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Dialectical Behavior Therapy

and Student Achievement

in Special Education

by

Delora Medina

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Abstract

The focus of this case study is a social-emotional learning (SEL) program that supports students emotionally, socially, and behaviorally in a county juvenile camp high school for male adolescents. This unique facility is located in southern California and is referred to as “Mountain High School” for the purposes of this research. The 8½ week study was designed using a quantitative, quasi-experimental design. The goal of this research was to identify the impact of an SEL program embedded in Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), on positive behavior outcomes for the special day class (SDC) program. The SDC students have the most restrictive individualized education plans (IEPs) and are in the special education program. A central theme for this case study is the disproportionate number of discipline procedures such as higher rate of suspensions and write-ups, for these particular students. The SDC students have special education eligibilities ranging from learning disabilities, emotional disturbance, and attention deficits. In addition, many students at this school site, including both special education students and general education students, battle against alcohol and drug abuse; unstable relationships with peers, family, and romantic partners; identity struggles; and suicidal tendencies.

DBT is the chosen intensive program implemented by the juvenile camp school staff, the on-site department of mental health staff, and the on-site probation officers in order to carry out the camp and accompanying school’s “culture of care” used to support the adjudicated youth. For this case study, *DBT Skills in Schools* (Mazza et al., 2016) is the source for the specific skills (i.e., mindfulness, interpersonal effectiveness, emotion regulation, distress tolerance), practiced in the DBT lessons implemented in the SDC program. The lens for this study is based in cognitive theory, along with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT); a model DBT stems from. The results of the study indicate that the 15-minute comprehensive DBT lessons implemented over

the period of one month, did not impact the SDC students' behavior choices, in order to improve the disproportionality of school-wide suspensions and write-ups. In addition, there was no improvement in the number of daily positive behavior points earned. After answering the research question, "How would a comprehensive approach to DBT in the SDC program, using daily reinforcement lessons (mindfulness, interpersonal effectiveness, distress tolerance, emotion regulation) impact positive behavior outcomes?" the case study's findings, limitations, recommendations, and future directions are explored.

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Chapter One: Definition of Problem

The intent of this case study is to examine the rate of discipline procedures among Special Day Class (SDC) students and general education students. This particular study, involving a small number of students, uses archival data to survey the disproportionate amount of suspensions and write-ups in a juvenile court high school, received by the special education students from the SDC program. At Mountain High School located within a juvenile campsite serving adjudicated male youth, the group of students enrolled in the SDC program struggle with disabilities that have an impact on their behavior and academic performance. The school opened the doors in July 2018 and is conducting a pilot program based on a “culture of care”, set in a therapeutic milieu, which is embedded in Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). Studies show many benefits of comprehensive DBT programs, which addresses several variables. At Mountain High there is lack of a comprehensive DBT approach for the SDC students. They receive only two to five minutes of daily mindfulness exercises, just as their general education peers do. Mindfulness is only one of four modules of DBT. To mitigate the disproportionate number of write-ups and suspensions in the SDC program, this case study will involve supporting the SDC students with daily DBT skills lessons involving the other three modules of DBT. The data analysis from this case study will inform the design of a future action plan for Mountain High School, incorporating best practices embedded in DBT skills.

In the *Chapter 2 Literature Review* of this case study, school-based Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) programs and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs are explored. Prior studies regarding DBT in schools, help inform the methodology and design of this case study, which is explained in *Chapter 3*. *Chapter 4* will analyze the quantitative data gathered, which is

archival data collected pre-implementation; and then again, concurrent with implementation of the DBT daily lessons in the SDC program. *Chapter 5* makes recommendations for an action plan based on the analysis of research results. Key terms in this study are dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), social emotional learning (SEL), special day class (SDC) program, and Individual Education Plan (IEP).

Purpose of Research/Statement of Problem

There are many adolescents that suffer from diagnosable mental health disorders such as post-traumatic stress, ADHD, anxiety issues, mood disorders, and disruptive behavior disorders. Because less than 20% of students actually receive treatment for these serious issues, these adolescents experience poor school performance (Sakowich, 2017). In some alternative settings such as juvenile court schools, 70% of the adolescents struggle with mental health issues (Bonnie, Johnson, Chemers, & Schuck, 2013). Many educators are moving toward Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs to support students: “Over the past 10 years, the number of SEL curricula has grown dramatically, as has support for using them” (Mazza, Dexter-Mazza, Miller, Rathus, & Murphy, 2016, p. 6).

Mountain High School, a juvenile camp high school serving adjudicated male youth, opened July 2018 and is conducting a pilot program based on a culture of care set in a therapeutic milieu. Dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) is part of a framework for positive peer-to-peer and peer-to-adult interactions and outcomes, inside the classroom as well as the shared living quarters on campus. DBT skills groups provide social-emotional learning for students outside of school hours, led by the Department of Mental Health in conjunction with the Probation Department on a weekly basis, implementing one-hour sessions. There are four

modules in DBT but the school currently addresses one module, *mindfulness*, for five minutes at the beginning of each day.

There is a disproportionate amount of suspensions and write-ups in the juvenile court high school, received by the Special Day Class (SDC) students. The SDC program is designed for special education students with the most needs. These students have Individual Education Plans (IEPs) to address learning disabilities, emotional disturbance, attention deficits, and other processing deficits. The Spring 2018 group of SDC students received 66.7% of the Mountain High School suspensions and 60.0% of the write-ups, even though the SDC class contained 6 of the 21 high school students enrolled at that time. Also, the Summer/Fall 2018 group of SDC students received 33% of the school suspensions and 26% of the write-ups, despite the fact that the SDC students only comprised 19% of the total school population. Therefore, the number of disciplinary actions that occurred in the SDC program was disproportionate as identified by data collected both in Spring 2018 as well as Summer of 2018.

This case study aims to answer the question: *How would a comprehensive approach to DBT in the SDC program, using daily reinforcement lessons (i.e., mindfulness, interpersonal effectiveness, distress tolerance, emotion regulation), impact positive behavior outcomes?* Several students and other important stakeholders such as parents, teachers, and principals have embraced DBT programs and other social emotional learning programs in schools. The following review of literature concerning DBT and SEL answers the question: How does Dialectical Behavior Therapy contribute to student success, and how is it implemented in schools?

Preview Literature

Various stakeholders use Social Emotional Learning (SEL) such as Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) to support the many adolescents that suffer from diagnosable mental health disorders. Students dealing with issues such as substance abuse, post-traumatic stress, as well as less severe mental health conditions, experience poor school performance. Select high schools across the nation who face epidemics such as self-endangerment, suicidal tendencies, and drug abuse, have turned to interventions and programs based on components of Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) (Mazza and Miller, 2017). These formidable, research-based DBT programs mitigate the negative effects of the mental health epidemic in schools. DBT focuses on four key areas including *core mindfulness, distress tolerance, emotion regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness*, and DBT also lends itself to extensive social-emotional learning (SEL) in the classroom. Because of the many reported benefits experienced by students who practice DBT skills, various stakeholders such as parents, teachers, and principals have embraced DBT programs and other social emotional learning programs in schools. The following review of literature concerning DBT and SEL answers the question: How does Dialectical Behavior Therapy contribute to student success, and how is it implemented in schools?

School-based SEL programs are vital for students that would not receive help otherwise. Approximately 25% of students have mental health disorders (Bonnie, et al., 2013) and social-emotional skills help students combat negative school outcomes. Depending on individual school settings, there are many types of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs, including ones that embed DBT interventions (Mazza, et.al., 2016). Research shows many positive outcomes of DBT programs: Sakowich (2017) cites students' ability to better regulate emotions and increase the use of coping skills to control behavior; while Reches (2014) cites improved attendance, and

better grades. Also, Sharp and Tackett report a 50% decrease in disciplinary referrals at one high school implementing DBT (2014). By the same token, SEL programs in general, have been proven to positively impact students' academic performance and behavior, as well as better their attitudes and outlooks (Jones et al., 2017).

Core mindfulness, distress tolerance, interpersonal effectiveness, and emotion regulation, the four modules of Dialectical Behavioral Therapy, are stated to have many positive outcomes for youth. DBT is an established treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder, personality disorders, substance abuse, and many other serious mental health issues. In schools, DBT relieves many "at-risk" students from self-harming, but reportedly benefits students with less acute conditions as well. *Core mindfulness*, the foundational module of DBT serving as the keystone for all other DBT modules, "help adolescents increase their self-awareness and attentional control while reducing suffering and increasing pleasure" (Rathus & Miller, 2015). Mindfulness allows one to be attentive and focused on the present, and "being in the moment" supports the tolerance of processing difficult emotions. Another module of DBT, *distress tolerance*, has been shown to address different types of growing behavioral and emotional concerns on school campuses. Some of these distress tolerance skills reportedly mitigates violence, drug use, and risky sexual behavior in adolescents; therefore making a positive impact on academic, social and personal success in schools (Payton, et. al., 2000). The DBT module, *emotion regulation*, focuses on identifying, feeling, and managing emotions before the feelings get out of control. A salient feature of emotion regulation is the idea of getting out of the "emotional mind" and instead staying in the "wise mind," which could help many adolescent students have better school outcomes (Rathus & Miller, 2015). Lastly, the *interpersonal effectiveness* module teaches adolescents to "improve and maintain peer and family relationships

and build self-respect” (Rathus & Miller, 2015). These particular skills focus on how to validate others, how to be dialectical (e.g., how to balance other people’s point of view with own point of view), how to make and keep friends, and many other skills that are conducive to healthy relationships (Rathus & Miller, 2015).

The valuable skills offered in the four DBT modules are essentially life-long skills whose reported benefits affect students who are at-risk as well as students dealing with typical adolescent issues. Many parents, educators, and other stakeholders in education who are invested in the achievement and well-being of students, value the impact of DBT and other social-emotional learning programs. SEL and DBT programs are stated to positively impact academic performance and behavior, as well as better students’ attitudes and outlooks on life.

Preview Methodology

The design of this case study focuses on the analysis of quantitative school data, through the lens of the cognitive model as well as a cognitive behavioral theory (CBT) lens. CBT is closely related to DBT in that the theories address negative thoughts concerning self and the external environment or world. DBT skills are used in Mountain High School’s juvenile court school setting to address social, emotional, and behavioral issues the adjudicated male youth grapple with on a continual basis. The instruments used in this study to gather quantitative data for discipline procedures and positive interventions, include the County Office of Education’s internal web-based platforms EPIC and AERIES. The Excel program from Microsoft was the tool used to create charts for data analysis. In addition, the guidebook *DBT Skills in Schools* (Mazza, et al., 2016) is the source for daily DBT lessons implemented in the SDC program. After attaining IRB and school approval, a six-step procedure was followed by collecting data,

disaggregating data, teaching daily 15 minute DBT lessons in the classroom, investigating growth in behavior, and analyzing behavior trends for both SDC and general education students. The case study outcomes regarding discipline procedures and positive behavior points reveal unexpected results. This research shows how pre-implementation of daily DBT exercises yielded a lower number of suspensions and write-ups in the SDC program, along with a higher number of positive points earned; while data reflecting the time during implementation of daily DBT lessons correlates with a higher number of suspensions and write-up and a lower number of positive points earned. These results happened to be the opposite of what existing DBT studies demonstrate.

Significance of Research

This research targets better behavioral outcomes for special education students in juvenile court high schools. This research builds on literature primarily done at the middle school and high school level. Currently, much research has been done on the benefits of social-emotional learning programs but research on DBT programs used in schools is minimal. This research will inform future actions taken to support the students in both in the SDC program and in the general education program at Mountain High School. The goal is to rehabilitate the adjudicated youth at the school, and research-based programs are key in achieving this arduous task.

Chapter Summary

Establishing programs to best support special education students emotionally, socially and behaviorally, in the juvenile camp school SDC program, is the problem being explored in this case study. The goal is to identify the impact of a comprehensive DBT approach, on positive

behavior outcomes for SDC students. The disproportionate number of discipline procedures for this group of students is a central theme for this case study. This case study will inform the design of a differentiated social-emotional program involving best practices based in DBT skills.

Definitions

- A. ***DBT***- Dialectical Behavior Therapy
- B. ***IEP***- Individualized Education Plan
- C. ***SDC***- Special Day Class
- D. ***SEL***- Social Emotional Learning
- E. General Education Student- any student who does not have an IEP
- F. Special Education Student- any student educated using an Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

Chapter Two: Literature Review

There are many adolescents that suffer from diagnosable mental health disorders such as post-traumatic stress, ADHD, anxiety issues, mood disorders, and disruptive behavior disorders. Given that less than 20% of students actually receive treatment for these serious issues, these adolescents experience poor school performance (Sakowich, 2017). Many educators are moving toward Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs to intervene with this crisis. Although the research involving social-emotional learning (SEL) curricula pertaining to adolescents is limited (Durlak et al., 2011), the outcomes of two relevant studies by Cook et al. from 2008 and McMain from 2013 “suggest that skills training focused on interpersonal and emotion management issues can be an effective strategy for school-based adolescents, especially in the area of reducing emotional distress” (Mazza et al., 2016). Nationwide, select high schools that face epidemics such as self-endangerment, suicidal tendencies, and drug abuse, have turned to interventions based on components of Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) (Mazza et al., 2017)..

This formidable, research-based program mitigates the negative effects of the mental health epidemic in schools. DBT focuses on four key areas including *core mindfulness, distress tolerance, emotion regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness*, and DBT also lends itself to extensive social-emotional learning (SEL) in the classroom. Because of the many stated benefits experienced by students who practice DBT skills, various stakeholders such as parents, teachers, and principals have embraced DBT programs and other social emotional learning programs in schools. Students themselves have provided testimonies of how these types of programs have created positive outcomes for them during their school-aged years, impacting them all the way into adulthood (Jones et al., 2017). The following review of literature concerning DBT and SEL

answers the question: How does Dialectical Behavior Therapy contribute to student success, and how is it implemented in schools?

Benefits of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) in Schools

Historically, Social Emotional Learning (SEL) only involved counselors, social workers, and at-risk students who were demonstrating difficulty (“SEL Trends,” 2018). In contrast with the past, SEL programs are now implemented school-wide, beyond the departments of these experts in student support services. Presently, school counselors and social workers are joined by savvy teachers, classroom aides, administrators, and parents to address social-emotional deficits in today’s youth. With growing evidence that SEL can help all students socially, emotionally, and academically, many schools have implemented programs that consequently benefit students from all walks of life.

School-based SEL programs are vital for students that would not receive help otherwise. Research shows that a large majority of students who suffer from mental health issues do not receive outside counseling services due to financial restrictions, transportation issues, lack of family support, and conflicts in cultural beliefs (DeKruyf, Auger, and Trice-Black, 2013). Results from a Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Survey “indicate that youth ages 12-17 are most likely to receive mental health care in educational settings, with an approximate 2.9 million children receiving mental health treatment in schools in 2010” (Sharp & Tackett, 2014, p. 396). Approximately 25% of students have mental health disorders (DeKruyf, et.al., 2013), and in some alternative settings such as juvenile court schools, up to

70% of the adolescents struggle with mental health issues (Bonnie, Johnson, Chemers, and Schuck, 2013). Social-emotional skills help students combat negative school outcomes.

Depending on individual school settings, there are many types of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programs, including ones that embed DBT interventions (Mazza et al., 2016). Although DBT has proven to be the most effective evidence-based treatment for emotion dysregulation and a variety of other mental health issues, DBT concepts can actually benefit every type of student (“Skills in Schools,” n.d.). Research shows many positive outcomes of DBT programs: Sakowich (2017) cites students’ ability to better regulate emotions and increase the use of coping skills to control behavior; while Reches (2014) cites improved attendance, and better grades. Also, Sharp et al. report a 50% decrease in disciplinary referrals at one high school implementing DBT. By the same token, SEL programs in general, have been proven to positively impact students’ academic performance and behavior, as well as better their attitudes and outlooks (Jones et al., 2017). Since 2001, there have been 21 school districts and 11 individual schools across the country, that have implemented comprehensive DBT programs across various grade levels, which include teaching rigorous interventions and social emotional skill sets (Mazza et al., 2017).

In the many schools using comprehensive DBT programs, a proactive approach is being taken since DBT Skills are taught before students experience emotional dysregulation. Mazza et al. describe how administrators, teachers and other school personnel, are all necessary components to the efficacy of the DBT programs’ implementation (2017). Also, one language that can be used throughout schools benefits students who must transition from different placement settings (Mazza et al., 2017). When discussing how to use DBT in an educational setting, Caligiuri describes why the school environment is conducive to helping students utilize

DBT skills and interventions (2014). First of all, teachers, nurses, and guidance counselors are frequently the first adults to find out when a student is having a problem. Also, schools are an authentic environment where students learn to regulate their emotions in various situations when interacting with peers and adults. In addition, school stakeholders experience an added benefit of DBT programs being cost effective. Research shows that problem behaviors that lead to emergency hospital visits can be decreased (Caligiuri, 2014).

Mason, Catucci, Lusk, and Johnson (2011) demonstrate how DBT in a high school setting results in less class cutting, decreased referrals to the assistant principal, and lower rate of detentions and suspensions. In addition, students report a reduction in mental issues such as anxiety, depression, and self-injurious behaviors. It is because of the reported positive outcomes for youth, that stakeholders such as teachers, principals, and employers commit to the idea of having SEL programs in the majority of schools.

Implementing the Four DBT Modules in Schools

Dialectical Behavioral Therapy has proven to be an effective treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder, personality disorders, substance abuse, and many other serious mental health issues. It is a cognitive behavioral psychotherapy, developed in the late 1980s by Marsha M. Linehan, PhD, ABPP (“What is Dialectical Behavior Therapy?” n.d.). Because the word “dialectical” is defined by the existence of two opposites at the same time; for example, teachers empathizing with the situations students are currently in, while at the same time acknowledging that students need to change and rise above the situation in order to reach a positive outcome. This dialectic is very effective, due to students being more receptive to interventions stemming from this type of dynamic. It is logical that educators who refrain from showing a dismissive

attitude about students' current emotions and situations have better success rates of social-emotional teaching. For DBT, the primary dialectic idea (i.e. opposite strategies) involves *acceptance* and *change* (Rathus & Miller, 2015).

In fact, the four key skills modules of DBT are balanced in the ideas of acceptance and change. Specifically, there are two sets of skills balanced in “change” (*interpersonal effectiveness and emotion regulation*) and the other two sets of skills are balanced in “acceptance” (*mindfulness and distress tolerance*). The Linehan Institute defines the four DBT skills modules in the following manner: *core mindfulness* is “the practice of being fully aware and present in this one moment;” *distress tolerance* is “how to tolerate pain in difficult situations, not change it;” *interpersonal effectiveness* is “how to ask for what you want and say no while maintaining self-respect and relationships with others;” and *emotion regulation* is “how to change emotions that you want to change.”

Although DBT was originally employed to treat Borderline Personality Disorder, now DBT has been proven to address all types of mental health issues with varying degrees of severity. The body of research continues to grow and show positive results, due to the efficacy of DBT. In schools, it has been proven to not only relieve many “at-risk” students from self-harming, but also for students with less acute conditions. According to Mazza et al., most SEL programs lack skills in addressing emotional dysregulation (2016); hence intervening with skills and strategies embedded in DBT therapy is valuable to educators who teach students who are unable to control strong emotions.

DBT Module: Core Mindfulness

Core mindfulness, the foundational module which serves as the keystone for all other DBT modules, “help adolescents increase their self-awareness and attentional control while

reducing suffering and increasing pleasure” (Rathus & Miller, 2015). At the same time, mindfulness allows one to be attentive and focused on the present, without being judgmental of the moment (Caligiuri, 2014). Being in the moment also helps one tolerate and accept difficult emotions with the goal of keeping himself in the “wise mind” instead of the “emotional mind” (Rathus & Miller, 2015). The idea of “core mindfulness” is explored within a video series featuring DBT’s creator, Dr. Marsha Linehan. This prolific psychologist and author explains how DBT is the first psychotherapy to include mindfulness, and how meditation is not conducive to treating people who cannot tolerate focusing on their breath and meditating (2017). Even so, many middle schools and high schools are producing positive outcomes for students, as they turning towards meditation and yoga to practice mindfulness.

There is vast empirical evidence pertaining to “mindfulness-based activities to facilitate enhanced student learning and to support students’ psychological, physiological, and social development” (Rempel, 2012). Since mindfulness focuses on being in the present moment, yoga and meditation are both conducive to this goal. The study regarding yoga in an inner-city middle school, demonstrates how this physical activity, based on the mind-body connection, positively effects school engagement and attendance, as well as decreases the rate of detentions (Frank, 2016). Barnes, Bauza, and Treiber (2003) discuss how meditation in a high school reduces stress, after the adolescents used daily meditation; added benefits include a decrease in school absences, suspensions, and rule infractions. Mindfulness is one route in helping students navigate through emotional turmoil: “there is a need to provide children with a way to combat the stress and pressure of living in today’s highly charged world: mindfulness may be one helpful alternative” (Barnes, et al, 2003). In addition, contemplative practices such as mindfulness has been shown to strengthen empathy and compassion which benefits the student

in schools as well as in their personal lives (Davidson, Dunne, Eccles, Engle, Greenberg, Jennings, & Vago, 2012). Linehan reiterates how mindfulness skills such as observing, describing, and participating, are the core skills of DBT that every other component depends on. The very first skill learned in DBT is being able to thoroughly observe: “learning the skill of noticing, paying attention, noticing what’s in front of you, noticing what’s within you, noticing what’s in your mind, noticing what’s in your body, and noticing what’s outside” (2017). Observing is central to all four modules of DBT; core mindfulness, distress tolerance, emotion regulation, and interpersonal effectiveness.

DBT Module: Distress Tolerance

Besides practicing mindfulness to learn the lessons of “acceptance,” the other module that focuses on this concept is distress tolerance. In DBT, distress tolerance skills “offer tools to reduce impulsivity and accept reality as it is” (Rathus & Miller, 2015). Caligiuri describes distress tolerance as being able to view a stressful event without ignoring or being overwhelmed by emotion (2014). These types of interventions build tolerance by focusing on how to accept situations that cannot immediately be changed and that cause emotional pain: “Through radical acceptance and a willingness to embrace reality as it is, one can reduce emotional suffering and move forward in a more centered and effective manner (Rathus & Miller, 2015, p. 127). The idea of “radical acceptance” is explored within a video series featuring DBT’s creator, Dr. Marsha Linehan: “Radical acceptance doesn’t mean you don’t try to change things, because you only have to radically accept the moment that you are in; and the past. But you can try to change the next moment” (Linehan, 2017). Beyond teaching how to accept the present reality, distress tolerance also teaches crisis survival skills that improve impulse control. These survival skills prevent engagement in self-harming behaviors, substance abuse, and other harmful behaviors,

while “changing one’s experience of the distress by distracting, self-soothing, improving the moment, considering pros and cons of impulsive versus effective action, and “tipping” one’s body chemistry to rapidly reduce extreme arousal” (Rathus & Miller, 2017, p. 126).

In the school setting, distress tolerance might be seen when a disorderly student learns to calmly and radically accept directives from teachers and staff when asked to complete non-preferred tasks. A more serious situation might involve an anguished student coping with a visit to the school counselor and/or nurse to self-soothe; using cold packs or ice water to decompress and prevent himself/herself from self-injurious behaviors such as cutting.

Anywhere between 13-45% of adolescent males and females engage in non-suicidal self-injury; this epidemic spans across all races and ethnicities (Choate, 2012). Beside self-injurious behavior, low distress tolerance also leads to other types of troubling behavior. Low tolerance for mental and emotional pain has been shown to increase involvement in illegal activities among African American adolescents, elevate the risk for alcohol use among Caucasian adolescents, and often leads to internalizing symptoms (i.e., depression and rumination) among females (Daughters et. al., 2009).

DBT distress tolerance skills have been shown to address these types of growing behavioral and emotional concerns on school campuses. All in all, DBT tackles the student issues mentioned above, as well as violence, drug use, and risky sexual behavior; therefore making a positive impact on academic, social and personal success in schools (Payton, et. al., 2000). Finally, distress tolerance skills are necessary in being able to regulate one’s emotions, another important concept of DBT.

DBT Module: Emotion Regulation

The two DBT modules discussed above, *core mindfulness/distress tolerance*, both embody the idea of “acceptance.” The opposing position of this dialect is “change,” which is an essential quality of the module called *emotion regulation*. Regulating emotions includes identifying, feeling, and managing emotions before the feelings get out of control, as well as increasing favorable emotions and decreasing unfavorable emotions (Rathus and Miller, 2015).

In the field of psychology it has been widely accepted that there are six basic emotions: happiness, surprise, sadness, fear, disgust and anger (Jack, Garrod, Schyns, 2014). However, Jack et al., challenges this notion with experiments on facial muscle analysis, suggesting there are actually only four basic emotions. Disgust and anger are seen as two of the numerous complex emotions that have evolved from the four emotional building blocks: happiness, surprise, sadness, and fear (2014). Currently there are two scientific theories defining what an emotion is. The cognitive appraisal theory interprets emotions as judgments, while the physiological perception theory argues that emotions stem from mental reactions or perceptions of changes in the body: “Understanding how the brain works shows that these theories of emotion - cognitive appraisal and physiological perception - can be combined into a unified account of emotions” (Thagard, 2010). According to these theories, anger in a student would be experienced as a judgment in the brain’s prefrontal cortex, while also being processed by the brain’s amygdala and insula based on changes in breathing rate, heartbeat, hormone levels and possibly diaphoresis.

The idea of “emotion regulation” is explored within a video series featuring DBT’s creator, Dr. Marsha Linehan. She describes emotion regulation strategies as learning how to regulate the physiology, experience, and actions associated with emotions; Dr. Linehan explains

how “those strategies have been taken from the science of emotions and from the evidence-based treatments that treat emotions” (2017). DBT treats adolescents who suffer from serious emotion dysregulation, a concept which derives from a theory contending that “people with chronic, significant problems regulating emotion have a constitutional emotional sensitivity, high reactivity, and slow return to baseline mood, and lack capacities for regulating emotions” (Ruthus & Miller, 2015, p. 192). Adolescents with mood disorders such as Borderline Personality Disorder, benefit greatly from emotion regulation skills, as do adolescents who are vulnerable to reverting to a negative state of mind. Another important goal of emotion regulation is to change emotional distressing situations by first being mindful of one’s own emotions and then perhaps choosing the opposite action of responding to the situation; a positive action instead of that would normally be chosen (Ruthus & Miller, 2015). In other words, the idea of getting out of the “emotional mind” and instead staying in the “wise mind” could help many adolescent students have better school outcomes.

DBT Module: Interpersonal Effectiveness

The other module that encourages “change,” is interpersonal effectiveness. This DBT component teaches adolescents to “improve and maintain peer and family relationships and build self-respect” (Ruthus & Miller, 2015). The idea of “interpersonal effectiveness” is explored within a video series featuring DBT’s creator, Dr. Marsha Linehan: “Interpersonal skills have several components. It’s how to get what you want, how to get what you want while you maintain a relationship... and how to know when to use what skill, and how to know when to ask, and how to know when to say no” (2017). Interpersonal interventions skills also focus on how to validate others, how to be dialectical (i.e., how to balance other people’s point of view with own point of view), how to make and keep friends, and many other skills that are conducive

to healthy relationships (Ruthus & Miller, 2015). Having balanced, healthy, relationships is beneficial for adolescents inside school and beyond.

Stakeholders Who Value Social Emotional Learning (SEL):

Students, teachers, principals, and employers are some of the prominent stakeholders that support the inclusion of SEL programs in schools for the betterment of society. A commissioned survey indicates that 93% of teachers want SEL to become more prominent in school environment, by including it in the everyday curriculum and to become part of the school culture (Bridgeland, Bruce & Hariharan, 2013). A national principal survey reveals that almost all principals understand the benefits of SEL in schools and that these school leaders have confidence in SEL programs' positive impact on relationships in the classroom, bullying rates, school climate, and building citizenship skills (DePaoli, Atwell & Bridgeland, 2017). A 2016 CASEL and Committee for Children Congressional report reveals that half of employers surveyed are having difficulties filling company vacancies with new employees who possess appropriate job skills in the following areas: problem-solving, adaptability, communication, and decision-making. This 2016 report also declares how "in the long run, greater social and emotional competence can increase the likelihood of high school graduation, readiness for postsecondary education, career success, positive family and work relationships, better mental health, reduced criminal behavior, and engaged citizenship" (2016, p.2).

In the short run, the stakeholders who benefit most from social and emotional competence (e.g., DBT skills), are the students who find themselves in emotionally difficult situations. According to Mazza et al., the most vital part of DBT is learning decision-making skills and coping strategies. The following examples are situations adolescents are able to

employ these particular skills: alcohol and drug use; relationships with peers, family, and romantic partners; suicidal behavior and self-harming behavior; physically and/or sexual abuse; bullying, victimization, and perpetration; homeless youth; antisocial behavior; academic pressures; and identity struggles (self, sexual orientation)” (2017).

Chapter Summary

As demonstrated by the research, there are numerous ways in which Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) skills and other forms of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) greatly benefit both at-risk students as well as typical students inside and outside of the classroom. They learn life-long skills that impact interpersonal effectiveness, such as regulating emotions and increasing the use of coping skills to have more self-control and reduce stress. In addition, SEL and DBT programs positively impact academic performance and behavior, as well as better their attitudes and outlooks on life. These types of programs are implemented in various ways depending on the needs of the school. Some SEL programs, such as the ones embedded in DBT, are more intensive and help students who are the most troubled. Other SEL programs are more universal and are meant to guide the whole student body, in their journey to becoming emotionally healthy young adults, with appropriate social skills.

Stakeholders understand the need for these various SEL programs and it is common for educators to integrate social-emotional skills into elementary, middle, and high school curricula. Parents, educators, employers, and other stakeholders in education who are invested in the achievement and well-being of students, value the mission of social-emotional learning. SEL is an important part of education, and is continuing to grow as a prominent part of schools’ culture and curriculum. In the remaining chapters of this research project, Mountain High’s case study

is explained and analyzed. This juvenile court school's SEL program is embedded in Dialectical Behavior Therapy, a salient feature of the school's "culture of care."

Chapter Three: Methodology

Mountain High School, built to meet the educational needs of adjudicated male youth, was opened July 2018 and is part of a 18-month pilot program based on a culture of care set in a therapeutic milieu. Dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) is part of a framework for positive peer-to-peer and peer-to-adult interactions and outcomes, inside the classroom as well as the shared living quarters on campus. DBT skills groups provide social-emotional learning for students outside of school hours, led by the Department of Mental Health in conjunction with the Probation Department on a weekly basis. There are four modules of DBT and the school addresses one module, *mindfulness*, for 2-3 minutes at the beginning of each day.

There is a disproportionate amount of suspensions and write-ups in the juvenile court high school, received by special education students from the self-contained SDC classroom. These students have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) to address learning disabilities, emotional disturbance, attention deficits, and other processing deficits. Although there is not a massive number of suspensions taking place at this school, SDC students are suspended at higher rates than their general education peers.

Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) is a researched-based intervention that is effective for helping people with both minor and major mental health issues, such as those students in the Special Day Class (SDC) program at Mountain High School. How is a comprehensive approach to DBT in a self-contained classroom using daily reinforcement lessons (including the four modules of *mindfulness, interpersonal effectiveness, distress tolerance, and emotion regulation*) related to positive behavior outcomes for special education students?

Design

A two month long quantitative case study was conducted, using a quasi-experimental design based in Cognitive Theory. Behavior data for the 6 special education students in the SDC program, (i.e., positive behavior points, number of write-ups, and rates of suspension) were collected for the study. In addition, suspension rates and write-ups for the general education population of the juvenile court high school were gathered for 26 students, which totals 32 adjudicated youth in all at Mountain High School. Data for the SDC program were disaggregated for 1 month prior to DBT lesson implementation, and for 1 month during implementation. The DBT curriculum is a type of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) program and the duration of implementation was 21 school days, from 9/8/2018 through 10/5/2018.

The SEL program comprised of comprehensive DBT lessons (each involving, mindfulness activities followed by either interpersonal effectiveness, distress tolerance, or emotion regulation skills review and/or practice) was the focus for 15 minutes every morning in the self-contained class SDC. These lessons happened in conjunction with the scheduled school-wide DBT mindfulness exercises that are very brief and inconsistent. The 26 general education students in the school continued with the regimented mindfulness exercises in the allotted 5 minutes most mornings, depending on the homeroom teacher. The question, “Does a comprehensive approach to DBT in the SDC classroom have a positive impact on student behavior?” was answered with limited conclusions of this case study.

Participants

The SDC program that is the focus of this case study, consists of 6 special education male students with disabilities including Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) Emotional Disturbance

(ED), serious attention deficits, distractibility issues and visual and/or auditory processing deficits. The classroom racial make-up consists of 1 African-American student and 5 Hispanic students. These students struggle with more negative behavior and poorer academic achievement than the other 26 students in the school.

There is a total of 32 students school-wide; the other students are also male and 7 (22% of total population) of the students are African-American and 25 (78% of total population) are Hispanic. The whole student population is considered low-income and roughly 40% have been, or currently are, foster youth. The school attendance of both the SDC students and the general population is consistent since the youth are escorted by the probation officers every morning and supported by the probation officer liaisons in the classroom for behavioral issues.

The adjudicated youth of Mountain High School court school are monitored by the probation department at all times in and outside of the classrooms and the deputy probation officers rotate as their 2 ½ day work-shifts begin and end. The students themselves are a transient population, as they enter and exit all at different times depending on their court dates and whether or not they get an early or late “release date,” depending on factors such as behavior, high school graduation, and/or placement situations after leaving the county’s camp and school. Students normally receive a 5-7 month program or a 7-10 month program for more serious offenses. It is a common occurrence for these disadvantaged students to have difficulties in the school setting since many have long gaps in their attendance record at their regular school sites.

Setting

The setting the study takes place is Mountain High School at a juvenile court facility in Southern California, which educates 9th through 12th grade adjudicated male youth. Students live

and go to school at the juvenile camp for an average of 7 months depending on progress and behavior. The school's mission is that Mountain High School "supports, empowers, and educates traditionally underserved students by providing a well-rounded, academically rigorous, college-preparatory and career-ready education within a therapeutic milieu that promotes and inspires the development of students' unique skills, builds character, and provides opportunities for civic engagement and real-world experiences" (an excerpt taken from the staff handbook of "Mountain High"). The 6 students that are in the self-contained, Special Day Class (SDC) all have IEPs for varying disabilities.

The class consists of 5 Latino students and 1 African-American student who are educated in the SDC classroom anywhere from 100 minutes (33% of school day) to 300 minutes (100% of school day). The small teaching faculty that educates the transient population of the at-risk adjudicated males of Mountain High School are all appropriately credentialed and all but 1 are considered veteran teachers. The racial make-up of the teaching faculty is 2 African-American, 2 Latino and 4 Caucasian. There are 2 female teachers and 5 male teachers. Since it is the second year of the school operating, and since it is part of a pilot study, the student population will slowly triple by the end of 2018. All school staff have been trained in Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) alongside the probation staff who physically monitor the classes, rotating in and out of classrooms throughout the school day. The SDC class is conducive to the study because the room contains students who need the most support behaviorally and academically to be successful in school. It was apparent that these particular students needed more interventions than the other students due to behaviors causing more suspensions/write-ups as well as earning a relatively low percentage of daily positive behavior points throughout the school day. These

SDC students were practicing the brief morning DBT mindfulness exercises just as the other classrooms in the school.

Instruments

Two quantitative data collection tools were employed during this case study. Data included student demographics and behavior related information, all used to identify relevant discipline issues within the classroom context for special education SDC students in relation to their general education counterparts. All quantitative data was collected from either EPIC or Aeries, two of the school district's internal web-based platforms. The EPIC website displays daily points earned for each student. The Aeries website displays both school-wide and student specific data on suspensions and write-ups. The instrument used for the 1 month (i.e., 20 school days) of comprehensive DBT lessons implemented in the SDC program, was an educational text containing student lessons and reproducible worksheets. Published by Guilford Publications, *DBT Skills in Schools: Skills Training for Emotional Problem Solving for Adolescents (DBT STEPS-A)*, is a 490-page guidebook written by leading DBT experts using research-based interventions. The five authors of this in-depth text include A.L. Miller, E.T. Dexter-Mazza, H.E. Murphy, J.J. Mazza, and J.H. Rathus. *DBT STEPS-A* contains lessons pertaining to all four modules of DBT: *mindfulness, interpersonal effectiveness, emotion regulation, and distress tolerance* (Mazza et al., 2014).

Procedures

After attaining approval from the university's CSUSM Institutional Review Board (IRB) in conjunction with the approval from Mountain High's principal, a six-step procedure was

followed when completing the 8-week case study; collecting data, disaggregating data, teaching daily 15-minute DBT lessons in the classroom for 1 month, investigating changes in behavior, and then analyzing behavior trends for the SDC students by comparing pre-DBT lesson implementation data and concurrent data collected during the four weeks the DBT lessons occurred.

For the first procedure, during initial data collection utilizing the district-wide Aeries database, the total numbers for the general education population along with the SDC special education population were configured. Two snapshots of the transient school population of Mountain High, where the adjudicated students are able to attend juvenile court school year-round, revealed the exact ratios of the SDC sub-group during the Spring of 2018 time period as well as the Summer/Fall time period. Next, the Aeries database was then utilized to gather discipline data for both the general education population and SDC special education population for all students who were enrolled by August 7, 2018, the specific date marking 20 school days before the DBT lessons were implemented in the SDC class at the beginning of September.

For the second procedure, involving disaggregation, the data relating to suspensions and write-ups revealed a disproportionate number of discipline actions taken within the SDC program for the 6 students participating in the SDC program, Spring 2018. The Summer/Fall 2018 data, also involving 6 SDC students (2 from the Spring semester and 4 newly enrolled students from Summer semester), again revealed a disproportionate number of discipline actions inside the SDC program in relation to their general education peers.

The enrollment period for these particular Summer/Fall 6 SDC students dictated the timeframe for the DBT implementation of the study considering none were scheduled for disenrollment from Mountain High juvenile court school (i.e., release from the adjoining juvenile

probation camp) until after the end date of the study October 7, 2018. Only one Fall SDC student was not accounted for in the data collection/analysis since he was enrolled in late September after the comprehensive DBT lessons had already been underway. He participated in the DBT lessons to the best of his ability with the other special education students. All of the adjudicated youth throughout the camp were blind to the fact that there was DBT case study taking place. The 15-minute DBT skills lessons were conducted in the SDC classroom from Friday, September 8, 2018 through Friday, October 5th (total of 21 school days) as part of a plan to answer the case study's question: *How would a comprehensive approach to DBT in the SDC program impact positive behavior outcomes?*

For the third procedure, in the presence of the SDC teacher and the SDC paraeducator, the researcher implemented the 15-minute daily DBT lessons inside the self-contained SDC classroom, every morning (18 lessons total, conducted over a 1 month period) from Friday, September 8th through Friday, October 5th. The researcher was trained in using and teaching DBT skills the school year prior, and implemented the daily lessons from the guidebook *DBT Skills in Schools* (Mazza et al., 2016) provided by the probation camp's DBT coach. The comprehensive daily DBT lessons included discussion and practice encompassing the four DBT modules: *mindfulness, interpersonal effectiveness, emotion regulation, and distress tolerance*. Each lesson began with a *mindfulness* activity, such as various breathing exercises, and continued with a skills review lesson involving worksheets, discussion, and/or role-play. Most of the DBT skills are remembered through mnemonic devices and acronyms such as "G.I.V.E." and "S.T.O.P." After the month-long implementation, the write-up data and suspension data for the 6 SDC students were collected from 9/8/2018 through 10/5/2018 (the exact weeks coinciding with the comprehensive DBT skills lessons). In addition, daily behavior points were totaled from

the district-wide EPIC database, which were manually calculated for each of the 6 SDC students of the case study. These points consist of a maximum of 12 possible behavior points awarded each day for compliance and work completion. The daily point system is part of a structured positive intervention program and up to 4 points are given and entered into EPIC for each of the 100-minute blocks of the school day across both the special education and general education setting. There are 3 blocks each day, and the SDC students are in the self-contained room anywhere from 100 to 300 minutes per day (i.e., 1 to 3 blocks per day).

For the fourth procedure (i.e., investigating changes in behavior), all daily points earned, and write-ups/suspensions given in the SDC program were calculated for the four weeks prior to the comprehensive DBT lessons (8/7/2018 through 9/7/2018), in order to compare the numbers to the other set of data from the weeks coinciding with the comprehensive DBT lessons. Lastly, for the fifth procedure, (i.e., analysis) trends in behavior data were analyzed within the SDC program. After entering all data into excel spreadsheets and creating charts to visually organize the information, the task of data analysis was completed in order to reveal whether or not the comprehensive DBT lessons impacted the behavior of the SDC students.

Analysis

After the procedures of the case study were completed, the resulting data was analyzed to determine the benefits of comprehensive DBT instruction for the SDC students of the juvenile court school, Mountain High. This data analysis was carried out through the lens of cognitive theory and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT). The Beck Institute of Cognitive Behavior Therapy describes this cognitive model and the aspect of “how people’s perceptions of or spontaneous thoughts about situations influence their emotional, behavioral (and often

physiological) reactions. Individuals' perceptions are often distorted and dysfunctional when they are distressed" ("A Thought Process," n.d.). CBT and DBT (a specific form of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) are both based on cognitive theory.

The two versions of psychotherapy, referred to as CBT and DBT, include talk therapy and behavioral therapy designed to correct irrational ways of thinking. Irrational thinking is sometimes displayed with adjudicated youth at Mountain High School who experience difficult moments and emotions brought on by the stressors of being placed in a camp for several months and mandated to go to school all day, Monday through Friday. The daily responsibility of participating full-time in the school setting is a daunting task for many of the boys who are accustomed to a different lifestyle before detainment at the juvenile court camps/schools.

DBT differs from CBT in the sense that the concepts of mindfulness, acceptance, and tolerating distress are explicitly taught within the DBT skills repertoire. These three concepts and related skills could be helpful when learning to replace irrational or negative thoughts and behaviors, with productive actions and thoughts. This process is meant to transform the dynamics among one's emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, in the way that they affect each other. These transformative CBT and DBT skills based in cognitive theory, help individuals feel equipped to overcome difficult moments. *Psychology Today* describes the ultimate goal of CBT regarding how "individuals will recognize how their thinking influences their emotions and will establish personalized coping mechanisms" (Gleissner, 2016, p. 1). By using coping skills and learning how to increase rational thinking and decrease distress, the juvenile court school students could lesson their verbal and physical aggression. This of course would lead to the students behaving more appropriately and possibly acquiring fewer write-ups and suspensions.

More importantly, in theory, the behavior therapy skills could lead the at-risk youth to behave more functionally in all settings, inside and outside of juvenile court schools.

Chapter Summary

Dialectical Behavior Therapy skills are used in the juvenile court school, Mountain High, to rehabilitate adjudicated male youth. Special education students in the SDC setting of Mountain High continuously struggle with social, emotional, and behavioral issues. The County Office of Education's internal web-based platforms EPIC and Aeries are the instruments used in this study to gather quantitative data for discipline procedures and positive interventions such as daily classroom points. In addition, the book *DBT Skills in Schools* (Mazza et al., 2016) is the source for the specific skills (i.e., *mindfulness, interpersonal effectiveness, emotion regulation, distress tolerance*) practiced in the DBT lessons implemented in the SDC program. The lens for this study is based in cognitive theory, along with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT); a model DBT stems from. The following content in Chapter Four gives a full analysis of the unexpected results of this case study.

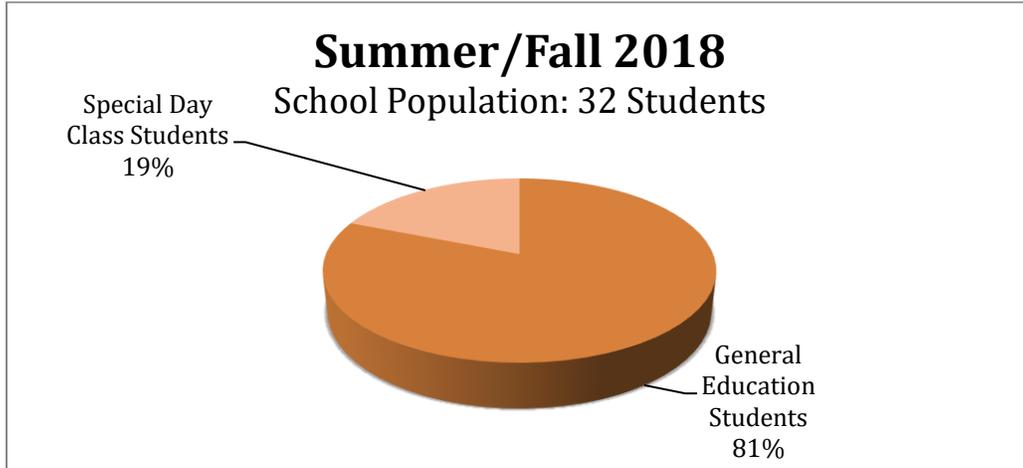
Chapter Four: Data Analysis

A positive behavior intervention program addressing behavior and social-emotional needs, such as the DBT skills taught in Mountain High School's classrooms, can go a long way in schools helping students achieve. Students may benefit in different ways from DBT skills depending on their needs. In order to increase better behavior and thought processes for the at-risk youth in the special education SDC program, a comprehensive approach to DBT, using skills lessons on a daily basis, would make a positive impact, in theory. The answers to the question, *"How would a comprehensive approach to DBT in the SDC program, using daily reinforcement lessons (mindfulness, interpersonal effectiveness, distress tolerance, emotion regulation) impact positive behavior outcomes?"* are varied. However, in this case study that is limited by certain external variables, there is no impact on positive behavior outcomes in relation to a comprehensive DBT approach in the SDC program. In other words, the disproportionate rate of suspensions and write-ups for Mountain High School SDC students did not improve. Also, the number of positive behavior points did not increase for the SDC students. The 5 charts included in the following sections of this chapter, illustrate the data collected throughout the 8 ½ week study.

Data Presentation

Pre-implementation of Daily DBT Lessons: Suspensions and Write-ups

The pie chart in *Figure 1* below, revealing the total percentage of special education SDC students and the total percentage of general education students, illustrates the make-up of Mountain High juvenile court school, for the group of students enrolled by August 7, 2018.

Figure 1: Summer/Fall 2018 School Population of Mountain High School

This group of students, considered the “Summer/Fall 2018” group for the purposes of this study, consists of 32 students staying anywhere from the typical 5 to 9 month stay at the juvenile camp/school; 9 students enrolled in Spring 2018 and 23 students enrolled in Summer 2018. There are exactly six SDC students, comprising 19% of the total school population and there are 26 general education students comprising 81% of the total population. Overall, each SDC student had an average decrease of 8%.

Figure 2 and Figure 3 below, show the number of write-ups and suspensions attained by this same group of students, with a total of 33 SDC write-ups and 17 SDC suspensions. This means that students in the SDC program were given 26% of the school’s total write-ups and 33% of the school’s total suspensions for the “Summer/Fall” group of students (i.e., all of the school’s general education and SDC students enrolled by August 7, 2018).

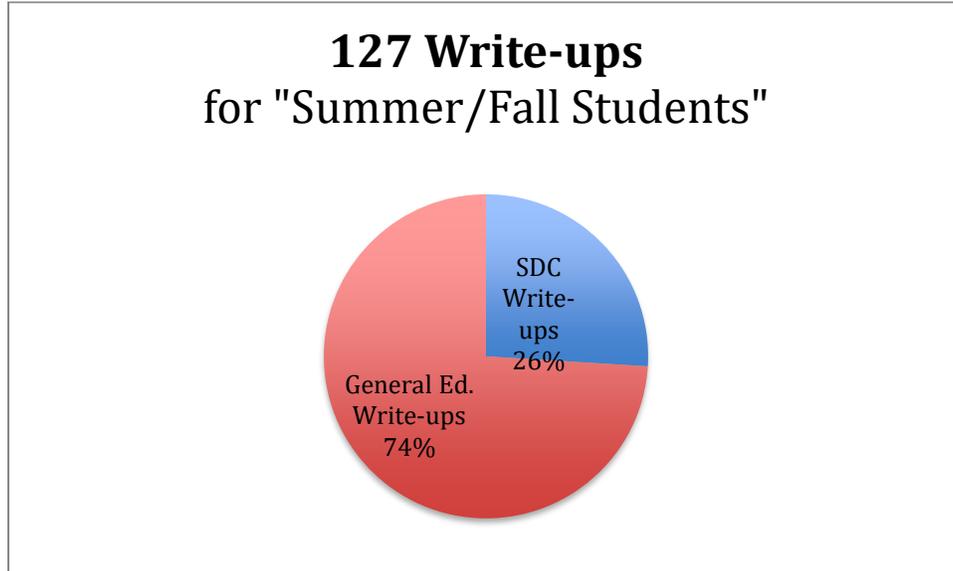
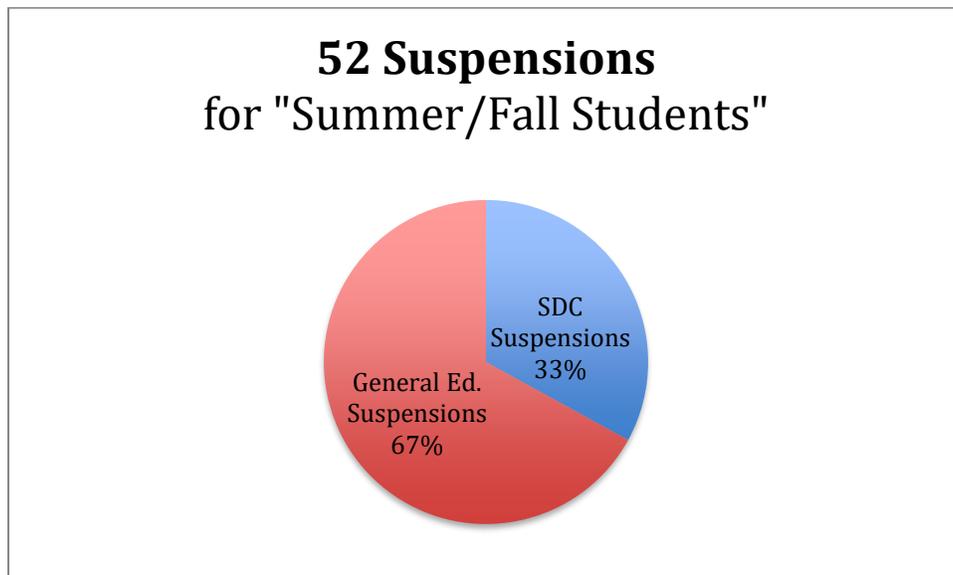
Figure 2: Total number of Write-ups for Summer/Fall Mountain High Students**Figure 3: Total number of Suspensions for Summer/Fall Mountain High Students**

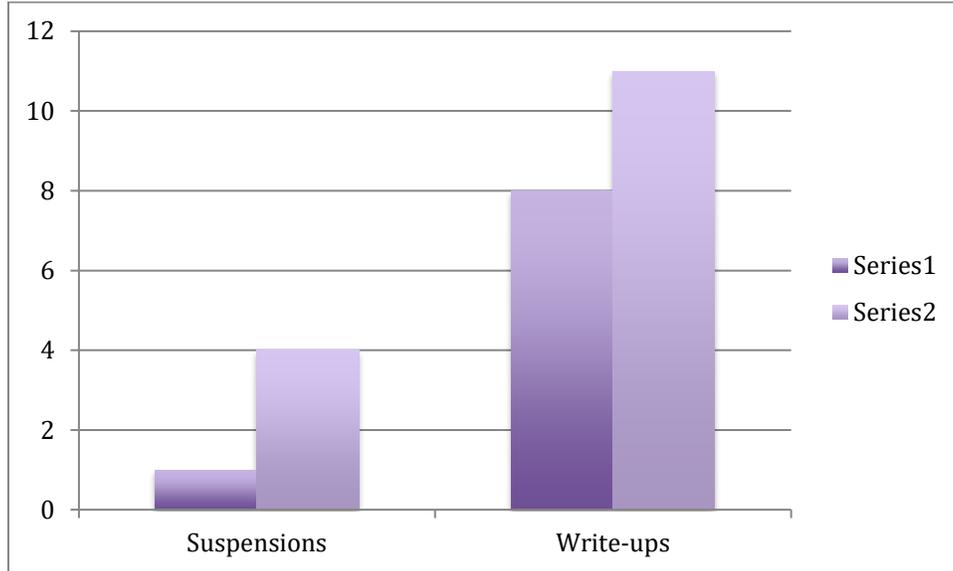
Figure 2 and Figure 3 above, reveal the fact that between the general education and the SDC students, 127 write-ups and 52 suspensions were given to the school-wide population which all took place between time of students' individual enrollments (enrollments between April and

August 7, 2018) until September 7, 2018 the date when comprehensive DBT lessons commenced for the SDC program.

Implementation of Daily DBT Lessons: Suspensions and Write-ups

In the SDC program designed to help the students with the most serious academic and/or behavioral challenges that impede access to the general curriculum, there are 6 students; including 4 Hispanic and 2 African-American students. Their IEPs address disabilities that include emotional disturbance (ED), specific learning disabilities (SLDs), and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The school attendance of both the SDC students and the general population is consistent since the youth are escorted by the probation department every morning and monitored by the probation officers and school staff at all times. In order to target the disproportionality of suspensions and write-ups received in the SDC program, the researcher implemented comprehensive DBT lessons for 1 month, daily from September 8, 2018 through October 5, 2018.

Figure 4 below shows an increase in behavior incidents during the time period of DBT lessons in the SDC program. Initially, SDC suspensions totaled 1 and write-ups totaled 8 in the month prior (8/7/2018-9/7/2018) to DBT lesson implementation. Then, during the 18 daily DBT lessons (9/8/2018-10/5/2018), the suspensions increased by 3 and the write-ups increased by 3 as well.

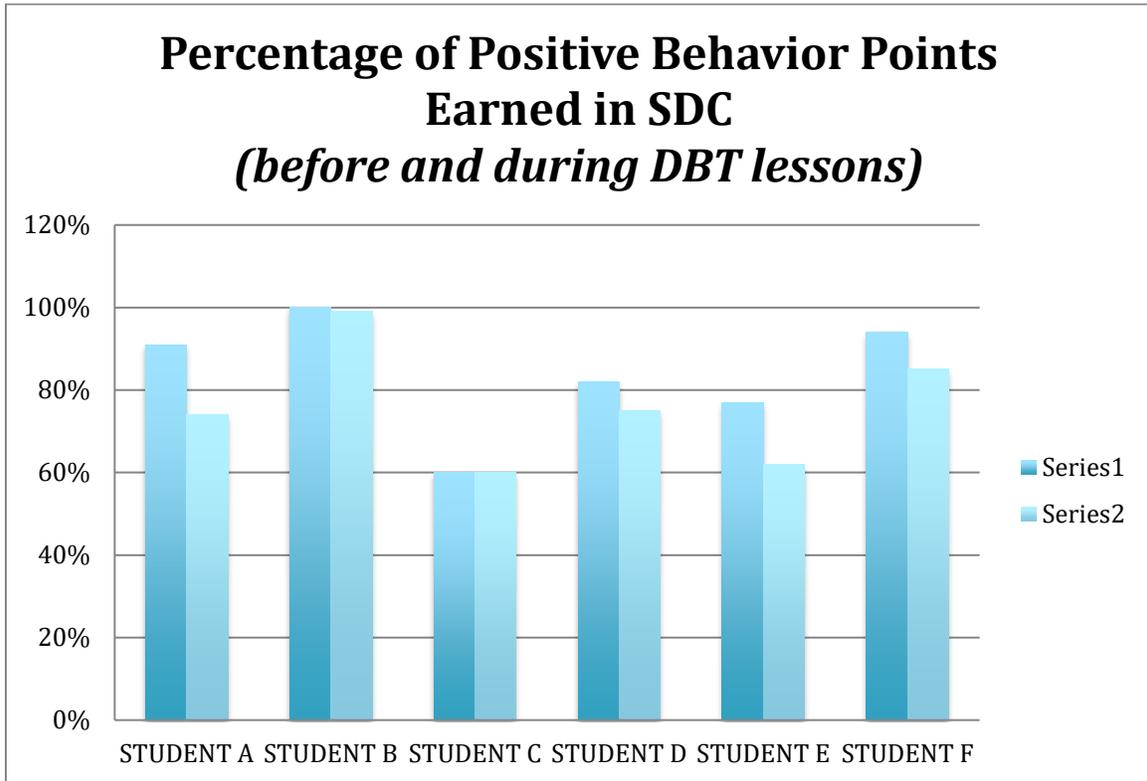
Figure 4: Number of Suspensions/Write-ups for SDC Program

(Series 1= one month before DBT lessons; Series 2= one month during DBT lessons)

Positive Behavior Points Earned

In *Figure 5* below, the percentage of positive behavior points earned in the SDC program as a whole, shows a decrease during the 1 month of comprehensive daily DBT lessons: Student A decreased from 91% to 74%, Student A decreased from 100% to 99%, Student C maintained at 60%, Student D decreased from 82% to 75%, Student E decreased from 77% to 62%, and Student F decreased from 93% to 85%. Six of the five students had a decrease in daily behavior points over the month of DBT lesson implementation, while one student stayed the same. Overall, each SDC student had an average decrease of 8%.

Figure 5: Percentage of Positive Behavior Points Earned in the SDC Program



(Series 1= one month before DBT lessons; Series 2= one month during DBT lessons)

Data Analysis

In analyzing the “Summer/Fall 2018” school-wide discipline data, disproportionality is found with regard to the discipline actions taken. The school-wide data collected on write-ups and suspensions includes all discipline actions taken during the students’ 5-month to 9-month stay; including 32 students (19% SDC and 81% general education students). If the write-ups were spread out in proportion with the student sub-groups (SDC students versus general education students) there would only be between 24 and 25 write-ups in the SDC program; about 19% of the 127 total write-ups of the school, to match the fact that there are 19% SDC students.

Instead, there are 33 write-ups for SDC students, which is 26% of the total write-ups. Therefore, this figure is off by 7%.

Following this same logic, the proportion of suspensions in the SDC class is off by 14%. School suspension data regarding this “Summer/Fall 2018” group reveals 52 suspensions school-wide. The SDC students received 17 of those suspensions, which is 33% of the total suspensions. A more proportional number would be 9 or 10 suspensions for the SDC sub-group (i.e., 19% of the suspensions). In other words, the SDC students acquired slightly more than a third of the suspensions even though they do not quite make up even a fifth of the total population. For write-ups, they acquired over a quarter of the school’s population.

The inflated number of disciplinary actions within the classroom for the special needs SDC students reflects the results of an in-depth, longitudinal study from a university in Texas in collaboration with a justice center. It involved nearly 1 million public secondary education students and not only revealed that certain students with certain educational disabilities (i.e., emotional disturbance) were more likely to be suspended and expelled, but African-Americans were suspended and expelled at high rates too. Almost three-quarters of the special education students during the study period were suspended or expelled at least once. In addition, the study found that “when students are suspended or expelled, the likelihood that they will repeat a grade, not graduate, and/or become involved in the juvenile justice system increases significantly (Fabelo, 2011).

As far as this case study revealing an increase in SDC suspensions and SDC write-ups during DBT lesson implementation (i.e., rising by 3 suspensions and by 3 write-ups from the month prior to DBT), these study results are inconsistent with the general body of research which reveals several positive outcomes of SEL and DBT. As detailed in *Chapter 2 Literature Review*,

previous studies involving DBT in schools reveal a range of benefits: fewer disciplinary referrals, fewer detentions and suspensions, reduction in mental health issues, better grades, and improved attendance (Reches, 2014; Sakowich, 2017). Although attendance is not a factor at the juvenile court high school where the collaboration with probation staff provides for a near perfect attendance rate, there are issues (i.e., external variables) that put limitations on this case study and the results; discussed farther in the *Interpretation* section below, as well as *Chapter 5* section *Limitations*.

One side note about this case study is that as the weeks progressed through the 8½ week study (8/7/2018-10/5/2018), more students trickled in as new enrollees to the school, with the total population reaching 41 students (consisting of 7 SDC, an increase of 1 in the program). However, the students who enrolled after August 7th were not calculated into the disaggregated data. This exclusion was implemented in order to concentrate on a consistent core group of students (i.e., being present the whole 8½ week study) in an effort to avoid some of the limitations of conducting research on a transient school population, inherent in the juvenile court schools in this county's programs.

Interpretation

The results from this case study indicate that comprehensive DBT lessons implemented in the self-contained special education classroom does not help reduce disproportionate rates of suspensions nor write-ups in the SDC setting. The results also indicate that DBT implementation has no impact on increasing positive behavior that could be rewarded in the classroom with positive behavior points. These findings are inconsistent with DBT studies discussed in the *Literature Review* of this research paper, which showed a positive correlation with not only

improved behavior, but also grades, and attendance. Limitations of the study included several external variables expanded upon in the *Chapter 5*. Some examples of variables include, a new teacher that began teaching during the study, a new positive intervention program that started during the second half of DBT implementation, and the limitations of a transient population.

As an “insider” of the Mountain High School where the study took place, certain precautions were taken so that the students were put at ease for the procedures of this case study, which they had no knowledge of. As a special education resource teacher, I have the flexible to go into different classrooms and support students, so I made it clear that I was there to support and teach them how to make better decisions to improve their behavior they make inside and outside of the classroom. Throughout the study, as the researcher/teacher, I strove to keep procedures, findings and interpretations unbiased. For the actual implementation of the DBT lessons, my circumstance as an insider allowed me to modify some of the lessons from the DBT manual in order to accommodate interest levels for the SDC students. For example in order to engage the students with the power of student choice, I informally surveyed each student to identify the DBT skills they wanted to expand upon the most, and then initially focused on three main skills at the beginning of the study. Also, I created teacher-made worksheets in order to simplify some of the more verbose worksheets inside of the DBT manual. Many of the SDC students have reading challenges so I wanted to make some of the lessons more “user-friendly.” When students were not willing to write I sometimes gave the option to share verbally instead. Overall, the students were still offered the same information that was contained in the DBT guidebook, but with occasional altered lessons to match their academic abilities.

Another limiting variable was that some of the SDC students were adjusting to the “new” teacher who is actually an experienced teacher in the district who wished to transfer to Mountain

High School from a different school/camp site. As I implemented the DBT skills from day one, the students were also pushing boundaries and limits with their new teacher perhaps trying to see what the consequences would be. He proceeded with consistency in utilizing suspensions, write-ups, and withholding the daily class points in an attempt to set-up a structured classroom environment. He provided me with his insight about how his SDC students will act “worse before they get better.”

Also, some students that enrolled in the spring term were more knowledgeable of the DBT skills than the other students in the SDC classroom who enrolled in the Summer term. The transient nature of our school population was a limiting factor in deciding when the study could take place as well. I had to choose dates for data collection and DBT implementation when I knew students would not be exiting the juvenile camp school and unknowingly abandoning their place in the study. Overall, I wish I had more weeks in the study to implement the DBT lessons in order to see if the students ended up using the skills more often and in order to spend more much-needed time on the module *emotion regulation*. As I designed it, I wanted to distribute the four modules of DBT evenly among the 18 lessons, but I saw that these particular students could get very emotional and seem to de-escalate slowly when they become angry. Therefore I chose many lessons that helped with these particular issues. Lastly, this case study has limited data since our school population is so small. But as the population grows, I now have more insight of how to speak the motivating language of DBT so that students will perhaps be more receptive; which may be beneficial during my support of the school as we progress through the pilot program.

Chapter Summary

The results of the study indicate that the 1 month long DBT implementation did not impact the SDC students' behavior choices, in order to improve the disproportionality of school-wide suspensions and write-ups. During the study, DBT implementation coincided with the new SDC teacher setting boundaries for the students, and both suspensions and write-ups increased from the month prior to DBT implementation. There was no improvement in the number of daily positive behavior points earned either. My role as an "insider" of the school allowed me to have more insight into the students' ability levels I know so well but I remained unbiased and did not let the students know I would be collecting data for a case study.

In answering the question, "How would a comprehensive approach to DBT in the SDC program, using daily reinforcement lessons (*mindfulness, interpersonal effectiveness, distress tolerance, emotion regulation*), impact positive behavior outcomes?" I identified limitations such as external factors that affected the study. These limitations along with findings, recommendations, lessons learned, and future directions will be explored further in *Chapter 5*.

Chapter Five: Recommendations/Lessons Learned

In order to increase better behavior and thought processes for the at-risk youth in the special education SDC program, a comprehensive approach to DBT, using skills lessons on a daily basis, could theoretically make a positive impact. This case study attempted to answer the research question found in the *Finding Summary* section below, “How would a comprehensive approach to DBT in the SDC program, using daily reinforcement exercises (*mindfulness, interpersonal effectiveness, distress tolerance, emotion regulation*) impact positive behavior outcomes?” Tools such as the school district’s web-based data portals, EPIC and Aeries, were used to collect behavior data as well as demographic data of the male adjudicated, at-risk students involved in the study. Excel was used to create charts used to visually analyze the data. Data were disaggregated for 1 month prior to DBT lesson implementation, and for 1 month during implementation that occurred for second half of the case study.

In the section *Finding Interpretation in Context*, an explanation of the case study’s variables in relation to prior DBT studies (reviewed in the literature of *Chapter 2*) was discussed. The section *Implications, Recommendations and/or Lessons Learned*, examines how this study contributes to the existing body of the research. Various shortcomings for this case study is delineated in the section *Limitations* and future directions are discussed in the *Conclusion* of this chapter.

Finding Summary

The findings of my case study do not validate my hypothesis that extra DBT skills lessons implemented in the SDC classroom would definitely benefit the special needs students. The findings pertaining to the original research question: “How would a comprehensive

approach to DBT in the SDC program, using daily reinforcement exercises (*mindfulness, interpersonal effectiveness, distress tolerance, emotion regulation*) impact positive behavior outcomes?” were unpredicted and adventitious. I hypothesized that at least one of the three measurable outcomes of this case study would be positively impacted: either suspension rates, number of write-ups, or daily behavior points. There are a few strong variables that affected the outcomes of this case study.

Finding Interpretations in Context

In relation to the special education SDC students, the independent variable being studied is the teaching of DBT skills lessons. The dependent variables are the behavioral outcomes. The most profound unplanned factor, or confound, was the fact that students were not used to the new classroom management system implemented by the new teacher. Behavioral choices that were ignored or simply redirected by the substitute teachers who were in charge of the SDC class in the months prior to 9/8/2018 (the date the new SDC teacher started managing and teaching the class as well as the date the DBT researcher/teacher started implementing the daily DBT lessons), were instead being addressed by the new instructor utilizing more intense discipline procedures such as suspensions, write-ups, and the withholding of daily school points.

Although the research involving social-emotional learning (SEL) curricula pertaining to adolescents is limited (Durlak et al., 2011), the outcomes of two relevant studies by Cook et al. from 2008 and McMain from 2013 “suggest that skills training focused on interpersonal and emotion management issues can be an effective strategy for school-based adolescents, especially in the area of reducing emotional distress” (Mazza et al., 2016). Also found in the *Chapter 2 Literature Review* is the research reporting a 50% decrease in disciplinary referrals at a high

school implementing DBT (Sharp et al., 2014). Another study discussed, revealed outcomes of improved attendance and better grades with DBT (Reches, 2014). Also, a doctoral dissertation reports students' ability to better regulate emotions and increase the use of coping skills to control behavior after learning DBT skills (Sakowich, 2017).

Considering the research-based DBT benefits of better grades, attendance, behavior, and emotion regulation, the negative results of my case study contradict past findings from the general body of literature. I was surprised at first by the fact that behavior incidents increased and daily points earned decreased. Lastly, demographic variables of the students, including their SDC status and the fact that one of the SDC students is African-American, converge with the large-scale Texas study revealing higher suspension and expulsion rates as well as higher chances of becoming involved in the juvenile justice system for certain special education students and African-Americans (Fabelo, 2011). The 1 million students in the Texas study were followed for a minimum of 6 years. This design is in stark contrast to this case study following 6 SDC students for a period of 8 ½ weeks. However, DBT will hopefully continue to be an important part of these SDC students' classroom curriculum as they carry out the last few months of their probation program on campus, because the new teacher will be trained in DBT techniques in November 2018.

Limitations

There are a few limitations and shortcomings of the study in regards to external validity, reliability, and statistical analysis, and certain variables. As far as external validity is concerned, the juvenile camp court school setting is such a unique environment that the research findings may not be easily applied toward other settings where for example, the at-risk students are not

escorted to school every day by probation officers and monitored throughout the class period. Reliability and statistical analysis are limited by the relatively miniscule number of students attending Mountain High School and enrolled in the SDC program (i.e., 6 SDC students total). Statistical analysis was limited to percentages and total numbers calculated rather than something more involved like correlational configurations.

Lastly, several external variables affected the design and outcome of the study. For instance, the transient nature of the school population affected enrollment dates. In turn, depending a student's enrollment, he may have more weeks of DBT exposure and practice than the next student. Another external variable was the fact that halfway through the timeframe for DBT lesson implementation, a new PBIS (positive behavioral intervention & supports) reward system was put in place involving certificates for the students' court files as well as positive reinforcement in the form of raffle tickets used for the chance to win fast food and snacks. Therefore, for the first half of the DBT lessons being implemented, there was not as much class participation. As discussed in the *Procedures* section of Chapter 3, school enrollment and exit dates affected the timeframe for DBT implementation

Most importantly, the timeframe for DBT was also driven by the new teacher's start date for the SDC program. The new teacher was also a factor since he is scheduled for an intensive DBT training later in Fall 2018, and is disciplining students from a different lens than the other Mountain High School teachers and substitute teachers in charge of the class prior to transfer. Inconsistency between the prior substitute teachers and the new permanent teacher in regard to discipline policies, caused an increase in suspensions, write-ups, and withholding of daily school points. This external variable of stricter classroom management is the most salient factor affecting the case study's unexpected outcomes.

Implications, Recommendations and/or Lessons Learned

A positive behavior intervention program addressing behavior and social-emotional needs, such as the DBT skills program reinforced in Mountain High School's classrooms, can potentially go a long way in helping students achieve in school. As discussed in the *Literature Review*, adolescents benefit in different ways from DBT skills depending on their needs. The general body of research involving social-emotional learning (SEL) curricula pertaining to adolescents is limited (Durlak et al., 2011); therefore this case study adds to the much-needed conversation of how DBT and other types of SEL programs could be implemented in a high school setting.

Although this particular case study may need to be carried out over a longer period of time to show positive results mirroring existing DBT studies, the unique setting of the juvenile court high school, Mountain High, offers insight for helping at-risk adolescents who may be seriously underprivileged. More DBT studies inside secondary schools are needed to mitigate the lack of these important types of studies. Also, DBT studies that take place inside schools have added value of potentially informing best educational practices. As much help is needed for the types of students who struggle most with behavioral, academic achievement, and social-emotional issues.

Future implications entail reaching a wider scope of students through research-based SEL and DBT strategies; giving an increased number of both at-risk adolescent students as well as typical adolescent students the much-needed tools for managing one's behavior and emotions. There are so many life-enhancing benefits that could be had of possessing and truly knowing how to use SEL/DBT strategies and coping mechanisms.

Conclusion /Future Direction

Reflecting on the research question “How would a comprehensive approach to DBT in the SDC program, using daily reinforcement exercises (*mindfulness, interpersonal effectiveness, distress tolerance, emotion regulation*) impact positive behavior outcomes?” there are many possibilities not realized in this limited case study. In the context of past DBT research studies revealing meaningful impacts on school and beyond, it would be a worthwhile choice to continue reinforcing DBT skills in the SDC program, beyond the 1-month timespan already completed. Future directions could be making sure to gather qualitative data pertaining to both teacher and student input about how to improve DBT implementation in schools. Perhaps tailoring the program to the needs of individual classrooms, might create more “buy-in” for both students and teachers.

The future directions of DBT having a prominent place in schools seems to be inevitable considering the direction society itself is moving. Currently, media seems to discuss mental illness more openly and adolescents are savvier than ever about discovering and researching information for themselves online. In fact, on the digital YouTube video-sharing platform, where many youth turn for entertainment, social, and informational purposes, adolescents are seen openly discussing the symptoms surrounding their own mental health issues. Schools can continue the conversation in a structured way and help students learn coping skills to help them be more successful in life.

As discussed in the literature review, students usually get the professional help they need via resources and services offered through school systems. Also discussed was the issue about the current social-emotion learning (SEL) programs used in schools, not directly addressing emotionally charged behaviors or emotional distress (Mazza et al., 2016, p.8). In order to help

adolescents who may have mental health issues or mere difficulties with managing their emotions, DBT skills could be taught as an SEL curriculum on a more in-depth basis, during a health class to reach these students who may or may not be being getting help otherwise. A DBT based curriculum embedded in a solid SEL program could provide life enhancing tools and strategies for adolescent students who struggle with typical issues (i.e., difficult and emotional situations) at this vulnerable time in their lives. These strategies may not only help youth make better decisions in the classroom, but also hopefully in relation to graduating high school or college, keeping important jobs, fostering valuable relationships, and obtaining and maintaining future careers. In other words, tools and strategies learned through DBT skills could possibly change life paths for the better. DBT may be the key to experiencing a positive ripple effect into a rewarding future.

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