A PILOT STUDY EXAMINING THE TREATMENT FEASIBILITY, ACCEPTABILITY, AND INITIAL OUTCOMES OF STEPS (STUDENT TRAINING FOR EDUCATIONAL AND PERSONAL SUCCESS): A SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING PROGRAM FOR BLACK MALES

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A dissertation submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the School of Education (School Psychology).

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ABSTRACT

Letanya A. Love: A Pilot Study Examining the Treatment Feasibility, Acceptability, and Initial Outcomes of STEPS (Student Training for Educational and Personal Success): A Social-Emotional Learning Program for Black Males
(Under the direction of Steve Knotek)

Racial disparities in school discipline were first highlighted in a 1975 seminal report released by The Children’s Defense Fund (Children’s Defense Fund, 1975). Since that time, racial disparities in school discipline have increased, and Black students remain the most vulnerable group affected (Wald & Losen, 2003; Losen, 2012). Of all students, Black boys face the most significant rates of out-of-school suspension (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), and research indicates that disparities in school discipline begin as early as preschool (U.S. Department of Education, 2014 & 2016). Toldson et al. (2013) argued that out-of-school suspension is the most common behavior management tool used by schools to correct problem behaviors. Unfortunately, research has shown that suspension is ineffective in reducing future misbehavior (Massar, McIntosh, & Eliason, 2015; Raffaele Mendez, 2003), and students suspended often do not receive services to address the root causes of the misbehavior (Raffaele Mendez, 2003). This is particularly concerning for students with a history of physical aggression as these behaviors place students at greater risk for poorer educational outcomes, mental health problems (Loeber et al., 2000) and delinquency (Fite et al., 2009). In addition to being the most vulnerable to exclusionary school discipline, which facilitates entry into the school-to-prison pipeline, school-aged Black males are also at greater risk for exposure to and perpetration of physical aggression.
Social-emotional learning has emerged as a framework to address students’ behaviors within a school-wide MTSS approach to promote prosocial skills and reduce problem behaviors. This pilot study investigated the feasibility and initial outcomes of an SEL intervention for 11 Black male high school students with a history of aggression. Using a quasi-experimental, pretest-posttest design, this research examined how student involvement in the STEPS Program impacted aggression, school conduct, school engagement, and academic performance. While the initial results indicated that no statistically significant differences were found, data collected during the one-year follow-up period revealed significant reductions in office disciplinary referrals and small gains in academic performance. With these encouraging trends, this study supports the promise of the STEPS Program as an alternative to suspension which promotes SEL skills. Limitations and directions for future research are discussed.

*Keywords*: social emotional learning, high school, Black, African American, school-to-prison, intervention
To my family and friends, this journey would have been impossible without your support.

Thank you all for loving and lifting me across the finish line.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES...........................................................................................................xii

LIST OF FIGURES..........................................................................................................xiii

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS............................................................................................xiv

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.............................................................................................1

Racial Disparities in School Discipline: Historical Context..........................4

Explanations of Racial Disparities in School Discipline.................................8

Poverty and Community Characteristics.........................................................8

Individual Behavioral Differences.................................................................10

Low Achievement.................................................................................................11

Bias .........................................................................................................................12

Current Trends in School Discipline...............................................................15

The School-to-Prison Pipeline...............................................................................16

Zero Tolerance Policies.........................................................................................18

School Resource Officers......................................................................................19

School Climate.......................................................................................................20

Two Systems. One Population..............................................................................21

Need for Interventions and Alternatives to Suspension............................23

Current Intervention Approaches......................................................................23

School Level Strategies........................................................................................24
Individual Level Interventions ......................................................... 25
Statement of the Problem ................................................................. 27

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW .................................................. 29
Social Emotional Learning ................................................................. 29
Theoretical Framework ........................................................................ 33
Cognitive Behavioral Theory ............................................................ 33
Behavioral and Academic Challenges of At-Risk Males ......................... 34
Aggression .......................................................................................... 34
National and State Level Data .......................................................... 35
Risk and Protective Factors ............................................................... 35
Aggression and SEL ............................................................................ 37
School Conduct .................................................................................. 39
School Conduct and SEL ................................................................. 40
School Engagement ............................................................................ 40
School Engagement and SEL ............................................................ 43
Academic Achievement ....................................................................... 43
National and State Level Data .......................................................... 44
Academic Achievement and SEL ........................................................ 46
Intervention Research .......................................................................... 46
Summary of Relevant Research .......................................................... 52

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY ............................................................. 57
Purpose of the Study ............................................................................ 57
Design .................................................................................................. 59
Participants…………………………………………………………………………………………59

Sampling.........................................................................................................................60

Focus Group Participant Recruitment.................................................................60

STEPS Participant Recruitment .............................................................................61

Measures.........................................................................................................................63

STEPS Focus Group Protocol..................................................................................63

STEPS Parent Questionnaire....................................................................................64

STEPS Student Questionnaire....................................................................................64

Behavior Assessment System for Children, Third Edition (BASC-3).......................65

Student Engagement Instrument (SEI).................................................................65

Educational Record Review.......................................................................................66

Procedures....................................................................................................................66

Data Collection...........................................................................................................66

Intervention Procedures............................................................................................68

Data Analysis ...............................................................................................................71

Qualitative Analysis....................................................................................................70

Quantitative Analysis..................................................................................................71

Descriptive Statistics..................................................................................................71

Initial Outcomes...........................................................................................................72

Ethical Considerations...............................................................................................72

The Investigator............................................................................................................74

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS.......................................................................................................76

Descriptive Analysis ....................................................................................................76

x
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Sequence of Sessions.................................................................123
Table 2: Data Analysis Plan.................................................................125
Table 3: Summary of Focus Group Demographic Characteristics...........76
Table 4: STEPS Focus Group Content Analysis......................................78
Table 5: Summary of Participant Demographic Characteristics.............91
Table 6: Summary of Parental Demographic Characteristics..................94
Table 7: Comparison of Mean Aggression Scores..................................95
Table 8: Comparison of Mean Office Disciplinary Referrals...................96
Table 9: Comparison of Mean Student Engagement Inventory Scores........96
Table 10: Comparison of Mean Semester Grade-Point Averages..............97
Table 11: Comparison of Mean Office Disciplinary Referrals at 9-Month Follow-up...98
Table 12: Comparison of Mean Student Engagement Subscale Scores........99
Table 13: Summary of Mean Item-Level Engagement Scores – SEI...........100
Table 14: Comparison of Cumulative Mean Grade-Point Averages...........101
Table 15: Comparison of Mean CBT Knowledge Scores..........................102
Table 16: Summary of Item Difficulty Scores-STEPs Curriculum Test........103
Table 17: Summary of Mean Student Participation Points.......................104
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: STEPS Program Problem Theory..............................................127
Figure 2: STEPS Theory of Change.............................................................128
Figure 3: STEPS Program Logic Model.....................................................129
Figure 4: Research Design of Current Study..............................................130
Figure 5: Research Design of Larger Study...............................................131
**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BASC-3</td>
<td>Behavior Assessment System for Children (Third Edition)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBI</td>
<td>Cognitive-Behavioral Intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBT</td>
<td>Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy</td>
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<tr>
<td>EOG</td>
<td>End of Grade</td>
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<tr>
<td>GPA</td>
<td>Grade Point Average</td>
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<tr>
<td>MTSS</td>
<td>Multi-Tiered System of Supports</td>
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<tr>
<td>ODR</td>
<td>Office Disciplinary Referral</td>
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<tr>
<td>PBIS</td>
<td>Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports</td>
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<tr>
<td>PRS</td>
<td>Parent Rating Scale</td>
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<tr>
<td>SEI</td>
<td>Student Engagement Inventory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEL</td>
<td>Social-Emotional Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SES</td>
<td>Socio-Economic Status</td>
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<td>UNC</td>
<td>University of North Carolina</td>
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Black boys in America have not realized the promise of an equitable non-discriminatory education set forth by the *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)* Supreme Court ruling. Black males attending our nation’s schools continue to face significant educational disparities which mark them for limited academic advancement and suppressed life outcomes. Data indicates that school-aged Black males are overrepresented in special education - most notably for services involving intellectual disability and emotional disturbance (Canty-Barnes, 2015), lag behind in areas of achievement, and continue to demonstrate elevated school dropout rates (McFarland, Cui, & Stark, 2018). An examination of recent data analyzing the 4-year freshman cohort graduation rate illuminates the problem of on-time graduation for Black males. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, for the 2012-2013 data collection period, 82% percent of all U.S. freshmen graduated within four years (McFarland et al., 2018). Unfortunately, Black male students are graduating at lower rates with only 64.3% graduating in four years (McFarland et al., 2018). In addition to these disparities, another startling educational inequity impedes the promise of a non-discriminatory education for Black males: the disproportionate rates of school suspension and expulsion. Data from the 2013-2014 Civil Rights Data Collection survey was released in 2016 and strikingly highlighted that Black boys received the highest rates of out-of-school suspension of all race and gender index groups (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). While Black boys accounted for 8% of all enrolled students, 18% percent of Black boys received an out-of-school suspension – a rate that is three times greater in comparison to White male students (5%). Disparities in expulsion rates illustrate a
similar trend: Black boys are expelled at a disproportionately higher rate when compared to their White male peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). This stark disparity has heightened public interest in how schools operate in pushing students, particularly Black males, out of school and into the school-to-prison pipeline.

The school-to-prison pipeline describes a system of school policies and practices that push students out of school thus making them vulnerable to and at risk of flowing into the prison system (Wald & Losen, 2003). Researchers illuminating the school-to-prison pipeline point to the following: 1) the pipeline often begins with school suspension (ACLU, 2008 as cited in Kirwan Institute, 2014); 2) exclusionary discipline places students at risk of lower achievement and dropout (Arcia, 2006) which significantly increases risk of criminal involvement (Fabelo et al., 2011; Monahan et al., 2014); and 3) more reliance on zero tolerance policies for minor infractions (American Psychological Association, 2008) and school resource officers (Education Week, 2017) accelerates juvenile justice referrals that disproportionately impact students of color (American Psychological Association, 2008). While the current empirical evidence of the school-to-prison pipeline is largely descriptive (American Psychological Association, 2008), the paralleling trends in racial disparities in school discipline and racial disparities in incarceration rates cannot be ignored (Wald & Losen, 2003). Black males have the highest rates of out-of-school suspension (U.S. Department of Education, 2014 & 2016), the most significant overrepresentation in juvenile justice placements (Sickmund, Sladky, Kang, & Puzzanchera, 2017), and the highest incarceration rates among all racial/ethnic groups (U.S. Department of Justice, 2018). A startling example of this alarming disparity is the incarceration rate among 18-19 year-old males – older adolescents who should be graduating from high school and preparing
for their transition to adulthood: Black males aged 18 to 19 are 11.8 times more likely to be incarcerated when compared to their White male peers (U.S. Department of Justice, 2018).

In 2010, following a speech by Arne Duncan, U.S. Secretary of Education, which highlighted the racial disparities in school discipline, more public outcry regarding this educational inequity and its deleterious effects ensued (Losen, 2011). With support from the Obama Administration, on January 8, 2014, the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, and the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice, released joint guidelines on school discipline to address racial disparities in school disciplinary practices (U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Given the growing public interest in creating equity in education, scholars began reemphasizing the need for more prevention programs and alternatives to school suspension and highlighted potential school- and individual-level strategies to address this national crisis (see Owen, Wettach, & Hoffman, 2015).

The current school-based pilot study was developed out of a need to create more school-based prevention programs and alternatives to suspension, and it represents one component (SEL program for Black high school males) of a three-pronged approach developed to address disparities in school discipline. STEPS (Student Training for Educational and Personal Success) is an early stage intervention designed to reduce participant’s risk of suspension, delinquency and incarceration through: 1) a school-based SEL program for at-risk Black males with a history of aggression; 2) school-based parent trainings; and 3) home visits. Since research indicates that suspension is ineffective in deterring future negative behavior (Massar, McIntosh, & Eliason, 2015; Losen, 2013; Raffaele Mendez, 2003), and children suspended for problem behaviors rarely receive services to address the underlying causes of misbehavior (Raffaele Mendez, 2003), it is our hope that policymakers will begin to institute more prevention programs designed to
reduce problem behaviors and ultimately decrease risk of entering the school-to-prison pipeline. The following literature review is intended to provide: a historical context of racial disparities in school discipline; a review of school-to-prison pipeline facilitators; a summary of alternatives to suspension; a review of social-emotional learning and key malleable mediators of students with aggressive behaviors; and a call to action for a school-based SEL program for aggressive at-risk students.

Racial Disparities in School Discipline: Historical Context

The federal government began collecting data on exclusionary school discipline indicators in 1968 (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Exclusionary school discipline is defined as punitive disciplinary action that results in removing a student from school (Losen, 2013). These measures can result in out-of-school suspension that is defined as removal from school buildings and grounds for one school day or longer, or expulsion – removal from a child’s regular school for disciplinary purposes for the remainder of the school year or longer (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). These discipline indicators are collected biennially by the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (OCR), through the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) survey. The most recent surveys were completed by all U.S. traditional public schools, alternative schools, career and technical education schools, and charter schools. Since the initial data collection began, it has been clear that the rates of suspension and expulsion have disproportionately impacted Black students.

In 1975, the Children’s Defense Fund released a seminal report that first chronicled the racial disparities in school discipline between White and Black students. School Suspensions: Are They Helping Children? (Children’s Defense Fund, 1975) revealed data obtained from the OCR collection that included surveys submitted by 2,862 school districts serving 24.1 million
students during the 1972-73 school year. The results indicated that Black secondary and elementary school students were two to three times more likely to be suspended at least once from school when compared to their White peers, respectively (Children’s Defense Fund, 1975). Moreover, according to research released by the UCLA Civil Rights Project, racial disparities in school discipline continued to rise sharply from the 1970s to the mid-2000s (Losen et al., 2015; Losen & Martinez, 2013). Research conducted by Wald & Kurlaender (2003) revealed that although Black students accounted for less than 17% of the overall student population in 2000, Black school-aged children represented 34% of all suspensions (a rate 2.6 times greater than White students). Wald & Losen (2003) reported that from 1972 – 2000, the rate of suspension for White students rose from 3.1 to 5.1 percent. Comparatively, the suspension rate for Black students rose sharply from 6.0 to 13.2 percent, during the same time period (Wald & Losen, 2003). Taken together, these data illuminate the finding that Black students received more exclusions from school, from 1972 – 2000, that undoubtedly lead to missed instruction and a higher likelihood of school failure.

Since 2000, more recent national and regional data of racial disparities in school discipline found similar trends of disproportionality reflected in several states and school districts examined. In a nationally representative sample of students from 364 elementary and middle schools, during the 2005-2006 school year, Skiba et al. (2011) discovered that Black and Latino students were referred, suspended, and expelled more than their White peers for the same or similar problem. Specifically, at both the elementary and middle school levels, Black students were overrepresented in ODRs across all infraction types (i.e., minor misbehaviors, disruption, noncompliance, moderate infractions, major violations, use/possession, and tardy/truancy). The data revealed that Black students were 2.19 (elementary) and 3.78 (middle) times more likely to
be referred for problem behavior as White students. In a regional investigation, Smith & Harper (2015) explored 2011-2012 school discipline trends in K-12 public schools in 13 Southern States: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. Strikingly, the data indicated that 55% of Black student suspensions, and 50% of Black student expulsions from public schools in the United States occurred across these 13 Southern states. Furthermore, a closer inspection of the disaggregated data revealed that while Black students comprised approximately 24% of the students in the 3,022 districts analyzed, Black students were suspended and expelled at disproportionately higher rates (Smith & Harper, 2015). For each of the Southern states reviewed, Black student suspensions were 1.5 to 2 times greater than their school enrollment percentage. Astoundingly, in 84 of the Southern school districts examined, Black students comprised 100% of school suspensions. Overall, Smith & Harper (2015) found that Black students represented 48% of suspensions, and 49% of all expulsions for public schools districts in the South.

State-level investigations from other regions in the United States revealed a similar pattern of racial disparities in school discipline. Rausch & Skiba (2004) examined disproportionality among minority students in the Midwest (Indiana). These scholars analyzed out-of-school suspension and expulsion rates for Indiana’s three largest racial groups (i.e., Blacks, Hispanics, and Whites) for the 2002-2003 school year across school locations and school level. The results indicated that Black and Hispanic students were more likely to be suspended and expelled at higher rates in urban, suburban, town, and rural schools across all school levels. And, in comparison to White students, Black students elementary school suspension rates were 6 times higher than White students. Further, at all school levels, the rate of expulsions for Black
students was higher than White students – reaching a rate that is 3 times greater by high school. This finding suggested that not only are Black students suspended from school earlier in their matriculation, they are also expelled at higher rates by the time they reach high school (Rausch & Skiba, 2004).

Within North Carolina, data from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction’s 2015-16 Consolidated Data Report indicated that Black students attending public schools experience higher rates of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions (NCDPI, 2017) – a finding that is consistent with other studies of racial disparities in school discipline. Smith & Harper (2015) reported that Black students accounted for 26% of students in school districts across North Carolina, but comprised 51% of suspensions and 38% of expulsions, during the 2011-12 school year. Further, Losen (2013) illustrated that among North Carolina students suspended for the first-time, Black students were more likely to be suspended for minor offenses including cell phone use, disruptive behavior, disrespect and public displays of affection than White students. This finding in Wake County Public Schools prompted an OCR complaint filed by the NAACP alleging that Black first-time students received a higher rate of out-of-school suspensions for the same category of offenses when compared to White students (NAACP et al., v. Wake County Board of Education et al., 2010 as cited in Losen, 2013).

Consistently, these data demonstrate that racial disparities in school discipline exist across states (U.S. Department of Education, 2014 & 2016), regions (Harper & Smith, 2015), school locations and school levels (Rausch & Skiba, 2004), and infraction types (Skiba et al., 2011). And, Black students are the student group at greatest risk for exclusionary discipline (U.S. Department of Education, 2014 & 2016). Moreover, disaggregated out-of-school suspension data indicated that Black males had the highest rates of suspension and among all
racial and gender student groups (U.S Department of Education, 2014 & 2016). With a national student enrollment of approximately 8%, 18% percent of Black boys received out-of-school suspensions (U.S Department of Education, 2016). Shollenberger (2015) revealed that by the time Black boys finish high school, an astounding seven in ten can expect to receive at least one in-school or out-of-school suspension. These data are concerning as school suspension and expulsion have been linked to innumerable negative outcomes including lower academic achievement and increased dropout risk (Arcia, 2006; Bowditch, 1993), retention (Owen et. al., 2015), and criminal involvement (Suh & Suh, 2007; Boneshefski & Runge, 2014). Given the documented negative outcomes associated with exclusionary school discipline, it is important to explicate the root causes underlying these disparities currently found within the literature.

Explanations of Racial Disparities in School Discipline

Given the overwhelming evidence illuminating the disproportionalities in school discipline, scholars have generated several theories explaining why these discrepancies exist. Primarily, these hypotheses assert that the influence of poverty, individual differences, implicit bias, and low achievement contribute to the disparities in school discipline. Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera (2010) synthesized the empirical evidence explaining the racial discipline gap (another term commonly used within the literature to describe racial disparities in school discipline) and postulated five explanations: poverty and neighborhood characteristics, low achievement, differential behavior, differential selection, and differential processing. Their taxonomy will serve as a guide for the current examination of these potential causal mechanisms.

Poverty and Community Characteristics. There is no shortage of empirical evidence underscoring the impact of poverty on the developmental trajectory of school-aged children. Jensen (2009) revealed that poverty impacts academic and social behaviors at school which may
result in “acting out” behaviors, more limited range of behavioral responses, inappropriate emotional responses, impatience and impulsivity, and less empathy for others’ misfortunes. Further, Jensen (2009) posited that these behaviors can frustrate, puzzle, or irritate teachers who have limited experience with lower SES youth. Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera (2010) noted that children living in economically distressed neighborhoods may experience an increased exposure to violence and substance abuse that could lead to school sanctions (Brantlinger, 1991) as a result of school conduct problems secondary to violence exposure and behavioral difficulties. The disproportionate rates of exclusionary discipline found with lower SES communities has been documented within the literature. The research conducted by Raffaele Mendez (2003) revealed that lower SES children are suspended and expelled at higher rates.

Gregory & Mosely (2004) explored teachers’ views on the causes underlying racial disparities in school discipline. Using a sample of 19 high school teachers, 14 White, four Black, and one Latino, the researchers conducted 40-minute, semi-structured interviews to investigate the teachers’ understanding of the causes of discipline problems and how they chose to handle them. The findings revealed that approximately 45% of teachers emphasized Black youth culture and factors related to poverty as the cause for the discipline gap. Considering the association between race and SES, one White teacher explained: “African American kids in my class come from lower SES backgrounds and have a lot more problems, home problems” (Gregory & Mosely, 2004, p.23).

In 2015, more than 14 million children under the age of 18 were living in poverty (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2016). Although the poverty rate declined slightly, Black children represented the largest percentage of children 18 and under living in poverty. The 2015 data revealed that more than 36% of Black children were living in poverty, down from 38% in 2010.
Given these data, if school sanctions are associated with poverty, Black children are most likely to be on the receiving end of those sanctions. Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera (2010) argued that because race, SES, and neighborhood factors are highly correlated, it is difficult to tease out the significant contributions of each factor to the racial discipline gap. Yet, these researchers indicated that the empirical evidence is clear in revealing one highly consistent finding: race/ethnicity remains a significant predictor of discipline even after controlling for measures of family income. This suggests that student SES alone is not sufficient in explaining racial disparities in school discipline (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010).

**Individual Behavioral Differences.** Individual student behavioral deficits and differences are another explanation often espoused to explain racial disparities in school discipline. Early theories from the 60s and 70s attempted to characterize Black students as unskilled, culturally deprived and lacking the skills to succeed in school (Coleman, 1999 as cited in Gregory & Mosely, 2004). While the language has shifted from these extreme derogatory mischaracterizations, the stereotype still remains that students from certain racial/ethnic groups misbehave or contribute to more of the safety problems found in school than students from other groups (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). The qualitative research conducted by Gregory & Mosely (2004) revealed that some high school teachers believed that Black children came into the classroom with individual deficits as a result of community and culture that lead to higher rates of school misbehaviors. This assertion is not supported by evidence found within the literature.

In national school crime and safety data reported by Musu-Gillette, Zhang, Wang, Zhang, & Oudekerk (2017), no significant differences in self-reported unsafe behavior across racial groups were observed in comparison to the racial disparities in school discipline. Skiba,
Michael, Nardo & Peterson (2000) examined middle school disciplinary records and did not find any evidence to support the hypothesis that individual student behaviors among Black and White students were responsible for the discipline gap. In sum, Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, (2010) found a dearth of evidence to support the hypothesis that racial disparities in school discipline could be explained by differential student behaviors.

**Low Achievement.** Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, (2010) posited that lower achievement was another factor that may impact racial disparities in school discipline. Sattler (2008) reported that lower achievement is closely related to poverty and is associated with ethnic minority children entering kindergarten almost three months behind the national average in reading and mathematics. Moreover, minority children are more likely to attend schools with limited resources, poorly trained teachers, and inadequate curricula which adversely impact academic achievement (Sattler, 2008). Educational statistics have also demonstrated that these educational difficulties persist and Black children often lag behind White children and some racial/ethnic minority groups in national indicators of educational performance (U.S. Department of Education, 2016 & 2018). Some researchers have suggested that these academic gaps may lead to student frustration and contribute to the high rate of school conduct problems (Miles & Stipek, 2006) which could result in school sanctions.

Gregory & Mosely (2004) discovered that high school teachers often embrace the low achievement theory as an explanation for the racial disparities in school discipline. For these teachers, this theory focuses on an individual student’s ability to cope with the experience of academic failure. This is marked by a student’s low frustration tolerance when encountering challenging academic concepts and “acting out”, a failure to reveal academic difficulties and seek support, or giving up on the educational process. More than 50% of the teachers
interviewed subscribed to this theory as an explanation for the overrepresentation of Black students receiving exclusionary discipline. Gregory & Mosely (2004) concluded that by embracing low achievement theory teachers see low achievement as a “cause for rejection of the educational process and framed as an individual psychological coping mechanism that occurs regardless of experiences of cultural mismatch, discrimination, or institutionalized racism” (p. 23).

**Bias.** Much of the research on racial disparities in school discipline has considered in some part the impact of discrimination, implicit bias, or cultural incongruence on school disciplinary practices. Within the educational context, *differential selection*, which has been heavily documented in justice research provides a useful framework for understating how discrimination could contribute to the documented disparities in school discipline (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). The *differential selection* hypothesis posits that persons of color are more likely to be arrested because they are more likely to be arrested and picked out for wrongdoing despite similar levels of infractions from persons in other communities (Piguero, 2008 as cited in Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera (2010). Applying this hypothesis to the school setting, Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera (2010) asserted that despite similar rates of misbehavior across racial/ethnic groups, ethnic minority students may be more likely to be differentially selected for school discipline sanctions. In support of the differential selection hypothesis are studies which suggest that a bias in selection at the classroom level undoubtedly impacts racial disparities in school discipline (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). Often, Black students are perceived by teachers to be more defiant, rule-breaking or disruptive than students in other racial groups (Wentzel, 2002).
Related to differential selection is Piquero’s (2008) differential processing hypothesis that points to discrimination in the courts and correctional systems leading to disproportionate arrest and incarceration rates for minorities (as cited in Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). When applied to the school setting, the hypothesis suggests that minority and non-minority students may receive different consequences when office disciplinary referrals are received for the same behavior (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). Support for the differential processing assertion often reveals that Black students receive harsher consequences for school misconduct (Skiba et al., 2011).

Scholars examining implicit bias have investigated how our unconscious automatic thoughts and stereotypes can impact disparities in school discipline. In a recent study conducted by investigators at Yale, the implicit biases of preschool teachers were examined to determine their impact on expulsions and suspensions. Using deception to elicit unconscious stereotypes, Gilliam et al. (2016) asked teachers to view a six-minute video and identify the behaviors they perceived as challenging. While none of the videos contained challenging behaviors, and instead portrayed typical play amongst preschoolers, the teachers overwhelmingly identified the Black boys as exhibiting the most challenging behaviors requiring their attention. The findings demonstrated that preschool teachers observed Black children, and especially Black boys, more closely when challenging behaviors were expected. Gilliam et al. (2016) argued that these results could explain how teachers’ underlying biases contribute to the documented racial disparities in preschool suspensions and expulsions. Similar results have also been found in studies revealing that when teachers examined two fictional disciplinary records of students – one labeled with a stereotypical White name, and the second labeled with a stereotypical Black name; teachers suggested harsher punishments for the fictional student with the stereotypical
Black name, although the behaviors were the same (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). A recent report from the Kirwan Institute (2014) examined racial disproportionality in school discipline and argued that implicit bias was heavily implicated in these disparities.

A cultural incongruence or “mismatch” created by a teaching workforce that is predominately White has also been posited as an explanation for the racial disparities in school discipline. Townsend (2000) asserted that most classrooms are based on Eurocentric culture and beliefs with different academic and behavioral expectations of Black students that are not consistent with Black culture. For example, Black children may talk in louder tones that are not aligned with mainstream cultural values, which may pose some difficulty in an instructional climate that expects students to speak in quieter tones (Townsend, 2000). This could lead to office disciplinary referrals for disruptive behavior and perhaps exclusionary discipline.

Relatedly, Townsend summarized research by Gilbert & Gay (1985) who highlighted that Black children may exhibit “stage setting” (i.e., sharpening pencils, collecting papers, socializing with peers, getting water) before initiating an academic task. These behaviors are often not encouraged or rewarded within a classroom environment that emphasizes engagement in one academic activity at a time (Townsend, 2000). Monroe (2005) provided further analysis of the cultural incongruence hypothesis in her research. Monroe argued that teachers can misunderstand the interaction styles of Black youth and regularly misinterpret benign behaviors as insults (i.e., overlapping speech as disrespect and play fighting as authentic aggression).

Recent research revealing that Black students are suspended less when they have Black teachers (Lindsay & Hart, 2017; Klein, 2016) could provide some support for the cultural incongruence hypothesis.
While several explanations of the mechanisms that underlie racial disparities in school discipline have been posited, it is clear that no one explanation can account for the overrepresentation of Black children being excluded from school. Skiba et al. (2011) determined that with multiple hypotheses asserted it is likely that the cause of discipline disproportionality is complex and the result of numerous factors.

**Current Trends in School Discipline**

Unfortunately, the OCR data first reported over 40 years ago has remained unchanged: racial disparities in school discipline indicate that Black students are disproportionately suspended, expelled, and referred to law enforcement in comparison to their White peers (U.S Department of Education, 2014). Moreover, school-aged Black males continue to be at greatest risk for exclusionary school discipline (U.S Department of Education, 2014 & 2016). The risk is even higher for Black males in special education with 1 in 4 Black boys with disabilities receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions (U.S Department of Education, 2016). A newer finding in the OCR data exposed that racial disparities in school discipline begin as early as preschool (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). With a preschool enrollment of 19%, Black children represented 47% of preschool children receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). White children accounted for 41% of preschool enrollment, but only 28% of preschool suspensions. This suggests that the exclusion of Black students from the school environment begins early and persists over time. Moreover, disparities in school sanctions contribute to the over-representation of Black students, particularly Black males, referred for adjudication. Black students are 2.2 times more likely to be referred to law enforcement or subjected to school-related arrest when compared to White students (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).
Taken together, these data illustrate the alarming fact that Black students continue to be at greater risk of maladaptive educational and social outcomes associated with racial disparities in school discipline. Given this, it is important to elucidate how racial disparities in school discipline underlie many social problems including fueling the school-to-prison pipeline (especially for Black males).

**The School-to-Prison Pipeline**

In the 1990s, as federal laws were strengthened to fight a war on drugs and crime, school policies were toughened to fight crime and keep school children safe. These efforts ushered in the passage of The Gun Free School Act of 1994, which mandated a 1-year expulsion for the possession of firearms at school (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010), and popularized zero tolerance policies. Following the horrific 1999 school shooting at Columbine, school personnel and policy makers relentlessly pursued ways to prevent another school massacre. What was their response? A massive wave of enforcing zero tolerance policies and arming school grounds with school resource officers. While at the outset the move appeared to make our schools “safer”, the result was a dramatic increase in out-of-school suspensions, school arrests, and students headed for the local penitentiary (Wald & Losen, 2003). This phenomenon, often referred to as the *school-to-prison pipeline*, is marked by exclusionary school discipline policies and practices that cause students to “flow” out of our schools and into the criminal justice system (Wald & Losen, 2003). While much debate continues regarding the complex factors underlying the school-to-prison pipeline, empirical evidence is clear: out-of-school suspension places students at higher risk for dropout and criminal activity (Wald & Losen, 2003; Suh & Suh, 2007; Boneshefski & Runge, 2014; Fabelo et al., 2011; Monahan et al., 2014). Unsurprisingly, since Black males are
the student group with the highest rates of out-of-school suspension, these students will be the ones most likely pushed out of school and into the criminal justice system.

Over the last two decades, more investigations have explored the associated factors contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline. Arcia (2006) found that students who were suspended had lower achievement prior to suspension, and continued to lag behind their non-suspended peers which resulted in high dropout rates. Suh and Suh (2007) added that suspended students are 78% more likely to drop out of school. Moreover, research on adolescents has revealed the association between exclusionary discipline and subsequent delinquency, arrest and criminal justice involvement (Arum & Bestie, 1999; Fabelo et al., 2011; Monahan et al., 2014; Shollenberger, 2015). Townsend (2000) further explained the exclusionary discipline and delinquency link by noting that Black children who are excluded from school because of discipline are likely to be unsupervised by adults which increases their opportunity to engage with deviant peers and commit illegal acts. A recent report from the Brown Center on Education Policy (2017) further elucidated this phenomenon and summarized that out-of-school suspensions are associated with low achievement, poor attendance, and juvenile crime – a combination that pushes students into the school-to-prison pipeline.

As more researchers have investigated the impact of the school-to-prison pipeline, scholars have been keenly interested in understanding the school policies and practices that may create a pathway to incarceration. A recurring theme within the literature is the impact of zero tolerance policies, school resource officers (SROs), and school climate as mechanisms that accelerate the removal of Black students from the schooling process and into criminal justice settings.
**Zero Tolerance Policies.** Cornel, Gregory & Fan (2011) indicated that zero tolerance policies refer to discipline policies or practices that mandate a fixed punishment. These policies are often misunderstood by teachers and applied without consideration of the school context, developmental level of the child, or any mitigating factors including home environment. Cornell (2006) found that zero tolerance may result in harsher penalties for minor school offenses. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that these policies unfairly punish minority students. A report from the American Academy of Pediatrics (2013) summarized research asserting that while zero tolerance legislation was designed to address incidents perpetrated by White students, the vast majority of zero tolerance policy applications adversely impact Black or Hispanic students. Robbins (2005) revealed that zero tolerance policies are often unfairly applied to minority students as these groups are often perceived as disruptive and prone to behavioral problems. This finding was supported by additional research indicating that zero tolerance policies lead to exclusionary discipline for minority students even for minor violations including dress code and absences (Alliance for Quality Education, 2015).

Due the rapid expansion of zero tolerance policies, the American Psychological Association commissioned the Zero Tolerance Task Force to examine the academic and behavioral effects of zero tolerance policies on school-aged children (American Psychological Association, 2008). The committee found that despite a 20-year implementation history, zero tolerance policies are not as effective as once believed (American Psychological Association, 2008). Specific Task Force findings that garnered concern related to minority children indicated that zero tolerance policies maintain the overrepresentation of minority children in exclusionary discipline; the policies may represent a mismatch between adolescents’ developmental stage and behavioral expectations of secondary schools; the policies increase a schools reliance on law
enforcement strategies including profiling, use of security personnel, and metal detectors; and the policies increase referrals to the juvenile justice system for violations once handled by schools (American Psychological Association, 2008). Further, recommendations from the Zero Tolerance Task Force included using a tiered primary prevention model to address school discipline and school violence. In its 2013 report, the American Academy of Pediatrics did not support the use of zero tolerance policies and advocated for more appropriate methods to address school discipline including programs to reduce behaviors that lead to out-of-school suspension or expulsion.

**School Resource Officers.** School resource officers (SROs) are local police officers who are placed at schools to maintain the safety and security of school grounds. According to the literature, research has shown that SRO presence has not been consistently linked to feelings of safety (George, 2016). Moreover, for minority children, the SROs often create an assumption of guilt and a feeling of surveillance that reinforces racial inferiority (Wolf, 2014). While these officers have law enforcement responsibilities, they are expected to have additional skills in managing school-aged children through counseling and educational services (Scholosser, 2014). Unfortunately, research has shown that the officers often rely mostly on their law enforcement duties and have decreased reliance on their counseling role (Scholosser, 2014).

A recent analysis conducted by *Education Week* revealed important findings regarding police in schools. The results indicated that school police were common in American public schools (Education Week, 2017). Nationally, 28.9% of schools have SROs. North Carolina exceeds this average with 55% of schools employing SROs. With regard to student differences, Black students are most likely to attend schools with police officers. The data indicated that 74% of all U.S. Black high school students attend a school with at least one SRO. This
percentage is less for White students; 65% of White high school students attend schools with SROs (Education Week, 2017). It is significant to note that this finding could be related to unsafe neighborhood characteristics related to high poverty and high crime that results in more security personnel on school grounds (Brown Center on Education Policy, 2017). Alternatively, it could reflect the tendency to criminalize Black youth through methods of power and control. While the cause of the presence of SROs in schools with a high percentage of Black students should not be reduced to one explanation, it does appear that SRO presence in schools with high Black student enrollment contributes to the racial disparities in school arrests – and the increased likelihood of Black students entering the school-to-prison pipeline. Although Black students comprised 15% of overall school enrollment, for the 2013-14 school year, they represented 25.8% of students referred to law enforcement, and 33.4% of arrests (Education Week, 2017). White students were 50% of enrolled students, 38.2% of referrals to law enforcement, and 33.7% of schools arrests (Education Week, 2017). These results revealed the overrepresentation of Black students in criminal justice encounters, and the underrepresentation of White students for these indicators.

**School climate.** School climate has a significant impact on the culture of punitive policies and practices that impact the school-to-prison pipeline. As previously mentioned, high poverty schools may implement more security measures (i.e., SROs, metal detectors) as a safeguard against the neighborhood violence in which the schools are located. While well-intentioned, these practices have had the unintended consequence of adversely impacting exclusionary discipline and school dropout. Empirical evidence has supported this assertion and demonstrated that high-poverty, high-suspending schools are more likely to see more students being *pushed* out of school (Raffaele Mendez, 2003). Further, Lee, Cornell, Gregory & Fan
(2011) examined the school suspension rates at 289 Virginia public schools. Their finding revealed that high suspending schools tended to have higher dropout rates. Cotton et al. (1994) explored the factors related to suspensions and found that a school’s reliance on exclusionary discipline for behavior management was associated with students receiving suspensions. Moreover, school administrators set the disciplinary culture for any school, and some scholars have found that principals’ attitudes toward school discipline have facilitated punitive practices (Skiba, Chung, Trachok, & Hughes, 2014). Finally, a report of exclusionary discipline practices in California’s public schools uncovered three school characteristics that were related to increases in school suspensions: high percentage of Black student enrollment, high total enrollment (more than 1,300 students), and school level (middle schools reported the highest suspension rates) (Brown Center for Public Education, 2017).

Taken together, empirical evidence demonstrates that a reliance on zero tolerance policies, SROs in schools (particularly in high poverty, high minority schools), and a punitive school climate facilitate the school-to-prison pipeline that disproportionately impacts Black youth. These data indicate the importance of considering existing school policies and practices and partnering with the school administrators when developing and implementing prevention programs addressing suspension risk and the school-to-prison pipeline.

**Two Systems. One Population.** Some scholars have argued that the racial disparities in school discipline parallel the discrepancies within the criminal justice system (Wald & Losen, 2003). Black males have the highest rates of out-of-school suspension (U.S. Department of Education, 2014 & 2016), the most significant overrepresentation in juvenile justice placements (Sickmund et al., 2017), and the highest incarceration rates among all racial/ethnic groups (U.S. Department of Justice, 2018). Thus, while this evidence is descriptive (American Psychological
Association, 2008), it suggests that school-aged Black males appear to be at greater risk for entering the school-to-prison pipeline. Bird & Bassin (2014) acknowledged that in addition to disproportionality in special education, disparities across school disciplinary practices and the juvenile justice system have raised grave concerns “from the U.S. Department of Education’s office for Civil Rights and the Office of Special Education Programs, the National Association of School Psychologists, the American Civil Liberties Union, the American Psychological Association, and several youth advocacy groups about school policies and practices that promote certain groups of students being removed from school and pushed into the juvenile justice system” (Bird & Bassin, 2014, pp. 5).

Wald & Losen (2003) poignantly described the relationship between the racial disparities in school discipline and the disproportionalities in the justice system. They commented:

“…the racial disparities within the two systems [school and criminal justice] are so similar – and so glaring – that it becomes impossible not to connect them. Many observers, advocates, and educators have done so, crafting terms such as prison track and school-to-prison pipeline to describe these dual trends. Such phrases depict a journey through school that becomes increasingly punitive and isolating for its travelers. Many will be taught by unqualified teachers, tested on material they never reviewed, held back in grade, placed in restrictive special education programs, repeatedly suspended, and banished to alternative outplacements before dropping out or getting pushed out of school altogether. Without a safety net, the likelihood that these same youths will wind up arrested and incarcerated increases sharply.” (p. 11)

Using ethnographic data from two Northeastern high schools and one minimum security prison, Casella (2003) reported findings that indicated that high rates of expulsion and high rates of incarceration for Black males may be related. Further, Monroe (2005) supported the assertions of Wald & Losen (2003) and suggested that the overrepresentation of Black males in the criminal justice system coupled with the racial disparities in school discipline warranted more investigation of the link between these two areas. Three primary causes of the discipline gap,
and to a larger extent the school-to-prison pipeline, were noted by Monroe (2005): 1) the criminalization of Black males; 2) race and class privilege; and 3) zero tolerance policies. To assist educators in their efforts to address this burgeoning educational disparity, Monroe offered four recommendations: 1) teachers must be afforded professional development opportunities to challenge their biases and long-held beliefs about African American males; 2) culturally responsive disciplinary strategies should be valued and incorporated; 3) the discourse around school disciplinary decisions should be broadened; and 4) high-quality, engaging instruction must be maintained to engage students.

**Need for Interventions and Alternatives to Suspension**

While the body of empirical evidence has demonstrated that Black males are the largest student group impacted by disparities in school discipline (Toldson et al., 2013; U.S Department of Education, 2014 & 2016), which have been associated with disparities in criminal justice involvement (Wald & Losen, 2003), less is known about effective school-based prevention programs and alternatives to suspension shown to reduce the discipline gap for at-risk students – particularly at the secondary level. It is clear that interventions and alternatives to suspension addressing disparities in school discipline are needed at the state-, district-, school-, and individual-level to systematically target this inequity and ultimately reduce the risk of students entering the school-to-prison pipeline.

**Current Intervention Approaches.** In a report issued by the Duke Center for Child and Family Policy and Duke Law School, Owen, Wettach, & Hoffman (2015) offered 11 alternatives to suspension that have proven or promising support for their utility. These alternatives cover a range of initiatives including school-wide interventions, professional development initiatives, individual level programs, and board policy changes. More importantly, Owen, Wettach, &
Hoffman (2015) reported on school discipline legislation enacted by the North Carolina General Assembly in 2011 which addressed the negative outcomes of school exclusion and called for a “full range of responses to violations of disciplinary rules” including counseling and instruction in conflict resolution (p. 6).

**School-Level Strategies.** At the school level, Owen and colleagues advocated for the implementation of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) or Safe and Responsive Schools (SRS; Skiba, Ritter, Simmons, Peterson, & Miller, 2006), improving professional development to increase teacher capacity to manage problem behaviors, and examining the role of SROs who tend to unduly criminalize adolescent misconduct. For school climate initiatives, PBIS employs a set a strategies based on behavioral psychology that are implemented by all adults in the school and offers interventions within a tiered framework to address more challenging behaviors. SRS focuses on improving student behavior, reducing violence, and improving overall school climate through recommended programing for each school level and intensity of student behaviors. The program incorporates training in life skills, screening and assessment for students at risk of more challenging behaviors, and behavior plans for the most disruptive behaviors. With regard to professional development, research has revealed pre-service and in-service teacher professional development is critical to effective interventions targeting the discipline gap. Office discipline referrals begin with teachers, and it is important to evaluate the teachers’ beliefs, expectations, personal biases, classroom instruction, and behavioral management and any connections to disproportionality (Gregory & Mosley, 2004). One promising professional development program, My Teaching Partner – Secondary (MTP-S), aims to improve teachers’ interactions with their students and has been shown to reduce the racial discipline gap for Black students whose teachers were receiving bi-
weekly coaching (Gregory, Allen, Mikami, Hafen, Pinta, & 2013). Finally, given that nearly half of the juvenile justice referrals in North Carolina were related to school offenses (Owen, Wettach & Hoffman, 2015), Owen and colleagues advocated for limiting the role of SROs in North Carolina schools (a strategy that has been proven to reduce suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to law enforcement in other states).

Owen, Wettach, & Hoffman (2015) presented several encouraging school-level suspension alternatives that should garner interest from school officials across the state. Of those presented, PBIS has received a high level of support from North Carolina school leaders and policymakers interested in reducing school suspensions and expulsions. However, while PBIS has been shown to be effective in reducing school-wide discipline referrals and suspensions (Owen, Wettach, & Hoffman, 2015; Vincent, Sprague, & Gau, 2013), research examining PBIS has revealed that Black students remained the largest student group receiving these punishments (Vincent, Sprague, & Gau, 2013). This suggests that racial disparities in school discipline may remain even after school-wide attempts to improve behavioral supports. Therefore, race must be considered, understood, valued, and incorporated into intervention designs addressing the discipline gap. Some schools have responded and incorporated district and school level racial equity training for school staff, but more work is needed for specific individual level interventions for those students most affected by exclusionary discipline.

*Individual-Level Interventions.* Owen, Wettach, & Hoffman (2015) reported a number of individual level interventions that schools and districts have adopted as alternatives to suspension for students engaged in misbehavior. These strategies include restorative justice programs to repair victim harm and hold offenders accountable, community service requirements as a suspension alternative, community-school partnerships for high needs students, substance abuse
interventions for students whose misbehavior involves drug offenses, and alternative schools for the most severe behaviors. Although these suggested alternatives are needed across our schools and districts, what is missing is an easily accessible prevention program and alternative to suspension for those students who are most at-risk of suspension and expulsion and whose early behaviors may lead to more serious offenses long term.

In its recommendations of strategies to address the school-to-prison pipeline within North Carolina, Youth Justice North Carolina, now the Youth Justice Project – a subsidiary of the Southern Coalition of Social Justice, recommended social-emotional learning programs as a prevention strategy (Youth Justice North Carolina, 2014). In considering the need for more individual level prevention and intervention efforts, and the Monroe (2005) recommendation for culturally responsive disciplinary strategies, interventions at the individual level are needed for Black males who are at greatest risk for exclusionary discipline and resulting negative outcomes. From a school violence prevention perspective, targeting aggressive behavior should be a primary concern as it poses a threat to school safety (Larson, 2008) and increases risk for later violence (Farrington, 1991). Thus, one point of prevention entry may be more targeted efforts to address problem behaviors in a student population at high risk for suspension and expulsion. Toldson et al. (2013) found that aggressive behavior was associated with school disengagement and ODRs for Black male students, but this relationship was not as strong for Latinos and White males. Therefore, prevention efforts and alternatives to suspension that seek to remediate problem behaviors and maintain a child’s connection to the school environment should be considered.

To that end, it is important to develop and implement interventions for Black male students with a history of ODRs or exclusionary discipline for aggressive behaviors as these
behaviors place one at greater risk for adult violence (Farrington, 1991), school disengagement (Toldson et al., 2013), lower achievement (Choi, 2007) and subsequent contact with law enforcement (Fite et al., 2009). Suspension is often the primary disciplinary method used by schools to address problem behaviors (Toldson et al., 2013) including aggression. However, research has shown that suspension is an ineffective means to correct and deter problem behavior (Losen, 2013; Raffaele Mendez, 2003), and there is evidence to suggest that it could serve as a behavioral reinforcer (Jacobsen, Pace, & Ramirez, 2016). Moreover, as powerfully argued by Raffaele Mendez (2003), students who misbehave are often suspended and return to school without receiving services to address the underlying cause of the misconduct. Townsend (2000) also recognized that students who are suspended and expelled generally do not receive instruction on prosocial behavior which increases the likelihood of dismal outcomes. Social emotional learning programs have demonstrated effectiveness in building SEL competencies that lead to reducing aggressive behaviors, decreasing school conduct problems, and improving academic success (Pennsylvania State University, 2017; Dymnicki, Sambolt, & Kidron, 2013; Durlak et al., 2011). Therefore, a school-based SEL program may hold promise as a prevention program and alternative to suspension for students with aggressive behaviors to foster the development of social competence which impacts behavioral and academic success.

**Statement of the Problem**

Black children face significant vulnerabilities which place them at greater risk for negative long-term outcomes. Of these children, Black school-aged boys are the most vulnerable given their documented disproportionalities in exclusionary school discipline which place them at higher risk for lower educational attainment, delinquency, and incarceration. With renewed efforts to address this racial disparities in school discipline, more public attention has been given
to the need for system-wide strategies and individual-level interventions which support the
development of prosocial behavior. This is promising as schools have traditionally focused
primarily on academic learning with limited efforts placed on social-emotional learning.
Moreover, as more states and districts move to implementation of Multi-Tiered System of
Supports (MTSS), which incorporates PBIS, schools will be challenged further to meet the
behavioral needs of all students at each tier. Social-emotional learning interventions provide a
pathway to meeting the behavioral needs of students, and research has shown that these
programs can result in increased academic performance and decreased problem behaviors
(aggression and conduct problems) (Pennsylvania State University, 2017; Dymnicki, Sambolt &
Kidron, 2013; Durlak et al., 2011). Furthermore, these initiatives will be vital to students with
externalizing behaviors as schools have largely resorted to exclusionary approaches for behavior
management of aggression with limited emphasis on providing high-intensity, explicit
instruction in the social and emotional areas of need (i.e., anger management, conflict resolution,
emotion regulation, interpersonal skills, etc.).

The current study was designed to test a prototype of an SEL intervention targeting Black
high school males with a history of aggression. Grounded in cognitive behavioral theory, the
SEL intervention was developed to facilitate acquisition of prosocial skills that would decrease
aggression and school conduct problems and improve the student’s school engagement and
academic achievement. With positive outcomes, the intervention could hold promise as a school
violence prevention program and alternative to suspension for at-risk students.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Social-Emotional Learning

Historically, school personnel have assumed responsibility for academic learning and given less attention to social-emotional learning; however, Scott, Anderson, & Alter (2012) assert that social behavior is just as important and must be explicitly taught. Further, these scholars suggest that “the student who leaves school with academic skills but who has few social interaction skills and quickly resorts to physical violence during a disagreement is as likely to fail in life as the student with academic deficits” (Scott et al., 2012, pp. 6). In an effort to meet the needs of all students, schools have recognized the need to build “non cognitive” skills to facilitate academic and behavioral success.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) initiatives are emerging as a framework to address maladaptive behaviors and increase positive outcomes for all students including at-risk youth. First introduced in 1997 (Garner et al., 2014), SEL is a process through which an individual acquires the knowledge, attitudes, and skills associated with the emotional aspects of life in ways that promote positive development across academic and social domains (Elias et al., 1997). The overarching goal of SEL interventions is to increase prosocial behavior and to reduce antisocial behavior (Garner et al., 2014). Elias et al., (2007) explained that SEL initiatives grew out of emotional intelligence work and evolved from a prevention of mental illness model to the broader goal of promoting social competence.
The goals of social-emotional learning are achieved through the development of five core skills: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2015). Kress & Elias (2006) and Dymnicki, Sambolt & Kidron (2013) conceptualized the core components as follows: Self-awareness is defined as recognizing and naming one’s emotions and involves having a growth mindset, understanding the reasons and circumstances for feeling as one does, and knowing one’s strengths, needs, and values. Self-management is defined as managing one’s emotions to achieve academic and personal goals and encompasses impulse control and coping with emotions (i.e., anger, anxiety, and depression). Social awareness is defined as the ability to show empathy and understanding of others and consists of perspective taking and diversity awareness. Relationship skills involve the capacity to form and maintain relationships and include communication, social engagement, and managing conflict. Responsible decision-making is defined as making ethical decisions based on social norms, respect for others, and consequences. These skills are vital for students with a history of aggression and should be the foundation of a curriculum-based program designed to facilitate prosocial skills and decrease negative behaviors.

Effective social-emotional learning programs can be delivered through various approaches to encourage the development of social emotional competency and involve SAFE practices. Primarily, the modalities involve: 1) skill-focused promotion – explicit instruction on social emotional competency through free-standing lessons; 2) academic integration – programs that supplant or supplement standard class curricula with one that incorporates SEL strategies embedded within it; 3) teaching practices – programs designed to promote positive classroom or school environment, cultivate student-teacher relationships, and healthy peer interactions (i.e., cooperative learning); and 4) organizational reform programs – systems level strategies primarily
at the secondary level to promote SEL (Pennsylvania State University, 2017). Durlak et al. (2011) suggested that the most effective SEL programs incorporate SAFE practices: S (Sequenced) - use of a connected and coordinated set of activities to develop social emotional competencies to achieve their objective; A (Active) – active forms of learning to engage students and provide practice (i.e., role-plays, behavioral rehearsal); F (Focused) – at least one session component dedicated to the development of personal or social skills; and E (Explicit) – target specific skills for SEL development rather than general skills for positive development. The integration of a primary delivery approach with SAFE practices ensures that the SEL program is developmentally appropriate and connected for optimal acquisition of knowledge and skills.

Empirical evidence demonstrates that SEL programs are effective for elementary, middle, and high school students. In a 2011 meta-analysis, Durlak and colleagues reviewed 213 school-based, universal (SEL) programs involving over 270,000 K-12 students. Their findings suggested that in comparison to controls, SEL students saw improvements in SEL skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance resulted in an 11-percentile point gain in achievement. While these results demonstrated the effectiveness of SEL programs, the review focused entirely on universal programs, without the inclusion of selected (Tier II) or indicated (Tier III) models for children at risk for or exhibiting more severe concerns, and 56% of the school-based programs were implemented with elementary school students. To fill this gap, Dymnicki, Sambolt & Kidron (2013) summarized findings from SEL programs with an emphasis on the needs of secondary students that revealed participation in SEL programs was related to improved SEL skills, more positive attitudes toward self and others, more positive social behavior, higher academic performance, and reduced conduct problems. More importantly, the researchers indicated that SEL programs are effective for at-risk youth and students requiring intensive
social-emotional support. Further, Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan (2010) conducted a meta-analysis of SEL after-school programs (ASP) and found that SEL curricula implemented after normal school hours yielded positive outcomes including reductions in problem behaviors and improved school performance. Taken together, these findings suggest that SEL is effective for children at all school levels and demonstrate clinical utility for a range of social-emotional deficits (for both in-school and after-school models).

Recent research has investigated the effectiveness of SEL programs with urban and alternatively placed students. Hamedani & Darling-Hammond (2015) investigated the overall impact of SEL programming in three ethnically diverse high schools in Boston, Brooklyn, and San Antonio. Across these schools, the student populations were largely comprised of Black and Latino students with a combined 57% of the students receiving free and reduced lunch. The results revealed that each of the schools with SEL programs had stronger persistence, academic outcomes, and graduation rates in comparison to other schools (without SEL programming) in the district serving similar students. Slaten, Irby, Tate & Rivera (2015) examined the SEL outcomes in an alternative urban school. Using interviews with 15 school staff members, the researchers investigated the predominately Black urban alternative school’s approach to meeting the SEL needs of its students. Employing innovative methods to reach students was important to school personnel considering that students placed in alternative schools are the most vulnerable youth in an educational setting with linkages that support the school-to-prison pipeline (Slaten et al., 2015). Results revealed that by culturally adapting (i.e., incorporating culturally representative images, music, content, etc.) the SEL pedagogy to increase its relevance for the students served, the educators were able to meet the SEL needs of the youth while building stronger relationships with the alternatively placed students. It is widely accepted that
strengthened teacher-student relationships enhance a student’s sense of belonging which is critical for school engagement and overall academic success. These studies indicate that SEL programs demonstrate clinical utility with diverse, at-risk populations and culturally relevant SEL content can foster the development of social-emotional competency.

Theoretical Framework

Cognitive-Behavioral Theory. Elias et al. (2007) postulated that many interventions within SEL employ cognitive-behavioral theory as the source of their pedagogy. Cognitive-behavioral theory, as posited by Aaron Beck and Albert Ellis, asserts that maladaptive behaviors result from faulty/irrational cognitions (thinking errors) that impact our emotions. This framework can be applied to a number of clients with problematic behaviors as it emphasizes that our faulty beliefs are not fixed (Elias et. al., 2007), and once replaced with more positive and adaptive cognitions clients can experience changes in affective and behavioral consequences.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), which focuses on strategies to produce changes in thinking, feeling, and behavior (Kendall, 2006), can be implemented with children and adolescents in school. Within a school setting, these connections can be taught using the ABC model (antecedents, beliefs/behaviors, consequences) proposed by Ellis (Joyce-Beaulieu & Sulkowski, 2015). With a wealth of empirical evidence, cognitive-behavioral intervention has been recognized as an evidence-based approach which can be utilized to help students with aggression. CBT is an effective therapeutic method because it targets deficits in emotion regulation and social problem-solving that are associated with aggressive behavior (Dodge, 2003; Sukhodolsky et al., 2016). In a meta-analytic review of 21 published and 19 unpublished reports, Sukhodolsky, Kassinove, & Gorman (2004) revealed that CBT interventions produced moderate effect sizes for children and adolescents with anger-related problems. Modeling,
feedback, and homework techniques were positively associated with the magnitude of the effect size (Sukhodolsky et al., 2004). This evidence demonstrates the utility of CBT approaches in reducing aggression in adolescents. To that end, a social-emotional learning program which incorporates CBT pedagogy can be implemented to improve the outcomes of Black male students with a history of aggressive behaviors. The current research is guided by the overarching belief that teaching aggressive youth new cognitive and behavioral skills (through the SEL curriculum) will increase their coping strategies and ability to reduce aggression and related problem behaviors.

**Behavioral and Academic Challenges of At-Risk Males**

**Aggression**

Connor (2002) defined aggression as an overt behavior that can result in harm to self or others. Aggressive behaviors can involve physical aggression, verbal aggression, bullying, unwanted sexual touch, relational aggression, and electronic aggression (Reilly & Shopshire, 2002). Within the school setting, physically aggressive behaviors are important behaviors to address within a comprehensive intervention approach to school violence as these behaviors could result in victim harm and impede overall school safety (Larson, 2008). Moreover, Musu-Gillette, Zhang, Wang, Zhang, & Oudekerk (2017), revealed that physical attack or fight (without a weapon) was the most common violent school discipline incident reported by school principals on a national school crime and safety survey; approximately 57% of school principals reported physical attacks in their school. In focusing on these concerns, it is important to identify which school populations are most at risk for exposure to or perpetration of aggression.
to improve student social emotional competence and reduce the risk of exclusionary discipline and later violence.

**National and State Level Student Data.** In a recent Youth Risk Behavior Survey (2015), conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a nationally representative sample was assessed to explore self-reported school and community violence. The results revealed that Black high school males are at high risk for aggression. This finding is important as it adds to the cumulative risk (Townsend, 2000) of a vulnerable population facing seemingly insurmountable challenges. According to the CDC report, in 2015, during the 12 months before the survey, 38.6% of Black high school males reported involvement in a fight, 5.8% were injured in a fight, 15.4% were in a physical fight on school property, and 8.9% were threatened or injured with a weapon on school property. These numbers were higher in comparison to their White peers; the report indicated that 26.6% of White high school males reported involvement in a fight, 2.8% were injured in a fight, 8.0% were in a physical fight on school property, and 4.4% were threatened or injured with a weapon on school property, during the same time period (CDC, 2016). Within North Carolina, the data revealed the same trends – Black males attending North Carolina’s public schools are at higher risk for physical aggression on and off school grounds when compared to their White male peers (CDC, 2016). These results illuminate the need to target physical aggression as a behavioral concern warranting school-based intervention for Black males as physical aggression has been identified as a risk factor for conduct disorder, later violence, and other mental health concerns including ADHD (Loeber et al., 2000).

**Risk and Protective Factors.** With national and state level data revealing that Black high school males are at higher risk of physical aggression, which has been associated with later
violence (Zins et al., 1994; Loeber et al., 2000), it is important to further elucidate the risk factors of youth violence that may warrant clinical attention. Several individual, familial, and environmental risk factors of violence have been identified by empirical studies. First, gender, early multi-setting aggression, difficulty reading non-verbal cues, low self-esteem, academic failure, disruptive classroom behavior, and poor communication skills were found to be key individual risk factors of youth violence (Embry et. al., 1996; Christie, Petrie, & Christie, 1999; Larson, 2008). Familial factors shown to predict an increased likelihood of youth violence include inconsistent child-rearing practices, lack of parental supervision, parental criminality, harsh discipline, and single parenthood (Embry et. al., 1996; Christie, Petrie, & Christie, 1999; Larson, 2008). Moreover, social and community factors related to the development of youth violence were poverty, peer rejection, association with a deviant peer group, high delinquency rate schools, and neighborhood exposure to violence (Embry et. al., 1996; Christie, Petrie & Christie, 1999; Larson, 2008).

Adding to this research, the CDC summarized factors which contribute to the development of youth violence. Their findings suggest that a history of violent victimization, poor behavioral control, association with delinquent peers, social rejection by peers, poor academic performance, low commitment to school, and school failure were related to the perpetration of youth violence (CDC, 2017). Further, individual and social protective factors amenable for promotion within a school context were highlighted. These protective factors included: higher academic achievement, high educational aspirations, highly developed social competencies, positive school social relationships, commitment to school and doing well at school, and involvement in prosocial activities.
Scholars have revealed significant findings regarding aggression among Black youth. Cotton et al. (1994) explored within group differences in aggression among a sample of North Carolina middle schoolers who were predominantly Black (97%) and male (53%). Their findings suggested that age and gender were predictive of individual student reports of aggressive behavior and fighting at school. Further, poverty and school factors were associated with students having a school suspension record for fighting. Basch (2011) summarized national school crime and safety data that showed aggression disproportionately impacts Black youth and has a negative impact on academic achievement. More specifically, Basch acknowledged that the link between aggression and academic achievement is mediated by school engagement and conduct indicators (school connectedness and absenteeism). Basch (2011) also recognized that verbal aggression warranted clinical attention as minority and public school students were more likely to report race-related hate words used against them. To reduce aggression and violence, Basch (2011) provided a number of recommendations which included implementing curricula and instruction to help students learn and practice pro-social behaviors. Social-emotional learning initiatives would meet that need. Adding to this line of inquiry, Toldson et al. (2013) found that for Black males, aggressive behaviors preceded school disengagement – which negatively impacted academic achievement. According to Toldson and colleagues, aggressive behaviors and school disengagement were found to have the most significant impact on suspensions and disciplinary referrals for Black males.

**Aggression and Social Emotional Learning.** Larson (2008) argued that aggression is a stable behavioral trait, and students unable to demonstrate more appropriate strategies to manage anger and conflict and resort to violence are in need of additional behavioral support at school – in order to prevent more serious long-term problems. Additionally, he asserts that for many
students school may be “the last best hope” (Larson, 2008, p. 14). Further, he acknowledged that many “frustrated” school principals believe in error that the threat of exclusionary school sanctions will result in a student’s willingness to control their aggressive behaviors (p. 14). To target the behavioral difficulties for at-risk students, he advocated for selected (at-risk students) or indicated (severe and pervasive aggression) school interventions which involve skills training that builds cognitive and behavioral skills (i.e., anger management, conflict resolution, self-regulation) over time.

Unsurprisingly, many of the factors related to aggression and youth violence are also shared by Black males who experience more exclusionary school discipline: gender, poverty, low achievement, school disengagement, school conduct problems (disruptive behaviors including aggression), and lack of parental supervision. This provides more support for the need to address aggressive behaviors early on and at the school level for at-risk youth. Lee, Cornell, Gregory & Fan (2011) acknowledged that aggressive behaviors such as fighting are common reasons for school suspension. However, as previously explained, while suspension is the most often used disciplinary strategy in schools (Toldson et al., 2013), it has been shown to be ineffective in reducing future misbehavior (Massar, McIntosh, & Eliason, 2015; Losen, 2013; Raffaele Mendez, 2003). Cornell, Gregory & Fan (2011) acknowledged that students who are suspended from school tend to engage in higher rates of subsequent misbehavior. Moreover, this method does not address the root causes of the student’s misbehaviors (Raffaele Mendez, 2003). Given this, scholars have called for social-emotional learning initiatives to build social competence in students at risk of developing more serious behaviors (Larson, 2008). This bolsters support for social-emotional learning programs to be implemented within a school-wide approach to school violence prevention and disciplinary concerns.
School Conduct

Appropriate school conduct is reflected in a student’s ability to follow school rules, demonstrate respect for peers and authority figures, and complete academic tasks as instructed. Students who exhibit conduct problems may have difficulty conforming to school rules, cheating in school, stealing, and lying (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2015). While related to aggression, conduct problems would be categorized as behaviors that are rule-breaking and antisocial rather than overtly threatening and potentially harmful behaviors (physical or verbal) that are directed at another person or object (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2015). Within the school setting, these behaviors are concerning as they disrupt the learning environment and could lead to a major or minor disciplinary infraction. Reducing conduct problems would be important in a school-based program focused on reducing risk for exclusionary discipline and negative outcomes as these behaviors can lead to suspension, and place students at risk of delinquency, juvenile arrest, and mental health concerns (Fite, Wynn & Pardini, 2009).

While not all school conduct problems will result in significant life-long challenges, empirical evidence has shown the importance of intervening when conduct problems do arise as they are associated with a myriad of negative outcomes. Fite, Wynn & Pardini (2009) explored the role of 14 individual (i.e., conduct problems, low achievement, inattention/hyperactivity) and contextual (i.e., peer delinquency, family, and neighborhood SES) risk factors to explore the discrepancies in arrest rates between Black and White male juveniles. The results were striking as the findings revealed that of the 14 risk factors analyzed, conduct problems was the most consistent predictor of future arrest for both theft and violence (Fite et al., 2009). Moreover, low levels of academic achievement was also associated with conduct problems and was identified as a risk factor of later violence. With regard to between group differences, Black boys emerged as
the most vulnerable due to the level of cumulative risk (Townsend, 2000) endured by this population. From a prevention perspective, Fite and colleagues advocated for an increased emphasis on school- and community based programs for predominantly Black families that target early conduct problems.

Reducing adolescent risk for conduct problems will be important as it has been associated with low achievement and increased risk of arrest and violence (Fite et al., 2009). With regard to exclusionary school discipline, Black youth have been commonly cited for conduct problems (i.e., lying, inappropriate language, theft) and suspended for these concerns (Skiba et al., 2011). While the literature indicates that some element of this overrepresentation could reflect differential selection bias (Skiba et al., 2011), a school-based program aimed to reduce risk of exclusionary discipline for Black males should seek to target reductions in school conduct problems. Bolstering skill building in responsible decision making and social awareness through explicit instruction will support the development of SEL skills in these domains.

**SEL and Conduct Problems.** Conduct problems are amenable to intervention within an SEL framework. With an emphasis on the five core component skills, students will be able to build social competence in domains related to problem behaviors (i.e., self-management and responsible decision making). Empirical evidence supports the utility of SEL programs with diverse, at-risk youth (Hamedani & Darling-Hammond, 2015; Dymnicki, Sambolt, & Kidron, 2013) and has been shown to reduce school conduct problems (Durlak et al., 2011).

**School Engagement**

School engagement, as defined by Furrer & Skinner (2003), describes the effort, interest and enjoyment demonstrated during participation in school-related activities (Toldson et al.,
This construct is multi-dimensional (Hart, Stewart, & Jimerson, 2011) and believed to encompass cognitive (i.e., self-regulation, relevance/value of education), behavioral (i.e., attendance, participation in class), and affective (i.e., sense of belonging, close school relationships, teacher connectedness) aspects of engagement (Reschly, Appleton, & Christenson, 2007). Empirical evidence has demonstrated consistently that school engagement is correlated with school dropout (Jimerson et al., 2009). It has also been correlated with other variables critical to student academic success (i.e., academic performance) and predicative of behavior problems in school (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Shernoff & Schmidt, 2008). Given that school engagement has been shown to predict school behavioral problems, school engagement has also been correlated with aggression (Carter, McGee, Taylor, & Williams, 2007) and disciplinary referrals (Toldson et al., 2013). For school practitioners, school engagement has become an important target of intervention efforts as it is a dynamic (malleable) correlate of academic achievement (Christenson, Sinclair, Lehr & Godber, 2001).

A review of the literature revealed that school engagement is an important variable to consider when promoting academic success and reducing risk of exclusionary discipline of Black youth – particularly males. Carter et al. (2007) reported that school engagement correlated with aggression. Relatedly, since Black school-aged males are at increased risk for aggressive behaviors, it is likely that school engagement may be revealed as an additional risk factor for this population. This assertion is supported in the research conducted by Toldson et al. (2013). Toldson and colleagues conducted a secondary analysis of data from the Monitoring the Future: A Continuing Study of American Youth (Johnson, Bachman, O’Malley & Schulenberg, 2008) study (as cited in Toldson et al., 2013) to investigate the relationship between school suspension and engagement. The study sample included 4,164 Black, White, and Hispanic 8th and 10 grade
males. Several of the findings are worth noting: 1) The self-reported suspension and expulsion rates for Black males was twice the rate reported for White students; 2) Black males reported lower grades and higher school disengagement in comparison to White males; 3) Academic disengagement was a strong predictor of truancy and disciplinary referrals for Black males; and 4) For Black and Hispanic males, delinquency and aggressive behavior preceded academic disengagement. For these students, once they became academically disengaged and involved in school crime, disciplinary referrals followed, which adversely impacted academic achievement. Overall, these scholars noted that aggressive behaviors and academic disengagement may be the most significant factors impacting suspensions and disciplinary referrals for minority males (Toldson et al., 2013).

**Strong teacher-student relationships are an essential affective component of student engagement.** Unfortunately, research has shown that Black youth may have difficulty building strong relationships with their teachers. Gregory & Ripski (2008) acknowledged that teacher-student relationships could be problematic for Black adolescents as they may be perceived as more defiant (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008) and rule-breaking. Inherent in strong teacher-student relationships is the concept of connectedness or “the belief by students that adults in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals” (CDC, 2009, p.3 as cited in Anyon, Zhang & Hazel, 2016). Anyon, Zhang & Hazel (2016) examined racial differences in student’s reported connectedness to school adults using secondary data from a Denver Public Schools School Satisfaction Survey and archival school disciplinary data. These scholars found that males, Black students (and minorities in three additional racial/ethnic groups), and older students reported lower connectedness. They suggested that cultural incongruence could be the underlying mechanism responsible for this finding. Moreover, they revealed that racial
disparities in school discipline were associated with connectedness for all students. Adding to the research examining teacher-student relationships, Blankmeyer, Flannery & Vazsonyi (2002) reported that weak or negative student-teacher relationships were associated with school disengagement.

**SEL and School Engagement.** Taken together, these studies suggest that school engagement is an important variable to consider for Black youth, especially males, when designing interventions to promote better educational outcomes and reduce risk of exclusionary discipline. These studies demonstrated that school engagement was found to be associated with aggression, disciplinary referrals, racial disparities in school discipline, and teacher connectedness. Further, males and minority students may require more support in building school engagement particularly in developing better relationships with teachers. Within a social emotional program, students would receive skill building and instruction to facilitate more developed social awareness, conflict resolution, and relationship building skills to cultivate those relationships. Moreover, results from SEL research demonstrate its utility and effectiveness in strengthening student engagement (Dymnicki, Sambolt, & Kidron, 2013).

**Academic Achievement**

The goal of a quality educational system is for all students to progress through each grade level meeting all academic standards proficiently. While this goal remains, it is well-documented that all students do not progress easily through school. And, for those students with lower achievement, higher risk of suspension, expulsion, and dropout can ensue. This makes lower achievement of particular interest to educators tasked with developing interventions to promote school success for at-risk youth. Within the context of reducing risk for exclusionary discipline, academic achievement can be bolstered by focusing on the malleable mediators
described above: aggressive behaviors, school conduct, and school engagement. Improving academic achievement will be critical for Black males who continue to lag behind other student groups in academic achievement indicators, and remain at highest risk for suspension and expulsion.

**National and State Level Data.** Recent national educational data suggests that Black students continue to lag behind in reading and mathematics achievement. Data released in March 2016 revealed that 8th grade NAEP reading and mathematics achievement for Black students was lower than all racial/ethnic groups (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). State-level data indicated that Black students in North Carolina also struggled to meet grade level standards. For 8th grade NAEP reading scores, Black students in North Carolina scored lower than all racial/ethnic groups except American Indian/Alaska Native students (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Eighth grade state-level NAEP mathematics scores illustrated the same trend; Black students in North Carolina scored lower than all racial/ethnic groups, except American Indian/Alaska Native students (U.S. Department of Education, 2018), for math achievement. With this demonstrated lower achievement, Black students are at higher risk for negative educational outcomes.

Empirical evidence has shown a strong association between low achievement, suspension, and dropout. Arcia (2006) examined the pre- and post-suspension reading achievements of suspended and non-suspended students. Using a longitudinal retrospective approach, the study included a sample of suspended students \( n = 49,327 \) and matched controls \( n = 42,809 \) with three years of academic and disciplinary data from 2001 – 2004. The population included a diverse sample of students: 58% Hispanic, 29% Black, 10% White, and 3% other races. The results indicated that there was a significant relationship between
suspensions and reading achievement. Students with lower pre-suspension achievement were subsequently suspended more than students with higher achievement. There was also an important finding regarding achievement post suspension. The more days a student was suspended, the less the student gained in reading achievement following suspension. Students with high rates of suspension (21 or more days suspended) were approximately three years behind nonsuspended students in year one. By year three, they were five grades behind their nonsuspended classmates. Finally, there was a strong positive association between suspensions and drop-out percentages. As a result of these findings, Arcia argued for disciplinary strategies that do not remove students from their class and for school administrators to discontinue extensive use of suspension.

Rausch & Skiba (2004) added to the research and demonstrated that low achievement was a significant concern for suspension and expulsion – especially for Black youth. In their examination of racial disparities in school discipline in Indiana, they discovered that exclusionary discipline was negatively related to achievement outcomes. The strength of the relationship was most significant for Black youth for both suspension (-.381) and expulsion (-.272). The researchers indicated that this finding suggested that school removal had a particularly deleterious effect for Black students. Perhaps because of school climate and school engagement Black students experienced more difficulty re-engaging with school or seeking help with missed assignments, following school removal.

Within the context of reducing the risk of exclusionary discipline, low achievement has been associated with the key indicators previously discussed. It is well documented in the literature that low achievement is associated with exclusionary discipline (Rausch & Skiba, 2004; Arcia, 2006). Students who are low achieving are more likely to be given discipline
sanctions (Leone et al., 2002). Low achievement has been shown to be correlated with aggression (Choi, 2007) and conduct problems (Fite, Wynn, & Pardini, 2009). Within the school engagement literature, low achievement has been associated with school engagement (Toldson et al., 2013; Basch, 2011). And, research has indicated that males and minority students may need more support in building school engagement due to lower connectedness with teachers (Anyon, Zhang & Hazel, 2016). To that end, an emphasis on reducing problem behaviors (aggression and misconduct), and strengthening school engagement, should yield improvements in academic performance.

**SEL and Academic Achievement.** SEL programs have been beneficial in positively impacting student achievement. In a 2011 meta-analysis, Durlak and colleagues reviewed 213 school-based SEL. Their findings suggested that in comparison to controls, SEL students saw improvements in SEL skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance resulted in an 11-percentile point gain in achievement. In an SEL program targeting Black males with a history of aggression, academic performance is likely to improve as mediators related to achievement (i.e., aggressive behaviors, school misconduct, and school engagement) are addressed.

**Intervention Research**

Fraser, Richman, Galinsky, & Day (2009) defined intervention research as “the process of creating the elements of an intervention and refining those elements in a series of studies” (p. 28). Intervention research is encouraged when practitioners and scholars attempt to advance a new strategy to address a social problem or strengthen the components of a pre-existing technique. This methodology is grounded in scientific methods while incorporating an iterative process by which all sources of evidence are used in the design and development of programs (and continues to develop over time) (Fraser et al., 2009). Based on the Rothman and Thomas
conceptualized a five-step approach to intervention design that is the framework for the current study. These steps include: 1) specify the problem and develop a program theory; 2) create and revise planned program materials; 3) refine and confirm program components; 4) assess effectiveness in a variety of settings; and 5) disseminate findings and program materials (Fraser et al., 2009).

The first step in intervention research involves specifying the problem and developing a program theory. This phase of research development entails providing a description of the problem, identifying the target population, and hypothesizing the process of change (Fraser et al., 2000). In developing the problem theory, the investigator identifies the risk factors relevant to the facilitation of the problem and understands potential protective factors to reduce risk. Additionally, at this stage, a program theory is developed that identifies the malleable mediators (intermediate or medial outcomes) that can be the target of a meaningful intervention and feasibly changed. A theory of change is also formulated that depicts the core components and change process. Finally, logic models are designed which illustrate the program objectives, inputs, outputs, malleable mediators, and distal outcomes.

Creating and revising the program materials reflects the second step in intervention research outlined by (Fraser et al., 2009). Fraser et al., (2009) presented the three-step approach to manual development conceptualized by Carroll and Nuro (2002) which they later expanded. Within the Carroll and Nuro (2002) three-step framework, the first step includes developing a first draft of the treatment manual and related program materials and conducting initial feasibility testing. During feasibility testing, the core components of the program are reviewed by practitioners and consumers, implemented in a practice setting, and evaluated for initial efficacy.
The second step of manual development involves expanding the treatment manual to highlight common challenges and barriers. This could involve developing and explaining strategies for dealing with difficult group members or protocols for training and supervision. The last step of manual development involves refining the tested manual in a variety of settings to prove effectiveness. Fraser et al. (2009) further explained that the Carroll and Nuro (2002) three-step manual development process occurs across all five stages of intervention research and expanded the formulation to include four steps of manual development—formulate materials, revise materials, differentiate materials, and translate/adapt materials. The current STEPS intervention represents a design at the first step of manual development and feasibility testing.

The third and fourth steps of intervention design include refining and confirming the program components and testing effectiveness by scaling up the intervention in a variety of settings. Key features of step three include: 1) testing major intervention components separately and maintaining high control of implementation; 2) conducting efficacy trials with combined intervention components; and 3) analyzing effect sizes by moderators, performing mediation analyses, and developing rules for adaptation. The fourth step includes scaling the intervention and testing in a variety of settings. Throughout the intervention design process fidelity - “the extent to which a program follows an intended model” (Fraser et al., 2009, p.124) - remains paramount and it becomes an even greater concern as interventions are scaled for effectiveness and outside of the control of the researcher. To ensure fidelity, measurement tools should be developed and implemented to confirm that the intervention implemented is aligned with the intended protocol.

The last step of the intervention research process culminates with disseminating findings and program materials (Fraser et al., 2009). Key features of the final phase include publishing
findings, disseminating program materials, and developing training protocols and end-user certification programs. It is during this phase that researchers assess the need to adapt various components of an intervention to fit various treatment contexts. Moreover, as the intervention is integrated in different settings, assessing sustainability and the extent of the local adaptations will be an ongoing process.

**STEPS Intervention Description.** STEPS is a 10-week SEL school-based group intervention for Black males (grades 9-12) with a history of physical or verbal aggression. The program is grounded in cognitive-behavioral theory and seeks to change problematic behaviors by training participants to restructure cognitive processes and develop self-control. Since parents are key partners in addressing aggression in at-risk youth, the comprehensive STEPS approach incorporates parent training and home visits that will be tested in future feasibility studies.

The ultimate goal of the STEPS Program is to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline by reducing participants’ risk of school suspension, dropout, and delinquency. The specific STEPS SEL program objectives are: 1) to increase self-awareness and ownership of aggressive behaviors and consequences and reduce problem behaviors; 2) to facilitate student development of prosocial skills; 3) to improve self-regulation for school success; and 4) to strengthen school engagement. With the future inclusion of parents as key participants, two additional program objectives will be emphasized: 1) to increase caregivers’ awareness and practice of positive parenting strategies; and 2) to strengthen parental engagement and family-school partnerships.

The STEPS comprehensive core components include: SEL student training sessions, parent groups, and home visits. Regarding the SEL student groups, two (2) weekly student training sessions were conducted by two (2) trained facilitators. Each student group met for two (2) hours—for a total of 40 contact hours over the duration of the program. The topics for the
SEL student groups and sequencing are delineated in Table 1. While the current pilot testing focused on the school-based SEL student groups only, a description of the parent training and home visiting components are provided as these prongs are incorporated in the overall problem theory, theory of change, and logic model. In future feasibility studies, five (5) bi-weekly parent training sessions, with an emphasis on positive parenting practices, will be facilitated by two parent trainers. All parent groups will meet for two (2) hours (for a total of 10 program contact hours). Additionally, five (5) bi-weekly home visits will be scheduled by a trained social worker to further strengthen the home-school partnership and assess any additional community resource needs of the student and family. Each home visit will conclude after one hour (for a total of 5 home visiting contact hours per family).

**STEPS Problem Theory.** To strengthen understanding of the problem, a conceptual model was developed from a review of the literature to outline the risk factors, malleable mediators and the distal outcomes associated with the STEPS intervention (Figure 1). The risk factors identified within this model reflect race, gender, SES, harsh parenting practices, prior aggressive behaviors, bias, and academic difficulties. The malleable mediators the current research aimed to address with the intervention manual are aggressive behaviors, school conduct, and school engagement. Additional mediators addressed in the comprehensive model are also outlined in the problem theory. The outcomes anticipated from program implementation are improved student social-emotional competence as reflected by reductions in problem behaviors (aggression and conduct problems) and improved prosocial skills and academic performance. Additional distal outcomes believed to be anticipated are reductions in exclusionary discipline and delinquency.
**STEPS Theory of Change.** After conducting a review of SEL and CBT approaches for at-risk and aggressive youth, the STEPS intervention includes five core components, some of which have a reciprocal relationship while others have a linear relationship (Figure 2). The core components are: training the STEPS staff on use of the intervention manual; application of the STEPS manual by trained staff; acquisition and application of cognitive-behavioral intervention (CBI) skills by students; impact on prosocial behaviors; and impact on students’ academic performance, suspension rates, and delinquency. Skills acquisition for parents and an impact on parents’ positive parenting practices will be assessed as core components in future testing. The first three components (i.e., training the STEPS staff on use of the intervention manual, application of the STEPS manual by trained staff, and acquisition and application of CBI skills by students) have a linear relationship. The STEPS facilitators must first have training on how to use the intervention manual to implement the specified modules, then they will apply their training knowledge by facilitating student groups, and finally students will apply the CBI skills acquired after attending the STEPS sessions. The second and third core components (i.e., manual use by the STEPS staff and skills and knowledge of the students) have a reciprocal relationship; the amount of acquired skills will impact the manual use and vice versa.

**Logic Model.** Based on a review of school-based interventions, the anticipated inputs, outputs, and outcomes for the intervention were developed (Figure 3). The necessary inputs for the intervention include time, resources, funding, facilitators, training, a pilot school, and curriculum development. The required activities for a successful program are pre-service staff training, program recruitment and screening, BASC-3 pre- and posttesting and student skill development. For future feasibility testing, home assessments and community resource referrals would be required activities. The participants for the current school based SEL pilot included
STEPS student participants, parents/caregivers, focus group educators, and facilitators for the SEL student sessions. Additional short-, medium-, and long-term outcomes for the intervention are provided in the logic model. The short-term (proximal) outcomes are an increase in students’ ownership and self-awareness of aggressive behavior and consequences, and an increase in students’ CBI skills acquisition. The medium-range (medial) outcomes include improved BASC-3 posttest scores, reductions in aggressive behaviors, improved school conduct, and strengthened school engagement. The long-term (distal) outcomes are improved academic performance (i.e., GPA, EOG scores, and academic promotion), decreased instances of out-of-school suspension, and reduced delinquency.

**Summary of Relevant Research**

The research is clear: Black males are disproportionately suspended from school in comparison to all student groups (US Department of Education, 2014 & 2016), racial disparities in school discipline have been present since the 1970s (Losen et al., 2015; Losen & Martinez, 2013), and data now suggests that these disparities begin as early as preschool (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). With this educational inequity, Black males are marked for limited educational advancement before they enter kindergarten. Data indicates that school-aged Black males are overrepresented in special education - most notably for services involving intellectual disability and emotional disturbance (Canty-Barnes, 2015), lag behind in areas of achievement, and continue to demonstrate elevated school dropout rates (McFarland et al., 2018). While Black boys are exposed to a myriad of risk factors that affect academic outcomes, disproportionalities in school discipline add to the cumulative risk (Townsend, 2000) of this vulnerable population which has garnered growing interest because of the *school-to-prison* phenomenon.
Given the well-documented racial disparities in school discipline, scholars have been interested in better understanding the potential causes of these discrepancies. Several theories exist which attempt to elucidate what underlies the overrepresentation of Black students who are suspended or expelled. These theories include poverty and community characteristics which point to the large percentage of Black children (36%) living in poverty (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2016) and the resulting impact on behavior. However, this hypothesis is not supported by the literature which revealed that race is a significant predictor of exclusionary discipline after controlling for poverty. Second, individual student differences, the stereotype that students from certain racial/ethnic groups misbehave and contribute to more school problems, has not been supported by the literature. Moreover, low achievement theory postulates that the racial disparity in school discipline is the result of struggling students who “act out” because they are unable to cope with academic challenges. While low achievement has been associated with exclusionary discipline (Arcia, 2006), it has not solely accounted for the racial disparities in school discipline. Finally, bias in disciplinary referrals caused by differential selection, differential processing, implicit bias, and cultural incongruence have been examined. Understanding the causes of this educational crisis presents a complex challenge; however, there is evidence that bias may be one plausible factor to consider (Skiba et al., 2011).

While researchers investigating the school-to-prison pipeline recognize that a number of intricate factors underlie this trend, scholars highlight the following: 1) exclusionary discipline places students at risk of lower achievement and dropout which significantly increases risk of criminal involvement (Arcia, 2006; Fabelo et al., 2011; Monahan et al., 2014); 2) more reliance on zero tolerance policies for minor infractions (American Psychological Association, 2008), school resource officers (Education Week, 2017), and a punitive school climate (Brown Center...
for Education Policy, 2017) increase juvenile justice referrals that disproportionately impact students of color. Moreover, although the current empirical evidence of the school-to-prison pipeline is largely descriptive (American Psychological Association, 2008), the paralleling trends in racial disparities in school discipline and racial disparities in incarceration rates cannot be ignored (Wald & Losen, 2003). Black males have the highest rates of out-of-school suspension (U.S. Department of Education, 2014 & 2016), juvenile justice placement (Sickmund et al., 2017), and adult incarceration (U.S. Department of Justice, 2018) among all racial/ethnic groups.

With heightened interest in reducing disparities in school discipline, there have been several suggestions to target the problem of racial disparities. Owen, Wettach, & Thomas (2015) released a report outlining possible alternatives to suspensions. Owen and colleagues recommended school- and individual-level interventions which could include Positive Behavior Intervention & Support (PBIS), Safe and Responsive Schools (SRS), teacher professional development with an emphasis on controlling problem behaviors, examining the role of SROs who unduly criminalize adolescent misconduct, and reducing suspension and expulsion as a behavior management tool. While some of these recommendations have shown promise, data suggested that Black students continued to be disproportionately suspended and expelled even after school-wide exclusionary discipline decreased (Vincent, Sprague, & Gau, 2013). Moreover, less is known about accessible school-based individual interventions that can be implemented within a tiered level of support for selected (Tier II) and indicated (Tier III) secondary students with problem behaviors – namely aggression.

Suspension is often the primary disciplinary method schools utilize to correct problem behaviors (Toldson et. al., 2013) including aggression. However, research has shown that this method is largely ineffective in changing problem behavior (Losen, 2013; Raffaele Mendez,
Cornell, Gregory & Fan (2011) acknowledged that students who are suspended from school tend to engage in higher rates of subsequent misbehavior. Relatedly, suspended and expelled students often do not receive services and support to address the root causes of their misbehavior (Raffaele Mendez, 2003). Since aggression places students at greater risk for adult violence (Farrington, 1991), school disengagement (Toldson et al., 2013), lower achievement (Choi, 2007), and subsequent contact with law enforcement, the social emotional learning needs of this population should be a priority for school officials.

SEL programming has been shown to be effective in reducing problem behaviors (aggression and conduct problems) and increasing academic achievement (Dymnicki et al., 2013; Durlak et al., 2011). Based on the promotion of five core skills (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making) and SAFE practices, SEL programs lend themselves to the theoretical underpinnings of cognitive behavioral theory for behavior change. Cognitive-behavioral interventions, which look at the relationship between thoughts-feelings-actions, have been shown to be effective for reducing externalizing behaviors within an SEL framework (CASEL, 2015).

In addressing the SEL needs of students with a history of aggression, key educational concerns have emerged: school engagement, conduct problems, and lower academic achievement. Aggressive behavior has been shown to be related to school engagement (Toldson et al., 2013) and school achievement (Choi, 2007). Moreover, conduct problems, which are related to aggression, have been associated with academic achievement and can place a student a greater risk for later violence if serious problems persist. (Fite et al., 2009). In research exploring exclusionary discipline and minority males, school disengagement was recognized as one of the most significant factors impacting suspensions and disciplinary referrals (Toldson et
al., 2013). This is a concern for Black youth, especially males, as the research has shown that males and minority students may need more support in building teacher-student relationships – an affective component of school engagement (Anyon et al., 2016). Taken together, these data suggest that SEL curricula targeting aggressive behaviors should involve reducing problem behaviors (aggression and school conduct problems) while improving school engagement and academic performance.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this investigation was to examine the effect of student involvement in the STEPS program (a 10-week SEL curriculum) on students’ behaviors (home and school), school engagement, and academic performance. To that end, two primary aims guided the current inquiry: 1) to examine the feasibility and acceptability of the SEL curriculum for minority high school males, and 2) to investigate the effect of student participation in the student training program (STEPS) focusing on social and emotional learning on aggression, school conduct, school engagement, and academic performance of at-risk adolescent Black males.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: What is the feasibility and treatment acceptability of the STEPS curriculum?

Rationale for Research Question 1: The current study gathered feedback from Orange County Public Schools stakeholders about the feasibility of STEPS intervention implementation within the desired context. Focus group participants were asked to share their feedback in a number of domains including program/curriculum content, barriers to implementation, and implementation suggestions. These data guided any modifications to the curriculum components, prior to implementation.

Research Question 2: Do students who participate in the STEPS Program demonstrate decreases in aggressive behaviors?
Hypothesis for Research Question 2: It was predicted that students who participated in the STEPS Program would show reductions in aggressive behaviors. Prior research has demonstrated the effectiveness of CBT-based approaches in decreasing aggression (Dodge 2013; Sukhodolsky et al., 2016).

Research Question 3: Do students who participate in the STEPS Program demonstrate decreases in poor school conduct?

Hypothesis for Research Question 3: It was predicted that students who participated in the STEPS Program would demonstrate decreases in school conduct problems. Prior research has demonstrated the effectiveness of SEL approaches in improving school conduct (Durlak et al., 2011).

Research Question 4: Do students who have participated in the STEPS Program show improvement in school engagement?

Hypothesis for Research Question 4: It was predicted that students who participated in the STEPS Program would demonstrate increased school engagement. Prior research has demonstrated the effectiveness of SEL approaches in improving school engagement (Durlak et al., 2011; Dymnicki et al., 2013).

Research Question 5: Do students who participate in the STEPS Program demonstrate improvement in academic performance?

Hypothesis for Research Question 5: It was predicted that students have participated in the STEPS Program would exhibit improvement in academic performance. Prior research has demonstrated the effectiveness of SEL approaches in improving academic achievement (Durlak et al., 2011; Dymnicki et al., 2013).
Design

A quantitative dominant approach was used to answer questions about the efficacy of the STEPS curriculum to impact changes in the student’s maladaptive behaviors and educational indicators. A quasi-experimental, one-group pretest-posttest design was utilized to address each dependent variable and included a within-subjects approach to data analysis. The research design plan is provided in Figure 4. The current research incorporated two components (treatment acceptability and feasibility focus group and STEPS 10-week SEL implementation) of a larger UNC IRB approved study of STEPS implementation that involves a follow-up phase (Figure 5).

Participants

Three groups of participants were required for the present study. A description of each group is provided below:

Focus Group. A panel of ten (10) school administrators, support services staff and teachers were selected to volunteer for the curriculum review focus groups, prior to program implementation.

Student Participants. The STEPS student participants included 11 Black males with a history of physical or verbal aggression who were identified by administrators and student support services staff from the pilot school to attend the 10-week SEL program. The inclusion criteria are enumerated below:

1) Black/African-American males (grades 9-12) currently enrolled at the pilot school;
2) At least one office disciplinary referral for physical or verbal aggression during the current (2018-19) or past (2017-18) academic year;
3) Proficient in English;

4) The STEPS Program was voluntary, and students were required to sign an assent form and agree to complete program activities; and

5) Signed parent/legal guardian consent was required (Appendix C);

Parents. One parent/caregiver (i.e., foster parent, biological parent, legal guardian, family caregiver with knowledge of the student’s behaviors (over the last 30 days), etc.) of each STEPS participant was asked to complete study questionnaires.

Sampling

Setting. A preliminary project proposal was presented to the high school principals at the two target schools located in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. Both principals provided permission to conduct the pilot program in their schools. These schools were selected based upon enrollment of Black males and reported disproportionate rates of exclusionary discipline. One school was selected as the pilot site after the second school was excluded due to district restrictions.

Stage 1/Question 1: Treatment Acceptability and Feasibility

Focus Group Participant Recruitment. A total of ten (10) teachers, school administrators, and student support services staff members were recruited from educational staff located at the pilot school to participate in a curriculum review focus group. An email was sent to selected staff at the pilot school inviting them to participate in the study focus group (Appendix D). The selected sampling group for the curriculum review focus group included all student support services counseling personnel (i.e., school counselors, school workers, school psychologists), school administrators, exceptional children’s/special education personnel, and one regular-education teacher (selected by the principal) from each
grade level at the pilot school. By targeting school personnel with education and experience
in counseling, special education, and school administration, the investigator was able to access
the educators with the most expert knowledge in the problem area. A signed informed consent
was required for focus group participation (Appendix C).

Stage 2/Questions 2-5: STEPS Implementation

STEPS Participant Recruitment. Purposive sampling was employed to reach the
target population. The pilot school had a total enrollment of 1,305 students. The racial/ethnic
composition was as follows: 67% White, 19% Black, 11% Hispanic, less than 1% Asian, and
less than 2% multiracial. Although Black students made up less than 20% of the student
population, they comprised over half of the in-school and out-of-school suspensions. Black
males accounted for approximately 11% of the student population, but they disproportionately
comprised over 24% of the short and long-term suspensions (NCDPI, 2017). These
suspending included a range of causes including aggressive acts that place students at higher
risk of delinquency and incarceration.

Adolescent Black male students (grades 9-12), with a documented history (one or more
disciplinary referrals) of physical or verbal aggression, as defined by the district’s school code
and disciplinary reports (i.e., fighting, communicating threats, bomb threats, using profanity to
intimidate/bully another person, inappropriate sexual touching without permission, etc.),
during the 2018-19 or 2017-18 academic school year, were asked to participate in the present
study. To recruit the students, the PI collaborated with the school’s student support services
staff (hereafter referred to as school liaisons) to identify students meeting the selection criteria.
Students were identified through two methods: 1) a disaggregated report generated by the
school liaison using the school’s disciplinary data and STEPS eligibility criteria; and 2)
referrals from school counselors and administrators. School counselors and administrators were asked to refer students using the STEPS Student Recruitment Form (Appendix E). However, they elected to email program referrals to the school liaison instead. The disaggregated report and referrals were provided to the PI to determine student eligibility.

Identified students were given a STEPS Student Letter and study packet during a face-to-face recruitment meeting with research staff who (a) shared information about the study, (b) sent flyers and parental consent forms home with the student, (c) invited student to a program information session with parent, and (d) provided contact information for the investigator and research assistant(s) who were available to answer additional project related questions (see Appendices F, G, and H). Follow-up telephone recruitment was conducted to ensure that the parents were aware of the study, after-school information session, and parental consent requirement (Appendix H).

Identified students and parents at the participating school were invited to attend a 45-minute, after-school information session about the study. At this information session, parents were to be informed of the goals and expectations of the project, and the investigator was available to answer procedural questions about the project and solicit informed consent. Program packets containing the STEPS Parent Letter and STEPS Consent Forms were also distributed by the school liaison before the information session was held (see Appendices).

Since most of the parents received consent forms in program packets distributed before the information session, many of the parents declined to attend the information session. Only one parent indicated that she was interested in attending the information session. This parent later called and asked if the program information could be shared over the phone. Interested parents were later contacted by the PI and school liaison, after the scheduled information
session, and given the opportunity to ask questions regarding STEPS Program participation. Informed consent for child participation was requested for interested parties within 7 – 10 days. Parents were assured that participation was voluntary, allowing them to withdraw at any time without negative repercussions.

After informed consent was obtained, parents of potential participants completed the STEPS Participant Contact Form containing items related to the child’s age, gender, race/ethnicity, and personal and emergency contact information. The form was used to obtain information about the potential participants and to exclude any child who did not meet criteria. To participate in the study, students must be English-speaking as didactic instruction was not provided in other languages. Parents were also provided the STEPS Parent Questionnaire to complete. Students were provided the STEPS Student Questionnaire. All forms were available in the school liaisons office for pick-up, or sent home with the prospective student, at the parent’s request. Completed forms were returned to the school liaison in a sealed envelope and provided to the PI.

Measures

The data for the current study were collected using six instruments: STEPS Focus Group Protocol; STEPS Parent Questionnaire; STEPS Student Questionnaire; Behavior Assessment System for Children, Third Edition (BASC-3; Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2015); Student Engagement Instrument (SEI; Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006); and a review of cumulative educational records for each participant (Appendix J).

STEPS Focus Group Protocol. The STEPS Focus Group Protocol was developed to solicit feedback regarding the feasibility and acceptability of the STEPS intervention from each
stakeholder using 13 open-ended interview questions. The focus group protocol included
questions assessing program components/content, implementation suggestions, barriers to
implementations, role clarity, and general feedback. For the current study, modifications to the
curriculum and program delivery were considered to increase feasibility within the desired
context.

**STEPS Parent Questionnaire.** STEPS Parent Questionnaire prompted parents to report
demographic information about themselves and their child, such as their race/ethnicity,
educational history, income, criminal history, and employment status (e.g., “Please indicate the
highest level of education you completed” and “Are you employed full-time or part-time?”)
(Appendix J). The questionnaire was comprised of 24 items with dichotomous responses (e.g.,
“Yes” or “No”) or selected categories reflecting the anticipated range of responses. These
questions were chosen based upon a review of the literature demonstrating that these factors may
impact academic success of at-risk students.

**STEPS Student Questionnaire.** The STEPS Student Questionnaire assessed
demographic characteristics by asking students to share aspects of their educational history,
criminal history, and family history (e.g., “Have you ever skipped school for an entire school
day?”) (Appendix J). The questionnaire was comprised of 21 items with dichotomous responses
(e.g., “Yes” or “No”) or selected categories reflecting the anticipated range of responses.
Consistent with the development of the parent questionnaire, the questions were formulated
based upon a review of the literature indicating that these factors may impact the academic
success of at-risk students.
**Behavior Assessment System for Children (BASC-3) – Third Edition.** The Behavior Assessment System for Children, Third Edition (BASC-3; Reynolds & Kamphaus, 2015) is a multi-informant, multidimensional system used to assess the behavior and self-perceptions of children and young adults ages 2-25. The most recent edition includes ten components including two rating scales, one for teachers (Teacher Rating Scales; TRS) and one for parents (Parent Rating Scales; PRS), which gather descriptions of the student’s behavior(s). The PRS was used for the present study and included a 4-point frequency response set from never (1) to almost always (4). The BASC-3 PRS, for adolescents, provided data on several clinical and content scales including Hyperactivity, Aggression, Conduct Problems, Depression and Withdrawal. The Aggression subscale was used for the current study to measure problem behaviors within the STEPS participants. The BASC-3 had been tested for validity and reliability with results indicating that it was a valid and reliable instrument. Test retest reliability for the TRS adolescent form was found to be stable with corrected coefficients in the .80s or higher (Reynold & Kamphaus, 2015). Internal consistency was also measured using Cronbach’s alpha for the derived subscales ranging from .80 to .98.

The Aggression subscale describes a tendency to act in a hostile manner (verbal or physical) that is threatening to others. The PRS Aggression subscale is derived from 10 items and assesses aggressive behaviors in the home/community. For the current analysis, the PRS aggression subscale T-scores were examined to assess pre- and posttest changes in aggressive behaviors.

**Student Engagement Instrument (SEI).** The Student Engagement Instrument (SEI; Appleton, Christenson, Kim, & Reschly, 2006) is a 35-item self-report survey instrument designed to measure the cognitive and affective components of student engagement. The SEI
measured six subtypes of student engagement Teacher-Student Relationships (TSR), Control & Relevance of School Work (CRSW), Peer Support for Learning (PSL), Future Aspirations and Goals (FG), Intrinsic Motivation (IM) and Family Support for Learning (FSL). Affective engagement was assessed using the TSR, PSL, and FSL subscales. Cognitive engagement was related to the CRSW, IM, and FG subscales. Thirty-three items were measured on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The two items on the IM subscale were reverse scored from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree). Possible scores for each scale ranged from 1 to 4. Research has demonstrated the utility of the SEI as a measure of student engagement for students in grades 6 to 12 (Betts et al., 2010). Internal consistency using Cronbach’s alpha range from .72 to .88 for the six subtypes (Appleton et al., 2006). For the present analysis, a composite score across all six subtypes was used to assess changes in student engagement pre- and post-intervention.

**Educational Record Review.** Each participating student’s cumulative educational record was reviewed during the pre- and posttest periods to document academic performance. Academic performance was measured by the most recent quarterly grade point average documented on the student’s report card received prior to and after the conclusion of the STEPS Program intervention.

**Procedures**

**Data Collection: Treatment Acceptability and Feasibility**

A focus group of teachers, student support services personnel, school administrators, and district staff reviewed the STEPS curriculum to determine the appropriateness for the selected school and student population. Feedback was solicited from each panel member using 13 open-ended interview questions on the Focus Group Interview Protocol (Appendix
The questions assessed the STEPS Program components/content, implementation suggestions, barriers to implementations, role clarity, and general feedback. The focus group was recorded, and the responses were transcribed verbatim for coding and analysis. The day and time of the scheduled focus group was approved by the school’s principal. The focus group was expected to run 60-90 minutes. At the conclusion of the focus group, all participants completing the curriculum review session were given a $20 cash stipend and asked to sign a receipt.

**Data Collection: STEPS Implementation**

All participating children were individually assessed using the Behavior Assessment System for Children, Third Edition (BASC-3). The BASC-3 Parent Rating Scales (PRS) gathered descriptions of the student’s behavior(s). The PRS was expected to take 10-20 minutes to complete. Parents were asked to complete the initial pre-intervention PRS and the STEPS Parent Questionnaire, after informed consent was provided. For parents with reading difficulties, an interview with the school liaison or research staff members was scheduled to complete the BASC-3 PRS and STEPS Parent Questionnaire. After participating students signed and returned their assent for participation, they were asked to complete the SEI and STEPS Student Questionnaire and return it to the school liaison or research staff. Pretest administration began after the scheduled information session and concluded the first week of the intervention. Posttest data were collected during the two weeks following the last day of the intervention. The measures used during the pre-intervention period (PRS and SEI) were also used to collect posttest data. Trained evaluators, including the principal investigator, co-facilitator, and school liaison followed-up with students and parents for collection of pre- and posttest data. Each participating student’s cumulative educational record was reviewed during
the pre- and posttest periods to document office disciplinary referrals, exclusionary discipline (i.e., out-of-school suspension, expulsion), and academic performance.

**Intervention Procedures**

**Curriculum:** The researcher developed STEPS curriculum was utilized during the investigation is a 10-week cognitive-behavioral school-based group intervention for Black males (grades 9-12) with a history of physical or verbal aggression. The curriculum was grounded in cognitive-behavioral theory and aimed to change problematic behaviors by training participants to restructure cognitive processes and develop self-control. The STEPS student curriculum objectives were: 1) to increase students’ self-awareness and ownership of aggressive behavior and consequences; 2) to facilitate student development of prosocial skills and reduce problem behaviors; 3) to improve self-regulation for school success; and 4) to improve school engagement.

**Student Groups:** Two, weekly student training sessions were conducted after school by two trained facilitators. Each student group met for two hours (for a total of 40 contact hours over the duration of the program). Each group session was designed to teach a specific skill. Curriculum modules were as follows: a) Goal Setting, b) Cognitive Training, c) Aggression Awareness, d) Anger Management, e) Conflict Resolution, f) Healthy Relationships, and g) Academic Skills. The structure of the sessions included:

1. Opening circle and discussion (15 minutes)
2. Didactic instruction and modeling (45 minutes)
3. Participant activity/role-playing (15-30)
4. Review and homework assignment (5-10 minutes)
5. Reflection, goal setting, and closing circle (10-15 minutes)
At the beginning of each session, students were arranged in a circle for opening
discussion. This circle process was a restorative justice practice and sought to improve
community building and group cohesion. During the opening discussion, the facilitator would
encourage each student to participate by sharing a notable event from the week or answering a
circle question (i.e., “How successful were you in managing your behavior at school today?”)
or responding to a circle prompt (i.e., “My goal for the week was ______.”). After each
student participated in the opening circle, the facilitator introduced and taught the scheduled
skill according to the lesson plan outlined in the curriculum manual. The explicit instruction
incorporated an “I do, We do, You do” framework which included a teaching component,
modeling, group practice, and independent student assignment. Videos and role-plays were
utilized to model or reinforce the skill. Next, students were asked to role-play the skill with a
partner/group or complete a group or independent active learning activity (i.e., compose a
poem or rap, design a t-shirt describing individual traits, group game challenge). Following
completion of the participant activity, the group facilitator(s) led a discussion reviewing the
skills learned and the planned homework assignment. At the conclusion of each group,
students were asked to gather for the closing circle at which time each student shared a daily
or weekly goal. The group concluded with session reflections (i.e., “Tell me one thing you
learned today in group.”) and closing comments processed by the group facilitator. Five
Black male professionals from the community were also invited to one session each to share
their personal motivational success story.

A student point sheet was completed each week to improve student accountability and
program and school engagement. The point system was implemented as an incentive to
document session attendance, assignment completion, group participation, and prosocial in-
school behavior. Participants could earn up to 20 points per STEPS session. Points were allocated as follows: session attendance (5 points), homework completion (5 points), and group participation (5 points). Five (5) bonus points were awarded each session by group facilitators for exemplary behavior and leadership. To promote prosocial behavior in school, 5 points were deducted for each weekly office disciplinary referral. If the student received an out-of-school suspension, ten points were deducted. Students earned up to 40 points per week and 400 points over the course of the 10-week program. Students with a minimum of 20 points each week were entered into the weekly raffle to win one participation reward (i.e., movie tickets, school supplies, and gift cards). One STEPS Leader award was given weekly to the student with the highest weekly points’ total. Weekly incentives did not exceed a $25.00 value.

At the conclusion of the final session, students and family members were invited to attend a follow-up meeting and graduation ceremony. Each participant received a certificate acknowledging their successful completion of the STEPS program. Incentives were provided based upon total points earned. Posttest data (PRS, SEI and education record review) were collected two weeks following the intervention.

To ensure the STEPS sessions were conducted according to the intended protocol, the researcher was one of the facilitators responsible for leading the student sessions. The graduate student investigator and session co-facilitator(s) were trained mental health professionals with advanced degrees in clinical psychology, social work, or a related field. In addition, weekly face-to-face or phone conference meetings were held with session facilitators to ensure fidelity and discuss implementation challenges or concerns. Moreover, session attendance records were kept for each group to track attrition.
Data Analysis

**Qualitative Analysis.** To determine the treatment feasibility and acceptability of the STEPS curriculum, qualitative data from the school focus group were coded by themes and analyzed using NiVivo qualitative analysis software. Initial coding was completed by the PI and corroborated by independent coding of a random audit analysis of 50% of the transcribed data conducted by two psychologists trained in qualitative methods. Discrepancies were resolved by member checking and consensus to ensure reliability. This information was used by the investigator to further develop and refine the curriculum. Initial analysis included codes in each of the following categories: suggestions for program/curriculum content, barriers to implementation, implementation suggestions, and general feedback. Modifications to the SEL curriculum and initial program components were not indicated, based on the examination of the data. See Table 2 for data analysis plan.

**Quantitative Analysis.** To determine the initial outcomes of the STEPS program on the dependent variables (e.g., aggressive behaviors, school conduct, school engagement, and academic performance), quantitative data were analyzed using R Version 3.5.1.

**Descriptive Statistics.** Descriptive statistics (i.e., mean and standard deviation) were used to gain an understanding of student characteristics. For example, statistics that described the participants’ age, grade level, parents’ educational level, parental employment status, and income were analyzed and reported.

**Exploratory Data Analysis.** To maximize insight into the data set, exploratory data analyses (EDA) was conducted. To complete the EDA, graphs of the data were used. The data were examined to detect missing values and to evaluate data to determine if all assumptions for conducting a repeated measures t-test (within group approach) were met. This included
normality, homogeneity of variance, interval or ratio data, and independent observations (Field, Miles, & Field, 2012). Violations of assumptions were addressed as needed; however, if the assumptions were met, the group means were compared using the dependent means t-test. Wilcoxon Signed-Rank tests were conducted when a non-parametric t-test alternative was indicated.

**Initial Outcomes.** To examine the pretest and posttest differences for each outcome variable, results were summarized within group and compared across each experimental condition (pre- and posttest). In brief, this within group comparison research seeks to identify the effects of participation in the STEPS program. Paired Sample T-Tests were conducted for each dependent variable (i.e., aggressive behaviors, school conduct, school engagement, and academic performance) to compare differences in the pre- and posttest means. The t-test *p-values* identified the presence of a significant difference (*p* < .05); however, an examination of the *p*-values did not show the magnitude of the differences. Thus, the effect sizes were calculated when significant differences were observed. The effect size indicates the smallest difference that could be detected within the students who participated in the STEPS program (Ware, 2014). Cohen (1988, 1992) defines a small effect as .1 (1% of total variance), medium effect = .3 (9% of total variance), and large effect = .5 (25% of the variance) (Field, Miles & Field, 2012).

**Ethical Considerations**

The current research was approved by the Institutional Review Board from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (IRB# 17-3264).

**Informed Consent.** All participants (i.e., focus group panel and STEPS students) were required to have signed informed consent forms prior to participating in the current study. In addition, signed assent forms using developmentally appropriate language were required for
student participants under the age of 18. To avoid influencing parental permission of student participation, parents were allowed to have a waiting period between hearing information about the study and signing the consent form. Consent or assent could have been withdrawn at any time.

**Psychological Risks.** Unlike adults, children may experience more difficulty processing emotions elicited by content in some of the sessions and group discussions. Our facilitators were trained mental health clinicians who were able to assist students experiencing any emotional difficulty during group sessions. To minimize emotional distress, group lessons focused on increasing knowledge and enhancing behavioral strategies and less emphasize was placed on processing emotionally triggering incidents.

To prevent potential embarrassment associated with participants sharing the sensitive information of other students, students were instructed to avoid sharing personal or sensitive information about themselves and their families during group. Students were also discouraged from sharing confidential group information outside of the group setting.

**Confidentiality.** To protect children and parents from breaches of confidentiality, information shared on questionnaires or written documents was kept confidential through the use of alphanumeric identification codes. Identifying information were stored separately from the linking codes. The identification codes were used in research notes and documents. Notes and data collected at the pilot site were initially stored in a locked storage container, in the personal possession of the graduate investigator, before being transported to a locked filing cabinet in the investigator’s office. Participant data transferred to digital files were stored on the University’s secured network and accessed remotely using a password by the PI. No published reports will
include identifying information. Parents will be given the opportunity to review the final
research report.

**Reported threats of harm.** Students with a history of physical aggression were one of
the target groups for this study. Therefore, it was likely that these students may have perpetrated
or been victims of additional violence that was previously unreported. Although no threats to
harm others were reported during the present study, the facilitators were prepared to report any
threats to harm others to parents, school administrators, and contact with an identifiable potential
victim would have been made. Additionally, any reports of suspected child or elderly abuse
would have been reported to Child Protective Services. Moreover, any reported threats of self-
harm would have been assessed and reported immediately to the parent and school liaison. If
warranted, contact with the approved mobile crisis service would have been initiated. The
graduate student investigator and research assistant were trained in risk assessment procedures
for school-aged children.

**Disposition of study data.** Linkage codes, audio files, and all identifiable data (i.e.,
names, telephone numbers, any elements of dates, and electronic mail addresses) will be
destroyed one year after the study has ended. The information will be disposed of using a
professional shredding service.

**The Investigator**

The investigator for the present research study is a sixth-year doctoral student in the
School Psychology Program at UNC Chapel Hill. With a career as a North Carolina prison
psychologist that spanned over thirteen years, the investigator became keenly aware of the racial
disparities in incarceration. During her work as a mental health provider serving inmates, she
often conducted mental health assessments which revealed the devastating impact of school
discipline on juvenile delinquency and adult incarceration. As a Black woman, the investigator became more interested in understanding and addressing the crisis of the mass incarceration of Black men. With the first-hand knowledge of countless inmate stories of lives ravished by incarceration, she was determined to explore the educational linkages to incarceration. That goal led to a career shift to school psychology and serves as the impetus for the overarching long-term goal of the current research – to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline.

Years of work and life experience provided knowledge of how systems operate to marginalize certain groups of people in a racialized society. Given this history, the investigator was aware of how this knowledge could bias her opinions of how schools facilitate the removal of “troubled” youth (who are mostly minority males). To address her personal biases and strengthen her ability to work alongside school staff committed to helping at-risk youth, the investigator closely monitored her thoughts and reactions through personal journaling and consultation with her faculty advisor and dissertation committee.

As a trained mental health clinician, the investigator was adept in building rapport with and maintaining the trust of school-aged clients, parents, and school administrators. This foundation guided the implementation of the current research as building alliances with research participants and school officials was critical to the overall impact of the intervention. The graduate student investigator was committed to working closely with project staff and the school liaison to ensure that at all phases of the research a working alliance was maintained, a true partnership was developed, and the needs of the students were met.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Descriptive Analysis

Focus Group Demographics

Ten educators were recruited to participate in the teacher focus group to review the STEPS social-emotional curriculum, prior to implementation. Of the focus group participants, 60% percent were White, 30% were Black, and 10% were Asian. Regarding gender, 70% of participants were female; males accounted for 30% of participants. Additionally, the teacher focus group was comprised of general and special education teachers, school support staff, and school administrators. See Table 3. Summary of Focus Group Demographic Characteristics.

Table 3

Summary of Focus Group Demographic Characteristics

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</table>
Focus Group Content Analysis

**Hypothesis 1.** To examine the treatment acceptability and feasibility of the STEPS curriculum, in lieu of testing a hypothesis, feedback was gathered from educators participating in the focus group to determine if curriculum and/or implementation modifications were indicated. Thematic content analysis was utilized to examine emerging trends from the semi-structured focus group protocol. Following an initial data coding conducted by the investigator, a random audit analysis of 50% of the transcribed data was completed by two additional raters to ensure inter-rater reliability. Participant comments were organized using the following four categories: Program/Curriculum Content, Implementation Barriers, Implementation Suggestions, and General Feedback. Buy-in and trust emerged as salient sub-themes. See Table 4. STEPS Focus Group Content Analysis.

**Program/Curriculum Content**

Following a 20-minute presentation from the investigator reviewing the STEPS program, the educators were asked to reflect and offer any feedback regarding the STEPS school-based social-emotional learning curriculum. The presentation highlighted the STEPS three-pronged approach: 10-week SEL school-based student groups, parent trainings, and home visits. Since the current inquiry was limited to the initial outcomes of the school based SEL student groups, the investigator reviewed the SEL curriculum content in depth. The SEL curriculum included 20 lesson plans covering a range of topics to address the needs of at-risk youth with a history of physical or verbal aggression. The modules involved explicit instruction on cognitive-behavioral training, anger management, aggression awareness, conflict resolution, healthy relationships, academic skills, and goal setting. No SEL curriculum content changes were suggested by the
Table 4

*STEPS Focus Group Content Analysis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Program/Curriculum Content</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Training focus appreciated</td>
<td>Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Career assessment for at-risk youth is essential</td>
<td>Student selection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Consider intervening before high school</td>
<td>Student buy-in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation Barriers</td>
<td>Program facilitated by outside organization</td>
<td>Attendance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student challenges</td>
<td>Emotional concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Parental engagement</td>
<td>Parental support</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Parent buy-in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implementation Suggestions</td>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communicate with teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Follow-up after pilot study</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How success is measured</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Feedback</td>
<td>Adult SEL skills</td>
<td>Conflict resolution</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Student-teacher relationships</td>
<td>Empathy and acceptance</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Participant strengths</td>
<td>Give time to reflect</td>
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<td>Impact of home environment</td>
<td>Feeling liked</td>
</tr>
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<td>Build connections</td>
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<td>Intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Social justice advocates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Leadership development</td>
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</table>

focus group. Overwhelmingly, the group expressed that the proposed curriculum appeared to include the core components to address the needs of the target population. When sharing his appraisal of the STEPS curriculum and presentation, one male EC educator commented:

“Something I never said before, I agree [with] everything you said. I think you're absolutely right. As far as everything on there, it applies.”

Another educator added that she liked the emphasis on training:

“I just love that it's training. You know it's like providing the support and training for the kids to understand more about why they're the way that they are, and what they're going through. But here is some training, support and solutions of how to change that. Because
I think a lot of times the kids are like I want to change this. [But] I have no idea...how to do that.”

A special educator expressed her appreciation for the incorporation of a career assessment within the STEPS SEL curriculum:

“I particularly like...when they do a career assessment. I say that because I know as an EC teacher, we do...we talk about...transitioning from high school...We always ask, what [do you] want to do after high school? And a lot of kids say, “I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know.” And so, I feel like them actually knowing what they're good at gives them hope. And, [they begin to think] I can be something else, I can do something other than what I see modeled at home. Yeah, I can be something different than that...even if they can't, the possibility is still put in their head if they can see what they're good. I really feel like that is a powerful piece to give. So, it’s about the power that you give to somebody that they can't get any other way if they don’t know what they like.”

A vocational educator was invited to participate in the focus group, and he also noted the importance of including the career assessment for at-risk youth:

“...just to wrap up the career component...you know these kids have a lot more opportunities than they think they do. I just went to a really good meeting the other day on apprenticeships, and one of the folks that conducted the meeting said what a success they had...with at-risk students - placing them in apprenticeships - because they actually you know...[have] less of a college commitment, and more of a work-based learning commitment. So...when you start talking about careers and career goals, make sure to assert that they have a lot of opportunities.”

Finally, while the group indicated that the current STEPS curriculum was a feasible and acceptable curriculum to address the needs of at-risk youth with behavioral challenges, one administrator questioned the age range of the STEPS target population. She commented:

“Why are you waiting until high school? Because research already shows some of these [students], we've established in third grade. We can predict from that. These are already the ones we know coming from middle school...because they've already been identified. We know who they are at the most at risk. So why high school?

The administrator’s comment prompted a brief discussion during which the investigator agreed that earlier intervention was always best practice, and most SEL programs available target younger school-aged populations (CASEL, 2012). However, less SEL programming is available
for high school students with behavioral challenges, and exclusionary discipline has remained
the primary approach schools implement to address problem behaviors (Toldson et al., 2013)
which has been shown to be ineffective in reducing future misbehavior (Massar, McIntosh, &
Eliason, 2015; Losen, 2013). These approaches also fail to address the underlying root causes of
student misbehavior (Raffaele Mendez, 2003).

**Implementation Barriers**

With any new initiative or program piloted in a K-12 school, the opinions of experienced
school teachers, administrators, and support staff are essential as they are keenly aware of the
school climate and the needs of their student population. In evaluating suggested programs,
school-based staff can astutely explore and articulate barriers which may impede successful
implementation. When considering the STEPS SEL pilot program, the focus group educators
identified several potential implementation difficulties for the investigator to consider. For the
current study, the educators’ comments regarding implementation barriers reflected three
subthemes that emerged: program facilitated by outside organization, student challenges, and
family engagement.

**Program Facilitated by Outside Organization.** The STEPS program was designed by
a doctoral student investigator at UNC Chapel Hill and funded by the UNC Campus Y’s CUBE
(Creating University Born Entrepreneurs) Social Innovation Program. While the investigator
and co-facilitator were experienced mental health practitioners, these clinicians were not
employees of the district or pilot school. The educators explained that as representatives of an
outside organization, the investigator and co-facilitator may experience challenges in building
trust with the target population and student selection. When reflecting on potential barriers, two
teachers thoughtfully discussed the difficulties with trust. They explained:
Female Teacher: “I say building trust is going to be so important. These kids have been...a lot of them have been taught since kindergarten not to trust grown-ups, and not to trust grown-ups related to the school, because maybe we haven’t always come through for them the way we should. And, so you know you're going to have to build trust with them.”

Male Teacher: “Yeah, being an outsider organization...”

Investigator: “Yeah.”

Male Teacher: “They trust [assistant principal’s name redacted].”

Investigator: “But, they don't know me.”

Female Teacher: “And trust [school social worker’s name redacted].”

Another male teacher also shared that student selection may present a challenge. As he talked, many of the educators gestured in agreement. He added:

“I would say...as kids come in to the groups, you know you've got some kids that work well together... [and others] you know don’t go together. That probably needs to be looked at in fact that imbalance. Because [some kids] don't always gel.”

The teachers’ comments prompted the investigator to review the STEPS recruitment protocol and discuss the importance of working closely with the school liaison to select STEPS participants and build student trust.

**Student Challenges.** Students with a history of aggression can present unique challenges for teachers and researchers working to address their needs. There are noteworthy concerns for physically aggressive youth whose behaviors place them at greater risk for poorer educational and mental health outcomes (Loeber et al., 2000) and delinquency (Fite et al., 2009).

Upon reviewing the STEPS program, the focus group educators identified a few key participant challenges that should be considered by the investigator. These barriers were coded as subthemes and included student buy-in, attendance, trust, and emotional and behavioral concerns. Undoubtedly, successful implementation of STEPS requires students with a history of
school difficulty to buy into a newly-designed program designed to meet their needs – which could be tough. Understanding this, one teacher noted:

“I think the key will be buy-in. I think if you can get the kids to buy into the program...then this will work.”

Also highlighted were issues of poor school engagement and low attendance which are often seen in children with behavioral problems. Consequently, if a student is not attending school, the student is not likely to be present for an after-school program. Recognizing the issue of attendance, a teacher added:

“Attendance. A lot of times our kids who don't like school are not regular school attenders. Or they're coming to school, but they're not in the classroom because they're in ISS or they're being suspended.”

Building trust was identified as another potential barrier for STEPS participants. Trust is essential in establishing any new relationship. However, trust building can be even more challenging for students with personal and/or school histories marked by negative experiences. One teacher explained:

“I’d also say building trust both with the family and with the student, because a lot of times when the students and families have a history of bad experiences with schools, then they aren't inclined to believe us or to trust us...”

Finally, the emotional and behavioral difficulties exhibited by the students targeted to enroll in the program were identified as participant barriers. The challenges of youth with emotional and behavioral concerns are well documented in the literature. The educators participating in the focus group were aware of the struggles displayed by many of these students at their school, and they shared how deficits in self-regulation, emotional expressiveness, impulsivity, self-awareness, and attention negatively impacted students. Two teachers noted:
*Teacher 1:* “I would say that in my experience working with students who are at risk that a lot of times our kids who present behavioral problems have a lot of trouble recognizing when their behavior is escalating, and then also have trouble de-escalating themselves – when they've become upset.”

*Teacher 2:* “I also realized sometimes...when students do become escalated, they don't have the...vocabulary to properly articulate how they're feeling. So, it usually moves to profanity. And like Mr. [name redacted] said in his answer, they escalate, and they aren't able to de-escalate.”

**Parental Engagement.** Consistent with any educational initiative committed to improving the outcomes of at-risk youth, parental engagement and involvement in the STEPS program was essential. Parents needed to complete and submit consent forms for student participation, to encourage their students to participate in the after-school program, to complete and return study questionnaires, to arrange or provide after-school transportation – if bus transportation consent was not provided, and to attend program events (i.e., STEPS informational meeting, graduation event). With the level of parent engagement required, the educators noted parental trust, support, and buy-in as potential implementation barriers.

As previously noted, one educator explained, and the group agreed, that building trust with the family would be critical for successful program implementation. Adding to her comment, a school support staff member noted that overall parental support at their school has been problematic for teachers trying to reach this population. She explained:

> “Supportive parents. Instead of hearing us out, they automatically are in defense. “Well they’ve been saying this since middle school, and I don’t believe it.” Well, if they’ve been saying it since middle school, and now we’re saying it in high school, maybe we should try a different approach.”

Most of the group nodded in agreement that parental support had been a concern. Another discussion point focused on parental buy-in as an implementation barrier. An attendee commented:
“...historically it is a generational issue. And it goes back to the family. And we also know that we also get less parental buy in once the child gets older. So, you have more parental buy in when you hit them in elementary and middle school than when they get to high school.”

Implementation Suggestions

The focus group educators offered a myriad of implementation suggestions to increase the overall likelihood of a successful pilot program. Their recommendations included providing transportation to STEPS participants, following up with students after the pilot program concludes, determining how success will be measured, and communicating student success to teachers. Regarding transportation, one educator explained:

“I would say I like the curriculum. I'd say in terms of logistics. Transportation for those kids it's going to be important like to get them home after. You know because a lot of them you know if mom's working, mom you can't get them. Or if mom's got...if they've got a younger sibling. So maybe helping them facilitate some of those like practical hurdles.”

Following her response, the investigator and school liaison noted that after-school bus transportation was provided to all STEPS participants to decrease the burden on parents/caregivers. Next, continued follow-up with STEPS students was also mentioned as a suggestion for implementation. When expressing the importance of participant follow-up, a concerned female educator commented:

“What is the follow-up afterwards? Now, I feel like this...I know this is your target right on. Then after 10 weeks, I always think like, then what? Even like when the kids leave here, I always think like, then what? ...Because you're establishing a relationship with them. And I feel like that is important...that's so important. And, then all of a sudden, it's out of their life again. And it doesn't need to be out of their life.”

The teacher’s comment started a group discussion regarding maintaining a connection with the STEPS participants, at the conclusion of the program, and an explanation from the investigator that indicated the larger parent study research protocol included a one-year follow-up with
STEPS participants. Determining how student success is measured was also offered as a suggestion to consider. An educator added:

“So, how ...how do we measure their success, and how do we celebrate that? ...As individual teachers, as a school, as a program...”

Following the teacher’s question, the investigator reviewed the outcome variables assessed pre- and post-intervention. In addition, the STEPS point system that is designed to reinforce and celebrate the “small” and more immediate positive behaviors of the students (i.e., session attendance, homework completion, participation) was highlighted. Lastly, communicating with teachers, particularly a communication of student effort to encourage teacher support and student motivation, was mentioned as a final implementation suggestion. One educator stated:

“I think as the student is trying and learning this somehow communication with the teachers that they do have...that are supportive of it...that they’re really seeing them trying. Do you know what I mean? Because if they get shut down so quickly, you know I feel like it could be so discouraging.”

General Feedback

The focus group offered general feedback that reflected four themes including the need to build adult social-emotional learning skills, the importance of positive student-teacher relationships, the strengths of behaviorally challenged youth, and the impact of the home environment.

**Adult SEL Skills.** While the focus of the STEPS curriculum addresses the SEL skills of at-risk youth, the focus group educators were adept in their awareness of the need to also improve the SEL skills of adults working with at-risk students. The teachers identified using conflict resolution techniques, demonstrating empathy and acceptance, and giving students a time to reflect as the primary SEL skills adults need to support students with behavioral
challenges. For example, as several teachers acknowledged the significance of adult conflict resolution skills in managing challenging behaviors, one teacher explained:

“I think it's so important for adults who work with young people to seek to diffuse conflict instead of to create it. Because you know you can talk to a kid who's having a behavior issue in a way that increases and then adds further behavior issues, [or] you can talk to them in a way that allows them...to step back.... For example, if you're raising your voice. Like, when a kid is heated with me, I'm never going to raise my voice. I'm going to go quieter. I am going to go calmer. I'm going to go slower, because I don't want to push you know. And that doesn't mean giving ground and doesn't mean not holding a child responsible. But it does mean that you're addressing a kid in a way that's not going to add gasoline to the fire.”

Relatedly, one teacher emphasized, and the group concurred, how empathy and acceptance could be utilized to deescalate conflict with difficult students. He noted:

“For me, a real guiding force in my work has been empathy...unconditional acceptance. When you can approach a student, you know, students do things that are unsavory, disrespectful, umm, you know offensive. But, no matter what they've done, in some proportional way, I've done that to in my own way. So, if someone pointed that out to me, what I did, how would I like to receive that information - that I was being disrespectful. Because yeah, I've been disrespectful before. But you know how [would I want] that pointed out to me in a way that was respectful and helpful and not punitive. So, I always think - you know when I talked to the student - how are they going to receive what I say, and are they going to feel accepted when I point out their...their behavior which...needs to be curtailed.”

Lastly, giving students time to reflect arose as another SEL strategy that adults need to learn and implement when working with challenging students. A female teacher commented:

“I also think, speaking of tools, giving students a chance to kind of simmer down and reflect a bit. As adults, we're kind of able to think in the moment, but even as an adult at the end of the day you have to kind of reflect on your day - you know what did I do well, what could I have done differently to change. And I think giving students that opportunity to reflect a lot of times, even if they're upset, you come back later you know [to] have a conversation. And oftentimes they can articulate what happened and what they should have done...But, just having the opportunity to reflect and to go back and pinpoint what happened and what they could do differently...I think is something that's imperative for our students.”
**Student-Teacher Relationships.** Undoubtedly, adult SEL skills are inextricably linked to a teacher’s ability to form positive relationships with students. These skills are critical for educators as student-teacher relationships are associated with school engagement which impacts student success. Given this, the importance of positive student-teacher relationships emerged as a noteworthy theme revealed during the qualitative analysis. Recognizing the significance of this positive relationship in addressing the needs of at-risk youth, a female educator explained:

“I tell my student teacher that particularly with the at-risk kids, the most important thing is that the kid has to believe you like them. I tell them...I tell her it is more important than with any other child in the building. An AP child, or a child from like a supportive home, does not always need...you know they're coming to you to learn. The kid with challenges is coming to you to be loved and to be liked, too. And it is...it is paramount that they believe you like them. And it doesn't matter how much they frustrate you. It doesn’t matter how tired you two are of each other at the end of the day. You have to approach everything from a stance of they have to...they have to believe you like them. And you have to like them, or you don't belong in there with them.”

Moreover, a white male educator poignantly discussed how he has attempted to acknowledge stereotypes and build relationships based on commonalities with disadvantaged, at-risk males. He commented:

“Not that you can ever remove, but I think the attempt to try to dissolve some of the stereotypes that students have coming in - especially with all of us being white male or white female teachers. And dealing with African American males, there’s a kind of stereotype that you're just an old white teacher. You don't understand me. You don't get me. You know? My goal by the end of the semester is that they don’t see me as a white male older teacher; they simply see me as a teacher who is an older white male. And it doesn’t sound like it’s a big difference. But it really is. You see him as a teacher, first, instead of this white guy that’s trying to make you do what every other white guy made you in education. And you don’t want to do it. So, I work really hard on trying to make that connection. You know, you're 15. You're black. You're poor. I've been there. I mean, I may not have been black. But I've been poor. So, we do have a connection.”

Finally, as a foundation of student-teacher relationships, trust was identified as one critical component that must be established when working with at-risk youth. An educator noted:
“You build[ing] that trust is so crucial in that relationship where they can make a mistake and you’re still gonna like them. You know they can mess up, and you’re still in their corner. You still believe in them. I think that’s crucial.”

Participant Strengths. In addition, despite the behavioral challenges displayed by physically or verbally aggressive students, individual strengths observed within this population were also a focus of the general feedback offered by the focus group attendees. The educators noted that many at-risk youths are intelligent and motivated to learn. For example, one teacher commented:

“Some students - I’m thinking of a couple in particular - are actually very, very smart...And, oftentimes if it’s a subject that they are particularly interested in, they can be very passionate about doing well.

A second teacher added:

“I think of one student here...he did great in my class. And was so engaged in learning, and really wanted to learn and was such a joy in class. Very creative. Added a lot to discussions. He just had struggles outside of class more in unstructured time.”

Social justice advocacy was also identified as a personal attribute often exhibited by behaviorally challenged youth. One of the teachers stated:

“...some of those kids also become really important voices for social justice because they’re very sensitive to issues of fairness and equity. And, so a lot of times it’s those kids are...are really good in kind of recognizing inequity. And helping us can recognize maybe some things that we should look at as an entire faculty our entire population. Because they’re very sensitive to mistreatment or perceived mistreatment.”

Another teacher shared that with the right approach, some students perceived negative behaviors are also strengths and offer opportunities for leadership development, if cultivated appropriately. She explained:

“And one of the strategies that a particular teacher used was to take one of those students that had a big personality and make him a leader in one of his class groups. And, so once he gave him that kind of leadership role, his personality fit what he was
expected to do in the classroom. And behaviors that were seen as undesirable of course dropped off.”

**Impact of Home Environment.** Inarguably, teachers are sensitive to the factors which influence student behavior and academic performance. After the investigator discussed the inclusion of parent trainings and home visits in the comprehensive STEPS approach, several educators shared how the home environment impacted students with behavioral challenges. While parent trainings and home visits were not implemented as a part of the current iteration of the STEPS pilot program or research inquiry, the educators’ feedback regarding these two components, and the importance of the home environment, is presented. One educator noted:

> Teacher: “I generally teach a large inclusion class load. And, generally in those classes we have high minority, high poverty and kids who have behavioral problems due to home problems - maybe single parent homes...things like that. So..”

> Investigator: “So, it's been your experience that...the home environment can impact the kids’ behavior?”

> Teacher: “Absolutely.”

Notably, given the impact of the home environment on students’ behaviors, when asked about the STEPS component that would be the most effective in meeting the needs of at-risk students, a female educator highlighted the importance of the home visits:

> “I think we just talked about the home visit being an important component. And how I think after our conversation, I could see how that is important.”

Finally, another educator explained how the incorporation of home visits extended the potential reach of the STEPS program and could be one mechanism utilized to reach younger at-risk children within the family earlier. She commented:

> “…when you do like the home visits. So, wouldn’t in theory the student who is in the program, if they have younger siblings [at home], wouldn't the siblings be able to benefit
maybe from their older siblings dealing with [problems better]? ...So, did you think that? Have you thought about that possibly being a way to reach the younger generation sooner than high school, maybe?”

**Descriptive Analysis**

**STEPS Participant Demographics**

Following the STEPS recruitment protocol, 14 students were enrolled in the school-based social-emotional learning pilot program. One enrolled student, a high school senior, was later placed in a district alternative school, prior to the onset of the program; therefore, he was deemed ineligible to participate in the program at the pilot site. Due to extracurricular involvement, two additional enrolled students voluntarily withdrew from the program, after attending one group. Of the 14 students initially enrolled, 11 students completed the STEPS pilot program. The current analysis is limited to STEPS participants with available data. See Table 5. Summary of Participant Demographic Characteristics.

**Personal and Academic History**

The mean reported age of the STEPS participants was 15 years (SD=1.0). The age range was 14 – 17. Thirty-six percent of the students were 14, 36% were age 15, 18% were 16, and one student (9%) was 17 years old. At the onset of the program, the mean cumulative GPA, through the 3rd semester of the 2018-19 academic year, was .98 (SD=.54). Fifty-six percent of the participants were currently enrolled in 9th grade. Additionally, 36% of students attended 10th grade. The remaining 9% of students were enrolled in the 11th grade. No high school seniors attended the program. Regarding special education services, 73% of the participants were currently receiving specialized instruction as mandated by an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Twenty-seven percent of students were not currently receiving specialized instruction.
Table 5  

*Summary of Participant Demographic Characteristics*

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<th>Demographic</th>
<th>% (n)</th>
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**Academic History**

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**Disciplinary History**

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<td>Yes</td>
<td>22% (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>60 (6)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>78 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Criminal History**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prior Adjudication</th>
<th>% (n)</th>
<th>Court Disposition</th>
<th>% (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>80% (8)</td>
<td>Probation</td>
<td>37% (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>20 (2)</td>
<td>Comm. Service</td>
<td>37 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>25 (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Familial Arrest History</th>
<th>% (n)</th>
<th>Familial Incarceration</th>
<th>% (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>70% (7)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>70% (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>30 (3)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>30 (3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Of the students not currently receiving specialized education services, one student received classroom accommodations provided by a 504 plan. Retention data were available for eight students of which 38% percent reported previous grade retention; 62% reported no history of being retained. School attendance data were provided for all STEPS participants. Of the 11 participants, approximately 63% recorded 10 or less absences for the 2018-19 academic year. Over 36% of students had 16 or more absences. Nine students self-reported their lifetime history of skipping school for an entire day. Fifty-six percent of students reported skipping school for at least one day; 44% of students had not previously skipped school for an entire day.

Extracurricular activity data were self-reported from nine students; 67% reported no extracurricular involvement. Twenty-two percent of students were involved in church organization activities. Eleven percent reported attending other activities that were later identified as music related. Finally, reduced/free lunch eligibility data, a common indicator of poverty, were available for 10 students; 80% received free/reduced lunch.

**Disciplinary History**

Disciplinary data were self-reported for prior ISS sanctions, prior OSS sanctions, first OSS sanction, and alternative school placement. Ten of eleven participants provided data for prior ISS sanctions, prior OSS sanctions, and first OSS occurrence. Sixty percent of respondents reported six or more prior ISS sanctions; 30% reported three to five prior ISS sanctions; 10% reported two or less prior ISS sanctions. Of the 10 students with reported prior OSS data, 40% reported zero to two prior OSS sanctions. Moreover, 40% reported three to five prior OSS incidents, and 20% reported six or more OSS sanctions. Regarding first OSS occurrence, 40% reported being first suspended out of school in elementary; 60% reported a first OSS occurrence in middle school. No students reported being first suspended in high school. Nine students
reported data related to prior alternative school placement; 78% reported no prior alternative school placement. Twenty-two percent reported previous alternative school enrollment.

**Criminal History**

Criminal history data were self-reported and available for 10 STEPS participants. Eighty percent of students reported a prior juvenile adjudication; 20% reported no prior adjudications. Of the students with reported prior juvenile court adjudication, the case dispositions included the following: 37.5% received probation, 37.5% were ordered to complete community service, and 25% reported other dispositions which could have included restitution. Regarding familial criminal history, 70% of students reported a family member being arrested and incarcerated. Thirty percent of students denied any history of family member arrest or incarceration.

**Parental Demographic Characteristics**

Parental marital status data were self-reported by a parent/legal guardian for 10 participants. The available data revealed the following: 20% of parents reported being single; 60% were separated, divorced, or widowed; and 20% reported being married. Educational and employment information were provided by eight of eleven parents. Regarding parental educational history, the data showed the following: 12.5% of parents reported less than high school education; 12.5% reported a high school education; 50% reported completion of an associate’s degree; and 25% reported completion of a bachelor’s degree. Parental employment history indicated that 37.5% of parents were currently unemployed; 62.5% were currently working full-time. Finally, family income data were self-reported by seven parents. Fifty-seven percent of parents reported an annual family income of less than $49,999; 43% reported a family income of $50,000 or more. See Table 6. Summary of Parental Demographic Characteristics.
Table 6

Summary of Parental Demographic Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working full-time</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working part-time</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 12 years</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate’s Degree</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10,000 – $19,999</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$20,000 – $29,999</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$30,000 – $39,999</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$40,000 – $49,999</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,000 or more</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Quantitative Analysis

Aggression

Hypothesis 2. It was hypothesized that STEPS participants would show decreases in aggressive behaviors. To evaluate this hypothesis, the pre- and posttest mean differences on the Aggression subscale from the BASC-3 Parent Rating Scale-Adolescent were compared. A within group Paired Sample T-test was computed to evaluate differences in pre- and posttest
scores for all STEPS participants with complete data (n=5). The t-test results did not reveal statistically significant differences in aggression scores for students participating in the STEPS program \((t (4) = -0.63, p = 0.56)\). See Table 7: Comparison of Mean Aggression Scores.

**Table 7**

*Comparison of Mean Aggression Scores*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BASC-3 PRS Aggression Subscale</th>
<th>(n)</th>
<th>(M)</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>64.6</td>
<td>10.33</td>
<td>52 – 77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>66.8</td>
<td>15.07</td>
<td>49 – 81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(t (4) = -0.63, p = 0.56\)

**School Conduct**

**Hypothesis 3.** It was hypothesized that STEPS participants would show decreases in poor school conduct. To evaluate this hypothesis, the pre- and posttest differences in the total number of third and fourth quarter office disciplinary referrals was compared for the 2018-19 academic year. A within group Paired Sample T-test was planned; however, one of the variables was positively skewed and violated the assumption of normality. The results from the Shapiro Wilks Normality Test revealed a \(p\)-value = .0064. A Wilcoxon Signed Rank non-parametric test was computed to evaluate pre- and posttest mean differences for all STEPS participants with complete data (n=8). The results did not reveal statistically significant differences in office disciplinary referrals for STEPS participants \((p = 0.348)\). See Table 8: Comparison of Mean Office Disciplinary Referrals.
Table 8
*Comparison of Mean Office Disciplinary Referrals*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Office Disciplinary Referrals</th>
<th>Pretest</th>
<th>Posttest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>1.75</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD</td>
<td>2.493</td>
<td>2.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>0 – 7</td>
<td>0 – 6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p = 0.348*

**School Engagement**

**Hypothesis 4.** It was hypothesized that STEPS participants would show improvement in school engagement. To evaluate this hypothesis, the pre- and posttest mean differences on the Student Engagement Inventory (SEI) were compared. A within group Paired Sample T-test was computed to evaluate differences in pre- and posttest scores for all STEPS participants with complete data (n=5). The t-test results did not reveal statistically significant differences in school engagement scores for students participating in the STEPS program (*t* (4) = -1.004, *p = 0.372). See Table 9: Comparison of Mean Student Engagement Inventory Scores.

Table 9
*Comparison of Mean Student Engagement Inventory Scores*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SEI Scores</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>1.94 – 2.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>1.68 – 3.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*t (4) = -1.004, p = 0.372*

**Academic Performance**

**Hypothesis 5.** It was hypothesized that STEPS participants would show improvement in academic performance. To evaluate this hypothesis, the pre- and posttest mean differences in
GPA were compared for the third and fourth quarters of the 2018-19 academic year. A within group Paired Sample T-test was computed to evaluate differences in pre- and posttest semester grade-point averages for all STEPS participants with complete data (n=8). The t-test results did not reveal statistically significant differences in academic performance for STEPS participants (t (7) = 1.419, p = 0.199). See Table 10: Comparison of Mean Semester Grade-Point Averages.

**Table 10**

*Comparison of Mean Semester Grade-Point Averages*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semester Grade-Point Averages</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>0.94</td>
<td>0.25 – 3.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>0.62</td>
<td>0.25 – 2.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* t (7) = 1.419, p = 0.199

**Supplementary Analysis**

Additional analyses were completed to gain a better understanding of the school conduct, student engagement, academic achievement, CBT knowledge outcomes of STEPS participants, and overall student participation.

**School Conduct**

Disciplinary data collected during a one-year follow-up period were available from the larger STEPS parent study. To glean the impact of STEPS participation on long-term school conduct, office disciplinary referrals were compared from the three academic quarters prior to (2018-19) and after (2019-20) STEPS participation. At the time of study follow-up, seven STEPS students were still enrolled at the pilot school and disciplinary data from these students were utilized. To analyze these data, a non-parametric Wilcoxon Signed Rank test was computed as the data violated the assumption of normal distribution. The results indicated a
significant decrease in office disciplinary referrals for the nine months following the completion
of the STEPS program ($p = 0.016$). An effect size was calculated using Pearson’s $r$ to determine
the magnitude of the effect detected. A large effect was observed, $r = -0.64$. See Table 11.

Comparison of Mean Office Disciplinary Referrals at 9-Month Follow-Up.

**Table 11**

*Comparison of Mean Office Disciplinary Referrals at 9-Month Follow-Up*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Office Disciplinary Referrals</th>
<th>$n$</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2018-19 (August – March)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.71</td>
<td>2.21</td>
<td>1.0 – 7.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019-20 (August – March)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>.28</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>0 – 1.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*$p = 0.016$, $r = -0.64$

**School Engagement**

A review of the SEI subscales was conducted to glean participants self-reported
engagement outcomes in the six areas assessed. To analyze student engagement along these
scales, mean SEI pre- and posttest subscale scores were compared. For those variables meeting
the assumptions of parametric testing (Teacher-Student Relationships (TSR) and Family Support
for Learning (FSL)), Paired Sample T-tests were calculated to determine if differences were
observed. Wilcoxon Signed Rank tests were used to analyze scales requiring non-parametric
testing (Peer Support at School (PSS), Control and Relevance of School Work (CRSW), and
Intrinsic Motivation (IM)). While self-reported gains were observed in teacher-student
relationships, control and relevance of school work, and future goals and aspirations, the
analyses did not reveal statistically significant differences after completion of the STEPS SEL
program. See Table 12. Comparison of Mean Student Engagement Subscale Scores.
Table 12

Comparison of Mean Student Engagement Subscale Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SEI Scales</th>
<th>Pretest</th>
<th>Posttest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Affective (Psychological) Engagement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher-Student Relationships (TSR)</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>2.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer Support at School (PSS)</td>
<td>2.63</td>
<td>2.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Support for Learning (FSL)</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>2.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive Engagement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control and Relevance of School Work (CRSW)</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>2.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Aspirations and Goals (FG)</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>3.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic Motivation (IM)</td>
<td>3.30</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An item analysis was conducted to evaluate item-level engagement scores which provided the proportion of high engagement responses for each SEI test item. To complete this calculation, student responses to each question were dichotomized. Student responses rated as “Strongly Disagree” or “Disagree” received a score of “0”; responses rated “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” were coded “1”. For the two items requiring reverse coding, participant responses rated “Strongly Disagree” or “Disagree” received a score of “1”; responses rated “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” were coded “0”. To analyze item-level engagement, means for each test item were computed. Mean scores for each item ranged from 0 to 1. Scores closer to 0 indicated low engagement; generally, scores .5 or above suggested high engagement.

The results indicated that the proportion of students reporting higher engagement increased for several of the SEI items, as shown in Table 13. Particularly, at the conclusion of the STEPS Program, 40% of respondents believed adults at their school listened to the students (Item 5); all respondents noted that school was important for achieving their future goals (Item 19); 80% of students indicated that adults at their school treated them fairly (Item 21) and cared
Table 13

*Summary of Mean Item-Level Engagement Scores – SEI*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Score</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Item 1: FSL</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td>Item 13: TSR</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 2: CRSW</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>.2</td>
<td>Item 14: PSS</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 3: TSR</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>Item 15: CRSW</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 4: PSS</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>.6</td>
<td>Item 16: TSR</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 5: TSR</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Item 17: FG</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 6: PSS</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td>Item 18: IM</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 7: PSS</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td>Item 19: FG</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 8: FG</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>.6</td>
<td>Item 20: FSL</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 9: CRSW</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Item 21: TSR</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 10: TSR</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Item 22: TSR</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>.2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 11: FG</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>.6</td>
<td>Item 23: PSS</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item 12: FSL</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td>Item 24: PSS</td>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
about students (Item 31). Moreover, 80% of respondents believed learning was fun because they got better at something (Item 33); 80% of students also indicated that what they were learning in their classes would be important in their future (Item 34).

**Academic Achievement**

Academic achievement data collected during a one-year follow-up period were available from the larger STEPS parent study. To investigate the effect of STEPS participation on long-term academic performance, cumulative GPAs were compared from the time of study enrollment (March 2019) and nine months after STEPS participation (March 2020). At the time of study follow-up, seven STEPS students were still enrolled at the pilot school. Academic performance data were available for five of the remaining students. To analyze these data, a Paired Sample t-test was computed. The results indicated no significant increase in academic achievement for the nine months following completion of the STEPS program ($t (4) = -1.69, p = 0.166$). See Table 14. Comparison of Cumulative Mean Grade-Point Averages.

**Table 14**

*Comparison of Cumulative Mean Grade-Point Averages*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cumulative Grade-Point Averages</th>
<th>$n$</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>March 2019</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.93</td>
<td>.72</td>
<td>0.0 – 1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2020</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>0.5 – 1.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$t (4) = -1.69, p = 0.166$

**Cognitive-Behavioral Knowledge**

The researcher-developed STEPS SEL curriculum included a 10-question assessment to assess participants CBT knowledge pre- and post-intervention. To understand the acquisition of
cognitive-behavioral skills and knowledge gained, the mean pre- and posttest scores for STEPS participants were compared. A Paired Sample T-test was computed to analyze mean differences. The results indicated that STEPS participants improved their CBT knowledge by 52%; however, no significant differences were observed when comparing pre- and posttest means ($t (5) = -1.602, p = 0.170$). See Table 15. Comparison of Mean CBT Knowledge Scores.

Table 15

Comparison of Mean CBT Knowledge Scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STEPS CBT Curriculum Test</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pretest</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>7.92</td>
<td>20.0 – 43.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posttest</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>29.56</td>
<td>15.0 – 97.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$t (5) = -1.602, p = 0.170$

An item analysis was conducted to evaluate item difficulty which provides the proportion of correct student responses for each CBT test item. To complete this calculation, student responses to each question were dichotomized. Correct responses received a score of “1”; incorrect responses were coded “0”. To analyze item difficulty, means for each test item were computed. The results indicated that the proportion of students answering correctly increased for six of the ten items. Notably, at the conclusion of the STEPS Program, 83% of respondents were able to identify at least 2 of 3 components of the ABC Model (Item 2); 83% correctly classified anger as a secondary emotion (Item 5); and 50% of students could accurately label the cognitive distortion presented in a scenario (Item 9). See Table 16. Summary of Item Difficulty Scores – STEPS Curriculum Test.
### Table 16

*Summary of Item Difficulty Scores – STEPS Curriculum Test*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
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<td>Posttest .83</td>
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<td>Posttest .17</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Posttest 1.0</td>
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<td></td>
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</table>

### STEPS Point System

The STEPS program included a point system to encourage student participation and engagement in the pilot study. For each group session, students could earn five points for attendance, participation, homework completion, and exemplary behavior for a potential total of 20 points earned per session and 400 total points. For example, if a student attended each of the 20 sessions and participated in group discussion, but failed to complete homework assignments, or receive extra points for exemplary behavior, the student earned 200 points (50%) – which the researcher determined was indicative of moderate participation. An analysis of the points accrued was conducted to evaluate student participation in the STEPS activities which offered a measure a treatment feasibility and acceptability. To complete the analysis, descriptive statistics
were computed and summarized, as shown in Table 17. The results indicated the average number of points accrued for the 11 students participating in the STEPS program was 185.77 ($SD = 70.4$). Six students (55%) earned approximately 200 points or more. Two students received STEPS Leader recognition for garnering the highest points total (270).

**Table 17**

*Summary of Mean Student Participation Points*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STEPS Points</th>
<th>$n$</th>
<th>$M$</th>
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<td>70.4</td>
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CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The current pilot study was designed to test a prototype of STEPS (Student Training for Educational and Personal Success), an SEL intervention targeting Black high school males with a history of aggression. Grounded in cognitive-behavioral theory, the SEL intervention sought to facilitate acquisition of prosocial skills that would decrease aggression and school conduct problems and improve school engagement and academic achievement. By targeting the student population at greatest risk for exclusionary discipline, the researcher aimed to provide treatment acceptability, feasibility, and initial outcome data to support the development of alternatives to suspension for at-risk students thereby reducing their risk of entering the school-to-prison pipeline.

Previous studies revealed that SEL programs were effective in reducing aggressive behavior, school conduct problems, and increasing school engagement (Dymnicki, Sambolt & Kidron, 2013; Durlak et al., 2011). Additionally, researchers have concluded that SEL programs contributed to the increase in academic performance (Dymnicki, Sambolt & Kidron, 2013; Durlak et al., 2011; Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). Although these findings are significant, most studies in the literature include universal (MTSS Tier 1) approaches for elementary students. Few researchers have clearly evaluated and differentiated the effects of these programs for students requiring selected or targeted (MTSS Tier 2 and Tier 3) support. To that end, the current study attempted to extend the findings of previous investigations, while expanding research to determine the feasibility and initial outcomes of a social-emotional learning program for aggressive Black male high school students. Thus, by examining these
data, the current researcher hoped to answer the following important questions: What is the feasibility and treatment acceptability of the STEPS curriculum? Do students who participate in the STEPS Program demonstrate decreases in aggressive behaviors? Do students who participate in the STEPS Program demonstrate decreases in poor school conduct? Do students who participate in the STEPS Program show improvement in school engagement? Do students who participate in the STEPS Program demonstrate improvement in academic performance?

The following summary provides a discussion of the current results.

**Interpretation of Results**

**Treatment Acceptability and Feasibility.** In lieu of testing a hypothesis, the current study gathered data from educators at the pilot school to investigate the treatment acceptability and feasibility of the STEPS SEL curriculum. Feedback was categorized in four domains (i.e., program/curriculum content, barriers to implementation, implementation suggestions, and general feedback) and indicated that the proposed curriculum was a feasible and acceptable treatment for aggressive males within the desired setting. See Table 4. STEPS Focus Group Content Analysis. The educators noted that the curriculum included the requisite SEL learning components essential to meeting the needs of students with behavioral challenges, and no curriculum changes were offered. One administrator questioned the age range of the target population and suggested that intervention for this group needed to occur earlier as these behaviors are more ingrained by high school. The administrator’s comments highlighted the prevailing mindset of many educators which could contribute to exclusionary discipline being the primary tool used for problem behaviors (Toldson et. al., 2013). The question that must be posed to educators and practitioners is: What should be the response and consequence when a high school student is demonstrating behavioral problems? If the response falls short of
determining and addressing the root causes of student misbehavior, then we are failing to teach
the student the skills necessary to be successful. As Raffaele Mendez (2003) asserted,
suspension is ineffective in reducing future misbehavior and suspended students often do not
receive services to address the root causes of the misbehavior.

Adult social-emotional skills emerged as an important theme during the focus group. Unsurprisingly, the teachers were adept at recognizing that the behaviors of adults within the
school, and adults working with the students (i.e., STEPS facilitators), have the potential to
impact student behaviors. Specifically, with behaviorally challenged youth, the teachers noted
the need for educators to demonstrate conflict resolution skills, empathy and acceptance, and a
positive student-teacher relationship. This was an important theme discussed as any school
working to implement an intensive SEL program for at-risk youth should be committed to school
wide SEL implementation (Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3), and include programming to bolster the
SEL skills of educators. The pilot school recognized the need for teachers to be competent in
their ability to resolve conflict and build relationships with students and required their staff to
attend a Capturing Kids’ Hearts training designed to improve student connectedness – months
before the STEPS program was implemented.

Potential implementation barriers were also discussed by the focus group attendees as an
important area to consider. STEPS provided by an outside organization, student challenges, and
parental engagement emerged as significant barriers to address. First, Since STEPS was
developed by an outside graduate student researcher, the teachers explained that implementation
may by impeded by difficulties with student selection, student and parent trust, student and
parent buy-in, and parental engagement. With these barriers noted, the investigator consulted
with the school liaison regarding the student selection process and leveraged the appointment of
the school liaison as the on-site champion of STEPS to connect with prospective participants and families. Notably, student challenges, particularly the students’ known emotional and behavioral challenges, were important factors to consider and presented a significant student barrier. It was asserted that the behaviors which led to the student being eligible for the STEPS Program (a history of physical or verbal aggression) would also present challenges for the student to successfully participate. Furthermore, parental engagement was discussed in depth as a likely implementation barrier. Several of the attendees expressed difficulty regarding engaging parents of at-risk minority youth at the pilot school. From their comments, it appeared as though their experiences of parental disengagement did not represent isolated incidents but rather a persistent problem. While the teachers talked at length about the lack of parental support and buy-in, none of the educators were able to identify plausible explanations for the disengagement of minority parents. The school has a small percentage of minority students, and very few teachers of color on staff. Interestingly, the pilot school has had a history of negative racial incidents targeting minority youth, and recently the local school board engaged in a lengthy debate regarding the appropriateness of student attire displaying the confederate flag. For minority families in the South, this racial history could be offensive and underlie their perceived disengagement.

Conducting a focus group with practitioners was a requisite first step in determining the feasibility of the proposed STEPS manual and core components. This approach to engage stakeholders in the manual review process during feasibility testing was consistent with the Carroll and Nuro (2002) approach that was later expanded by Fraser et. al (2009). The second and third components of feasibility testing involved implementation in a practice setting and evaluation for initial efficacy. A discussion of the findings from the initial STEPS implementation in a school setting is provided below:
**Aggression.** It was hypothesized that students who participated in the STEPS Program would demonstrate decreases in aggressive behavior. In comparing the BASC-3 Parent Rating Scale (PRS) Aggression subscale T-scores, pre- and post-intervention, this hypothesis was not supported. These findings were not consistent with Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachon (2010) that found reductions in problem behaviors for students participating in after-school SEL programs. Overall, the results revealed that students who participated in the STEPS program did not exhibit reductions in aggressive behaviors.

The inability to measure any true effect of participation in the STEPS program on aggression could have been related to a few factors. First, aggression is a medial outcome in the STEPS Logic Model. Given this, any true changes in parent-rated physical or verbal aggression may not be seen for some time. At this stage of feasibility testing, perhaps a better assessment of aggressive behaviors could have focused on proximal outcomes by evaluating improvement in the students’ knowledge of aggressive behaviors, triggers, physiological responses, and their ability to identify appropriate cognitive-behavioral coping strategies. Second, while previous studies have shown that CBT skill-based approaches are related to reductions in aggressive behaviors (Sukhodolsky, Kassinove & Gorman, 2003), these studies found that the use of homework was significantly and positively related to outcomes. Throughout the implementation of the STEPS Program, most participants consistently did not complete homework assignments which could have impeded the potential for reducing aggressive behaviors.

**School Conduct.** It was posited that students who participated in the STEPS Program would demonstrate decreases in poor school conduct. In comparing the 2018-19 third and fourth quarter ODRs, this hypothesis was not supported. These findings were not consistent with previous research (see Durlak, Weissberg & Pachon, 2010). Overall, the results revealed that
students who participated in the STEPS program did not exhibit reductions in poor school conduct.

Much like aggression, changes in school conduct represent medial outcomes; therefore, any differential effects gleaned are not likely to be observed for some time. The current study evaluated changes in disciplinary referrals after only a 9- to 10-week period which yielded no reductions in office disciplinary referrals (ODRs). Perhaps analyzing this variable over a longer time period would result in a more accurate estimate of the study’s impact and offer a better opportunity to assess participants’ improvement in school conduct. Follow-up data available from the larger STEPS parent study supports this assertion. In comparing the mean ODRs occurring over three academic quarters prior to and after STEPS implementation, the results revealed significant reductions in office disciplinary referrals. Using follow-up ODR data available for seven STEPS participants, for the 2018-19 academic year, 19 total ODRs were reported for the first three quarters, prior to STEPS implementation. For the same time period during the 2019-20 academic year, only 2 referrals were reported. To that end, these data revealed that participation in the STEPS Program was associated with reductions in poor school conduct long term.

**School Engagement.** It was postulated that students who participated in the STEPS Program would demonstrate improvement in school engagement. In comparing the Student Engagement Inventory (SEI) total mean score pre- and postintervention, this hypothesis was not supported. These findings were not consistent with previous research which indicated improvement in school engagement for students participating in SEL programs (Dymnicki, Sambolt & Kidron, 2013; Durlak et al., 2011; Durlak, Weissberg & Pachan, 2010). Overall, the
results revealed that students who participated in the STEPS program did not exhibit improvement in school engagement.

Several possible explanations can be asserted to elucidate these findings. Consistent with other dependent variables investigated during this pilot study, school engagement represented a medial outcome in the STEPS Logic Model. Therefore, changes in the dependent variable may be difficult to glean at this stage of pilot testing. Notably, it is important to highlight that supplementary analysis of the SEI subscales indicated small gains in teacher-student relationships, control and relevance of school work, and future aspirations and goals; thus, it is quite possible that this promising trend could lead to a meaningful difference if student engagement is assessed long term. Interestingly, Anyon, Zhang & Hazel (2016) argued that males and minority students may have more difficulty building connectedness. The authors asserted that this may be due in part to cultural incongruence. Within the context of the current study, a lack of cultural congruence could have impacted student engagement for the STEPS participants who attended a school with a small percentage of minority staff and students.

Lastly, another possible explanation for no meaningful differences in school engagement concerned the time of the academic year when the program was implemented. Due to implementation delays, the STEPS Program was conducted during the last quarter of the year. It is possible that participants were less engaged overall due to end-of-year apathy and not amenable to strategies to improve engagement.

**Academic Achievement.** It was hypothesized that students who participated in the STEPS Program would demonstrate improvement in academic achievement. In comparing the 2018-19 third and fourth quarter GPAs, this hypothesis was not confirmed. These findings were not consistent with previous research that indicated gains in academic achievement for students
participating in SEL programs (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Durlak, Weissberg & Pachan, 2010). Overall, the results revealed that students who participated in the STEPS program did not demonstrate improvement in academic achievement.

A myriad of factors must be considered when positing explanations for this finding. The mean cumulative GPA for the STEPS participants at the time of enrollment was .976 which indicated that most of the students were failing. Shortly after the STEPS Program began, a few of the students received retention letters or notifications of required summer school enrollment for grade promotion. Given this, it is possible that the students were not motivated to do well academically because there was no perceived benefit to improving their grades and resigned themselves to continue their current academic performance. Another possible explanation for this finding could be the time of year that these academic achievement data were collected. The STEPS Program was implemented from April 6, 2019 – June 6, 2019 – the last quarter of the academic year – and academic achievement comparisons were analyzed for changes from the third academic quarter to the end of the fourth quarter. With these data being collected and analyzed at the end of the year, it is likely that end-of-year student fatigue, motivation, and limited effort may have impacted the results.

Finally, within the STEPS Logic Model, academic achievement represented a distal outcome that is not likely to be evident for some time. Therefore, while previous research has shown that participation in SEL programs improved academic achievement, this finding may be unlikely to be observed at this phase of pilot testing. Examining this variable for long-term differential effects postintervention would be a better methodological fit. Early follow-up data from the larger parent study supports this assertion and revealed small gains in overall cumulative GPA. At the 9-month follow-up period, academic achievement data were available
for five STEPS students who were matriculating at the pilot school. Collectively, from the third quarter of 2018-19 to the third quarter of 2019-20, mean cumulative GPAs improved slightly from .93 to 1.21. While these gains are small, the trend is promising.

**CBT Knowledge.** A supplementary analysis of the STEPS curriculum pre- and posttest scores was conducted to evaluate the participants’ gains in CBT knowledge. While no significant differences were found, STEPS participants increased their overall knowledge of CBT by 52.5%. This finding highlighted that despite the STEPS participants’ low academic performance (.976) and high rate of special education services (73%) the students were able to gain considerable knowledge of a research-based approach that if individually applied could reduce future problem behaviors.

In sum, while no statistically significant differences were found from the primary analyses, implementation of the STEPS Program holds promise for reducing office disciplinary referrals of at-risk students over time. With additional efficacy testing and curriculum refinement, this pilot program could contribute significantly to the scientific community by providing an alternative to exclusionary discipline which disproportionately impacts Black males. Furthermore, supplementary analysis of the STEPS curriculum pretest/posttest indicated that the participants demonstrated gains in their knowledge of cognitive-behavioral principles. This is a promising trend as cognitive-behavioral interventions have been shown to reduce aggressive behaviors in adolescents (Sukhodolsky, Smith, McCauley, Ibrahim, & Piasecka, 2016; Sukhodolsky, Kassinove & Gorman, 2004). Moreover, comments from the STEPS focus group educators were positive and indicated that the STEPS SEL curriculum included the requisite modules to address the emotional and behavioral needs of aggressive youth.
Limitations

A comprehensive review of this study revealed several limitations that may have influenced the initial outcomes. Primary methodological limitations of this study concerned the limited sample size and participant eligibility criteria. This study was a pilot project with a small sample size based on budgetary and staffing resources. While NIH guidelines indicated that feasibility pilot studies can restrict sample sizes based on project resources (NIH, 2020), a small sample impacted the ability to detect statistically significant findings. The characteristics of eligible participants represented a second methodology limitation worth noting. This pilot study focused exclusively on Black high school males with a history of physical or verbal aggression. With restricted inclusion criteria, the findings from this study are not generalizable; thus, external validity is limited.

A reduced implementation timeframe was a third limitation of this study. The STEPS SEL groups were designed to provide 40 hours of skills training to be implemented over a 10-week period (2 afterschool sessions per week, 2 hours each session). Due to implementation delays, the pilot study was implemented over a 9-week period. Although the schedule was modified to accommodate 40 hours of training over 9 weeks, the adjusted implementation timeframe reduced the time between pre- and posttest data collection. This decrease could have impacted potential effects in the dependent variables assessed.

Limited treatment acceptability and feasibility data from the STEPS participants was another limitation in methodology. The current study’s approach to manual development is based on the work conceptualized by Carroll and Nuro (2002) and later expanded by Fraser et al. (2009). Using this framework, the investigator engaged educators at the pilot school to review the core components of the STEPS manual and program materials, prior to implementation. This
method is supported by research. However, while the investigator had access to informal measures of treatment acceptability and feasibility from the participants (i.e., attendance records, attrition rate, homework completion, etc.) after implementation, formal assessment of treatment acceptability and feasibility from the STEPS student participants could have added to the study and informed curriculum modifications.

Low homework completion presented a fifth limitation of the current pilot study. While homework completion is a measure of treatment feasibility and acceptability, it is being illuminated as a study limitation because of its ability to influence the overall findings. Cognitive-behavioral skill-training often employs homework techniques which give participants an opportunity to extend learning and to practice skills. Research has shown that CBT approaches utilizing homework assignments yielded significant and positive therapy outcomes (Sukhodolsky, Kassinove, & Gorman, 2004). Homework assignments are also an essential part of the instructional framework embedded in many effective SEL programs (CASEL, 2012 & 2015). Each STEPS lesson plan included a homework activity to be reviewed the next session. To encourage homework completion, students were awarded five points for each completed homework assignment. Additional points were earned for session attendance, participation, and exemplary behavior. The points total was used to select one weekly STEPS leader who received a $20 gift card. Many of the students did not earn homework completion points during the duration of the study. They commented that they did not have adequate time to complete STEPS tasks outside of the weekly sessions. To address the low homework completion rate, some of the sessions were modified to allow students 10 minutes to complete the homework assignments. However, this did not significantly improve homework completion.
A final limitation of the pilot study was the afterschool program delivery format. As noted by the educators during the focus group, many of the students targeted to enroll in the STEPS afterschool pilot program needed transportation support to attend. Several of the STEPS participants came from single-parent, lower income families without the resources to provide evening transportation. Therefore, implementing the STEPS Program afterschool, from 4-6 pm, two days a week, warranting the provision of transportation for most participants. Essentially, without providing transportation, the STEPS Program could not be implemented.

Months before the program was implemented, the STEPS investigator was assured by the pilot school principal that afterschool transportation provided by the school district was available. Approximately two weeks before the STEPS Program was scheduled to start, the investigator was notified that an afterschool bus was not being provided by the district. This presented a challenge for program implementation; only three recruited students could attend without transportation support. After additional communication with district transportation officials, the STEPS Program was granted an afterschool bus, and the program proceeded as scheduled. Eight of the 11 students who completed the program required and received transportation provided by the STEPS Program through a contract with the local school district’s transportation department. Transportation expenses incurred by the STEPS Program totaled $2,680 ($134 per session). Delivering the STEPS Program within the normal school day would have eliminated the need for transportation services.

Implications and Future Directions

The findings of the current study have significant research and practice implications. Future research designed to extend the findings of this pilot study should consider the following: (a) increasing the sample size, (b) including a feasibility evaluation with student participants, (c)
adapting the curriculum for in-school program delivery, (d) extending the implementation timeframe, and (e) incorporating work with teachers.

First, increasing the sample size would yield a more robust examination of the study’s impact and offer a better opportunity to detect differential effects. This could be accomplished by conducting feasibility testing of the STEPS program in two schools, and eventually broadening the participant eligibility criteria to include a school-based program for Black girls and younger students. The current iteration of the STEPS program focused exclusively on Black males as this group is at greatest risk for exclusionary discipline (US Department of Education, 2014 & 2016) which has been associated with a myriad of negative outcomes including criminal involvement (Fabelo et al., 2011; Monahan et al., 2014). However, this limited the generalizability of the findings. More recent research and policy initiatives have illuminated the need for intervention for Black girls who face a similar plight. The negative schooling experiences of this population were recently highlighted in Dr. Monique Morris’ PBS Documentary “Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools.” The documentary expounded on Morris’ research which noted that in comparison to their White peers, Black high school girls were six times more likely to receive an out-of-school suspension, four times more likely to be arrested at school, and three times more likely to be referred to law enforcement for school offenses (“Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in School,” 2019). Expanding the inclusion criteria to include this at-risk population would offer an intervention option for more students and bolster the investigation of differential effects. Furthermore, while current SEL offerings include a myriad of programs targeting younger students (see CASEL, 2012), most of the programs in the literature are Tier 1 universal approaches. Hence, future research should
investigate the effectiveness of a modified STEPS curriculum for younger students with emerging physical or verbal aggression and poor school conduct.

Strengthening the feasibility evaluation to include perspectives of participating students is needed to inform future studies. The current pilot study included a focus group with school practitioners to assess the STEPS Program core components and program materials. While this approach is aligned with the manual development approach espoused by Fraser et. al. (2009), current consumers/participants were not formally assessed. Future studies should conduct feasibility assessments with participating students to gain their feedback on the perceptions of the curriculum content and program activities. This could involve incorporating qualitative measures including participant interviews or open-ended questions on evaluation surveys to gather feedback. Subsequently, this feedback could be incorporated to further modify program materials and inform the initial phase of efficacy testing.

Third, adapting the pilot program’s curriculum to accommodate an in-school delivery model should be considered in future research. The current study was delivered on-site at the pilot school from 4 – 6 pm. Since it was offered after school, evening transportation services were needed for 73% of the students. Without transportation support, most of the students would not have enrolled in the pilot program. Continuing the afterschool model only could potentially preclude future implementation at selected schools, if the school is not equipped with an afterschool bus/van. By adapting the STEPS curriculum to include shorter sessions that can be delivered during the school day, the need for transportation services would be eliminated and overall program expenses would decrease. Transportation expenses for the current pilot accounted for 33% of the overall budget.
Extending the implementation timeline is a fourth implication for future researchers to consider. The implementation of the current project was delayed, and most study related pre- and posttest data collection and group intervention occurred during the final 9-week period of the school year. This modified schedule shortened the intervention group by one week and reduced the overall data collection period by a month. With this change, there was less time to detect changes in the dependent variables. Moreover, during implementation, the facilitators realized that the 10-week timeline needed to be extended to ensure enough time to address all the core components included in the curriculum. Furthermore, since the STEPS program was implemented by outside providers, more time was needed within the first two weeks of implementation to build rapport with and set expectations for student participants. Given this, future iterations of the STEPS Program should incorporate a 12-week implementation of weekly SEL groups, and a 1-year maintenance period to include monthly booster sessions. In their meta-analysis of afterschool SEL programs, Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan (2010) found that most programs did not include follow-up periods. By extending the implementation period, future applications of this work would increase the treatment dosage, strengthen internal validity, and allow a better investigation of the effects of program participation over time.

A final implication of the current findings is related to engaging teachers within the treatment framework. Comments shared during the focus group highlighted the need to bolster the SEL skills of teachers working with behaviorally challenged youth. During the weekly STEPS sessions, many participants also discussed their negative experiences with teachers, past and present, and how those experiences had a devastating impact on their school progress. Moreover, data from the SEI showed problems with student-teacher relationships, although some small gains were emerging at the conclusion of the study. Anyon, Zhang, & Hazel (2016) found
that males and minorities may experience more problems building teacher connectedness which is highly correlated with school success. These authors indicated that this finding may be attributed to cultural incongruence. For students in the STEPS Program, attending a school with a low minority staff presence appeared to negatively impact their teacher relationships.

Taking into consideration the information ascertained from the teacher focus group, participant assessments, and participant anecdotal comments, future studies should incorporate SEL training for teachers and a daily student-teacher check-in component, as a part of the curriculum, to facilitate teacher connectedness. In a school setting, implementation of a Tier 2 or Tier 3 program like STEPS should occur within an overall whole-school SEL approach that includes increasing SEL competencies for teachers who are the primary SEL models for students, during the school day. The pilot school had taken steps to support teacher SEL development by providing the Capturing Kids’ Heart training, but it was clear from student and teacher reports that more work was needed. To foster stronger teacher-student relationships, a student engagement program that incorporates a daily check-in with a trusted teacher should be considered. Check-In/Check-Out (Strawhun & Peterson, 2013) is one such program that can be easily embedded within an SEL program to build teacher-student relationships and overall student engagement.

Conclusions

The current pilot study contributes to the growing body of research and equity policies committed to illuminating racial disparities in school discipline, developing feasible alternatives to exclusionary discipline, and disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline. While the primary analyses did not indicate significant changes, initially, post implementation, there were some promising findings worth noting. Follow-up data available from the larger study revealed
significant reductions in office disciplinary referrals for STEPS participants nine months after the program concluded. Participants also showed small gains in cumulative academic performance, at follow-up. Moreover, educators revealed that the STEPS Program was an acceptable and feasible intervention for implementation with Black high school males with a history of behavioral challenges. Additionally, in a school with a history of parental disengagement reported by educators, the STEPS parents were found to be very engaged in and supportive of their child’s participation in the pilot program. Anecdotally, a few parents commented on their appreciation for the STEPS program being offered at their son’s school, and several expressed interest in continuing their student’s enrollment – if the program was offered during the ensuing academic year.

In sum, the present pilot study offers evidence for the utility and promise of the STEPS Program as a social-emotional alternative to addressing the needs of students with a history of aggressive behaviors and exclusionary discipline, and in turn reducing their risk of entering the school-to-prison pipeline.
APPENDIX A: TABLES

Table 1: Sequence of STEPS Program Sessions
Table 2: Data Analysis Plan
Table 1: Sequence of STEPS Program Sessions

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Week 1: Orientation</th>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>STEPS Staff Meeting</td>
<td>STEPS Student Group 1: Program Orientation</td>
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<td>STEPS Student Group 2: ABCs of Cognitive Training</td>
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<td>Week 2: Self-Regulation/Anger Management</td>
<td>STEPS Staff Meeting</td>
<td>STEPS Student Group 3: ABCs of Cognitive Training</td>
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<td>Week 3: Anger Management</td>
<td>STEPS Staff Meeting</td>
<td>STEPS Student Group 5: Anger Management</td>
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<td>STEPS Student Group 6: Anger Management Module 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Week 4: Anger Management Module 2/Aggression Awareness</td>
<td>STEPS Staff Meeting</td>
<td>STEPS Student Group 7: Anger Management Module 2</td>
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<td>STEPS Student Group 8: Aggression Awareness (Definitions, types, causes, cycles, and patterns)</td>
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<td>Week 5: Aggression Awareness</td>
<td>STEPS Staff Meeting</td>
<td>STEPS Student Group 9: Aggression Self-Awareness (Individual behaviors, consequences, and precursors)</td>
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<td>STEPS Student Group 10: Aggression Awareness – Electronic Aggression/Cyber-bullying</td>
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<td>Week 6: Antisocial behaviors/Conflict Resolution</td>
<td>STEPS Staff Meeting</td>
<td>STEPS Student Group 11: Acts of Unkindness (Antisocial behaviors)</td>
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<td>STEPS Student Group 12: Conflict Resolution (School: peers)</td>
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<td>Week 7: Conflict Resolution</td>
<td>STEPS Staff Meeting</td>
<td>STEPS Student Group 13: Conflict Resolution (School: adults)</td>
<td>STEPS Student Group 14: Conflict Resolution (Family)</td>
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<td>Week 8: Relationship Skills Module</td>
<td>STEPS Staff Meeting</td>
<td>STEPS Student Group 15: Healthy Relationships</td>
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<td>STEPS Staff Meeting</td>
<td>STEPS Student Group 17: Academic Skills/Educational Advocacy</td>
<td>STEPS Student Group 18: College and Career Readiness</td>
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<td>Week 10: Goal Setting and Review</td>
<td>STEPS Staff Meeting</td>
<td>STEPS Student Group 19: Goal Setting (SMART and Squad Goals)</td>
<td>STEPS Student Group 20: Prepared for SUCCESS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Dependent Variable</td>
<td>Measure</td>
<td>Group</td>
<td>Timing</td>
<td>Method of Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
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<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. What is the feasibility and treatment acceptability of the STEPS curriculum?</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Focus Group Protocol</td>
<td>Treatment (Focus Group)</td>
<td>Pre-Intervention</td>
<td>Qualitative Coding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Do students who participate in the STEPS Program demonstrate decreases in aggressive behaviors?</td>
<td>Aggression</td>
<td>BASC-3 PRS Aggression Scale</td>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>Pre-test &amp; Posttest</td>
<td>Paired Sample T-test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Do students who participate in the STEPS Program demonstrate decreases in poor school conduct?</td>
<td>School Conduct</td>
<td>Office Disciplinary Referrals</td>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>Pre-test &amp; Posttest</td>
<td>Paired Sample T-test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Do students who participate in the STEPS Program demonstrate improvement in school engagement?</td>
<td>School Engagement</td>
<td>Student Engagement Inventory (SEI)</td>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>Pre-test &amp; Posttest</td>
<td>Paired Sample T-test</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Do students who participate in the STEPS Program demonstrate improvement in academic performance?</td>
<td>Academic Performance</td>
<td>GPA</td>
<td>Treatment</td>
<td>Pre-test &amp; Posttest</td>
<td>Paired Sample T-test</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B: FIGURES

Figure 1: STEPS Program Problem Theory
Figure 2: STEPS Theory of Change
Figure 3: STEPS Program Logic Model
Figure 4: Research Design of Current Study
Figure 5: Research Design of Larger Study
Figure 1: STEPS Program Problem Theory
Figure 2: STEPS Theory of Change

Core 1: Training of STEPS staff

Core 2: Application of STEPS by trained staff; develop rapport with students and parents

Core 3: Acquisition and application of cognitive-behavioral knowledge and skills by students and parents

Core 4: Impact on prosocial behaviors, school engagement, and parental involvement

Core 5: Impact on students’ academic performance, suspension rates, and delinquency
Figure 3: STEPS Program Logic Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inputs</th>
<th>Outputs</th>
<th>Outcomes – Impact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Money (Budget: $5,000)</td>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>Short Term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program materials (program manuals, handouts, snacks, and participation incentives)</td>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>Medium Term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting location (classroom or conference room at 1 selected school)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Long Term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff (social worker, group facilitators [6])</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training (2 days)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEL curriculum development</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre service training</td>
<td>15 staff training hours - (2 days, 7.5 hours each day)</td>
<td>Students' ownership and self-awareness of aggressive behavior and consequences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program recruitment/screening/intake</td>
<td>55 intervention hours for students and participating parents</td>
<td>Improved BASC post-test scores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BASC pre/post-testing</td>
<td>SEL student group instruction - (2 days/week x 10 weeks – 40 hours)</td>
<td>Improved school conduct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student and parent skill development</td>
<td>Parent training sessions - (Bi-weekly, 1 day x 10 weeks – 10 hours)</td>
<td>Reduced ODRs for aggressive behaviors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home assessments</td>
<td>Home visits – (1, Bi-weekly x 10 weeks – 5 hours)</td>
<td>Strengthened school engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community resource referrals</td>
<td></td>
<td>Increased academic motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Improved family-school partnership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Improve academic performance (GPAs, EDGs, graduation rates)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reduce out-of-school suspensions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reduce criminality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 4: Research Design of Current Study

**Focus Group**

- Email Recruitment
  - $n = 10$
- Informed Consent
- Conduct focus group using Focus Group Protocol
  - 60-90 minutes
- Qualitative Data Analysis
- Incorporate changes prior to STEPS SEL implementation

**STEPS SEL Pilot Intervention**

- Recruitment
  - $n = 10-15$
  - Obtain both reports of identified students (STEPS Recruitment Form and disaggregated report from data manager of students meeting inclusion criteria).
  - Meet individually with referred students at pilot school using In-Person Recruitment Script.
  - Distribute STEPS packet with student letter, STEPS flyer, and information session information.
  - Call parents using Telephone Recruitment Script and provide information session information.
- Information Session
  - 45 minutes
  - Prospective students and parents
- Informed Consent/Assent Forms
- Pretest data collection (SEI, PRS, STEPS Parent Questionnaire, and review educational record).
- Quantitative Data Analysis
- Posttest data collection (SEI, PRS, and review educational record).
- STEPS 10-week SEL Intervention
- Incorporate changes for future feasibility testing.
Figure 5: Research Design of Larger Study

1. Treatment Feasibility & Acceptability
   - Focus Group

2. STEPS SEL Intervention
   - 10 Weeks

3. Follow-up Phase
   - 1 Year

4. Incorporate Changes for Future Feasibility Testing
APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORMS

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Consent to Participate in a Research Study
Adult Student Participants

Consent Form Version Date: 2/27/18
IRB Study # 17-3264
Title of Study: Examining the Treatment Acceptability, Feasibility and Initial Outcomes of STEPS (Student Training for Educational and Personal Success): A Social-Emotional Learning Program for Black Male High School Students
Principal Investigator: Letanya Love
Principal Investigator Department: School of Education Deans Office
Principal Investigator Phone number: 919-622-0047
Principal Investigator Email Address: llove@live.unc.edu
Faculty Advisor: Steven Knotek
Faculty Advisor Contact Information: (919) 843-2049
_________________________________________________________________

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. To join the study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. You may not receive any direct benefit from being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies.

Details about this study are discussed below. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. You should ask the researchers named above, or staff members who may assist them, any questions you have about this study at any time.

What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of this research is to examine the effectiveness of a researcher developed social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum for Black male high school students. STEPS is a 10-week school-based group intervention which utilizes the SEL curriculum for Black males (grades 9-12) with a history of physical or verbal aggression. The program seeks to change problematic behaviors by training participants to change the way they think to develop self-control. Topics included over the 10-week period include:

- Goal-setting
- Aggression Awareness
- Self-regulation/Self-awareness
- Anger Management
• Conflict Resolution
• Healthy Relationships
• Academic Skills
• Educational Advocacy

Program Goals
The STEPS program objectives are: 1) to increase self-awareness and ownership of aggressive behavior and consequences; 2) to facilitate student development of prosocial skills and behaviors; 3) to improve self-regulation for school success; and 4) to improve school engagement. You are being asked to be in this study because you received at least one office disciplinary referral for poor school conduct (physical or verbal aggression) during the current or past academic year.

How many people will take part in this study?
A total of approximately 10-20 Black males at your school will take part in this pilot study.

How long will your part in this study last?
The core STEPS Program is a 10-week after-school group that will be held at [redacted]. Over the course of 10 weeks, you will attend 20 groups (two groups each week). Each after-school group is scheduled from 4 – 6pm. At the conclusion of the student groups, we will follow-up with you, your parent(s), and your teachers (if you are enrolled in a public high school) for one year to evaluate your academic and behavioral performance.

What will happen if you take part in the study?
As a part of the STEPS research project, we will ask you and your parent(s) to complete study questionnaires before and after the program. These surveys will ask you questions about your academic history, school conduct, family background, personal strengths, and current needs. You may choose not to answer a question for any reason. Your teacher will also be asked to complete a survey documenting your school behaviors. Additionally, the STEPS researchers would ask your permission to access and review your cumulative educational records available in paper format at your school or in an electronic format, from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and Education Policy Initiative at Carolina (EPIC) partnership, to access pre- and post-academic performance, attendance records, and disciplinary data.

Initial the line that best matches your choice:

______ STEPS research team has my permission to access my cumulative educational records protected by FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974).
Initial

______ STEPS research team does not have my permission to access my cumulative educational records protected by FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974).
Initial

What are the possible benefits from being in this study?
Research is designed to benefit society by gaining new knowledge. There are a number of potential benefits to participating in the study. The sessions are structured to assist you in developing new skills that may help you with academic performance, school engagement, and overall school conduct.
What are the possible risks or discomforts involved from being in this study?
During certain sessions, you may feel uncomfortable discussing certain topics. There is also some risk that participants could share what is said during session outside of the group. To minimize any psychological risks, you will be advised to avoid discussing sensitive personal or family information in a group setting with other adolescents. Trained mental health clinicians are available at each session should you experience any emotional discomfort. Everything possible will be done to ensure that you are comfortable and we will do everything possible to support confidentiality.

What is a Certificate of Confidentiality?
To help us protect your privacy, we have obtained a Certificate of Confidentiality from the National Institutes of Health. With this Certificate, the researchers cannot be forced to disclose information that may identify you, even by a court subpoena, in any federal, state, or local civil, criminal, administrative, legislative, or other proceedings. The researchers will use the Certificate to resist any demands for information that would identify you, except as explained below.

The Certificate cannot be used to resist a demand for information from personnel of the United States Government that is used for auditing or evaluation of federally funded projects or for information that must be disclosed in order to meet the requirements of the federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

You should understand that a Certificate of Confidentiality does not prevent you or a member of your family from voluntarily releasing information about yourself or your involvement in this research. If an insurer, employer, or other person obtains your written consent to receive research information, then the researchers may not use the Certificate to withhold that information.

The Certificate of Confidentiality does not prevent the researchers from disclosing voluntarily, without your consent, information that would identify you as a participant in the research project under the following circumstances: (a) disclosures of child or elderly abuse, or (b) reports of intent to hurt self or others.

Limits to Confidentiality
As described above, there are some situations that will require us to breech confidentiality. Under North Carolina law, researchers are required to report information about the abuse or neglect of a child or disabled adult to local or state authorities. We would also have to respond to and report any threats of harm to self or others.

How will information about you be protected?
Participants will not be identified in any report or publication about this study. All identifiable study information will be kept separately in a locked filing cabinet. Study questionnaires and surveys will be coded using a study ID number and kept in a separate locked filing area to protect the privacy of participant data. Although every effort will be made to keep research records private, there may be times when federal or state law requires the disclosure of such records, including personal information. This is very unlikely, but if disclosure is ever required,
UNC-Chapel Hill will take steps allowable by law to protect the privacy of personal information. In some cases, your information in this research study could be reviewed by representatives of the University, research sponsors, or government agencies (for example, the FDA) for purposes such as quality control or safety.

**Video/Audio Recording**
We may want to video record [or audio tape] you to hear your thoughts regarding participation in the STEPS program. Statements from these tapes would be used to promote the STEPS program to other districts and to help train future schools who may choose to have STEPS come to their school. Your name will not be associated with any video or audio recording. The researchers will keep these tapes in a locked file cabinet when not used by the researcher or study personnel. We will only video record [or audio tape] you with your permission.

Initial the line that best matches your choice.

_____ I give my permission to be recorded.
Initial

_____ I do not give my permission to be recorded.
Initial

**What if you want to stop before your part in the study is complete?**
You can withdraw from this study at any time, without penalty. If you withdraw from this study, the researchers will ask if the information already collected from you can be used. If you wish to have the researchers not use your information, you can make that request verbally or in writing within seven days of your study termination. Written documentation of your request will be provided to you for your records. The investigators also have the right to stop your participation at any time. This could be because your behavior is perceived to pose a threat to any group member or research personnel, or because the entire study has been stopped.

**Will you receive anything for being in this study?**
You will receive a chance to win weekly attendance incentives (i.e., movie tickets, gift cards, college/sports memorabilia) for being in this study. In addition, students will also earn points for attending sessions, completing assignments, and receiving positive reports from teachers. Each week, the student with the highest total will receive the weekly mystery award (i.e., movie tickets, gift cards, college/sports memorabilia). Since the educational sessions will be held after school, dinner will also be served at each session at no cost to the participants. If you are an OCPS bus rider, transportation from the after-school group meetings will be provided by the after-school transportation service.

**Will it cost you anything to be in this study?**
It will not cost you anything to be in this study.

**What if you have questions about this study?**
You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions about the study (including payments), complaints, concerns, or if a research-related injury occurs, you should contact the researchers listed on the first page of this form.
What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?
All research on human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Institutional Review Board at 919-966-3113 or by email to IRB_subjects@unc.edu.

Participant’s Agreement:

I have read the information provided above. I have asked all the questions I have at this time. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

____________________________________  __________________
Signature of Research Participant  Date

____________________________________
Printed Name of Research Participant

____________________________________  __________________
Signature of Research Team Member Obtaining Consent  Date

____________________________________
Printed Name of Research Team Member Obtaining Consent
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Assent to Participate in a Research Study
Adolescent Participants age 14-17

Consent Form Version Date: 2/18/18
IRB Study # 17-3264
Title of Study: Examining the Treatment Acceptability, Feasibility and Initial Outcomes of STEPS (Student Training for Educational and Personal Success): A Social-Emotional Learning Program for Black Male High School Students
Principal Investigator: Letanya Love
Principal Investigator Department: School of Education Deans Office
Principal Investigator Phone number: 919-622-0047
Principal Investigator Email Address: llove@live.unc.edu
Faculty Advisor: Steven Knotek
Faculty Advisor Contact Information: (919) 843-2049

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You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your parent, or guardian, needs to give permission for you to be in this study. You do not have to be in this study if you don’t want to, even if your parent has already given permission. To join the study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. You may not receive any direct benefit from being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies.

Details about this study are discussed below. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study. You will be given a copy of this consent form. You should ask the researchers named above, or staff members who may assist them, any questions you have about this study at any time.

What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of this research is to examine the effectiveness of a researcher developed social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum for Black male high school students. STEPS is a 10-week school-based group intervention which utilizes the SEL curriculum for Black males (grades 9-12) with a history of physical or verbal aggression. The program seeks to change problematic behaviors by training participants to change the way they think to develop self-control. Topics included over the 10-week period include:

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- Aggression Awareness
- Self-regulation/Self-awareness
- Anger Management
- Conflict Resolution
- Healthy Relationships
- Academic Skills
- Educational Advocacy
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The STEPS program objectives are: 1) to increase self-awareness and ownership of aggressive behavior and consequences; 2) to facilitate student development of prosocial skills and behaviors; 3) to improve self-regulation for school success; and 4) to improve school engagement. You are being asked to be in this study because you received at least one office disciplinary referral for poor school conduct (physical or verbal aggression) during the current or past academic year.

**How many people will take part in this study?**
A total of approximately 10-20 Black males at your school will take part in this pilot study.

**How long will your part in this study last?**
The core STEPS Program is a 10-week after-school group that will be held at [redacted]. Over the course of 10 weeks, you will attend 20 groups (two groups each week). At the conclusion of the student groups, we will follow-up with you, your parent(s), and your teachers for one year to evaluate your academic and behavioral performance.

**What will happen if you take part in the study?**
As a part of the STEPS research project, we will ask you and your parent(s) to complete study questionnaires before and after the program. These surveys will ask you questions about your academic history, school conduct, family background, personal strengths, and current needs. You may choose not to answer a question for any reason. Your teacher will also be asked to complete a survey documenting your school behaviors. Additionally, the STEPS researchers have asked your parent for permission to access and review your cumulative educational records to access pre- and post-academic performance, attendance records, and disciplinary data.

**What are the possible benefits from being in this study?**
Research is designed to benefit society by gaining new knowledge. There are a number of potential benefits to participating in the study. You can enhance personal strengths and develop new skills that will help you with academic performance, school engagement, positive behaviors at school, anger management and reduced absences related to suspensions. With those changes, one could expect to see improved grades and graduation rates.

**What are the possible risks or discomforts involved from being in this study?**
During certain sessions, you may feel uncomfortable discussing certain topics. There is also some risk that participants could share what is said during session outside of the group. To minimize any psychological risks, you will be advised to avoid discussing sensitive personal or family information in a group setting with other adolescents. Trained mental health clinicians are available at each session should you experience any emotional discomfort. Everything possible will be done to ensure that you are comfortable and we will do everything possible to support confidentiality.

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**Limits to Confidentiality**
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_____ I agree to be recorded.

Initial

_____ I do not agree to be recorded.

Initial

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You will receive a chance to win weekly attendance incentives (i.e., movie tickets, gift cards, sports memorabilia) for being in this study. In addition, students will also earn points for attending sessions, completing assignments, and receiving positive reports from teachers. Each week, the student with the highest total will receive the weekly mystery award (i.e., movie tickets, gift cards, and sports memorabilia). Since the educational sessions will be held after school, dinner will also be served at each session at no cost to the participants. If you are an OCPS bus rider, transportation from the after-school group meetings will be provided by the after-school transportation service.

Will it cost you anything to be in this study?
It will not cost you anything to be in this study.

What if you have questions about this study?
You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions about the study (including payments), complaints, concerns, or if a research-related injury occurs, you should contact the researchers listed on the first page of this form.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?
All research on human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Institutional Review Board at 919-966-3113 or by email to IRB_subjects@unc.edu.
Participant’s Agreement:

I have read the information provided above. I have asked all the questions I have at this time. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

______________________________________________________
Your signature if you agree to be in the study

______________________________________________________
Date

______________________________________________________
Printed name if you agree to be in the study

______________________________________________________
Signature of Research Team Member Obtaining Assent

______________________________________________________
Date

______________________________________________________
Printed Name of Research Team Member Obtaining Assent
Consent Form Version Date: 2/27/18
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Principal Investigator Phone number: 919-622-0047
Principal Investigator Email Address: llove@live.unc.edu
Faculty Advisor: Steven Knotek
Faculty Advisor Contact Information: (919) 843-2049

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Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. You may not receive any direct benefit from being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies.

Details about this study are discussed below. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. You should ask the researchers named above, or staff members who may assist them, any questions you have about this study at any time.

What is the purpose of this study?
You are invited to participate in a research study about the feasibility and acceptability of a social-emotional learning curriculum for at-risk minority students. This study is being conducted by Letanya Love, Ph.D. Candidate in the UNC School of Education. The UNC Campus Y’s CUBE (Creating University Born Entrepreneurs) program has provided funding for this study. You are invited to participate in this study because we value your experience and input as educators.

The focus group will be audio-recorded in order to ensure accuracy. If you participate in the study, you may request that the recording be paused at any time. You may choose how much or how little you want to speak during the group. You may also choose to leave the focus group at any time.

How many people will take part in this study?
A total of approximately 10 school personnel from your district will take part in this study,
including approximately eight educators, administrators and student support staff from your school.

**How long will your part in this study last?**
Your participation in this focus group will last approximately one hour.

**What will happen if you take part in the study?**
The group will be asked to review the STEPS social-emotional learning curriculum, discuss the social-emotional learning needs of at-risk youth, and answer open-ended questions related to curriculum development and program implementation. No questions will be directed to you individually, but instead will be posed to the group. You may choose to respond or not respond at any point during the discussion. The focus group discussion will be audiotaped so we can capture comments in a transcript for analysis.

**What are the possible benefits from being in this study?**
Participating in this study may not benefit you directly, but it will help us to identify the essential components of a researcher-developed social-emotional curriculum for at-risk youth, to better understand the potential implementation challenges at your school, and to examine the program fit.

**What are the possible risks or discomforts involved from being in this study?**
We anticipate minimal risks or discomfort from your participation in this study. Even though we will emphasize to all participants that comments made during the focus group session should be kept confidential, it is possible that participants may repeat comments outside of the group at some time in the future. Therefore, we encourage you to be as honest and open as you can, but remain aware of our limits in protecting confidentiality.

**How will information about you be protected?**
Every effort will be taken to protect your identity as a participant in this study. You will not be identified in any report or publication of this study or its results. Your name will not appear on any transcripts. After the focus group recording is typed, it will be destroyed. The typed transcription will be kept on the password-protected computer and any printed copies will be kept in a locked file cabinet. Only members of the STEPS research group will be able to listen to the recording or read the typed version of the recording.

**What is a Certificate of Confidentiality?**
To help us protect your privacy, we have obtained a Certificate of Confidentiality from the National Institutes of Health. With this Certificate, the researchers cannot be forced to disclose information that may identify you, even by a court subpoena, in any federal, state, or local civil, criminal, administrative, legislative, or other proceedings. The researchers will use the Certificate to resist any demands for information that would identify you, except as explained below.

The Certificate cannot be used to resist a demand for information from personnel of the United States Government that is used for auditing or evaluation of federally funded projects or for
information that must be disclosed in order to meet the requirements of the federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

You should understand that a Certificate of Confidentiality does not prevent you or a member of your family from voluntarily releasing information about yourself or your involvement in this research. If an insurer, employer, or other person obtains your written consent to receive research information, then the researchers may not use the Certificate to withhold that information.

The Certificate of Confidentiality does not prevent the researchers from disclosing voluntarily, without your consent, information that would identify you as a participant in the research project under the following circumstances: (a) disclosures of child or elderly abuse, or (b) reports of intent to hurt self or others.

**What if you want to stop before your part in the study is complete?**
You can withdraw from this study at any time, without penalty. The investigators also have the right to stop your participation at any time.

**Will you receive anything for being in this study?**
If you participate in the full duration of the focus group, you will receive a $20 cash stipend for your time.

**Will it cost you anything to be in this study?**
It will not cost you anything to be in this study.

**What if you have questions about this study?**
You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions about the study (including payments), complaints, concerns, or if a research-related injury occurs, you should contact the researchers listed on the first page of this form.

**What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?**
All research on human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your rights and welfare. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Institutional Review Board at 919-966-3113 or by email to IRB_subjects@unc.edu.
**Participant’s Agreement:**

I have read the information provided above. I have asked all the questions I have at this time. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

______________________________________________________
Signature of Research Participant
___________________________ Date

______________________________________________________
Printed Name of Research Participant

______________________________________________________
Signature of Research Team Member Obtaining Consent
___________________________ Date

______________________________________________________
Printed Name of Research Team Member Obtaining Consent
What are some general things you and your child should know about research studies?
You are being asked to allow your child to take part in a research study. To join the study is voluntary. You may decide to not allow your child to participate, or you may withdraw your permission for your child to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty. Even if you give your permission, your child can decide not to be in the study or to leave the study early.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. Your child may not receive any direct benefit from being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies.

Details about this study are discussed below. It is important that you and your child understand this information so that you and your child can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. You and your child should ask the researchers named above, or staff members who may assist them, any questions you have about this study at any time.

What is the purpose of this study?
The purpose of this research is to examine the efficacy of a researcher developed social-emotional learning (SEL) curriculum for Black male high school students. STEPS is a 10-week school-based group intervention which utilizes the SEL curriculum for Black males (grades 9-12) with a history of physical or verbal aggression. The program seeks to change problematic behaviors by training participants to change the way they think to develop self-control. Topics included over the 10-week period include:

- Goal-setting
- Aggression Awareness
- Self-regulation/Self-awareness
- Anger Management
• Conflict Resolution
• Healthy Relationships
• Academic Skills
• Educational Advocacy

Program Goals
The STEPS program objectives are: 1) to increase self-awareness and ownership of aggressive behavior and consequences; 2) to facilitate student development of prosocial skills and behaviors; 3) to improve self-regulation for school success; and 4) to improve school engagement. Your child is being asked to be in this study because he has received at least one office disciplinary referral for poor school conduct (physical or verbal aggression) during the current or past academic year.

How many people will take part in this study?
A total of approximately 10-20 Black males at your son’s school will take part in this pilot study.

How long will your child’s part in this study last?
The core STEPS Program is a 10-week after-school group that will be held at [redacted]. Over the course of 10 weeks, your teen will attend 20 groups (two groups each week). At the conclusion of the student groups, we will follow-up with you and your child for one year to evaluate your child’s academic and behavioral performance.

What will happen if your child takes part in the study?
As a part of the STEPS research project, we will ask you and your child to complete study questionnaires before and after the program. These surveys will ask you questions about your child’s academic history, school conduct, social and developmental history, family background, personal strengths, and current needs. You or your child may choose not to answer a question for any reason. Your child’s teacher will also be asked to complete a survey documenting your child’s school behaviors. Additionally, the STEPS researchers would ask your permission to access and review your child’s cumulative educational records available in paper format at his school or in an electronic format, from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and Education Policy Initiative at Carolina (EPIC) partnership, to access pre- and post-academic performance, attendance records, and disciplinary data.

Initial the line that best matches your choice:

_____ STEPS research team has my permission to access my child’s cumulative educational records protected by FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974).

_____ STEPS research team does not have my permission to access my child’s cumulative educational records protected by FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974).

What are the possible benefits from being in this study?
Research is designed to benefit society by gaining new knowledge. There are a number of potential benefits to participating in the study. Student participants can enhance personal strengths and develop new skills that will help with academic performance, school engagement,
positive behaviors at school, anger management and reduced absences related to suspensions. With those changes, one could expect to see improved grades and graduation rates.

**What are the possible risks or discomforts involved from being in this study?**
During certain sessions, your child may feel uncomfortable discussing certain topics. There is also some risk that participants could share what is said during session outside of the group. To minimize any psychological risks, your child will be advised to avoid discussing sensitive personal or family information in a group setting with other adolescents. Trained mental health clinicians are available at each session should your child experience any emotional discomfort. Everything possible will be done to ensure that your child is comfortable and we will do everything possible to support confidentiality.

**What is a Certificate of Confidentiality?**
To help us protect your privacy, we have obtained a Certificate of Confidentiality from the National Institutes of Health. With this Certificate, the researchers cannot be forced to disclose information that may identify you, even by a court subpoena, in any federal, state, or local civil, criminal, administrative, legislative, or other proceedings. The researchers will use the Certificate to resist any demands for information that would identify you, except as explained below.

The Certificate cannot be used to resist a demand for information from personnel of the United States Government that is used for auditing or evaluation of federally funded projects or for information that must be disclosed in order to meet the requirements of the federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

You should understand that a Certificate of Confidentiality does not prevent you or a member of your family from voluntarily releasing information about yourself or your involvement in this research. If an insurer, employer, or other person obtains your written consent to receive research information, then the researchers may not use the Certificate to withhold that information.

The Certificate of Confidentiality does not prevent the researchers from disclosing voluntarily, without your consent, information that would identify you as a participant in the research project under the following circumstances: (a) disclosures of child or elderly abuse, or (b) reports of intent to hurt self or others.

**Limits to Confidentiality**
As described above, there are some situations that will require us to breech confidentiality. Under North Carolina law, researchers are required to report information about the abuse or neglect of a child or disabled adult to local or state authorities. We would also have to respond to and report any threats of harm to self or others.

**How will information about your child be protected?**
Participants will not be identified in any report or publication about this study. All identifiable study information will be kept separately in a locked filing cabinet. Study questionnaires and surveys will be coded using an alpha-numeric identifier and kept in a separate locked filing area to protect the privacy of participant data. Although every effort will be made to keep research
records private, there may be times when federal or state law requires the disclosure of such records, including personal information. This is very unlikely, but if disclosure is ever required, UNC-Chapel Hill will take steps allowable by law to protect the privacy of personal information. In some cases, your child’s information in this research study could be reviewed by representatives of the University, research sponsors, or government agencies (for example, the FDA) for purposes such as quality control or safety.

Video/Audio Recording
We may want to video record [or audio tape] your child as he participates in group sessions. The tapes would be used to promote the STEPS program to other districts and to help train future schools who may choose to have STEPS come to their school. The researchers will keep these tapes in a locked file cabinet when not used by the researcher or study personnel. We will only video record [or audio tape] your child if you and your child give us permission.

Initial the line that best matches your choice.

_____ I give permission for my child to be recorded.
Initial

_____ I do not give permission for my child to be recorded.
Initial

What if you or your child want to stop before your child’s part in the study is complete?
You can withdraw your child from this study at any time, without penalty. If your child is withdraw from this study, the researchers will ask if the information already collected from your child can be used. If you wish to have the researchers not use your withdrawn child’s information, you can make that request verbally or in writing within seven days of your child’s study termination. Written documentation of your request will be provided to you for your records. The investigators also have the right to stop your child’s participation at any time. This could be because your child’s behavior is perceived to pose a threat to any group member or research personnel, or because the entire study has been stopped.

Will your child receive anything for being in this study?
Your child will receive a chance to win weekly attendance incentives (i.e., movie tickets, gift cards, sports memorabilia) for being in this study. In addition, students will also earn points for attending sessions, completing assignments, and receiving positive reports from teachers. Each week, the student with the highest total will receive the weekly mystery award (i.e., movie tickets, gift cards, and sports memorabilia). Since the educational sessions will be held after school, dinner will also be served at each session at no cost to the participants. If your child is an OCPS bus rider, transportation from the after-school group meetings will be provided by the after-school transportation service.

Will it cost you anything for your child to be in this study?
It will not cost anything to be in this study.

What if you or your child has questions about this study?
You and your child have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about
this research. If there are questions about the study (including incentives), complaints, concerns, or if a research-related injury occurs, contact the researchers listed on the first page of this form.

**What if there are questions about your child’s rights as a research participant?**
All research on human volunteers is reviewed by a committee that works to protect your child’s rights and welfare. If there are questions or concerns about your child’s rights as a research subject, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Institutional Review Board at 919-966-3113 or by email to IRB_subjects@unc.edu.

**Parent’s Agreement:**

I have read the information provided above. I have asked all the questions I have at this time. I voluntarily give permission to allow my child to participate in this research study.

___________________________________________________________________________
Printed Name of Research Participant (child)

__________________________________________  ______________________________
Signature of Parent Date

___________________________________________________________________________
Printed Name of Parent

___________________________________________________________________________
Signature of Research Team Member Obtaining Permission Date

___________________________________________________________________________
Printed Name of Research Team Member Obtaining Permission
APPENDIX D: RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Focus Group Recruitment

Dear Educator:

My name is Letanya Love, and I am completing a doctoral degree in school psychology at UNC Chapel Hill. As a part of my doctoral dissertation research, I will be pilot testing an innovative intervention for at-risk Black male high schoolers – STEPS. This social innovation was recognized as a 2016-17 UNC CUBE Venture with financial support provided by the UNC Campus Y. We hope that you will take the opportunity to learn more about the STEPS Program and consider participating in a focus group to review our curriculum.

Based upon empirical research which indicates that Black males are at greater risk of suspension, expulsion, school dropout, delinquency, and incarceration (Skiba et al, 2002; Toldson et al., 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2014; Losen, 2015), we have developed the STEPS (Student Training for Educational and Personal Success) Program with the goal of disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline by reducing participants’ risk of school dropout and delinquency. This intervention targets Black males with a history of physical and/or verbal aggression as these behaviors are of greater concern for school and community violence. The objectives of the STEPS Program are: 1) to increase self-awareness and ownership of aggressive behavior and consequences; 2) to facilitate student development of prosocial skills and behaviors; 3) to improve self-regulation for school success; and 4) to improve school engagement.

To accomplish these objectives, selected referred students will attend a 10-week curriculum based group intervention consisting of two weekly sessions held after school at your school. The STEPS curriculum includes modules based on cognitive behavioral science that address:

- Goal-setting
- Aggression Awareness
- Self-regulation/Self-awareness
- Anger Management
- Conflict Resolution
- Healthy Relationships
- Academic Skills
- Educational Advocacy

For the 2018 STEPS pilot, we are seeking 10 secondary educators from your school/district to participate in a focus group to discuss their ideas regarding social-emotional learning for at-risk youth, review our curriculum, and provide feedback. The focus group will be held on [date] at [time] in [location]. The focus group will last approximately one hour, and educators completing the full duration of the session will be compensated $20. If you are interested in participating, please respond to this email request or contact me at 919-622-0047 or llove@live.unc.edu.

Sincerely,

Letanya Love, MA, LPA
Ph.D. Candidate
UNC School of Education

151
## APPENDIX E: STUDENT RECRUITMENT FORM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Last Name</th>
<th>First Name</th>
<th>Does the student identify as Black or African-American?</th>
<th>Is the student a male?</th>
<th>Has the student received an office disciplinary referral for physical or verbal aggression, during the current or past school year?</th>
<th>Has the student received an in-school suspension for physical or verbal aggression, during the current or past school year?</th>
<th>Has the student received an out-of-school suspension for physical or verbal aggression, during the current or past school year?</th>
<th>Is the student currently attending [redacted]?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doe</td>
<td>John</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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APPENDIX F: STEPS FLYER

Interested in learning new social skills?

Had a disciplinary referral for fighting or using inappropriate language at school?

Program Participants Wanted

STEPS is seeking Black male high school students to participate in a school-based pilot program for a study conducted by Letanya Love, MA, LPA, School of Education doctoral student at the University of North Carolina.

Time Required
Selected students will attend 10-weeks of after-school groups (2 groups per week) focused on essential life skills.

Incentives
Earn a chance to win weekly movie passes and/or gift cards for group attendance.

Contact Information
For more information, contact your school counselor or social worker. Interested students and parents can visit their office for a program packet.

Principal Investigator
Letanya Love, MA, LPA
lllove@live.unc.edu or 919.622.0047
IRB# 17-3264
APPENDIX G: RECRUITMENT LETTERS

DATE

Dear Parent/Caregiver,

Thank you for your interest in the STEPS Program. STEPS, Student Training for Educational and Personal Success, is a research study designed to equip your teen with the tools to be successful in school and in life. Our program specifically focuses on African-American males with a history of school conduct problems (verbal or physical aggression). We believe that our program can help youth turn behaviors around and achieve their goals and dreams.

The STEPS Program is a 10-week after-school group that will be held at [redacted]. Over the course of 10 weeks, your teen will attend 20 groups (two groups each week) that will focus on the following topics:

- Program Orientation
- Goal-setting
- Aggression Awareness
- Self-regulation/Self-awareness
- Anger Management
- Conflict Resolution
- Healthy Relationships
- Academic Skills
- Educational Advocacy

Successful African-American men from the community will serve as guest speakers at some of the groups. Your teen will receive incentives for participation including movie tickets, gift cards to local stores, sports memorabilia, and an end-of-program outing. Participants with the highest group attendance points will receive special recognition.

Participation in this study is voluntary and can be withdrawn at any time. There are minimal risks associated with this program and they are outlined in detail in the consent form. The program will strive to maintain confidentiality for participants.

If you agree for your teen to participate in this potentially life-changing experience, please return a signed consent form. We are also inviting you to an information session on [ ] to learn more about this opportunity. If you have any questions regarding the STEPS Program, please contact your school liaison. Additional questions can be forwarded to Letanya Love, STEPS Founder, at 919-622-0047 or Kimberly Newsome, STEPS Co-Founder, at 919-622-4369.

The pathway to a brighter future begins today!

Best,

Letanya Love
Founder

Kimberly Newsome
Co-Founder

DATE
Dear Student,

Thank you for your interest in the STEPS Program. STEPS, Student Training for Educational and Personal Success, is a research study designed to equip you with the tools to be successful in school and in life. Our program specifically focuses on African-American males with a history of school conduct problems (verbal or physical aggression). It is our desire to work with you and other young men because research shows that Black males currently receive higher rates of exclusionary discipline (suspension and expulsion) which can lead to more problems after high school. At STEPS, our core principle is: “Success tomorrow begins with me today.” We have adopted this mantra because we believe you have the power to reach the level of success that you desire, and it is our goal to assist you as you strive to accomplish your goals.

The STEPS Program is a 10-week group that will be held at your school. Over the course of 10 weeks, you will attend 20 groups (two groups each week) focused on a variety of topics to help your achieve your personal best in the classroom and beyond. These groups will focus on the following topics:

- Program Orientation
- Goal-setting
- Aggression Awareness
- Self-regulation/Self-awareness
- Anger Management
- Conflict Resolution
- Healthy Relationships
- Academic Skills
- Educational Advocacy

Additionally, you will hear from accomplished African-American men who will share tips regarding how to achieve your best. As an incentive and friendly competition amongst the STEPS attendees, each time you attend a group you will earn points and a chance to win participation awards. These awards may include movie tickets, gift cards to local stores, sports memorabilia, and an end-of-program outing. Participants with the highest group attendance points will also be recognized.

Our main focus is to support you as you work to achieve your goals. If you would like to participate in this program, please return a signed consent form from your parent. In addition, you will need to agree to our program guidelines by signing our participation contract during the first meeting. If you have any questions regarding the STEPS program, please contact your school liaison. Additional questions can be forwarded to Letanya Love, STEPS Founder, at 919-622-0047 or Kimberly Newsome, STEPS Co-Founder, at 919-622-4369.

The pathway to a brighter future begins today!

Best,

Letanya Love
Founder

Kimberly Newsome
Co-Founder
APPENDIX H: RECRUITMENT SCRIPTS

*** In-Person Recruitment Script***

“Hello, my name is (NAME), and I am (school position/research role). I wanted to speak with you today to notify you of a new research project at [redacted] that we believe could benefit [you/Student’s Name]. The program is called STEPS which stands for Student Training for Educational and Personal Success. The research project will examine how participating in a student-focused after-school program can positively impact grades and behavior at school. The project is designed for young Black men and is being conducted by Letanya Love, a graduate student from UNC Chapel Hill, with the assistance of staff from STEPS and [redacted]. The school district’s administrators have approved this project.”

- “You were contacted because [you have/you have a child who has] a history of school misconduct and/or suspensions which could keep [you/him] from achieving [your/his] full potential. I would like to speak with you for about 10 minutes to share the program information. Is that ok?”
- If no…”Is there another day and time that is more convenient for you?” [Record day/time]. Thank you. We will meet again on [specified date and time]. If no convenient time was provided say, “Thank you for your time. Should you want to learn more about STEPS, please feel free to take a program packet and contact us.”
- If yes, continue with the script below.

The Study
In-Person Student:
“We are requesting your parent’s permission to allow you to participate in this research study. This project aims to support you as you learn new strategies to use to help change behaviors that have caused problems in the past. The study’s overall goal is to help you succeed in school and in life.”

In-Person Parent:
“We are requesting your permission to allow your student to participate in this research study. This project aims to support [Student’s Name] as he learns new strategies to use to help change behaviors that have caused problems in the past. The study’s overall goal is to help [Student’s Name] succeed in school and in life.”

Your Responsibility
In-Person Student:
“You will be asked to attend two, weekly, after-school groups for 10 weeks. Each group is scheduled to last less than two hours. Topics covered in the sessions include anger management, aggression awareness, healthy relationships, and job skills. These topics were selected to improve your ability to effectively handle problems that arise and give you the tools needed to achieve your goals. We’ll also get information from your parents and teachers as we learn more information about your specific strengths and needs. We will also ask you information and
feedback in the beginning and at the end of the program to make sure we are helping students reach their full potential. If you want to participate, we will need a consent form from a parent and you will have to sign an agreement to participate. As an incentive and friendly competition, participants in the program will have a chance to win attendance rewards (i.e., gift cards, movie tickets, and sport paraphernalia) weekly. Additionally, the STEPS participants will meet successful African-American men from the community who will share tips on how to achieve your best.”

**In-Person Parent:**
“Your child will attend two, weekly, after-school groups for 10 weeks. Each group is scheduled to last less than two hours. Topics covered in the sessions include anger management, aggression awareness, healthy relationships, and job skills. These topics were selected to improve your child’s ability to effectively handle problems that arise and give him the tools needed to achieve his goals. Parents will also be asked to complete study documents or an interview as we learn more information about your child and his specific strengths and needs. We will ask for information and feedback from you in the beginning and at the end of the program to make sure we are helping students who participate in the program. We may also contact you next school year for a follow-up to determine how your child has implemented the learned strategies.”

**Assurances**

**In-Person Student:**
“You are not required to participate in STEPS. It is a voluntary program. If you decide not to participate, there are no penalties or consequences from the school. Also, if you decide to join the study but change your mind, you may withdraw from the program without explanation. We believe that you could greatly benefit from the school-based program designed to help you reach your goals at school and beyond.”

“Would you be interested in participating?”

If Yes:
- “Great! Please take two program packets – one for you and one for your parent. After your parent has read the program information, the signed consent form can be returned in the sealed envelope which will be forwarded to STEPS staff. Your parent will receive information about the program orientation that they can attend with you. Please let me know if you have any additional questions.”

If No:
- “Thank you for your time and consideration. Have a great day.”

**In-Person Parent:**
“I would like to assure you that this study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. However, the final decision about participation is yours. You and your child are not required to participate in STEPS. It is a voluntary program. If you decide not to participate, there are no penalties or consequences
from the school. Also, if you decide to allow your student to join the study but change your mind, your child may withdraw from the study without explanation.”

“Would you be interested in granting your child permission to participate?”

If Yes:

- “Great! Please complete the participation documents in this packet. After you have completed the consent form, the sealed envelope will be forwarded to STEPS staff. You will receive information about the program orientation that you can attend with your child. Please let me know if you have any additional questions.”

If No:

- “Thank you for your time and consideration. Have a great day.”
*** Telephone Recruitment Script***

**Student Training for Educational and Personal Success (STEPS)**

“This is [NAME] calling on behalf of [redacted] [and STEPS]. May I speak with ______________?“

“Hello, my name is (NAME), and I am (school position/research role). I am calling to notify you of a new research project at [redacted] that we believe could benefit [Student’s Name]. The program is called STEPS which stands for Student Training for Educational and Personal Success. The research project will examine how participating in a student-focused after-school program can positively impact grades and behavior at school. The project is designed for young Black men and is being conducted by Letanya Love, a graduate student from UNC Chapel Hill, with the assistance of staff from STEPS and [redacted]. The school district’s administrators have approved this project.”

“You are being contacted because [Student’s Name] has a history of [cite behavior - school misconduct and/or suspensions] which could keep him from achieving his full potential. I would like to speak with you for 10 minutes. Is this a good time?”

- If no…“Is there another day and time that is more convenient for you?” [Record day/time]. Thank you. I will call you on [specified date and time]. If no convenient time was provided say, “Thank you for your time. Goodbye.”
- If yes, continue with the script below.

**The Study**

“We are requesting your permission to allow [Student’s Name] to participate in this research study. This project aims to support your child as he learns new strategies to use to help change behaviors that have caused problems in the past. The study’s overall goal is to help your child succeed in school and in life.”

**Your Responsibility**

“Your child will attend two, weekly after-school groups for 10 weeks. Each group is scheduled to last less than two hours. Topics covered in the sessions include anger management, aggression awareness, healthy relationships and job skills. These topics were selected to improve your child’s ability to effectively handle problems that arise and give him the tools needed to achieve his goals. Parents will also be asked to complete study documents or an interview as we learn more information about your child and his specific strengths and needs. We will ask for information and feedback from you in the beginning and at the end of the program to make sure we are helping students who participate in the program.”

**Assurances**

“I would like to assure you that this study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. However, the final decision about participation is yours. You and your child are not required to participate in STEPS. It is a voluntary program. If you decide not to participate, there are no penalties or consequences
from the school. Also, if you decide to allow your student to join the study but change your mind, your child may withdraw from the study without explanation. If you withdraw, we will ask your permission to use information gathered. We will not use the information if you do not give permission.”

“Would you be interested in granting your child permission to participate?”

If Yes:

- “Great! Please complete the participation packet you [received/will receive] from your child, place the forms in the sealed envelope and have your child return the packet to the school social worker/counselor (specific person). You will receive information about the program orientation that you can attend with your child. I will be able to answer any questions you have or assist you with completing the forms.”

If No:

- “Thank you for your time and consideration. Have a great day.”
APPENDIX I: STEPS PARTICIPANT CONTACT FORM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERSONAL INFORMATION</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Last Name: ___________________ First Name: ___________________</td>
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<tr>
<td>Address: __________________________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apt. #: ___________________ City: _____________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State: ___________________ Zip Code: _________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile Number: ___________________ Home Number: ___________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age: _______ DOB: ___<strong><strong>/_____/</strong></strong> Grade: _______ Teacher: ___________________</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>PARENT/LEGAL GUARDIAN</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship to Student: ______________________________________</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile Number: ___________________ Home Number: ___________________</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MEDICAL</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does your child have any illnesses that we need to know about? No ______ Yes ______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If yes, please specify ______________________________________________________</td>
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<tr>
<td>Allergies? ________________________________________________________________</td>
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APPENDIX J: ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENTS

STEPS Focus Group Protocol

(Procedures: As school staff enters the room, introduce team, provide staff with two copies of the consent form and the overview of the program.)

FACILITATOR SCRIPT: **Be sure to turn on the recorder.**

Thanks for coming to talk with us today about your work with at-risk students. As I mentioned in my email, we are designing a program to support the social-emotional learning of Black male high school students with a history of physical and/or verbal aggression.

My name is XXX from UNC Chapel Hill.

Before we get started with the discussion, I wanted to tell you a bit more about what we are doing today. We are gathering information from educators – administrators, teachers, counselors – about the essential components of a manualized, school-based program designed to support social and emotional learning skills in at-risk youth. We’ll use this information to help us further refine a social-emotional learning curriculum for underserved males with behavioral challenges.

I’m recording our conversation today so I can have it transcribed. We’ll review the transcriptions to identify common themes and subthemes across the different groups to find out what is working well, what gaps exist, and how we can provide positive behavior programming support to school staff. The information we learn will inform the development of our program and we may also summarize it for a research publication. Any reports or publications we write will not include your name or the name of your school. Do you have any questions about that? Has everyone had a chance to read and sign the consent form? One copy is for you to keep and one is for our records.

At the end of our meeting today, we’ll be able to give you a $20 cash stipend in appreciation for your time and insights. I’ll ask you to sign a receipt so we have a record of who has received the stipend. Any questions?

It would help me if we could go around the room and you say your name and position.

SCHOOL STAFF INTRODUCTIONS

Ok, thanks. Let’s get started.

1. Tell me about your experiences working with students with behavioral challenges – especially physical or verbal aggression.

2. What strengths do behaviorally challenged youth bring to the school?

3. What challenges do you encounter in supporting the success of students with behavioral challenges?

4. What social and emotional skills do you believe behaviorally challenged students need to be successful in high school?
5. What strategies, if any, could you utilize to support your student’s social-emotional growth?

6. Which behaviors or skills do you feel are critical to developing a successful relationship with the at-risk students?

REFER TO HANDOUT DESCRIBING PROGRAM COMPONENTS

7. Tell me about your initial thoughts of the program.

8. What components of this program do you think would be most effective in supporting the needs of at-risk students? Why?

9. What components do you think would be least effective, and why?
   a. How would you alter these components to be more effective?

10. What barriers might school and research staff encounter when they begin to implement the program?

11. This program is designed to utilize school staff (i.e., school counselor, social worker, etc.) as liaisons during program implementation. How would facilitating this program fit in with your current responsibilities?

12. What training would you need to be able to effectively serve as a facilitator of this program?

13. What suggestions do you have for increasing the likelihood that the program will be implemented effectively?

Is there anything else anyone would like to add?

Thank you so much for your time and your insights. Please be sure to complete this payment form and pick up your envelope with the $20.
STEPS Parent Questionnaire

This survey will provide important information to help us get to know you, your family, and your child’s educational and behavioral history. Unless otherwise specified, please answer the questions considering your child’s history from preschool through high school. The information collected below is confidential and will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. If you have any questions, please contact the STEPS research team.

1. Does the child currently live in your home?
   □ Yes (proceed to question 2)
   □ No (skip to question 3)

2. Please circle the total number of adults and children in your home.
   0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10+

3. Select which choice best describes your child’s current high school grades.
   □ A
   □ B
   □ C
   □ D
   □ F

4. My child is currently involved in the following extracurricular activities:
   □ Service clubs
   □ Academic honor societies
   □ Academic clubs
   □ Sports
   □ Vocational clubs
   □ Church organization
   □ Other: ____________________________
   □ Not involved in extra-curricular activities

5. Has your child ever skipped school (for an entire school day)?
   □ Yes
   □ No
   □ Not Sure

6. Has your child ever skipped at least one class period?
   □ Yes
   □ No
   □ Not Sure

7. How many in-school suspensions has your child ever received? (Including preschool through high school.)
   0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10+
8. How many school expulsions has your child *ever* received? *(Including preschool through high school.)*

    0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10+

9. How many out-of-school suspensions has your child *ever* received? *(Including preschool through high school.)*

    0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10+

10. When was your child’s *first* out-of-school suspension?

    □ Preschool
    □ Elementary School
    □ Middle School
    □ High School
    □ Not Applicable

11. Has your child *ever* been retained *(failed one or more grades)*?

    □ Yes
    □ No

12. Has your child *ever* been sent to an alternative school?

    □ Yes
    □ No

13. Has your child *ever* been sent to court for violating school rules or breaking the law?

    □ Yes
    □ No

14. If you answered yes to #13, please indicate the result of the court appearance.

    □ Case dismissed
    □ Fine/restitution
    □ Probation
    □ Community service
    □ Substance abuse or mental health counseling
    □ Juvenile training school
    □ Wilderness Camp/Tar Heel Challenge
    □ Other ______________________________

15. Have you or *any member* of the child’s immediate family (i.e., parent, sibling) *ever* been arrested for a misdemeanor or felony?

    □ Yes
    □ No

16. Have you or *any member* of the child’s immediate family (i.e., parent, sibling) *ever* served a prison or jail sentence?

    □ Yes
    □ No
17. Your Gender:
   □ Female
   □ Male

18. Relationship to the student:
   □ Mother
   □ Father
   □ Grandparent
   □ Foster Parent
   □ Legal Guardian
   □ Other: _______________________

19. Race/Ethnicity:
   □ African-American
   □ Hispanic
   □ Caucasian
   □ Asian
   □ Pacific Islander
   □ Other: _______________________

20. Marital status:
   □ Married
   □ Separated
   □ Divorced
   □ Widowed
   □ Unmarried

21. Please circle the highest level of education you completed.
   □ Less than high school
   □ High school or GED equivalent
   □ Associate Degree
   □ College Degree
   □ Master’s Degree or higher

22. Please indicate your employment status.
   □ Full-time
   □ Part-time
   □ Unemployed

23. Which choice best describes your annual income?
   □ Under $10,000
   □ $10,000 – 19,999
   □ $20,000 – 29,999
   □ $30,000 – 39,999
   □ $40,000 – 49,999
   □ $50,000 or more
24. Does your child currently receive free or reduced lunch?
   □ Yes
   □ No

Thank you for completing the STEPS Parent Questionnaire!
STEPS Student Questionnaire

This survey will provide important information to help us get to know you better. The information collected below is **confidential** and will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. If you do not remember the specific information requested for an item, please give your best guess. If you have any questions, please contact the STEPS research team.

1. With whom do you currently live?
   - □ Mother
   - □ Father
   - □ Both parents
   - □ Grandparent(s)
   - □ Foster Parent
   - □ Legal Guardian
   - □ Other: ____________________________

2. Please circle the total number of adults and children living in your home.
   - 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10+

3. How many brothers and sisters do you have?
   - 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10+

4. Select which choice **best** describes your current high school grades.
   - □ A’s
   - □ B’s
   - □ C’s
   - □ D’s
   - □ F’s

5. Please indicate your current extracurricular activities:
   - □ School service clubs
   - □ Academic honor societies
   - □ Academic clubs
   - □ Sports
   - □ Vocational clubs
   - □ Church organization
   - □ Other: ____________________________
   - □ Not involved in extra-curricular activities
6. Have you ever skipped school *(for an entire school day)*? *(Including elementary through high school.)*
   - □ Yes
   - □ No

7. How many times have you skipped school for an entire day? *(Including elementary through high school.)*
   - 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10+

8. Have you *ever* skipped at least one class period? *(Including elementary through high school.)*
   - □ Yes
   - □ No

9. Do you currently attend school regularly?
   - □ Yes
   - □ No

10. How many absences have you had this school year (2017-2018)?
    - 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10+

11. How many in-school suspensions have you *ever* received? *(Including preschool through high school.)*
    - 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10+

12. How many out-of-school suspensions have you *ever* received? *(Including preschool through high school.)*
    - 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10+

13. When was your first out-of-school suspension?
   - □ Preschool
   - □ Elementary School
   - □ Middle School
   - □ High School
   - □ Not Applicable

14. How many school expulsions have you received? *(Including preschool through high school.)*
    - 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10+

15. Have you *ever* been retained *(failed one or more grades)*?
   - □ Yes
   - □ No
16. Have you *ever* attended an alternative school?
   - □ Yes
   - □ No

17. Have you *ever* been sent to court for violating school rules or breaking the law?
   - □ Yes
   - □ No

18. If you answered yes to #17, please indicate the result of the court appearance.
   - □ Case dismissed
   - □ Fine/restitution
   - □ Probation
   - □ Community service
   - □ Substance abuse or mental health counseling
   - □ Juvenile training school
   - □ Wilderness Camp/Tar Heel Challenge
   - □ Other _______________________

19. Has *any member* of your immediate family (i.e., parent, sibling) *ever* been arrested for a misdemeanor or felony?
   - □ Yes
   - □ No

20. Has *any member* of your immediate family (i.e., parent, sibling) *ever* served a prison or jail sentence?
   - □ Yes
   - □ No

21. Do you currently receive free or reduced lunch?
   - □ Yes
   - □ No

*Thank you for completing the STEPS Student Questionnaire!*
1. My family/guardians are there for me when I need them.
   |   |   |   |
   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
   | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |

2. After finishing my schoolwork, I check it over to see if it’s correct.
   |   |   |   |
   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
   | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |

3. My teachers are there for me when I need them.
   |   |   |   |
   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
   | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |

4. Other students here like me the way I am.
   |   |   |   |
   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
   | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |

5. Adults at my school listen to the students.
   |   |   |   |
   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
   | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |

6. Other students at my school care about me.
   |   |   |   |
   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
   | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |

7. Students at my school are there for me when I need them.
   |   |   |   |
   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
   | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |

8. My education will create many future opportunities for me.
   |   |   |   |
   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
   | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |

9. Most of what is important to know you learn in school.
   |   |   |   |
   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
   | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |

10. The school rules are fair.
    |   |   |   |
    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
    | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |

11. Going to school after high school is important.
    |   |   |   |
    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
    | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |
12. When something good happens at school, my family/guardian(s) want to know about it.
   1  
   Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Agree  Strongly Agree

13. Most teachers at my school are interested in me as a person, not just as a student.
   1  
   Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Agree  Strongly Agree

14. Students here respect what I have to say.
   1  
   Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Agree  Strongly Agree

15. When I do schoolwork, I check to see whether I understand what I’m doing.
   1  
   Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Agree  Strongly Agree

16. Overall, my teachers are open and honest with me.
   1  
   Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Agree  Strongly Agree

17. I plan to continue my education following high school.
   1  
   Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Agree  Strongly Agree

18. I’ll learn, but only if the teacher gives me a reward.
   1  
   Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Agree  Strongly Agree

19. School is important for achieving my future goals.
   1  
   Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Agree  Strongly Agree

20. When I have problems at school my family/guardian(s) are willing to help me.
   1  
   Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Agree  Strongly Agree

21. Overall, adults at my school treat students fairly.
   1  
   Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Agree  Strongly Agree

22. I enjoy talking to the teachers here.
   1  
   Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Agree  Strongly Agree
23. I enjoy talking to the students here.

   1  2  3  4
Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

24. I have some friends at school.

   1  2  3  4
Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

25. When I do well in school it’s because I work hard.

   1  2  3  4
Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

26. The tests in my classes do a good job of measuring what I’m able to do.

   1  2  3  4
Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

27. I feel safe at school.

   1  2  3  4
Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

28. I feel like I have a say about what happens to me at school.

   1  2  3  4
Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

29. My family/guardian(s) want me to keep trying when things are tough at school.

   1  2  3  4
Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

30. I am hopeful about my future.

   1  2  3  4
Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

31. At my school, teachers care about the students.

   1  2  3  4
Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

32. I’ll learn, but only if my family/guardian(s) give a reward.

   1  2  3  4
Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

33. Learning is fun because I get better at something.

   1  2  3  4
Strongly Disagree Disagree Agree Strongly Agree
34. What I’m learning in my classes will be important in my future.

1 2 3 4
Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Agree  Strongly Agree

35. The grades in my classes do a good job of measuring what I’m able to do.

1 2 3 4
Strongly Disagree  Disagree  Agree  Strongly Agree
Behavior Assessment System for Children - Third Edition (BASC-3)

Reynolds & Kamphaus (2015)

Aggression Measure

Parent Rating Scale, Adolescent Form (PRS-A), Aggression Scale

1. Argues when denied own way.
   
   Never  Sometimes  Often  Almost Always

2. Bullies others.
   
   Never  Sometimes  Often  Almost Always

3. Gets back at others.
   
   Never  Sometimes  Often  Almost Always

4. Hits other adolescents.
   
   Never  Sometimes  Often  Almost Always

5. Is cruel to others.
   
   Never  Sometimes  Often  Almost Always

6. Is overly aggressive.
   
   Never  Sometimes  Often  Almost Always

7. Manipulates others.
   
   Never  Sometimes  Often  Almost Always

8. Teases others.
   
   Never  Sometimes  Often  Almost Always

9. Threatens to hurt others.
   
   Never  Sometimes  Often  Almost Always

10. Throws or breaks things when angry.
    
    Never  Sometimes  Often  Almost Always
REFERENCES


178


Klein, R. (2016, November 1). Black students are less likely to get suspended when they have Black teachers. The Huffington Post. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/black-students-suspension-study_us_581788e0e4b064e1b4b4070a


