notion that youth will essentially adapt to the environment around them. For this same reason, RULER is a program that focuses on the development of supportive and safe environments.

In addition to positive youth development theory, RULER draws upon Urie Broffebrenner’s ecological systems theory, which states that the setting in which youth exist shapes their development, and self-determination theory, which states that “youth are more likely to flourish when in settings that address their social and emotional needs” (Brackett & Rivers, 2014, p. 6). According to ecological systems theory, human development and behavior should be studied through a multi contextual approach, which recognizes that individuals participate in multiple social contexts at the same time as well as enter and exit different contexts throughout their lives (Kirk, 2009, p. 482). Broffebrenner (1986) stated that in order to understand a child, the child’s environment must be investigated (Burns, Warmbold-Brann, & Zaslofsky, 2015). The social-emotional climate of a classroom refers to the

relationships between and among students and teachers as “demonstrated by supportive and caring interactions, positive feelings, a shared sense of cohesion and respect, and teachers’ sensitivity to student needs” (Hagelskamp, Brackett, Rivers, & Salovey, 2013, p. 2). The “success of any attempt to educate the whole child is dependent upon the extent to which learning occurs in caring, supportive, safe, and empowering settings” (Brackett & Rivers, 2014, p. 6).

2. Method

2.1 Participants

An urban public school system in the northeastern United States implemented the RULER Program, an evidence-based social emotional learning program, into schools in 2014. This convergent parallel mixed methods case study investigates the impact of the RULER SEL Program on school climate at one PK-8 school within a large urban district.

The participants included in the suspension data and student attendance data are from the collective student body at the subject school, kindergarten through grade 8. The 2014-2015 school year was representative of all of the years before the RULER program was implemented and the 2017-2018 school year was representative of all of the years after the program was implemented. The total student population in 2014-2015 was 562 (N=562) and the total student population in 2017-2018 was 549 (N=549). The participants included in the standardized test score data included only students in grades 3, 5, 6, and 7. Fourteen (N=14) school staff and faculty participated in the “Panorama Staff Survey” (Panorama Education, 2018). All of these participants were certified faculty members, such as teachers, although the opportunity was presented to all staff and faculty, including non-certified staff such as paraprofessionals, office staff, and security. Six (N=6) classroom teachers participated in the classroom observations and 5 (N=5) of those classroom teachers participated in interviews.

2.2 Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

The quantitative strand of this study includes four data sources: Suspension data, student attendance data, Smarter Balanced math assessment scores, and survey data. The year 2014-2015 represents the pre-implementation population that had no school wide SEL program, and the year 2017-2018 represents the post-implementation population that did have a school wide SEL program. The third year of implementation, as opposed to the first year of implementation, was selected because the RULER Program is meant to be embedded in the school curricula and there may be an adjustment period for staff and students, thus the data better illustrates the long-term effects of the RULER Program.

The student suspension data was analyzed using a 2 proportion z test to demonstrate if the two populations differ significantly on a single characteristic (suspensions). Since the 2014-2015 group and the 2017-2018 group are similar in composition and size, this test is appropriate. Statistical significance was set at .01.

Discipline data has been used as a measure of the effects of reform efforts in schools to combat negative student behaviors and has been determined to be a valid and reliable measurement of student behavior (Sugai, Sprague, Horner, & Walker, 2000; Anderson, 2009; Barkley, 2013). Further, student behaviors are an indicator of school climate: Negative student behaviors reflect poor school climates and positive student behaviors reflect positive school climates (Story, 2010). Thus, student suspension data is an appropriate measure.

The second dataset used in the quantitative phase of this study is student attendance data. The data was organized into a table showing the proportion of students who were chronically absent in the 2014-2015 and 2017-2018 school years. The student attendance data was analyzed using a 2 proportion z test to demonstrate if the two populations differ significantly on a single characteristic (chronic absenteeism). Statistical significance was set at .01.

The third dataset used in the quantitative phase of this study is the Smarter Balanced Assessment. Math scores were analyzed by grade level in the 2014-2015 and the 2017-2018 school years. The only grade levels that were analyzed were grades 3, 5, 6 and 7. Only scores from the math portion of the *Smarter Balanced Assessment* were used. All grades had a 100% participation rate in the 2014-2015 and 2017-2018 school years. The data was organized into a table showing the number of students in grades 3, 5, 6, and 7 who scored Level 1 (Not Met) on the standardized test.

A 2 proportion z test was used to determine if the 2014-2015 data and the 2017-2018 data differ significantly on the number of students scoring Level 1 (Not Met) on the math portion of the Smarter Balanced Assessment. The researcher measured students scoring Level 1 (Not Met) instead of those scoring Level 2 (Approaching), Level 3 (Met), or Level 4 (Exceeded) because the data required to perform a statistical analysis on these other levels is not available due to the suppression of data for student confidentiality. Statistical significance was set at .01.

The fourth form of quantitative data was the results of the "Panorama Staff Survey" (Panorama Education, 2018). A link to an electronic version of the survey was made available to all school staff and faculty. The surveys provide ordinal data which was converted to numerical data that was organized into a frequency table. Descriptive analysis was conducted to determine the mean, median, mode, and standard deviation. These procedures have been used and been found effective in analyzing survey data (Barkley, 2013). The measures of central tendency are important to give an overview of the survey results. The mean score for each item identifies specific items that have scored very high or very low. This indicates that as a group, the teachers feel school climate is strong or poor.

Determining the Standard Deviation (SD) of each item indicates how much teachers agreed on each item. A SD of .50 or lower implies that most teachers agreed on an item; a higher SD suggests that teachers varied in their responses to a particular item and that the item could be an area in which teachers have conflicting views (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015). The results are presented.

Considering the small number of participants in this survey, a descriptive analysis of data to determine the mean, median, mode, and standard deviation of each survey item number is provided as opposed to inferential analysis. To begin analysis, the survey's ordinal scale was converted to its numerical equivalent. The more positive responses are reflected in higher, positive numbers; the more negative responses are reflected in lower or negative numbers.

The measures of central tendency are important to give an overview of the survey results. The mean score for each item identifies specific items that have scored very high or very low. This indicates which survey items teachers feel strongly about. Statistical significance was set at .05. A standard deviation of .50 or lower indicates that most teachers agreed about an item; a higher standard deviation would suggest that teachers varied in their responses to a particular item and that the item could be an area in which teachers have conflicting views (Gruenert & Whitaker, 2015).

2.3 Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

The qualitative strand of this study includes two data sources: Classroom observations and semi-structured interviews. The purpose of classroom observations was to collect data about teacher implementation of RULER in the classroom. To analyze both the classroom observation data and the semi-structured interview data, the researcher followed Creswell's (2012) steps in the process of analyzing and interpreting qualitative data. This process included conducting a preliminary analysis of the data by reading through it to obtain a general sense of the data, playing back the recorded interviews, transcribing the interviews, and reviewing all field notes and memos.

The qualitative research question focused on teacher perceptions of school climate at the subject school. Instrumentation to measure perceptions of school climate included semi-structured teacher interviews and classroom observations. Of the six classroom teachers who were observed, five participated in interviews.

After initial coding of the interview data, twenty-five initial codes emerged. After reviewing these initial codes, the researcher was able to identify relationships among the codes and pare down to twenty axial codes, five of which are main concepts.

Field notes collected from the classroom observations included descriptive and reflective notes focusing on the implementation of RULER and the overall climate of the observed classrooms. The researcher utilized a coding process to analyze the data and was able to identify relationships among the codes and pare down to fourteen axial codes, four of which were main analytical concepts.

3. Result

3.1 Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

The results of the 2 proportion z tests to determine if the 2014-2015 data and the 2017-2018 data differ significantly on student suspensions as seen in Table 1. A 2 proportion z test indicated that there was a statistically significant positive change in suspensions since the RULER Program was implemented.

Table 1. Students with at Least One Suspension in the Academic Year

Academic Year	At Least One Suspension	No Suspension	Total Student Enrollment
2014-2015	122	440	562
2017-2018	73	476	549

A 2 proportion z test indicated that the proportion of students chronically absent from school differed significantly before and after implementation of the RULER program as seen in Table 2. The percentage of students who were chronically absent from school was higher before implementation of the RULER program.

Table 2. Students Chronically Absent from School

Academic Year	Chronically Absent	Not Chronically Absent	Total Enrollment
2014-2015	140.5	421.5	562
2017-2018	88.94	460.06	549

The results of the 2 proportion z tests on the Smarter Balanced math assessment data are displayed in Table 3. The z-score was for Grade 3 was 2.77 and the p-value was 0.003. This is significant at .01 so there is evidence that the percentage of students scoring at Level 1 was higher before the implementation of the program. The z-score was for Grade 5 was 0.053 and the p-value was 0.48. This is not significant at .01 so there is no evidence that percentage of students scoring at Level 1 was higher before the implementation of the program. The z-score was for Grade 6 was 2.11 and the p-value was 0.017. This is significant at .01 so there is evidence that percentage of students scoring at Level 1 was higher before the implementation of the program. The z-score was for Grade 7 was 0.785 and the p-value was 0.22. This is not significant at .01 so there is no evidence that percentage of students scoring at Level 1 was higher before the implementation of the program.

Table 3. Smarter Balanced Math Assessment 2 Proportion Z Test Results

Grade Level	Z Score	P Value	Significant
3	2.77	0.003	Yes
5	0.053	0.480	No
6	2.11	0.017	Yes
7	0.785	0.220	No

p value = 0.01

Evidence that the percentage of students scoring at Level 1 was higher before implementation indicates that a statistically significant number of students were scoring lower on the Smarter Balanced math assessment prior to implementation of the RULER Program. Grades 3 and 6 do demonstrate that the percentage of students scoring at Level 1 was higher before the implementation of the program but grades 5 and 7 fail to provide evidence of the same. The results of these tests, therefore, do not consistently demonstrate that the percentage of students scoring at Level 1 was higher before the implementation across the grade levels presented.

Based on the results of the “Panorama Staff Survey”, particularly the preponderance of high means indicating favorable responses, the researcher concludes that faculty and staff perceive a positive school climate at the subject school, three years after implementation of the RULER Program. Results of the survey are shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Panorama Staff Survey Descriptive Statistics (N=14)

Question	Mean	Median	Mode	Standard Deviation
1. On most days, how enthusiastic are the students about being at school?	3.93	4.00	4.00	1.00
2. To what extent are staff trusted to work in the way they think is best?	4.36	4.00	4.00	.50
3. How positive are the attitudes of your colleagues?	3.64	4.00	4.00	.74
4. How supportive are students in their interactions with each other?	3.57	4.00	4.00	.51
5. How respectful are the relationships between staff and students?	3.93	4.00	4.00	.62
6. How optimistic are you that your school will improve in the future?	4.50	4.50	4.00 and 5.00	.52
7. How often do you see students helping each other without being prompted?	3.86	4.00	4.00	.53
8. When new initiatives are presented at your school, how supportive are your colleagues?	3.79	4.00	4.00	.43
9. Overall, how positive is the working environment at your school?	4.29	4.00	4.00	.47

Note: Response anchors: 1-Not at all, 2-Slightly, 3-Somewhat, 4-Quite, 5-Extremely.

3.2 Qualitative Data Analysis and Results

When the interview and observation data were analyzed together, the main analytical concepts of relationships, shared vision, belief in social emotional education, school leadership, and student-centered outcomes emerged, as seen in Table 5.

Table 5. Combined Interview and Observation Thematic Table

Main Analytical Concepts	Interview Subcategories	Observation Subcategories
Relationships	Environment	Positive student-teacher interactions
	Building Trust	Promoting community
	Safety	Positive reinforcement
		Calming music
		On-task behaviors
		Clear routines and structured environment
Shared Vision	Fidelity of Implementation	Fidelity of Implementation: Elements of
	Putting Children First	RULER present in classrooms
	Ongoing Process	
Belief in Social Emotional Education	Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports	PBIS used as positive reinforcement
	Faculty and Staff Buy-In	PBIS used as punitive threat
	Incorporation of Other SEL Programs	
School Leadership	High Expectations of Administrators	
	Support of Administrators	
	Administrators' Belief in Program	
Student-Centered Outcomes	Student self-advocacy and self-awareness	Productive student-student interactions
	Improved student behaviors	
	Student and faculty emotion management	

The only main analytical concept that was not present in both datasets was that of school leadership. School leadership must be included as a main analytical concept because of its prominence in the interview data as a factor contributing to school climate. In all of the interviews, the topic of leadership emerged and the perception among all of the participants was that the strong leadership at the subject

school has had a profound and positive impact on school climate. The fact that school leadership did not emerge as a main analytical theme in the observation data makes sense because the researcher was observing everyday classroom routines and lessons where the administrator was not present.

4. Discussion

Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) found that the overall climate of a school and the climate of individual classrooms can have a positive or negative influence on a school's effectiveness and ultimately student performance. The results of this study demonstrate that the presence of a school wide Social Emotional Learning (SEL) program has impacted school climate positively as evidenced by a decrease in student suspensions, a decrease in chronic absenteeism among students, staff and faculty positive responses on the "Panorama Staff Survey", and the emergence of the main analytical themes of relationships, shared vision, belief in social emotional education, school leadership, and student-centered outcomes from the qualitative data.

Based on the results of the suspension data analysis, the chronic absenteeism data analysis, the survey data analysis, and the interview and observation data analyses, the researcher concluded that the presence of a school wide SEL program impacts school climate by decreasing disruptive student behaviors, decreasing chronic absenteeism, and improving faculty and staff perceptions of school climate. Overall, the presence of a school wide SEL program improved school climate at the subject school.

The survey and interview data demonstrated that faculty and staff perceived implementation of the RULER program and strong school leadership to be two significant factors that have resulted in a positive school climate. The elements of this positive climate are strong and meaningful relationships among staff and students, a shared vision for the school, the belief that faculty and staff have in social emotional education, and the focus on student-centered outcomes. Outcomes of the climate are improved student behavior, improved student attendance, and positive faculty and staff perceptions of school climate.

This study provides school leaders with evidence that SEL programs do impact student outcomes and school climate. It also provides evidence that the programming that school leaders select needs to be supported by strong building administrators and that purchasing a program is not enough. Faculty and staff need to be trained and supported in their daily implementation of the program and best practices in school leadership need to be continued (Hill, Palmer, Klein, Howell, & Pelletier, 2010).

The results of this study support the use of the RULER Program because of its impact at the subject school. School leaders must select programming based on the needs of the individual school and select one which can be integrated into the day to day functions. Purchasing a SEL program is not sufficient. School leaders need to make the SEL program an ingrained part of the school in order to see results (Brackett & Rivers, 2014).

Schools need to be a place in which students feel safe, both physically and emotionally. Continued research on school climate and SEL programming will help us better understand how to create environments in which students feel safe and in which students can find the most success.

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