The Benefits of Trauma-Informed Social and Emotional Learning Curricula Among Court-Involved Students Living in Congregate Settings

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Abstract

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This three-paper dissertation examined the use of a trauma-informed social and emotional learning (TI-SEL) curriculum among court-involved students attending a specialized public charter school co-located with a residential treatment center. The dissertation study used secondary qualitative and quantitative data gathered through a school-led community-based participatory research (CBPR) evaluation study. The three papers examined how the public charter school's TI-SEL curriculum impacted school engagement among the school's students and explored different critical aspects related to meeting the educational needs of the court-

involved young people. The first paper, Chapter Two of this dissertation, is a qualitative analysis of focus group data collected with school staff members that examined how faculty viewed the strengths and challenges of using a TI-SEL curriculum to promote educational resilience among court-involved youth with complex trauma histories. The second paper, Chapter Three of this dissertation, is a quantitative analysis that focused on the importance of social and emotional learning competencies for school engagement. The third paper, Chapter Four of this dissertation, is a qualitative analysis that explored how students perceived their school engagement while living in an institutional setting. Together, these three papers analyzed the ways teachers, service providers, and students understood and benefited from a trauma-informed social and emotional learning skills curriculum. Chapter Five discusses implied related topics, the dissertation's implications for social work practice, and proposes further research. This dissertation underscores strategies for facilitating school engagement, educational normalcy, and resilience for court-involved young people living in congregate care settings.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to all the people in my life who made this possible. To my family and friends for their continuous support and encouragement. To all the teachers and researcher partners who have supported me throughout my doctoral studies. To all the court-involved young people I have had the privilege of learning from over the years.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE THREE ARTICLE DISSERTATION

Introductory Statement

This dissertation examined the use of a trauma-informed social and emotional learning (TI-SEL) curriculum among court-involved students living in a residential treatment center while attending a co-located public charter school. The study suggested that a TI-SEL curriculum could improve school engagement and offered insights into the experience of educational normalcy and the acquisition of educational resilience. The dissertation used secondary qualitative and quantitative data gathered through a school-led community-based participatory research (CBPR) evaluation study. The dissertation was comprised of three articles intended to be published separately. All three examined how the public charter school's TI-SEL curriculum impacted school engagement among the school's students and explored different critical aspects related to meeting the educational needs of the court-involved young people. The first article, Chapter Two of this dissertation, is a qualitative analysis of focus group data collected with school staff members that examined how faculty viewed the strengths and challenges of using a TI-SEL curriculum to promote educational resilience among court-involved youth with complex trauma histories. The second article, Chapter Three of this dissertation, is a quantitative analysis that focused on the importance of social and emotional learning competencies for school engagement. The third article, Chapter Four of this dissertation, is a qualitative analysis that explored how students perceived their school engagement while living in an institutional setting. These three articles analyzed the ways teachers, service providers, and students understood and benefited from the trauma-informed social and emotional learning skills curriculum. Chapter

Five discusses implied related topics, the dissertation's implications for social work practice, and proposes further research. This dissertation underscores strategies for facilitating school engagement, educational normalcy, and resilience for youth living in congregate care settings.

The next sections provide summary discussions of trauma-informed social and emotional learning, court-involved students, congregate care, educational normalcy, school engagement, the Family First Prevention Services Act, and qualified residential treatment programs.

Trauma-Informed Social and Emotional Learning

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is understood as a multi-layered, comprehensive conception of learning that was developed originally through the Collaborative for the Advancement of Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (Elias et al., 1997). Trauma-informed social and emotional learning (TI-SEL) differs from traditional SEL in its emphasis on increased support for students through the training of educators to recognize and understand the signs of traumatic responses in students' behaviors (Kim et al., 2021).

TI-SEL draws from the trauma-informed care model developed by Harris and Fallot (2001). The core principles of TIC emphasize the importance of understanding how trauma impacts people's behaviors and designing therapeutic interventions and service delivery models that are explicitly structured to address the needs of trauma survivors (Carello & Butler, 2015; Harris & Fallot, 2001). TI-SEL curricula help trained staff to recognize signs of traumatic responses among students and offer supportive interventions for students experiencing dysregulation (Transforming Education, 2020).

TI-SEL curricula aim to provide clear and predictable routines that give students a sense of security and stability (Pawlo et al., 2019; Transforming Education, 2020; Woolf, 2021). TI-SEL anticipates that students who have experienced substantial traumatic events may respond to

stimuli in educational spaces and subsequently exhibit behaviors that, if viewed without a trauma-informed lens, might elicit punitive responses from educators. TI-SEL curricula develop positive discipline practices that are instructional and foster prosocial replacement behaviors that replace exclusionary school discipline practices with alternative interventions aimed at redirecting students experiencing behavioral problems (Crosby, 2015; Gee et al., 2020; Manian, 2021). Osher and colleagues (2021) described trauma-informed curricula as "a schoolwide strategy for addressing trauma in which all aspects of the education environment are grounded in an understanding of trauma and its effects and are designed to promote resilience for all" (Osher et al., 2021). TI-SEL curricula introduce a paradigm shift in understanding the education process, focused specifically on teaching and learning as a holistic process that is premised upon the ability of educators and students to feel safe and supported while emphasizing SEL skill-building opportunities.

Court-Involved Students Living in Congregate Settings

The term "court-involved" used throughout this dissertation refers to foster care system jurisdiction or adjudicated by the juvenile justice system. Court-involved students living in congregate settings represent a particularly vulnerable student population for whom experiences of trauma and instability have undermined their educational experiences. These students often present with complex cognitive, emotional, and behavioral needs (Brown et al., 2013; Garwood & Moore, 2019). Many have faced substantial traumatic events (Bethell et al., 2014; Bishop, 2018) and far more educational hurdles than their peers in the general public, such as frequent school changes (Somers et al., 2020). Court-involved students often struggle in school and typically have poorer academic outcomes than their community peers (Clemens et al., 2017; Leone & Fink, 2017; Somers et al., 2020; Stone & Zibulsky, 2015). Trauma-informed

educational frameworks may be particularly advantageous for promoting strong school engagement among this population. TI-SEL curricula in schools educating court-involved students teach social and emotional competencies, such as self-regulation and self-awareness, while also emphasizing safety and positive connections.

Congregate care refers to "[a] licensed or approved setting that provides 24-hour care for children in a group home (7-12 children) or an institution (12 or more children)" (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2020). The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), Report #28 (2021), reported that approximately 22,000 youth involved in the foster care system are housed in congregate settings across the United States (Children's Bureau, 2022). The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) reported that over 55,000 youth adjudicated as delinquent are placed in out-of-home congregate settings (Hockenberry & Puzzanchera, 2021). Institutional congregate settings, such as psychiatric facilities, detention centers, and residential treatment centers, which are mandated to provide educational services for the youth in their care, are considered more intensive placement settings for court-involved youth living apart from their families (James et al., 2017). There is sparse federal guidance regarding educational services for court-involved students living in institutional settings (Development Services Group, 2019).

A National Child Welfare Workforce Institute study found that most of the court-involved youth placed in congregate care settings exhibited behavioral problems or externalizing symptoms related to mental health diagnoses (Chadwick Center & Chapin Hall, 2016). Some studies suggest that institutional care is most often used among the highest risk court-involved youth—those with more emotional and behavioral treatment needs (James et al., 2006; Palmer et al., 2020). Other studies suggest that many court-involved youth placed in congregate care have

similar behavioral and mental health care treatment needs as their peers placed in non-congregate family-based settings and could likewise be effectively served in community-based care (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010; Chadwick Center and Chapin Hall, 2016; English & Pecora, 2017; Romani et al., 2018). Court-involved youth living in family environments tend to have better educational outcomes than those served in congregate settings (Barth et al., 2007; Gutterswijk et al., 2020), and there is consensus among child welfare experts that the use of congregate care for court-involved youth is often counterproductive and should only be used when appropriate therapeutic services cannot be provided in a less restrictive, family-like environment (Casey Family Programs 2018; Dozier et al., 2014; Whittaker et al., 2016). This consensus has led to an effort to decrease the use of congregate care, resulting in an approximately 45% decrease among youth involved in the foster care system (Children's Bureau, 2022) and an approximately 63% decrease in juvenile adjudications resulting in placement in congregate settings (Hockenberry & Puzzanchera, 2021) between 2005 and 2020.

Family First Prevention Services Act and TI-SEL Curricula

In 2018, the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) was established with an emphasis on preventing children from entering foster care and providing improved services for families that would enable more children to remain in their homes. The FFPSA focused on prevention services for families involved in the public child welfare system and bolstered the established mandate that court-adjudicated youth should be placed in the least restrictive home-like environment possible (Kelly, 2018; NCSL, 2021; Pokempner, 2019). The FFPSA also provided the first federal guidelines for residential treatment facilities, which the FFPSA defined as "Qualified Residential Treatment Programs" (QRTPs). Under the FFPSA, QRTPs must meet

several criteria, including state licensure and accreditation, and must use trauma-informed treatment models (NCSL, 2020).

Educational Normalcy

Educational normalcy is crucial for strong school engagement. In the child welfare literature, the term "normalcy" refers to the ability to participate in developmentally- and age-appropriate activities (Pokempner et al., 2015; Simmons-Horton, 2017). For adolescents, these "normal" activities include activities considered typical for teens, such as participating in sports, socializing with friends, or pursuing a hobby. Many court-involved students living in institutional placements' ability to participate in common school-related activities such as sports, clubs, field trips, dances, internships, and volunteering opportunities are often limited or interrupted (Pokempner et al., 2015).

School Engagement

School engagement refers to a multifaced relationship between a student and school, comprising psychological and behavioral components that are reciprocally linked (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012; Wang et al., 2018). Cognitive school engagement is a student's investment in their education, such as their effort in school. Emotional school engagement reflects students' relationships with their school community, including their relationships with staff and peers, their feelings concerning the importance of school, and its benefits to their lives. Behavioral school engagement refers to students' participation in school activities and their school conduct (Fredricks et al., 2004). Research suggests that school engagement plays a protective role in reducing recidivism (Kubek et al., 2020) and increasing school completion (Fall & Roberts, 2012).

Supporting School Engagement Among Court-Involved Youth

Increasing school engagement among court-involved students is imperative for promoting positive educational outcomes that direct court-involved youth toward vocational and educational opportunities that foster healthy transitions from adolescence into adulthood. However, court-involved youth often experience unique challenges to school engagement, such as experiencing high levels of trauma and instability.

Many adolescents living in RTCs have experienced adverse childhood experiences and academic disruptions that have undercut their school engagement (Crosby et al., 2017; Day et al., 2017). There is a clear link between psychosocial development and educational success (Perry & Daniels, 2016). Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have wide-ranging negative impacts on students' ability to navigate school experiences successfully (Black et al., 2012; West et al., 2014). Experiencing ACEs is linked to lower grades (Hurt et al., 2001) and higher rates of suspension, expulsion, and school disengagement (Chafouleas et al., 2019; Perfect et al., 2016; Wolpow et al., 2009). Experiences of childhood maltreatment diminish organization and planning skills and the ability to self-regulate attention, emotions, and behavior (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; O'Brien, 1999).

One of the core potential educational benefits of institutional placements among court-involved youth is their ability to augment school engagement through increased school stability. This increased stability has the potential to provide a strong foundation for students who have experienced significant ACEs and to help build trusting student-teacher relationships in a safe and stable environment that enables students to fully participate in their school communities and cultivate their social and emotional learning strengths. These SEL skills are vital for healthy adolescent development (Ross & Tolan, 2018), and SEL-based curricula have been successfully

implemented in numerous schools and youth programs among young people who have experienced substantial traumas and instabilities (Caldarella et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2017).

Gender Differences Among Court-Involved Youth

This dissertation study examined the use of a trauma-informed social and emotional learning curriculum in a public charter school educating court-involved adolescents who were identified by the court systems as female. Young women only comprise approximately fifteen percent of juvenile justice-involved adolescents residing in residential treatment centers (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2019) and approximately forty percent of child welfare-involved youth living in congregate care (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2020). Most of the previous research examining the experiences of trauma and victimization among court-involved youth has focused on youth identified as male (Modrowski et al., 2021). The proportion of young women among the court-involved youth population has increased over the last decade (Anderson & Walerych, 2019). Young women are more likely than their counterparts to have experienced poly-victimization and complex developmental trauma (Kerig, 2018; Logan-Greene et al., 2016; Modrowski et al., 2021).

Dissertation Study

This three-article dissertation examined the impact of a TI-SEL curriculum on school engagement among court-involved middle and high school-age young women attending a specialized public charter while living in a co-located residential treatment center. The three articles included in this dissertation used secondary qualitative and quantitative data derived from surveys and focus groups collected as part of a school-led community-based participatory research (CBPR) evaluation study.

Study Site

The study site was a public charter school co-located with an RTC in a Midwestern metropolitan area. This type of specialized charter school is defined under state law as a "strict discipline academy" (Michigan Department of Education, 2017). A strict discipline academy is a special public charter school that enrolls students under the supervision of the department of health and human services or a county juvenile court (Michigan Legislature, 2020; Section 380.1311g of the Michigan Revised School Code Act 451 of 1979). The school enrolls 5th to 12th grade students who were identified as female at birth, most of whom live in the co-located RTC. All the students attending the school were placed under the child welfare system's jurisdiction or adjudicated by the juvenile justice court system. The RTC is a private, Catholic institution that receives public funds. It is a secure facility, and students cannot leave without prior authorization or supervision.

CBPR Evaluation Study

The school administration, teachers, and specialists collaborated to develop a TI-SEL curriculum tailored for the student population (Table 1.1). Throughout the six-year curriculum development process, the charter school's administration developed partnerships with academic researchers using community-based participatory research (CBPR) methods to continually evaluate the curriculum. CBPR emphasizes equitable collaborations between academic researchers and community partners and aims to promote reciprocity in the production of research (Maiter et al., 2008; Wallerstein et al., 2017). CBPR processes are co-produced between researchers and community partners. Israel and collogues (2008) outlined nine guiding principles of CBPR that emphasize building on community strengths and resources, engaging in collaborative and equitable decision making at each phase of the research, and focusing on the

community impact of the research. These guiding principles structure CBPR research as long-term co-learning processes that build capacity within communities and aim to address social inequalities through power-sharing between researchers and community partners (Israel et al., 2008). The use of CBPR methods helped to build strong relationships between the charter school staff and academic researchers. Multiple academic researchers were invited to partner with the school in its development, implementation, and evaluation. Researchers have spoken directly with students, teachers, and school specialists. Starting in the 2018-19 academic year, the charter school began its implementation of the TI-SEL curriculum (for more detail on the TI-SEL curriculum see Baroni et al., 2020). The CBPR evaluation study was conducted concurrently by the public charter school's administration in partnership with academic researchers. The CBPR methodology was essential in creating a relationship between researchers and school administration that led to conducting focus groups with the charter school's court-involved students. The students at the school represent a population whose voices are not often heard in academic literature, and the CBPR study provided a trusting research framework to gather and examine this hard-to-access cross-sectional data. The focus group protocol used to collect this data was collaboratively produced by the charter school's administration and academic researchers through the CBPR process and was structured to examine how students understood their school engagement. The focus groups were facilitated by a team of four academic researchers. Two of the academic researchers facilitating the focus groups had long-term involvement with the school's CBPR project and were familiar with the charter school staff and students.

Data Sources

The data used in this three-article dissertation are derived from a faculty survey, four faculty focus groups, a student survey, and six student focus groups.

Faculty Survey Instrument

The faculty survey included thirty validated SEL survey Likert items (derived from a publicly available SEL scale; Yoder, 2014) and multiple short answer questions that asked faculty to define, in their own words, the SEL skills taught at the school. The survey also included demographic questions and short answer responses about challenges and recommendations for developing and implementing a trauma-informed SEL curriculum among court-involved students.

Faculty Survey Sampling and Recruitment

All faculty were eligible to complete the survey. The survey was administered electronically via RedCap, and all twenty-three teachers and school staff members (N=23) completed the electronic survey. Survey respondents predominantly indicated their racial or ethnic identities were White or European American (82.6%); two identified as Black or African American (8.7%) and two identified as multiracial (8.7% Multiracial). Seventeen (73.9%) of the survey respondents identified themselves as female, three (13%) identified as male, and three (13%) did not specify a gender identity. Among the faculty respondents, twelve (52.2%) were employed at the schools as teachers, five (21.7%) were employed as paraprofessionals, and six (26.1%) were employed as "other school support staff," which included school social workers, trauma specialists, and other specialized service providers. Faculty members' length of employment varied considerably, with six indicating that they had worked at the school for "less

than one year (26.1%), three for “one year” (13.0%), five for “two years” (21.7%); one for “three to five years” 1 (4.3%), and eight for “more than five years (34.8%).

Faculty Focus Group Protocol

The faculty focus group protocol asked about professional background and involvement in the development of the school’s SEL curriculum. It queried faculty about their understanding of school engagement and social and emotional learning among court-involved students living in a residential setting.

Faculty Focus Group Sampling and Recruitment

All faculty were eligible to participate in the staff focus groups. All twenty-three teachers and school staff members participated in one of four focus groups, with five or six participants in each group. Two University of Washington School of Social Work researchers facilitated each focus group.

Student Survey Instrument

The student survey included Likert scale items assessing school engagement and past school experiences, as well as sixteen Likert items measuring two social and emotional learning domains: relational awareness and self-awareness. The survey items were collaboratively developed with the school administration through the CBPR process. The SEL items used in the survey were derived from the Social-Emotional Learning Scale (SELS) (Coryn et al., 2009) and the Best Starts for Kids (BSK) Youth Development Measurement Project (Jones et al., 2020). Some SEL survey items were changed to reflect agreement statements or modified for language as specified by the school administration.

Student Survey Administration

The purpose of the survey was to develop an understanding of the school experiences of court-involved students attending school while living in an RTC. During the study, in-person classes were canceled due to health concerns from the COVID-19 pandemic. Students were not attending school in their regular classroom setting and were completing distance learning in their residential units. As a result, the survey was administered on paper to students in their residential units. All students in the school (N=109) were provided a paper survey to complete. Survey participation was entirely voluntary, and students were instructed that if they did not want to complete the survey, they could choose to leave the survey blank. The public charter school's co-located RTC includes seven residential units that house students at various residential program levels. When the survey was administered, Building A housed three students, and all three returned completed surveys. Building B housed twenty-two students and returned nineteen completed surveys. Building C housed nineteen students and returned sixteen completed surveys. Building D housed three students and returned two completed surveys. Building E housed fifteen students and returned eleven completed surveys. Building F housed twenty-three students and returned seventeen completed surveys. Building G housed twenty-four students. No students in Building G completed the survey. Overall, among the 109 distributed surveys, eleven were returned with all item responses indicating the same value. These surveys were discarded. Thirty surveys were returned entirely blank. These included the twenty-four surveys distributed to Building G. In all, sixty-eight completed surveys were returned, comprising a 64.2% return rate.

Student Survey Sample

The student survey sample (N=68) ranged from 6th to 12th grade (*M=9.17*, *SD*=1.72). Each survey was distributed to students with a unique identification number on the paper copy.

The survey did not ask demographic questions, and this identification number was used to link de-identified demographic information provided by the school administration to each survey. The school offered limited demographic data linked to each survey. Demographic information was not self-reported by students. The linked demographic information provided by the school included students' race, grade level, and the previous school types attended in the last three years (e.g., alternative school or general education school). The reported racial or ethnic composition of the sample was predominantly Black or African American (54.4%) and White or European American (44.1%).

Student Focus Group Protocol

The student focus group protocol asked about past and present school experiences. It queried students about their understanding of school engagement and social and emotional learning and asked about their experiences attending school while living in the residential treatment center.

Student Focus Group Sampling and Administration

Six focus groups were conducted with 37 students. All students in the school (N=109) were eligible to participate in the focus groups. Inclusion in the focus groups was based on a convenience sample of students who volunteered to participate. The focus groups were initially planned to be conducted in person on the school campus, however, at the time of the study, the planned in-person focus groups were canceled due to health concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the study was modified, and the focus groups were conducted via Zoom. Due to privacy considerations, students were asked before the beginning of the focus group session whether they consented to record the Zoom session. Three focus groups provided verbal consent to having the focus groups' video and audio recorded, while three focus groups declined

to be recorded. In addition to video and audio conferencing via Zoom, the focus groups used the Zoom chat feature. This allowed students who felt more comfortable writing their responses rather than speaking an opportunity to contribute. The current study analyzed students' contributions to the focus groups through data derived from a combination of formats including the focus group Zoom transcripts, chat logs, and facilitator notes.

Thirty-seven students participated in the six focus groups. The school administration provided limited demographic data for each student who participated in the focus groups including race and grade level. All demographic information was provided by the school administration and was not self-reported by students. The participants ranged from 6th to 12th grade. Most participants (91.8%) were high school students (9th Graders 35.1%) (10th Graders 27%) (11th Graders 16.2%) (12th Graders 13.5%), and the racial/ethnic background of the students included 19 (51.4%) White or European Americans students, 17 (45.9%) Black or African American students, and 1 (2.7%) Latina or Hispanic student. Five of the student focus groups included six participants, and one included seven participants. Each focus group lasted approximately forty-five minutes.

Researcher Positionality

Researchers' perspectives and backgrounds are influential in the research process and frame how data is understood and disseminated (Parson, 2019). The first author identifies as a White-Hispanic man and doctoral student with a social work practice background in both education and public child welfare, and life experience living in a congregate care setting. He was the primary analyst of the data, and his aim in conducting this research was the development of educational support for court-involved young people. Such support should consider their perspectives. Their voices are not often heard in academic research.

Summary

This mixed-methods, three-article dissertation used secondary data from the staff and student surveys and focus groups for its analysis. Chapter Two used data from staff focus groups to conduct a qualitative study exploring what staff members thought of TI-SEL curricula for court-involved students. Chapter Three employed quantitative data from student surveys to evaluate the relationship between SEL competencies and school engagement. Chapter Four used student focus group data to coordinate a qualitative study to take stock of students' views regarding their school engagement while attending the public charter school and living in the RTC.

Chapters Two, Three, and Four comprise three separate articles intended for submission to academic journals. These three dissertation chapters were intended as stand-alone academic journal articles. Some of the content of each respective literature review may appear redundant. These three articles provide insight into the benefits of using a TI-SEL curriculum among court-involved students and give a variety of perspectives. The fifth and final chapter of this dissertation underscores findings, discusses implications for social work practice, and proffers recommendations for further research intended to facilitate school success among court-involved young people living in congregate care.

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Tables

Table 1.1

Components of the charter school's three-tiered trauma-informed social and emotional learning (TI-SEL) curriculum.

Tier 1: Targeted Professional Development The charter school's professional development training for faculty was structured around Wolpow and Hertel's (2016) *The Heart of Learning and Teaching*: *Compassion, Resiliency, and Academic Success* training process. Faculty were provided training about the way trauma impacts students and how to recognize and respond to trauma responses among students. The training focused on faculty working together to create a trauma-informed school climate.
Tier 2: Implementation of Practice Tools: The Monarch Room The Monarch Room intervention includes the use of sensory integration and a de-escalation room that is facilitated by trained behavioral interventionists. This intervention is designed to provide students who are experiencing traumatic responses a safe space to process and practice skills to help them regulate. Students using the intervention typically spend about fifteen minutes in the Monarch Room before returning to their classroom settings.
Tier 3: Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) Skills Curriculum The school designed an SEL skills curriculum that focused on six SEL soft skills: respect, motivation, helping others, organization and planning, teamwork, and accountability. The soft skills were adapted from CASEL's five core SEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Note: For more information see, Baroni, B. A., Vanderwill, L. & Day, A. (2020). Chapter 14: A multi-tiered strategy to treat trauma and build social-emotional skills among court-involved, at-risk, female students. In P. Towl & S. A. Hemphill (Eds.), *Safe, Supportive, and Inclusive Learning Environments for Young People in Crisis and Trauma* (p. 173-181). Taylor and Francis.

CHAPTER TWO

PROMOTING EDUCATIONAL RESILIENCE FOR COURT-INVOLVED STUDENTS THROUGH TI-SEL CURRICULA

Abstract

This secondary qualitative study used focus group data conducted with school staff (N=23) participating in a school-led community-based participatory research (CBPR) evaluation study to examine educators' views regarding the impact of a trauma-informed social and emotional learning (TI-SEL) curriculum on educational resilience among court-involved students attending school while living in a residential treatment center (RTC). Four focus group transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify themes related to the strengths and challenges of using a TI-SEL curriculum among students attending a specialized public charter school while living in an RTC. The study's findings offer new insight into the ways school staff view the efficacy of TI-SEL curricula in promoting educational resilience among this vulnerable population. The TI-SEL curriculum was viewed positively by staff, and the curriculum was understood to be supportive of educational resilience and the school's goal of providing a safe and enriching educational environment and supporting students' academic and psychosocial needs. The school staff also noted some challenges to students' educational resilience related to living in a highly structured and restrictive RTC environment. Implications for educational policy improvements and implementation strategies to support court-involved students living in congregate settings are discussed.

Introduction

Court-involved students, those adjudicated by the juvenile justice system or under the jurisdiction of the child welfare system, require specialized academic and social supports to foster educational resilience (Kothari et al., 2021; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018; Rosen et al., 2019) and school success (Clemens et al., 2017; Crumé et al., 2021; Hirsch et al., 2018; Pecora, 2012). This need is acute among court-involved students living in institutional placements and challenging due to complex trauma histories and significant educational disruptions faced by many in this population (Crosby et al., 2017; Day et al., 2017).

According to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), Report #28 (2021), approximately 23,000 youth involved in the child welfare system live in institutions (facilities with 12 or more children) (Children's Bureau, 2022). The National Center for Juvenile Justice (2021) reported that over 50,000 juvenile adjudications result in out-of-home placements annually, many in institutional settings (Hockenberry & Puzzanchera, 2021). Institutional settings such as psychiatric facilities and residential treatment centers (RTCs) are mandated to provide educational services. The 2018 Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) mandated that institutions caring for court-involved youth must use trauma-informed treatment models (Kelly, 2018). FFPSA did not specifically define how a residential facility's educational programming should be structured. There is much to learn regarding how schools serving court-involved students living in institutional placements have developed and implemented trauma-informed frameworks (Fondren et al., 2020). This study aims to contribute to this research gap by exploring strategies residential schools are using. This qualitative study examines how staff educating court-involved students living in a residential treatment center understand and use trauma-informed frameworks to promote educational resilience and foster

school success. Using thematic analysis of focus group data collected with school staff, the study's secondary qualitative analysis deepens understanding regarding how trauma-informed curricular strategies in residential schools promote educational resilience and academic well-being.

Educational Resilience

Educational resilience is broadly defined as the increased prospect of school success in the face of adverse experiences (Kothari et al., 2021; Rosen et al., 2019). It is promoted by both socio-emotional strengths and positive educational environments (LaBelle, 2019). Wang and colleagues (1997) identified school characteristics that promote educational resilience: safe campuses, student-centered classroom environments, and ongoing professional development for staff (Wang et al., 1997). Downey (2008) identified four core components of a curriculum that promote educational resilience: positive student-teacher relationships, positive classroom climate, instructional strategies, and the development of students' skills (Downey, 2008). Other factors that promote educational resilience include socioemotional strengths such as strong self-esteem, growth mindsets, and the ability to plan with clear expectations (Rosen et al., 2019). The literature on the education of court-involved youth has focused on deficits, such as school disengagement, behavioral problems, and achievement gaps (Kothari et al., 2021). Resilience emphasizes student strengths and potential. Educational resilience is malleable and can be promoted through school engagement and relationships with supportive adults in safe and stable environments (Kothari et al., 2021; Rosen et al., 2019; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016). Research suggests that trauma-informed practices (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016) and strengthening social and emotional learning competencies can increase educational resilience (LaBelle, 2019).

Court-Involved Students, Trauma, and Education

Educational resilience is particularly important because many court-involved students have experienced-complex trauma and instabilities that heighten educational challenges (Dierkhising et al., 2013; Greeson et al., 2011; Neal, 2017; Rosenberg et al., 2014). Studies suggest that the vast majority (over 90%) have experienced multiple traumatic life events (Barnett et al., 2018). This is particularly widespread among students living in congregate settings (Espinosa et al., 2013; Green, 2020; Marvin et al., 2017; Salazar et al., 2013). Trauma is defined as "experiences that cause intense physical and psychological stress reactions . . . that [have] lasting adverse effects on the individual's physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being" (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014), and complex trauma as multiple and or continuing traumatic events that impede healthy psychosocial development (Cook et al., 2017; Wolpow & Hertel, 2016). A clear link exists between psychosocial development, educational resilience, and educational success (Perry & Daniels, 2016). Complex trauma dysregulates young people’s ability to build self-regulation skills (Cole et al., 2005), decreases learning, relationship building, and healthy identity development (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998), generates and intensifies educational struggles (Somers et al., 2020), and hinders academic development and resilience (Anda et al., 2006; Black et al., 2012; Cole et al., 2005; Wolpow et al., 2009). Complex trauma is associated with lower grades (Spinazzola et al., 2017) and higher rates of school behavioral problems (Chafouleas et al., 2019; Perfect et al., 2016; Wolpow et al., 2009).

Experiences of complex trauma are especially prevalent among adolescent young women involved in juvenile court systems (Day et al., 2017; Modrowski et al., 2020). These young women are more likely than court-involved young men to have experienced poly-victimization

and complex developmental trauma (Kerig, 2018; Logan-Greene et al., 2016; Modrowski et al., 2020). Court-involved young women living in institutional facilities frequently present with complex trauma histories and symptomology that adversely affect psychosocial functioning, impede relational support, and undermine educational well-being (Day et al., 2017; Crosby et al., 2017). Complex trauma histories produce an array of impediments to healthy psychosocial development and educational well-being that necessitate trauma-informed educational interventions. To support educational resilience and school success, trauma-informed frameworks that embed core socioemotional competencies are being adopted among schools educating court-involved students (e.g., Baroni et al., 2020; Marvin et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2021). Recent legislation has provided opportunities for schools serving court-involved students in residential settings to develop and implement trauma-informed curricula.

Educational Policy and Court-Involved Students Living in Residential Settings

There is little specific federal guidance regarding educational services for court-involved students living in institutional placements (Development Services Group, 2019). Scholarship suggests that, broadly, court-involved youth treated in family environments have better outcomes than youth served in congregate settings (Barth et al., 2007; Gutterswijk et al., 2020). There is a growing consensus in the United States that the use of congregate care (i.e., groups homes or institutions) for court-involved youth is counterproductive—socially, developmentally, and educationally—and should only be used when appropriate therapeutic services cannot be provided in a less restrictive, family-like environment (Casey Family Programs 2018; Dozier et al., 2014; Whittaker et al., 2016). This consensus has led to a concerted legislative push to decrease the use of congregate care for court-involved youth (LeBel et al., 2018; Puzzanchera, 2020), resulting in an approximately 45% decrease in its use among youth involved in foster care

between 2005 and 2020 (Children's Bureau, 2022) and an approximately 64% decrease in the number of juvenile court cases adjudicated delinquent that resulted in out-of-home placement from 2005 and 2020 (Hockenberry & Puzzanchera, 2021).

Over the last decade, there has been an increasing focus on introducing legislation aimed at promoting the adoption of trauma-informed practices for young people into public policy. Between 2010 and 2015 twenty-eight bills focused on adopting trauma-informed care were introduced in Congress (Purtle, 2020; Purtle & Lewis, 2017). The Trauma Informed Care for Children and Families Act of 2017 (H.R. 1757) which was enacted in the 2018 Substance Use-Disorder Prevention that Promotes Opioid Recovery and Treatment for Patients and Communities (SUPPORT Act) (Pub L. No. 115-271) included a provision that established the Interagency Task Force on Trauma-Informed Care. This task force was aimed at developing best practices for training professionals and setting public policy for working with young people who experienced trauma (SAMHSA, 2022).

In 2018, the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) was established as part of the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 (Pub. L. No. 115-123) with an emphasis on preventing children from entering foster care and providing improved services for families that would enable more children to remain in their homes. FFPSA focused on prevention services for families involved in the public child welfare system. It bolstered the established mandate that court-involved youth should be placed in the least restrictive home-like environment (Kelly, 2018). FFPSA also focused on reducing the use of congregate care (NCSL, 2021; Pokempner, 2019). In cases where congregate care was used, FFPSA aimed to improve youth services by limiting federal Title IV-E funding (Social Security Act, 42 U.S.C. § 670) for the use of congregate care to facilities that meet specific criteria: a "qualified residential treatment program" (QRTP), or a specialized

setting providing support for youth who are parents, or for youth who were victims of [or are at risk of] sexual trafficking (Bellonci et al., 2019; NCSL, 2020a). FFPSA's definition of a QRTP exempted youth detention facilities (i.e., camps or facilities detaining young people determined to be delinquent) (NCSL, 2021).

Through this mandate, FFPSA provided the first federal guidelines for approved residential treatment facilities (viz., QRTPs). Under the FFPSA, QRTPs must meet several criteria, including state licensure and national accreditation. QRTPs must use trauma-informed treatment models (NCSL, 2020b). FFPSA mandated that QRTPs provide discharge planning for all youth, such as aftercare supports and independent living skills (ILS) in addition to traditional education services (NCSL, 2020b). QRTPs are accountable to federal and state education mandates: access to "free appropriate public education" and the "least restrictive environment" under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and protections granted by the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (Kelly, 2018).

While FFPSA developed a more precise definition of required components for residential treatment centers, it did not specifically outline requirements for educational services. This allows for flexibility to tailor educational curricula to their student population's needs. Each QRTP has considerable discretion. There is no clear standard under FFPSA that defines what the minimum requirements of a trauma-informed program are or to what extent a QRTP's educational programming must be trauma-informed. Residential treatment centers have recently adapted to FFPSA. There is much to learn concerning the specific curricular components of academic programs in QRTPs.

Promoting Educational Resilience through Trauma-Informed SEL Curricula

Trauma-informed schools focus on developing curricula through a trauma-informed lens (Vanderwill, 2020). The term "trauma-informed" stems from the trauma-informed care (TIC) model developed by Harris and Fallot (2001). TIC focuses on using an evidence-based understanding of how trauma impacts behavior. It structures interventions and service delivery for trauma survivors (Carello & Butler, 2015; Harris & Fallot, 2001). TIC emphasizes safety, social connections, managing emotions, and helps structure strengths-based programming (Bath, 2008). TIC approaches differ from trauma-specific treatments, such as directed therapies, such as Trauma-focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy or psychotropic medication. TIC focuses on not re-traumatizing individuals and developing institutions in which all staff members are trained to recognize when youth are having trouble coping because of prior trauma (Hummer et al., 2010).

Trauma-informed education applies TIC principles to schools. The goal is to build educational environments in which students feel cared for and are provided with appropriate therapeutic services that encourage academic and social success (Transforming Education, 2020). Trauma-informed schools train educators to use a trauma-informed lens and develop curricular content to provide clear and predictable routines that give students a sense of security and stability (Pawlo et al., 2019; Transforming Education, 2020). Trauma-informed educational frameworks emphasize the way traumatic experiences shape students' behavior and learning; and how to cultivate school climates in which students and staff feel safe and supported (Cohen et al., 2009).

Trauma-informed educational frameworks focus on creating safe environments for students and staff, connecting students to resources and mental health supports, teaching emotional and behavioral regulation, building students' peer and adult relationships, promoting

school connectedness, and adapting school policies and procedures to be trauma-informed (Manian, 2021). This involves schools shifting away from traditional pedagogical policies and procedures, and instead focusing on changing students' environments rather than changing or "fixing" individual students. For instance, rather than relying solely on counseling professionals to support struggling students, trauma-informed schools view supporting students who have been exposed to trauma as a shared faculty responsibility (Gee et al., 2020; Manian, 2021; Roseby & Gascoigne, 2021). Trauma-informed educational frameworks that embed core social and emotional learning skills have a strong potential to promote educational resilience (Kothari et al., 2021; Roseby & Gascoigne, 2021).

Social and emotional learning is a multifaceted view of learning (Elias et al., 1997). SEL comprises interconnected and reciprocal learning skills such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020a). SEL has been defined as "the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (CASEL, 2020b). The goal of SEL as a curricular framework is also to affect school climate: all school community members have the support, resources, and learning skills they need. Curricula structured by SEL emphasize coping with emotions, interacting with others, building relationships, and informing their decision-making processes (Payton et al., 2000; Zins et al., 2004). Schools that have implemented curricula integrating SEL competencies have better educational outcomes and safer school climates (Hoover, 2019).

Trauma-informed social and emotional learning (TI-SEL) contrasts with conventional SEL because of its focus on providing increased support for students with significant trauma

histories and training educators to recognize and understand traumatic responses in student learning and behavior (Kim et al., 2021). An important feature of TI-SEL curricula is the elimination of exclusionary school discipline. TI-SEL curricula develop positive discipline practices that are instructional and foster prosocial replacement behaviors (Baroni et al., 2020; Gee et al., 2020; Manian, 2021). TI-SEL curricula offer to stabilize learning environments in which students can focus on social and emotional skills development in concert with their academic learning. Integrating social and emotional learning competencies and trauma-informed care is particularly well-suited to support educational resilience (Baroni et al., 2020).

Educational resilience is connected to students' feelings of connectedness to school (Garwood & Moore, 2021; Green, 2020). Court-involved students living in institutions need to feel safe, supported, and connected (Pecora & English, 2016) and to have the ability to explore and develop their identities and cultivate agentic engagement while pursuing their educational goals. Agentic engagement describes students' involvement in the instruction they receive (Reeve & Tseng, 2011). Educational resilience is promoted through the process of students expressing their agency by communicating their needs and thoughts in class, expressing their interests and preferences, and actively seeking out opportunities to contribute and direct their learning (Reeve, 2013). Agentic engagement is a central goal of SEL skill-building and helps students connect with their school community in meaningful ways. Promoting agentic engagement can be challenging in highly regimented institutional settings. Embedding SEL competencies into trauma-informed educational curricula foster these skill-building opportunities and emphasize safety and positive connections. TI-SEL curricula have the potential to support educational resilience among vulnerable youth (Brunzell et al., 2016). Some schools have implemented TI-SEL curricula (Baroni et al., 2020; Marvin et al., 2017; Vanderwill, 2020), but

there is still much to learn regarding how staff working with court-involved students living in institutional settings view the impact of TI-SEL curricula.

Present Study

Due to limited knowledge regarding the role and impact of trauma-informed practices in an institutional setting, the purpose of this study was to examine how faculty at one public charter school co-located on the campus of an RTC educating court-involved students viewed the influence of the TI-SEL curriculum on students' educational resilience. The study was guided by a conceptual framework positing that educational resilience is a mutable promotive factor for school success that can be increased through curricular components that integrate trauma-informed frameworks and social and emotional learning skill-building strategies. TI-SEL curricula may have the potential to foster educational resilience among court-involved students. Knowing how educators view using a TI-SEL curriculum is important to understand its efficacy. This study explored two research questions: (1) What aspects of a TI-SEL curriculum at a public charter school foster educational resilience among court-involved students living in an RTC? (2) What are the challenges in implementing a TI-SEL curriculum with court-involved students living in an RTC?

Methods

This secondary qualitative study is a thematic analysis that examined focus group data collected as part of a school-led community-based participatory action research (CBPR) evaluation study. The school site was a public charter school for court-involved students co-located with an RTC in a Midwestern metropolitan area. This type of charter school is defined under state law as a "strict discipline academy." A strict discipline academy is a public charter

school that enrolls students under the supervision of the department of health and human services or a county juvenile court (Michigan Legislature, 2020; Section 380.1311g of the Michigan Revised School Code Act 451 of 1979). The school enrolls 5th to 12th grade students identified as female at birth, most of whom live at the co-located RTC. All students attending the public charter school have been placed under the child welfare system's jurisdiction or adjudicated by the juvenile justice court system. The RTC is a secure facility, and residential students cannot leave without prior authorization or supervision. The school's principal, who has a professional background in trauma-based therapy and holds an MSW and PhD, led the multi-year CBPR evaluation process. CBPR emphasizes collaborations between academic researchers and community partners and aims to promote reciprocity in the production of research (Maiter et al., 2008; Wallerstein et al., 2017). CBPR research is a long-term co-learning process that builds capacity within communities and aims to address social inequalities through power-sharing between researchers and community partners (Israel et al., 2008). The guiding principles of CBPR emphasize building on community strengths and resources, engaging in collaborative and equitable decision-making, and focusing on community impact (Israel et al., 2008). Through the six-year CBPR process, school staff collaborated to develop a trauma-informed social and emotional learning skills curriculum, and the school developed partnerships with academic researchers to co-facilitate evaluation and planning. Starting in the 2018-19 academic year, the school implemented the TI-SEL curriculum structured around six competencies tailored for the school's population (for more detail, see Towl and Hemphill's *Safe, Supportive, and Inclusive Learning Environments for Young People in Crisis and Trauma,* Chapter 14, p.173-181). The school was an ideal location to examine how school staff views TI-SEL curricula among court-involved students living in residential settings.

Recruitment and Sampling

As part of the broader CBPR evaluation study, focus groups were conducted with school staff regarding the school's TI-SEL curriculum. The focus group protocol was collaboratively produced in a partnership between the school's administration and researchers. The CBPR approach collaboratively defines research goals and collectively collects, analyzes, and disseminates study data (Wallerstein et al., 2017). The focus group protocol was structured to explore how staff members viewed the strengths and challenges of using the TI-SEL curriculum. The collaborative process of developing the protocol produced full faculty participation. The focus groups were facilitated by a team of four researchers—two researchers in each focus group. Two of the researchers facilitating the focus groups had long-term involvement with the school's CBPR projects and were familiar with school staff. The four focus groups were initially planned and scheduled to be completed in person at the RTC's co-located school. Due to health concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the planned focus groups were conducted online via Zoom. The online focus groups were recorded (video and audio), and transcripts were produced. In addition, an electronic questionnaire was provided to staff. It collected demographic information: race/ethnicity, gender, length of time working at the school, and professional role (Table 2.1). All school staff members were eligible to participate in the focus groups, and all twenty-three teachers, paraprofessionals, and support staff (e.g., social workers and therapeutic specialists) participated in four focus groups, with five or six participants in each group.

Researcher Positionality

Researchers' perspectives and backgrounds influence the research process and structure of how information is understood and disseminated (Parson, 2019). The first author identifies as a White-Hispanic man and social work doctoral student with a background in education and

public child welfare, and life experience living in a congregate care setting. He was the primary analyst of the data. This research is motivated by a goal to support the educational success of court-involved students.

Analytic Approach

The transcripts from the four focus groups were uploaded into Atlas.ti (Atlas.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH, 2021) and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify themes central to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis was conducted according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic coding. The goal of thematic analysis is to distinguish themes that are salient across the data and help inform understanding of the topic and research questions (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The first author conducted the initial coding, and a second coder was then used to ensure reliability and consistency. The initial coding process included organizing the focus group transcripts into segments related to the study's research questions. From these segments, open coding was used to develop the first round of initial codes. These codes were then reviewed, modified, and refined. After the initial coding process, the codes were examined for emerging concepts across the four transcripts. **A**fter the researchers completed the coding process, school leadership was invited to review the results and partner in the analysis process.

Findings

Research Question #1: How does TI-SEL Curricula Promote Educational Resilience?

This study's first research question examined how faculty at the public charter school viewed the use of a TI-SEL curriculum for promoting educational resilience. The study's thematic analysis identified two themes in the focus group data. The first theme related to the

importance staff placed on specific trauma-informed instructional strategies the school used to deliver the curriculum that they believed promoted educational resilience. The second theme was related to staff members' view that the TI-SEL curriculum was effective in fostering the development of foundational learning skills vital for promoting students' educational resilience (Table 2.2).

A Low-Stress Way to Start the Day

The theme "A low-stress way to start the day" was an in *vivo* code that related to the school's use of a daily SEL class during the first period of each day. The morning SEL classes focused on one of six SEL competencies that the faculty collaboratively developed and were aimed at cultivating social and emotional learning skills specifically tailored for the student population: respect, teamwork, organization and planning, motivation, helping others, and accountability. These lessons were then incorporated into other course instruction throughout the day to reinforce the skills and structure academic content around a shared common theme. One staff member outlined the process accordingly: *"First hour [every day] for a half hour. And all the classes are the same. It is like the same SEL topic for two weeks, and then it switches to a new SEL topic."* The participants in the four focus groups discussed the importance of the daily SEL class for promoting students' educational resilience in several domains. These domains were represented by four subthemes that described how the daily SEL class promoted inclusion and participation, offered staff an opportunity to model and reinforce skills throughout the day, fostered relationship building and a positive school climate, and cultivated a school-wide trauma-informed focus that centered all school community members around a shared daily theme.

Promoting Inclusion and Participation

Participation emphasizes how this instructional strategy provided students with a consistent, accessible, and supportive start to their school day. One teacher described the SEL class accordingly. *"It's a low-stress way to start the day, and we're kind of trying to get everybody centered down before anything starts happening."* Other staff members noted how the school-wide morning SEL class offered an inclusive, fun, and low-threshold way to start the school day that helped students orient and engage. *"It starts their day off and it gives them a chance to embrace something fun instead of just jumping into a normal academic lesson."* Another teacher added, *"It has been really positive, from what I've experienced the girls like to ease into the morning, and some of the girls that are normally really quiet participated. It was a kind of a positive start to the day."*

Opportunity to Model and Reinforce SEL Skills

The school-wide SEL instruction each morning was viewed by the faculty as a crucial instructional strategy that set the tone for the rest of the school day and allowed staff to integrate the shared SEL theme into students' other classes. This provided staff members an opportunity to reinforce and model SEL skills. One teacher commented: *"I think it's really helpful because you can kind of relate back to it . . . We can just go hey remember in SEL when we learned about this thing, and then you can use it to tie it into what they're learning, which is super important. So, I think it's really powerful."* Other focus group participants similarly emphasized the curriculum's ability to help model and reinforce positive behaviors for students in ways that promoted educational resilience. *"A big part is that we try to model that behavior and bring it up throughout the day." "I end up talking about it throughout the day and use it as a way to talk to the kids." "I think it's been kind of nice to have kind of like a structure to refer back to."*

Promoting Relationship Building and Positive School Climate

The participants in the four focus groups also emphasized that the morning SEL class promoted educational resilience through its facilitation of a positive school climate and promotion of relationship-building between students and staff. The faculty discussed the curriculum's strength in helping build rapport between students and staff that improved students' peer interactions and bolstered the ability of staff to build strong relationships with students. One staff member explained this by saying, *"It gives [students] an opportunity to talk about an issue that's happening . . . it's so important for building relationships."* Another teacher added, *"it's kind of like taking some life skills that kids may not have had and have an opportunity to talk to them about that and I like it for relationship building . . . I think it's a good way to get to know the kids.* Another teacher described the noticeable positive effect the SEL class had on the school climate. *"It was really chaotic before, whereas now I just feel like the whole building is just calm in the morning."*

Importance of a Whole-School Focus

Participants in the four focus groups noted how the universal nature of SEL class provided a shared school-wide goal each day that unified the school and promoted educational resilience. "*With the SEL class, everybody's involved. It is not just teachers. It's school-wide*." Staff members also noted how the whole-school focus was facilitated by training for staff. In all four focus groups, the faculty stressed the importance of regular trauma and SEL training provided by the school administration. One teacher expressed the benefits of clear training and administration support. *"Everybody's on the same page and knows what's going on. Having that consistency is key."* Participants in the focus groups noted that the school provided regular

opportunities for training and collaboration that established strong feedback loops to help coordinate curriculum development and delivery.

Developing Students' Real-Life Skills

The ability of the TI-SEL curriculum to foster educational resilience through building vital life skills was discussed in all four of the focus groups. Faculty members noted that a core benefit of the TI-SEL curriculum was its emphasis on building "real-life" soft skills that many court-involved students lacked. These soft skills were understood as being essential for educational resilience and foundational to students' long-term well-being. One staff member said, *"I think SEL is just mostly like our real-world skills . . . like how to deal with people. Just common courtesy that they might not have learned in their old schools or at home."* In the focus groups, participants noted that most students had not had the opportunity to develop what they considered necessary life skills for professional and academic success such as how to work collaboratively or maintain well-organized schoolwork. The TI-SEL curriculum's content was viewed as promoting educational resilience by helping students develop foundational learning skills that the faculty viewed as preconditions for success and becoming well-functioning adults. One teacher commented, "*These are skills that they will be able to use beyond school, they'll carry over into the workplace, they'll carry over into college."* Another teacher said, *"We picked the [SEL] topics that were going to be like those real-world job skills and helping them to become functioning adults, and that is what we focused on."* In another focus group, a staff member remarked, *"I know the focus at the school has been teaching the girls strategies that they will need to kind of help them be like functioning adults."*

This aspect of the TI-SEL curriculum was also viewed by the focus group participants as being specifically tailored to foster educational resilience among court-involved young women.

For instance, one staff member noted: *"A lot of our girls aren't really cognizant of what their bodies are telling them and what their emotions are. It's' like their emotions are either sad or pissed off. That's it . . . A lot of our girls are apprehensive about taking a win when they get it. Like it's either perfect, or it's a huge embarrassing failure . . . for girls who haven't received positive feedback and affirmations, that it is huge."* Another teacher reflected on the importance of focusing on strengthening self-management skills among the student population. *"They have a very narrow window of tolerance. And when they do get frustrated, they don't necessarily react in the most appropriate ways . . . What's important is that we're slowing stuff down and having the girls be less reactive. I think that's a skill set that you know we can build in most of the kids."* The SEL skill-building emphasis of the curriculum was viewed by faculty as crucial to helping build educational resilience while being mindful of students' past traumatic experiences. The focus group participants collectively described the curriculum as augmenting crucial social and learning competencies that many court-involved students had not had sufficient opportunities to develop. The curriculum's efficacy in developing these skills was viewed by staff as a benefit of the TI-SEL curriculum that helped students develop skills to manage emotions and engage positively with academic content.

Research Question #2: What are the challenges of using TI-SEL Curricula in an RTC?

This study's second research question examined how faculty at the public charter school understood the challenges of using a TI-SEL curriculum with court-involved students living in a confined RTC setting. The central theme that emerged related to students' diminished agency while living in the RTC (see Table 2.3).

Diminished Agency in Confined Residential Settings

In the four focus groups, school staff repeatedly noted what they perceived to be an unpredictable, sometimes unsafe, and challenging living environment in the RTC. This had the potential to limit and undermine educational resilience and circumscribed agentic development. One staff member commented on the regimented structure of the RTC, and how limited students were in their ability to make substantive choices vital for promoting educational resilience. *"Their days are structured for them . . . they don't have a lot of control over their lives."* Another staff member said. *"Over there [in the RTC], they're locking them in their rooms, and they're cleaning out their rooms, or they're throwing their stuff away.* Other teachers noted, *"You can't have anything be safe at the [RTC[. There's like not respect; things get lost, thrown away."* Another noted, *"a fight breaks out; now they can't get their homework done."* Due to the controlled structure of the RTC, the school staff viewed the diminished agency of the students as often having harmful effects on students' educational resilience because the setting impeded SEL skills development in domains such as motivation, organization, and planning. "*Our kids. I mean, we know that these types of populations are already behind with these types of skills. And then they're in a space where they don't really have the autonomy to grow because their schedules are set . . . they're so limited in what they can do."*

Discussion

This study examined two research questions asking for educators' views of the impact of a TI-SEL curriculum on educational resilience among court-involved students attending school while living in an RTC. TI-SEL programs have been shown to be effective in studies examining therapeutic facilities for youth (Greenwald et al., 2012; Hodgdon et al., 2013), but they have not

been thoroughly investigated as academic curricula within RTCs (Bryson et al., 2017; Fondren et al., 2020). This study's findings offer new insight into the ways school staff view the efficacy of TI-SEL curricula in promoting educational resilience. The study site's use of a TI-SEL curriculum was viewed very positively by staff, and the curriculum was understood to be supportive of educational resilience and the school's goal of providing a safe and enriching educational environment, supporting students' academic and psychosocial needs. School staff also noted some challenges to students' educational resilience related to living in a highly structured and restrictive RTC environment.

How did the TI-SEL Curriculum Promote Educational Resilience?

This study found that school staff viewed the school's TI-SEL curriculum to be effective in promoting educational resilience and identified multiple promotive instructional strategies used in the TI-SEL curriculum. The curriculum's whole-school focus and morning SEL class helped transform the entire learning system. Having all the students in the school focus on the same SEL domain each day provided a stabilizing and unifying bond that offered opportunities to develop relationships, decreased problem behaviors, and allowed staff to focus on modeling and reinforcing a distinct skill each day. The study's finding suggests that the school staff perceived this process as effective in engaging students who were otherwise difficult to engage and provided an opportunity for students who struggle in academic courses to engage without significant academic pressure. This helped build a positive school climate that was accessible and fun and was understood by staff members as promoting relationship-building and a positive school climate crucial for strong educational resilience.

Positive school climates are integral for promoting educational resilience (Downey, 2008; Kothari et al., 2021; Rosen et al., 2019; Wang et al., 1997). TI-SEL curricula can foster a

positive school climate by making students feel safe, supported, and connected, providing access to mental health services, and fostering vital learning competencies (Transforming Education, 2020). Positive school climates foster learning environments in which all the school community can participate and develop healthy and caring relationships that cultivate positive self-regard and achievement (Cohen et al., 2009).

The study's findings suggest that TI-SEL curricula can support building positive relationships. Positive relationship-building is vital for court-involved students. High levels of stress activate "fight, freeze, or flee" responses (Cole et al., 2005) that undermine the development of self-regulation skills (Spinazzola et al., 2017). This results in decreased learning and relationship building (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). This study found that teachers viewed the school's TI-SEL curriculum as a relationship-building tool that students and teachers considered enjoyable and low-stress. A TI-SEL approach may increase the ability of teachers and students to develop positive bonds that support students' educational resilience, academic well-being, and long-term positive development (Baroni et al., 2020; Dorado et al., 2016; Roseby & Gascoigne, 2021).

Another core finding was the importance of staff training. Research suggests that teachers can be influential in trauma-exposed students' recovery process. Teachers who have received trauma training more effectively assist students exposed to traumatic experiences (Alisic et al., 2012; Gee et al., 2020; Roseby & Gascoigne, 2021). Trauma training improves teachers' sense of well-being and competence to effectively respond to trauma-related needs (Berger et al., 2020; Manian, 2021). Various staff members noted that they had little exposure to trauma-informed principles or SEL before being employed at the school. These findings suggest that it is vital to prioritize staff training and provide opportunities for staff to develop an understanding of the

impact of trauma and support the legislative emphasis on the development of best practices for trauma-informed care.

This study also found that school staff understood SEL as representing essential real-life skills. These real-life skills were understood as foundational to success in education and other aspects of life. This perspective of SEL as real-life skills was a repeated theme voiced throughout the focus groups. Staff members emphasized that a key goal of the TI-SEL curriculum was to prepare students to engage positively in professional situations and develop relationships and social skills. Court-involved youth disproportionately experience challenges in social, emotional, and cognitive capacities (Bethell et al., 2014). Staff expressed a clear perspective emphasizing this. SEL competencies have an established utility in fostering healthy positive psychosocial development and school engagement for young people (Durlak et al., 2011; Scott et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2017). The school's process of reframing and renaming core SEL competencies in ways that were understandable and accessible to students represents a potentially effective strategy. Augmenting SEL skills among court-involved youth is essential. This study's findings suggested that schools can effectively adapt and incorporate SEL into specialized educational programming for court-involved youth.

Challenges to Educational Resilience in the RTC Environment

The public charter school that served as the study site is paired with an RTC (i.e., co-located with a residential treatment center where the students live). The RTC is run separately from the school, and there is limited cross-agency coordination between the school staff and the RTC staff. This type of pairing is uncommon; most RTCs provide their own educational programing to youth in their care. Teaching SEL competencies to students who live in an RTC emerged as the main challenge to promoting educational resilience using a TI-SEL curriculum

across the focus groups. School staff identified various aspects of this challenge, most notably how living in a secure residential setting circumscribed aspects of student autonomy and inhibited core emphases of the social and emotional learning curriculum: motivation, organization, and planning, all crucial to fostering educational resilience. Staff members repeatedly highlighted that these challenges derived from the students' experiences in residential placement. The RTC environment hindered agentic engagement opportunities due to its strictly regimented routines, prohibitions on organizational aids, safety concerns, uncertainty, and the overall lack of control court-involved youth in RTC settings experience. These aspects of residential settings challenge the core developmental goals of social and emotional learning and inhibit educational resilience. These challenges should be addressed by improved training for staff in RTCs, increased coordination between schools and other paired agencies partnering in the care of court-involved youth, and reductions in the use of congregate settings more broadly. Currently, RTC staff may not be receiving the same level of trauma-informed training as the staff at this study's school site. The Trauma Informed Care for Children and Families Act (H.R. 1757) established an Interagency Task Force on Trauma-Informed Care. This task force can support the development of guidelines for trauma training across different facilities and provide common standards for staff training in institutional congregate settings.

Schools educating court-involved youth in residential settings are often faced with navigating differing goals espoused by various service partners. These differing goals can sometimes appear at odds with promoting educational resilience. Child welfare agencies, juvenile justice agencies, and RTCs often focus predominantly on providing safety and stability. Safety and stability are indeed vital. Court-involved students in residential placements have typically experienced more adversity and instability than their peers (Frerer et al., 2013).

Residential treatment centers can provide a stabilizing environment, but most experts would advocate that youth be placed there only for intensive treatment and for the least amount of time possible (e.g., Dozier et al., 2014). Furthermore, many of the measures taken to protect youth living in residential settings inhibit their ability to make academic and personal choices and decrease opportunities to develop their agentic engagement. Agentic engagement is fundamentally linked to educational resilience and social and emotional development. Throughout the focus groups, school staff members repeatedly emphasized this underlying discord while discussing the challenges of promoting specific SEL competencies. This study's findings provided an increased understanding of how teachers and school staff understand these conflicting goals and navigate these challenges. These challenges are also central to FFPSA's focus on decreasing the use of congregate care among court-involved youth, as youth living in family environments and attending community schools have more opportunities to develop autonomy and SEL skills. Navigating the challenges RTC environments place on promoting educational resilience is crucial. Agencies working with court-involved students must address and develop strategies that foster the autonomy needed for educational resilience and healthy development.

Strengths and Limitations

This study is among the first to explore how school staff working with students residing in a QRTP have implemented a trauma-informed social and emotional learning skills curriculum and among the first to explore faculty perspectives regarding its impact on promoting educational resilience. This study provides in-depth descriptions of how educators working with court-involved students perceive the value of adapting and integrating core SEL skills into a trauma-informed curriculum within a secure facility. It analyzed data from all staff in the school,

due to faculty buy-in and participation resulting from the broader study's CBPR approach. It included staff perspectives from various positions and professional backgrounds. This study includes several limitations that constrain its generalizability to other settings serving court-involved students. This study's sample included staff at a facility serving only students identified as female at birth. The study's recommendation may not be generalizable to facilities serving students identified as male at birth, and the facility's specific dynamics and population may differ from other facilities serving court-involved students.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings from this study have significant implications for policy and practice regarding the promotion of educational resilience and well-being among court-involved youth living in institutional settings. Integrating social and emotional learning competencies into trauma-informed approaches can foster vital learning skills most needed among this population. But learning these essential skills necessitates creating positive and supportive environments. School administration and staff need to have the ability to effectively coordinate with other youth service providers, including child welfare workers, juvenile justice officers, and paired residential institutions housing students.

The mandate of the 2018 FFPSA included the requirement that institutions (QRTPs) providing long-term placement for youth integrate trauma-informed approaches. Literature supports that trauma-informed frameworks are critical for effective teaching in alternative schools and other specialized schools that educate court-involved students (Vanderwill, 2020). For this reason, more policy specificity is needed to define and operationalize trauma-informed educational mandates. The current policy mandates only represent a general acknowledgment of the importance of incorporating social and emotional learning in skill-building curricula. Such

curricula can serve as a central policy guideline for institutions' education of court-involved students. Educational success is vital for healthy adolescent development, and educational resilience is associated with positive transitions to adulthood and long-term well-being. Residential settings could benefit from more precise federal and state policy guidelines regarding educating students in their care. Residential institutions should have the flexibility to adapt trauma-informed approaches to the specific educational needs of the student populations. Policies supporting this process and providing team decision-making opportunities between multiple agencies and service providers working with court-involved students are needed. Clearer policy regarding curricular specifications, increased collaboration between schools and facilities, and improved interagency planning to support students' educational resilience are all needed. All workers involved in supporting court-involved youth should be provided with detailed trauma training. Policies outlining the requirements for staff trauma training should be established.

Conclusion

This study's findings support developing and implementing social and emotional learning competencies and trauma-informed educational approaches to promote educational resilience among court-involved students. Core SEL skills such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management, and responsible decision making should be adapted to meet students' developmental needs and delivered by trained professionals who recognize and attend to the effects of complex trauma. This study's findings build on the understanding of trauma-informed approaches for court-involved youth in schools and offer the essential perspectives of school staff on the efficacy of a TI-SEL curriculum. These perspectives are vital for expanding

and effectively implementing academic curricula that meet complex needs. The instabilities and trauma intertwined in the experiences of court involvement for young people—particularly for those living in institutional settings—can undercut healthy psychosocial development and educational resilience and obstruct their ability to acquire learning skills central to long-term well-being and professional success. Policies that foster interagency collaborations that prioritize providing safe and supportive educational environments are needed and should complement interventions and pedagogic strategies that cultivate educational resilience and well-being.

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Tables

Table 2.1
Faculty demographic characteristics and professional background.

Racial identity	
White or European American	82.6%
Black or African American	8.7%
Multiracial	8.7%
Gender identity	
Female	73.9%
Male	13.0%
Not Specified	13.0%
Role at the school	
Teacher	52.2%
Paraprofessional	21.7%
Other School Support Staff	26.1%
Length of time at the school	
Less than 1 Year	26.1%
1 Year	13.0%
2 Years	21.7%
3-5 Years	4.3%
More than 5 Years	34.8%

Note: N = 23

Table 2.2

Themes and illustrative quotes by the number of faculty discussing views regarding the TI-SEL curriculum's promotion of educational resilience.

Themes	Frequency	Illustrative Quotes
A low-stress way to start the day	28 (4)	*"I see a lot of value in the program for the girls because it really starts their day off, and it gives them a chance to embrace something fun instead of just jumping into a normal academic lesson. It kind of gives them that opening of a new day. And I find it very rewarding for them."* *"I think it helps with relationship building. I think it's also a lot less stressful for the kids because like stuff like math is very stressful for them because it's they're always wanting to get it right. But with the social-emotional learning stuff, it's not so much of getting it right. So, it's not as much stress on them."*
Real-Life Skills	20 (4)	*"SEL stuff is just real-life stuff and how it just comes up over and over and over again in everything that we do."* *"We picked the [SEL] topics that were going to be like those real-world job skills and helping them to become functioning adults, and that is what we focused on."*

Note: Frequency refers to the number of times each theme was discussed (The number of focus groups each theme was discussed in. | Faculty, N=23 (Focus Groups, N=4).

Table 2.3

Theme and illustrative quotes by the number of faculty discussing views regarding the challenges of using a TI-SEL curriculum in a confined residential setting across the four focus groups.

Theme	Frequency	Illustrative Quotes
Diminished agency in confined settings	21 (4)	*"Our kids. I mean, we know that these types of populations are already behind with these types of skills. And then they're in a space where they don't really have the autonomy to grow because their schedules are set, and they're, you know, they're so limited in what they can do."* *"Their days are structured for them . . . they don't have a lot of control over their lives."*

Note: Frequency refers to the number of times each theme was discussed (The number of focus groups each theme was discussed in. | Faculty, N=23 (Focus Groups, N=4).

CHAPTER THREE

HOW SEL COMPETENCIES IMPROVE SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT AMONG COURT-INVOLVED STUDENTS

Abstract

Trauma-informed social and emotional learning (TI-SEL) curricula are associated with increased school engagement and the promotion of school success among young people involved in the foster care system and the juvenile justice system. This study's secondary analysis tested the associations between SEL competencies and school engagement among a sample of court-involved students (N=68) attending a specialized public charter school while living in a co-located residential treatment center. The paper's results highlight how SEL skills buffer educational challenges and promote school engagement. The paper discusses implications for educators using trauma-informed SEL with students involved in the court systems and living in congregate settings.

Introduction

Social and emotional learning (SEL) skills improve school engagement and promote school success (Lawson et al., 2019; Zins et al., 2007a). SEL curricula have been integrated into numerous schools and youth programs to promote positive psychosocial development and school engagement (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). They are being used among young people involved in the foster care system and the juvenile justice system (Baroni et al., 2020; Bishop, 2018; Marvin et al., 2017; Vanderwill, 2020). SEL focuses attention on learning competencies many court-involved students (students under the jurisdiction of the child welfare system or adjudicated by the juvenile court system) have not had sufficient opportunities to cultivate (Clemens et al., 2017). Court-involved students have often experienced significant hardships and instabilities and require focused academic and social support (Clemens et al., 2017; Crumé et al., 2021; Hirsch et al., 2018; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018; Pecora, 2012; Rosen et al., 2019). This study examines the relationship between social and emotional learning skills and school engagement among a sample of court-involved adolescent young women attending school while living in a residential treatment center (RTC).

Court-Involved Students Living in Congregate Care Settings

There are over 50,000 court-involved young people in the United States living in congregate care facilities (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2020; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2020; Hockenberry & Puzzanchera, 2020). Congregate care refers to "[a] licensed or approved setting that provides 24-hour care for children in a group home (7-12 children) or an institution (12 or more children)" (NCSL, 2020). The high number of court-involved youth living in congregate care settings has drawn increasing scrutiny in recent years. There is a consensus among juvenile justice and child welfare experts that the use of congregate

care and other forms of restrictive institutional placements should be reduced or eliminated in favor of less restrictive, family-like placements (Casey Family Programs 2018; Dozier et al., 2014; Barth et al., 2007; Gutterswijk et al., 2020; LeBel et al., 2018; Whittaker et al., 2016). There is, however, a small but vulnerable population of court-involved youth who require treatment in congregate settings. Experts agree that their placement duration should be as short as possible (Casey Family Programs 2018; English & Pecora, 2017; Romani et al., 2019). Recent legislation, such as the 2018 Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA), has aimed to reduce and limit the use of congregate care (Kelly, 2018; NCSL, 2021; Pokempner, 2019). There has been a 45% decrease in the use of congregate care in the public child welfare system (Children's Bureau, 2022) and a 60% decrease in juvenile adjudications resulting in placement in congregate settings (Hockenberry & Puzzanchera, 2021) between 2005 and 2020. However, congregate care continues to be an enduring component of the child welfare and juvenile justice continuum of care (Lanctôt et al., 2010; Zhou et al., 2021).

Congregate care facilities are required to provide access to education for the youth in their care (Kelly, 2018 NCSL, 2021). Court-involved youth experience unique challenges that can cause them to struggle in school. Court-involved students living in out-of-home placements change schools more often than their peers living with their parents (Clemens et al., 2017). High rates of school instability create impediments to forming strong school connections (Somers et al., 2020; Pokempner et al., 2015). Heightened school mobility decreases peer and adult support and often negatively impacts social and academic outcomes, such as a student's likelihood to graduate (Frerer et al., 2013; Pecora et al., 2006). Increased school mobility is also associated with changes in the types of schools in which students are enrolled. Court-involved students often transition from comprehensive community schools to alternative schools, as alternative

schools function as dropout prevention options for students experiencing behavioral and academic struggles (Atkins & Bartuska, 2010). Pecora and colleagues (2006) found that over 30% of foster youth had experienced more than eight different placements while in care, and over 60% had more than seven school changes during their K-12 experiences. Literature suggests that increased school mobility is linked with increased behavioral problems (Perfect et al., 2016; Sullivan et al., 2010) and decreased academic achievement (Herbers et al., 2013; Spinazzola et al., 2017).

Impact of ACEs on Court-Involved Students

Court-involved students have typically experienced higher levels of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) than their peers in the general population (Barnett et al., 2018; Dierkhising et al., 2013; Salazar et al., 2013). This is especially prevalent among those living in congregate settings (Espinosa et al., 2013; Green, 2020; Marvin et al., 2017). Studies suggest that most (over 90%) have experienced multiple ACEs (Barnett et al., 2018), and approximately 75% of children entering care exhibit social and emotional challenges that warrant mental health care, significantly higher than their community peers (Landsverk et al., 2009).

While trauma experiences can happen to individuals at any point in their lives, traumatic events that occur during crucial development periods in childhood and adolescence, often referred to as ACEs, are particularly damaging to well-being. ACEs include childhood traumatic experiences of maltreatment, such as physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, neglect, parental incarceration, parental substance abuse, or mental health problems (Children's Bureau, 2020). There is broad academic literature establishing the negative impact of ACEs on youth development and outcomes in adulthood. Felitti et al. (1998), in an influential large-scale longitudinal study of ACEs with more than 17,000 study participants, found that two-thirds of

their sample had experienced at least one ACE and that increased ACEs exposure was linked to lifetime adverse health and wellness outcomes (Felitti et al., 1998). ACEs are associated with increased physical health problems (Ross et al., 2020) and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and other mental health problems (Bruskas & Tessin, 2013; Crosby, 2015; Ford et al., 2008; Rosenberg et al., 2014; Salazar et al., 2013). For instance, Bruskas and Tessin (2013) examined the relationships between ACEs and adult psychosocial distress among adult women who had experienced foster care as children. Their study found that more than half of the foster care alumni were currently experiencing some form of psychological distress (Bruskas & Tessin, 2013). The distress caused by ACEs is associated with both adolescent and lifelong impairments in social functioning (Brown et al., 2013; Crosby et al., 2017).

While much of the early ACEs literature originated in predominately affluent White populations in the United States, conceptualizations of childhood adversity have substantially expanded in recent years to include the experiences of more socioeconomically and racially diverse populations who disproportionately experience community-level ACEs such as poverty, discrimination, and community violence that are reciprocally associated with individual-level ACEs (Cronholm et al., 2015). An expanded conceptualization of ACEs is particularly important for understanding court-involved youth experiences. Court-involved youth in the United States are disproportionately poor and non-white. Racial disproportionality is substantial in both the foster care and juvenile justice populations. For instance, among youth involved in the foster care system, 23% were identified as Black or African American (AFCARS Report #28, 2021). Among juvenile arrests, 34% were among youth identified as Black or African American (Puzzanchera, 2020). These numbers contrast sharply with the 14% of the overall United States under 18 population identified as Black or African American (Annie E. Casey Foundation,

2020). Black or African American youth are 4.6 times more likely to be committed or detained than white youth (Children's Defense Fund, 2022). Community-level ACEs, such as poverty and systemic racism, compound and exacerbate individual-level ACEs' negative impacts on healthy development and well-being and lead to disparate representation among court-involved adolescents.

Most of the research examining the experiences of ACEs among court-involved adolescents has focused on young men (Modrowski et al., 2021). The proportion of young people identified as female at birth among the court-involved adolescent population has increased over the last decade (Anderson & Walerych, 2019). Literature suggests that, among young women, court involvement is often due to traumatic experiences such as family violence and sexual abuse (Anderson & Walerych, 2019). Court-involved young women are more likely than court-involved young men to have experienced multiple ACE (poly-victimization) and complex developmental trauma (Kerig, 2018; Logan-Greene et al., 2016; Modrowski et al., 2020). Experiencing poly-victimization creates feelings of diminished self-worth, hopelessness, and decreased belief in the ability to improve life (Cole et al., 2005). Modrowski and colleagues (2021) investigated victimization profiles among court-involved young women and found that those with histories of poly-victimization exhibited the highest levels of posttraumatic stress symptoms, substance use, suicidal behaviors, and sexual risk behaviors reinforcing the vital importance of trauma-informed support for these youth (Modrowski et al., 2021; Marvin et al., 2017).

Students in this court-involved youth population living in residential settings frequently struggle in school (Clemens et al., 2017; Crosby et al., 2017; Frerer et al., 2013; Garwood & Moore, 2019; Leone & Fink, 2017) and require specialized academic and social supports that

foster school engagement (Clemens et al., 2017; Crumé et al., 2021; Hirsch et al., 2018; Pecora, 2012). The negative impact of ACEs among court-involved students living in residential settings causes academic disruptions that undermine strong school engagement (Barnett et al., 2018; Crosby et al., 2017; Day et al., 2017; Dierkhising et al., 2013; Marvin et al., 2017). ACEs generate and intensify school struggles (Moore et al., 2018; Spinazzola et al., 2017; Stone, 2007), impede social and academic development (Anda et al., 2006; Black et al., 2012; Cole et al., 2005; Wolpow et al., 2009). Experiencing ACEs is linked to lower grades (Hurt et al., 2001) and higher rates of suspension, expulsion, and school disengagement (Chafouleas et al., 2019; Perfect et al., 2016; Wolpow et al., 2009). ACEs diminish organization and planning skills and the ability to self-regulate attention, emotions, and behavior, prerequisites to academic learning and school success (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). This results in decreased learning, relationship building, and identity development (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Accordingly, court-involved students disproportionately experience impairments in social, emotional, and cognitive capacities linked to positive school engagement and social and emotional learning skills (Bethell et al., 2014).

School Engagement

School engagement reflects students' relationships with their school community, including their relationships with staff and peers, their feelings concerning the importance of school, and its benefits to their lives. It also reflects students' behavior in school and their level of participation in activities and investment in learning. School engagement represents a multifaced relationship between a student and school, comprising psychological and behavioral aspects that are reciprocally linked (Fredricks et al., 2004; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012; Wang et al., 2018). This view of school engagement is often described as including three components:

cognitive, emotional, and behavioral (Fredricks et al., 2004; Wang & Eccles, 2013). The main factor in cognitive school engagement is a student's investment in education, such as their effort in school. Emotional school engagement reflects how students feel about school: their relationships with teachers and school staff, and if they feel as though school is benefiting them. Behavioral school engagement refers to students' participation in school activities and their school conduct (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Increasing School Engagement Among Court-Involved Youth with Trauma-Informed SEL

The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) outlined the role of schools and the child welfare system to collaborate in promoting school stability for young people involved in the foster care system and ensuring that students who faced placement changes could be immediately enrolled in school (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The ESSA also provided public schools an opportunity to expand student success measures. This allowed more schools to incorporate student well-being and socioemotional development measures into their evaluation processes and offered a significant opportunity for schools to embed social and emotional learning competencies into educational curricula (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). While ESSA did not make specific reference to social and emotional learning, its passage is credited for a significant uptake in the incorporation of SEL programs in public schools, particularly those serving high-risk youth (Darling-Hammond et al., 2016).

The 2018 Family First Prevention Services Act mandated that all institutions caring for court-involved youth use trauma-informed treatment models (Kelly, 2018). However, FFPSA did not specifically outline how institutions serving court-involved youth should develop educational curricula to be trauma-informed. This leeway has allowed for flexibility for residential educational settings to develop curricula specifically geared towards their student populations.

Some of these institutions have developed curricula that emphasize social and emotional learning competencies within trauma-informed educational frameworks (Baroni et al., 2020; Bishop, 2018; Marvin et al., 2017; Vanderwill, 2020).

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a multi-layered view of learning that was developed through the Collaborative for the Advancement of Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (Elias et al., 1997). In its original conception, SEL was understood as encompassing five interconnected competencies that describe intersecting and complementary skills required for successful learning: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020a). CASEL defines SEL as "the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions" (CASEL, 2020b). These learning skills are vital for healthy adolescent development (Ross & Tolan, 2018), and SEL-based curricula have been implemented in numerous schools and youth programs (Caldarella et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2017). The educational difficulties of court-involved students often center around social and emotional challenges (Palmieri & La Salle, 2017), and trauma exposure from ACEs can undermine the development of social and emotional learning skills and encourage maladaptive responses in self-regulation (Cook et al., 2005).

Trauma-informed educational frameworks emphasize the importance of understanding how traumatic experiences influence students' learning behaviors (Roseby & Gascoigne, 2021) and aim to create school climates that promote safety, connections, and managing emotions (Garwood & Moore, 2021; Gee et al., 2020; Manian, 2021). Positive and nurturing relationships

provide safety and buffer ACEs' harmful effects, such as emotional dysregulation (Bryson et al., 2017).

For court-involved youth living in residential treatment centers with substantial histories of ACEs, relational security developed through positive teacher and school staff relationships is critical for providing a feeling of safety and helping manage emotional impulses (Brunzell et al., 2016; Weber et al., 2016). Young people who have experienced relational trauma at an early age often struggle with self-regulation (Marvin et al., 2017; Schwartz & Davis, 2006). Building trusting and nurturing relationships with adults can reduce the negative impacts of traumatic experiences among court-involved young people (Greeson & Bowen, 2008). Strong mentoring relationships with caring adults are associated with improved academic performance and positive outcomes in early adulthood (Ahrens et al., 2008). Building strong teacher-student relationships is integral to school engagement but is often challenging among court-involved youth due to past relational trauma that undermines their relationship-building skills. Durlak and colleagues (2011) found that students who received SEL curricula demonstrated increased positive teacher-student relationships, improved behavior, and better academic outcomes than peers who did not receive SEL instruction. SEL competencies and school engagement are interrelated and build upon one another (Zins & Elias, 2007). Building strong teacher-student relationships increases students' participation in school activities and a sense of school support, all of which are integral parts of school engagement (Durlak et al., 2011).

Court-involved young women living in residential placements have often had extremely challenging past school experiences (Crosby et al., 2017; Day et al., 2017; Marvin et al., 2017). Residential schools catering to this population offer a significant opportunity for cultivating a safe and stable school environment that may counteract the impact of students' negative past

experiences and provide an educational context that encourages school stability and engagement. Integrating SEL into trauma-informed curricula can support the development of healing educational spaces in which students can grow their learning and relational skills (Phifer & Hull, 2016).

Osher and colleagues (2021) described trauma-informed SEL curricula as "a schoolwide strategy for addressing trauma in which all aspects of the education environment are grounded in an understanding of trauma and its effects and are designed to promote resilience for all." Trauma-informed social and emotional learning (TI-SEL) introduces a paradigm shift in understanding education from traditional views that focused specifically on teaching and learning to a more holistic view (Kim et al., 2021). This emphasizes certain prerequisites such as safety and well-being, through recognizing and addressing the impacts of traumatic experiences (Osher et al., 2021). Embedding SEL competencies within a trauma-informed approach is effective. Greenwald (2012) found that implementing trauma-informed treatment for youth in a residential treatment facility reduced problem behaviors (Greenwald et al., 2012). Hodgdon and colleagues (2013) found significant reductions in the frequency of PTSD symptomology after implementing a trauma-informed treatment framework. The academic effects of trauma-informed SEL curricula have not been thoroughly examined among court-involved youth living in RTCs (Bryson et al., 2017; Marvin et al., 2017). A trauma-informed SEL curriculum is designed as a universal school feature that seeks to transform the entire learning system into a process with embedded awareness of traumatic stress response while building SEL skills (Bryson et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2021). TI-SEL curricula among court-involved students aim to embed vital SEL skills and present an opportunity to focus on learning competencies most needed

among court-involved students while also emphasizing their need for safety and positive connections (Phifer & Hull, 2016).

Current Study

The current study examined two research questions related to the relationship between school engagement and social and emotional learning skills among court-involved students attending a public charter school co-located with a residential treatment center. The first research question examined whether students' school engagement and social and emotional learning skills differed based on students' racial identities, previous school types, grade level, or past school experiences: *(1) How do school engagement and social and emotional learning skills differ among court-involved students based on demographic differences and past school experiences?* The second research question examined the relationship between school engagement and social and emotional learning skills, considering the effect of past school experiences: *(2) Are stronger SEL competencies associated with better school engagement within this demographic?*

Methods

Study Site

The current study is a secondary quantitative analysis of student survey data collected within a broader community-based participatory research (CBPR) partnership conducted as part of a school-led evaluation study at a specialized public charter school co-located on the campus of a residential treatment center (RTC) serving 6th to 12th grade students identified as female at birth in a large Midwestern metropolitan region. The charter school in which this study was conducted falls under a specific type known as a "strict discipline academy." Under Section 380.1311g of the Michigan Revised School Code Act 451 of 1979, a strict discipline academy is

a charter school that is specifically designed to enroll students under the supervision of the department of health and human services or county juvenile court, as well as students who had previously been expelled from comprehensive or alternative schools (Michigan Department of Education, 2017; Michigan Legislature, 2020). All study participants lived in RTC while attending the public charter school and were previously placed in residential out-of-home placement due to child welfare court system jurisdiction or adjudication by the juvenile justice court system (See Table 3.1 for sample demographics). The RTC is a secure facility, and students cannot leave without prior authorization and supervision. The RTC can house roughly 150 students and operates year-round, with open enrollment. All participants in this study were current students when the study was conducted. When the research was conducted, 109 students were reported by the school administration to be enrolled and eligible to participate in the study.

The school uses a TI-SEL curriculum that was developed by the faculty and administration and based on an approach developed and adapted from Wolpow and Hertel's (2016) *The Heart of Learning and Teaching*: *Compassion, Resiliency, and Academic Success.* The school's curriculum focuses on training staff on how ACEs and complex trauma affect adolescent young women's behavioral, emotional, and cognitive school engagement, developmental needs, and psychosocial well-being, providing staff with practice tools to appropriately address student needs, and incorporating SEL skills into the curriculum. The school administration, teachers, and specialists collaborated with academic researchers throughout a six-year curriculum development process using CBPR methods to continually evaluate the curriculum, and the survey instrument used in this study was co-produced by the school administration and academic researchers.

CBPR aims to promote reciprocity in the production of research (Maiter et al., 2008; Wallerstein et al., 2017). CBPR processes are co-produced between researchers and community partners and emphasize building on community strengths and resources, engaging in collaborative and equitable decision-making, and focusing on the community impact of the research project (Israel et al., 2008). CBPR research is a long-term co-learning process that builds capacity within communities through power-sharing (Israel et al., 2008; Wallerstein et al., 2017). The use of CBPR methods helped to build relationships between the charter school administration and researchers, and multiple researchers were invited to partner with the school in its curriculum development, implementation, and evaluation.

Survey Administration

During the study, in-person classes were canceled due to health concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic. Students were not attending school in their regular classroom setting and were completing distance learning in their residential units. As a result, the survey was administered on paper to students in their residential units. All students in the school N=109 were provided a paper survey to complete. Survey participation was entirely voluntary, and students were instructed that if they did not want to complete the survey, they could choose not to fill out their responses and leave the survey blank. The public charter school's co-located RTC includes seven residential units that house students at various residential program levels. When the survey was administered, Building A housed three students, and all three returned completed surveys. Building B housed twenty-two students and returned nineteen completed surveys. Building C housed nineteen students and returned sixteen completed surveys. Building D housed three students and returned two completed surveys. Building E housed fifteen students and returned eleven completed surveys. Building F housed twenty-three students and returned

seventeen completed surveys. Building G housed twenty-four students. No students in Building G completed the survey. Overall, among the 109 distributed surveys, eleven were returned with all item responses indicating the same value. These surveys were discarded. Thirty surveys were returned entirely blank. These included the twenty-four surveys distributed to Building G. In all, sixty-eight completed surveys were returned, comprising a 64.2% return rate.

Sample

The subsequent study sample (N=68) ranged from 6th to 12th grade (*M=9.17*, *SD*=1.72). Each survey was distributed to students with a unique identification number on the paper copy. The survey did not ask demographic questions, and this identification number was used to link de-identified demographic information provided by the school administration to each survey. The school offered limited demographic data linked to each survey. This information was not self-reported by students. The linked demographic information provided by the school administration included students' race, grade level, and the previous school types students attended in the last three years (e.g., alternative schools or general education schools). The reported racial or ethnic composition of the sample was predominantly Black or African American (54.4%) and White or European American (44.1%) (Table 3.1).

Survey Instrument

The survey included Likert items assessing students' school engagement and their past school experiences, as well as sixteen Likert items measuring two social and emotional learning domains: relational awareness and self-awareness. The survey items were collaboratively developed with the school administration through the CBPR process. The SEL items used in the survey were derived from the Social-Emotional Learning Scale (SELS) (Coryn et al., 2009) and the Best Starts for Kids (BSK) Youth Development Measurement Project (Jones et al., 2020).

Some SEL survey items were changed to reflect agreement statements or modified for language as specified by the school administration.

Measures

Grade Level

Students in the sample ranged in grade from 6th grade to 12th grade, with most students in the 9th or 10th grades (*M=9.17*, *SD*=1.72. The students' grade levels were dichotomized to identify students as either in high school (grades 9-12) (70.6%) or middle school (grades 6-8) (29.4%) (Table 3.1).

Race/Ethnicity

The school administration identified students as either Black or African American (54.4%), Latina or Hispanic (1.5%), or White or European American (44.1%). Due to there being only one student in the sample identified as Latina or Hispanic, students' race/ethnicity was dichotomized as Black/African American or Latina students (55.9%) and White students (44.1%) (Table 3.1).

Previous School Type

The previous school type measured the type(s) of school(s) students attended in the three years before enrolling in the specialized charter school. Students were reported to have either attended comprehensive/general education schools only (20.6%), alternative schools only (32.4%), or alternative school and comprehensive/general education schools (47.1%). Students' school type was dichotomized to identify students as either having only attended public comprehensive schools in the last three years (20.6%) or having attended an alternative school (79.4%) (Table 3.1).

School Engagement

School engagement was a Likert scale that measured ten items (α = .802) related to how students viewed their relationships with staff members at the specialized charter school, whether they had behavioral problems at school, their participation in school activities, and their academic effort. Each item was presented as a statement asking respondents to indicate their level of agreement on a five-point ordinal scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly Agree). The statements, "I often get in trouble with teachers or staff" and "I often have a hard time with schoolwork, like math, reading, or writing" were reverse coded (1 = Strongly Agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Disagree, 5 = Strongly Disagree). Responses were combined to form a mean-based Likert scale, with higher values indicating a greater level of agreement with each statement (Range=1-5, *M*=3.55, *SD*=.75) (Table 3.2).

Social and Emotional Learning Skills

Social-emotional learning (SEL) skills was a mean-based scale that measured sixteen items (α = .819) relating students' perceptions of their SEL skills across two SEL domains: relational awareness and self-awareness. Students were asked to respond on a five-point ordinal scale (Strongly Disagree = 1, Disagree = 2, Neutral = 3, Agree = 4, Strongly Agree = 5) with their level of agreement with each statement. The items were combined to create a mean-based SEL scale (Range=1-5, *M*=3.94, *SD*=.50), with two subscales: relational awareness (Range=1-5, *M*=3.73, *SD*=.62), and self-awareness (Range=1-5, *M*=4.14, *SD*=.52) (Table 3.3).

Past School Experiences

Past school experiences was a mean-based scale (α = .640) that measured the level of agreement to six items that asked students about their perceptions of past school relationships,

whether they often got in trouble in their past schools, how they rated their past effort in school, and if they had participated in extracurricular activities. Students were asked to respond on a five-point ordinal scale (Strongly Disagree = 0, Disagree = 1, Neutral = 2, Agree = 3, Strongly Agree = 4). The statement "I often got in trouble with teachers or staff" was the exception and was reverse coded to reflect responses of (Strongly Disagree = 4, Disagree = 3, Neutral = 2, Agree = 1, Strongly Agree = 0). The six items were combined to create a past school experiences scale (Range=0-4, *M*=2.79, *SD*=.68, Median=2.83). The past school experiences scale was then bifurcated based on the sample median, resulting in two past school experience groups: more positive past school experiences (N = 38, scores at or above the median) and fewer positive past school experiences (N = 30, scores below the median). These two groups: more positive past school experiences (55.9%) and fewer positive past school experiences (44.1%) were used for comparison (Table 3.4).

Analytic Approach

The study's first research question examined whether students' school engagement and social and emotional learning skills differed based on group differences. Independent sample *t*-tests were used to compare the mean scores of students' school engagement and social and emotional learning skills. The second research question used linear regression to test the associations between school engagement and social and emotional learning skills, controlling for the influence of past school experiences. The associations between each independent measure and school engagement were first tested independently. Then, each measure of SEL was tested with the past school experiences scale. Due to sample size limitations (N=68), only two independent predictors were used in each multivariate regression to ensure that the analyses were sufficiently powered to detect a medium effect size (Faul et al., 2009). The regression models

describe how school engagement is associated with aspects of social and emotional learning and how past school experiences affect those associations. Preliminary analyses were conducted to assess assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity, and homoscedasticity, and correlational patterns among the study variables were examined. Together, the secondary quantitative analysis offered a cross-sectional view of how court-involved students' perceptions of their school engagement were associated with their views concerning their social and emotional learning skills and past school experiences.

Results

Groups Differences

Independent sample *t*-tests were used to assess the mean differences for the school engagement scale, the social and emotional learning scale, and the two SEL subscales: relational awareness and self-awareness between students, based upon four grouping criteria: race/ethnicity, grade level, previous school type, and past school experience groups (Table 3.5). For the school engagement scale, a significant mean difference (M_{diff}=0.43) was found between White students' (*M*=3.79) school engagement and the school engagement of Black or Latina students (*M*=3.36). No significant mean differences in school engagement scale scores were found for grade level or school type. However, students with more positive past school experiences (*M*=4.00) had significantly higher (M_{diff}=1.02) school engagement scale scores than students with fewer positive past school experiences (*M*=2.98). There were no significant differences among student grade level or previous school type groups on the mean scores of the SEL scale or its two subscales. Significant differences in past school experience groups were found for the SEL scale (M_{diff}=0.58) and the two subscales: relational awareness (M_{diff}=0.58);

self-awareness (M_{diff}=0.59). Students who reported more positive past school experiences reported significantly higher SEL scores.

Association between School Engagement and SEL Competencies

Linear regression was used to test the associations between school engagement and social and emotional learning, controlling for the influence of past school experiences. Four separate linear regressions were conducted, each including one independent predictor. Then, three multivariate regressions were conducted testing the SEL scale and its two subscales with past school experiences. The first regression (R^2=.592, p<.001) tested the association between school engagement and relational awareness (β =.335) and past school experiences (β =.641). The second (R^2=.561, p<.001) tested the association between school engagement and self-awareness (β =.432) and past school experiences (β =.610). The third (R^2=.611, p<.001) tested the association between school engagement and the full SEL scale (β =.592), controlling for past school experiences (β =.560). All the regression tests found significant associations between school engagement, social and emotional learning measures, and past school engagement (Table 3.6). The results indicate that higher school engagement is significantly associated with stronger social and emotional learning skills and more positive past school experiences.

Discussion

This study is among few that have assessed the relationships between school engagement and social and emotional learning competencies among court-involved young women living in institutional out-of-home care. School engagement among court-involved students is critical. Research suggests that school engagement increases school completion (Fall & Roberts, 2012). It helps foster positive relationships between students and adults that help support healthy

psychosocial development (Durlak et al., 2011; Geenen & Powers, 2007). In comparison with students in the general public, court-involved youth are far less likely to graduate high school or earn a college degree (Uppal, 2017). Court involvement is widely associated with lifetime negative experiences: lower earnings (Kirk & Sampson, 2013) and experiences of poverty (Gilman et al., 2015).

The results from this cross-sectional secondary analysis suggest that court-involved students' social and emotional learning skills, regardless of their past school experiences, affect their school engagement. No directional or causal conclusions can be made from these cross-sectional data, but the significance of increasing social and emotional learning skills was highlighted. Social and emotional learning skills were significantly associated with increased school engagement. These findings suggest that there is potential for bolstering school engagement by focusing attention on developing core SEL competencies among court-involved students.

Race, Grade Level, Previous School Type, and Past School Experiences

While demographic groups did not indicate significant differences in social and emotional learning competencies among different grade levels and previous school types, a significant mean difference was found between Black or African American and Latina students and White or European American students for school engagement. Research has noted how racial biases damage school engagement (Lea et al., 2020), and disparities in educational experiences marginalize Black and Latine students (Bell 2004; Dumas and Ross 2016; Ohito, 2019; Wun 2016). Culturally relevant education and increased project-based learning can support SEL curricula to be more effective in engaging diverse student populations (Jagers et al., 2019; Williams & Jagers, 2020). This study's findings should encourage educators to develop

strategies that counteract racial inequities in cultivating positive learning environments where diverse educational needs are respected and valued (Lea et al., 2020).

The study's independent sample *t*-tests found significant mean differences in school engagement, and social and the full emotional learning skills scale, as well as the self-awareness subscale concerning students' past school experiences. Students who reported more positive past school experiences had significantly higher school engagement and SEL scores. These findings support the importance of considering students' past educational experiences in the development of SEL curricula.

Association Between SEL Skills and School Engagement

This study found significant positive associations between students' SEL skills and their school engagement. There is broad empirical evidence suggesting that SEL programs in school improve indicators of positive psychosocial development and school engagement for young people: positive social behavior, academic success, fewer conduct problems, less emotional distress, decreased drug use, and increased school completion (Durlak et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2017). Literature suggests that these qualities of social and emotional learning have efficacy in supporting academic development among vulnerable youth populations (Brunzell et al., 2016), and many schools educating court-involved students have implemented SEL-based curricula to help foster healthy academic and social development (Baroni et al., 2020). Embedding SEL skills-building in the academic curricula helps focus attention on learning competencies most needed among this population.

Study Limitations

While this study's findings produced important insights, there are several limitations to the use of this type of data that should be noted. This study's data are cross-sectional (no causal

conclusion can be made by the results of this study). The survey sample size was also too small (N=68) to sufficiently power multivariate models to test more in-depth hypotheses regarding the multifaceted promotive factors for school engagement. Other factors also likely affect school engagement that were not available in the survey data. For instance, in keeping with the emphasis on trauma-informed educational frameworks, the survey intentionally avoided asking students questions that might be traumatizing or retraumatizing. No questions were asked regarding past adverse educational experiences, which would likely be predictive of students' school engagement. While measurement constraints and sample size are key limitations of this study, its findings do offer a clear snapshot of the importance of social and emotional skills for school engagement. Caution should be given to any generalizability of the findings, and no causal interpretations should be made. These data can, however, help inform practice strategies but should be understood as representing only a fraction of the educational experiences of court-involved students. These data came from one small public charter school co-located on the campus of a residential treatment center in a large Midwestern metropolitan region and may not be representative of other institutions educating court-involved youth.

The Role of Trauma-Informed SEL Curricula Among Court-Involved Students

Implementing trauma-informed SEL curricula in schools instructing court-involved students living in residential treatment centers goes beyond individual or group therapies and provides a universal trauma focus that permeates the day-to-day operations and interactions of students and school staff (Hodgdon et al., 2013). Trauma-informed curricula aim to "create a treatment culture of nonviolence, learning, and collaboration in which a universal precautions approach is highlighted in all environmental and interpersonal interactions" (Bryson et al., 2017, p. 3). Trauma-informed school interventions effectively address internalizing symptomologies in

students and promote their skills development in resilience and social-emotional learning (Marvin et al., 2017). Trauma-informed educational approaches have been developed to address the educational needs of students with complex trauma histories (Baroni et al., 2020). This study highlighted a positive relationship between SEL skills and school engagement. These findings should motivate congregate care facilities and other institutions charged with educating court-involved students to develop and integrate SEL competencies into trauma-informed school curricula.

Conclusion

This study found that school engagement is strongly associated with social and emotional learning skills among court-involved students attending school while living in out-of-home residential placement, despite students' negative past school experiences. These findings contribute to better strategies for school engagement among this vulnerable population. Trauma-informed SEL curricula help address the complex needs of this population. Trauma-informed schools provide young people with safe and nurturing educational environments. Promoting school engagement is central to redirecting educational trajectories for court-involved young people. This study's examination of the importance of SEL skills among court-involved students illustrates how curricula tailored for vulnerable youth help develop the relationships and skills foundational for academic and social success.

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Tables

Table 3.1
Sample Demographics

	N	%
Grade Level		
High School Students	48	70.6
Jr. High School / Middle School Students	20	29.4
Race / Ethnicity		
Black/African American or Latina Students	38	55.9
White Students	30	44.1
Previous School Type		
Alternative School Students	54	79.4
Comprehensive School Students	14	20.6
Past School Experiences Groups		
More Positive Past School Experiences	38	55.9
Fewer Positive Past School Experiences	30	44.1

N = 68

Table 3.2
School engagement scale items, with the percentage of responses.

	% Strongly Disagree	% Disagree	% Neutral	% Agree	% Strongly Agree
This school has helped me to respect others.	16.2	11.8	22.1	26.5	23.5
This school has helped me to develop organization and planning skills.	13.2	10.3	22.1	32.4	19.1
This school has taught me how to make the right decision when I have choices.	11.8	10.3	17.6	25.0	35.3
I have positive relationships with teachers or school staff members.	4.4	2.9	29.4	19.1	42.6
I feel like teachers and school staff are trying to help me succeed.	1.5	10.3	23.5	26.5	36.8
When I have a problem in school, teachers or school staff members will help me.	4.4	1.5	27.9	26.5	38.2
I often get in trouble with teachers or staff.[a]	22.1	16.2	32.4	16.2	11.8
I participate in student leadership activities.	10.3	7.4	27.9	23.5	27.9
I often have a hard time with schoolwork, like math, reading, or writing.[a]	17.6	14.7	20.6	16.2	29.4
I try my best to do all my schoolwork.	5.9	5.9	14.7	30.9	41.2

Note: α = .802 | N = 68 | Range 1-5 | Minimum = 1.90 | Maximum = 4.80 | Mean = 3.55 | SD = 0.75

[a] Items were reverse coded.

Table 3.3

Social and emotional learning scale items by the percentage of responses, with two subscales: relational awareness and self-awareness.

	% Strongly Disagree	% Disagree	% Neutral	% Agree	% Strongly Agree
Relational Awareness Scale					
I work well in groups with people who are different from me.	5.9	14.7	33.8	25.0	20.6
I have learned ways to make and keep friends in my school.	7.4	1.5	29.4	30.9	30.9
I understand what causes problems among my friends and classmates.	1.5	2.9	26.5	36.8	32.4
I try to help when I see someone having a problem.	2.9	8.8	19.1	39.7	29.4
I think about how my behavior will affect other people.	4.4	5.9	33.8	29.5	26.5
If I do something wrong, I take responsibility for my actions.	1.5	1.5	27.9	32.4	36.8
I can stand up for myself without putting other people down.	2.9	5.9	29.4	29.4	30.9
I can disagree with others without starting an argument.	7.4	11.8	32.4	25.0	22.1
Self-Awareness Scale					
My ability to succeed is something that I can change with effort.	1.5	0.0	20.6	33.8	44.1
I feel responsible for working to improve my life and future.	0.0	0.0	13.2	39.7	47.1
I know what makes me feel happy, sad, angry, or frustrated at school.	0.0	0.0	14.7	39.7	45.6
I work towards my goals even if I experience problems.	1.5	1.5	13.2	32.4	51.5
I can think of ways to calm myself down when I am upset at school.	2.9	4.4	25.0	32.4	33.8
I know I can be successful when I try my best.	0.0	1.5	8.8	29.4	60.3
I am good at thinking about what might happen before I decide what to do.	0.0	8.8	39.7	26.5	22.1
When I make a decision, I think about how it will affect my future.	2.9	7.4	17.6	33.8	35.3

Note: Relational Awareness Scale: Eight items, α = .736 | N = 68 | Range 1-5 | Minimum = 2.38 | Maximum = 5.00 | Mean = 3.73 | SD = 0.62 | Self-Awareness Scale: Eight items, α = .749 | N = 68 | Range 1-5 | Minimum = 3.00 | Maximum = 5.00 | Mean = 4.14 | SD = 0.52 | Social and Emotional Learning Scale: Sixteen items, α = .819 | N = 68 | Range 1-5 | Minimum = 3.06 | Maximum = 5.00 | Mean = 3.94 | SD = 0.50.

Table 3.4

Past school experiences scale items with the percentage of responses, and past school experience groups.

	% Strongly Disagree	% Disagree	% Neutral	% Agree	% Strongly Agree
I had positive relationships with teachers or school staff members.	0.0	2.9	20.6	26.5	50.0
I felt like teachers and school staff are trying to help me succeed.	1.5	7.4	17.6	26.5	47.1
When I had a problem in school, teachers or school staff members will help me.	4.4	7.4	25.0	27.9	35.3
I often got in trouble with teachers or staff.[a]	22.1	16.2	30.9	14.7	16.2
I participated in school activities like sports or clubs.	10.3	17.6	22.1	19.1	30.9
I tried my best to do all my schoolwork.	1.5	2.9	22.1	36.8	36.8
Past School Experiences Groups[b]		More Positive Experiences		More Negative Experiences	
N		38		30	
%		55.9		44.1	

Note: N = 68 | Minimum = 1.17 | Maximum = 3.83 | Median = 2.83 | Mean = 2.79 | SD = 0.68

[a] Item was reverse coded.

[b] Past School Experience Groups: More Positive = Median or Above | More Negative = Below Median

Table 3.5
Independent sample t-tests testing the mean differences between groups.

	N	School Engagement Scale	Social Emotional Learning Scale	Relational Awareness Subscale	Self-Awareness Subscale
Sample *M*(SD)	68	3.55 (0.75)	3.94 (0.50)	3.73 (0.62)	4.14 (0.52)
Race/Ethnicity					
Black / Latina Students	38	3.36 (0.68)	3.84 (0.50)	3.62 (0.65)	4.05 (0.52)
White Students	30	3.79 (0.78)	4.06 (0.48)	3.87 (0.58)	4.25 (0.50)
$Mean_{diff}$		0.43*	0.22	0.24	0.20
Grade Level					
High School Students	48	3.48 (0.78)	3.89 (0.51)	3.64 (0.63)	4.14 (0.55)
Middle School Students	20	3.70 (0.68)	4.05 (0.47)	3.97 (0.56)	4.15 (0.44)
$Mean_{diff}$		0.22	0.16	0.31	0.01
Previous School Type					
Comprehensive School	14	3.46 (0.65)	3.86 (0.49)	3.58 (0.63)	4.13 (0.54)
Alternative School	54	3.57 (0.78)	3.96 (0.51)	3.77 (0.62)	4.14 (0.52)
$Mean_{diff}$		0.11	0.10	0.19	0.01
Past School Experiences					
More Positive	38	4.00 (0.59)	4.19 (0.36)	3.99 (0.53)	4.40 (0.33)
Fewer Positive	30	2.98 (0.52)	3.61 (0.47)	3.41 (0.60)	3.81 (0.53)
$Mean_{diff}$		1.02***	0.58***	0.58***	0.59***

Note: * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$

Table 3.6

Linear regressions testing the associations between social and emotional learning skills and past school experiences on school engagement.

	F	R^2	B	*SE*	β	Lower	Upper
Relational Awareness	29.747***	.311	.673	.123	.557***	.427	.920
Self-Awareness	34.658***	.344	.851	.144	.587***	.562	1.139
SEL Scale	48.749***	.425	.981	.140	.652***	.700	1.261
Past School Experiences	65.113***	.497	.785	.097	.705***	.591	.980
Relational Awareness	47.233***	.592	.405	.104	.335**	.198	.612
Past School Experiences			.641	.096	.575***	.450	.832
Self-Awareness	41.493***	.561	.432	.140	.298**	.152	.712
Past School Experiences			.610	.108	.548***	.395	.826
SEL Scale	50.950***	.611	.592	.136	.394***	.321	.863
Past School Experiences			.560	.101	.502***	.359	.761

Note: N = 68

* $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$

CHAPTER FOUR

SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT AMONG COURT-INVOLVED STUDENTS LIVING IN A RESIDENTIAL TREATMENT CENTER

Abstract

This secondary qualitative study used thematic analysis to examine perceptions of school engagement among students attending a specialized public charter school while living in a residential treatment center. The study's data derive from six focus groups (N=37) conducted as part of a school-led community-based participatory research (CBPR) evaluation study. Thematic analysis identified two themes relating to aspects of the school curriculum that students noted as promoting their school engagement: personalized education and a stabilizing educational environment, and two themes relating to aspects of the curriculum that made strong school engagement difficult: a lack of normalcy and mismatched course content. The paper discusses opportunities schools can use to educate young people involved in the foster care system and juvenile justice system who are living in congregate settings that augment educational normalcy and support safety and stability through trauma-informed social and emotional learning (TI-SEL) curricula.

Introduction

Institutional out-of-home placements are part of the child welfare and juvenile justice continuum of care (Lanctôt et al., 2016; Mulvey et al., 2010; Zhou et al., 2021). Over 40,000 court-involved youth (young people involved in either the foster care system or the juvenile justice system) live in institutional placements in the United States (Children's Defense Fund, 2021). These placements, such as psychiatric facilities and residential treatment centers (RTCs), provide support for young people exhibiting behavioral and emotional problems and provide live-in treatment where they can be supervised by trained staff (De Swart et al., 2012). Young people living in institutional placement often have histories of trauma and have experienced substantial instabilities that discourage healthy psychosocial development and functioning (Day et al., 2017). Federal policy requires that institutional placements use trauma-informed treatment models and provide educational services (Kelly, 2018; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2020). Meeting the educational needs of court-involved youth living in institutional settings is complicated by problem behaviors, mental health care, and traumatic stress reactions (Barnett et al., 2018; Green, 2020). Court-involved students require specialized academic and social support (Clemens et al., 2017; Crumé et al., 2021; Hirsch et al., 2018; Pecora, 2012). Despite the clear need to improve educational outcomes for young people in residential treatment centers (RTCs), little is known about how court-involved students view their educational experiences (West et al., 2014). To provide effective academic support for court-involved youth living in institutional settings, it is vital to consider how students understand their educational goals and experiences. This is particularly true for students who have experienced significant educational instability and adversity and whose perspectives are often not directly represented in academic research (Kearley et al., 2021; West et al., 2014).

This qualitative study examined perspectives of school engagement among a sample of court-involved adolescent young women attending a specialized public charter school while living in an RTC. This study used secondary data derived from six focus groups conducted with students within a school-led community-based participatory research (CBPR) evaluation project to explore their perspectives regarding school engagement. The study specifically focused on how students regarded the use of a trauma-informed social and emotional learning (TI-SEL) curriculum and if it contributed to strengthening their school engagement.

Institutional Placements Among Court-Involved Youth

Most court-involved adolescents living in institutions have been progressively moved to higher levels of care due to behavioral needs and placement instability (Bellonci et al., 2019) or are at risk for further victimization living in their communities, such as those who have been victims of sexual trafficking (Latzman et al., 2019; O'Brien et al., 2017). Among court-involved adolescents, young women comprise approximately fifteen percent of juvenile justice-involved youth residing in residential treatment centers (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2019) and approximately forty percent of child welfare-involved youth living in congregate care settings (NCSL, 2020). The proportion of young women involved in the juvenile court systems has increased over the last decade (Anderson & Walerych, 2019). Young women's court involvement is often due to family violence and sexual abuse (Anderson & Walerych, 2019; Kerig, 2018; Modrowski et al., 2021) and young women have higher rates of poly-victimization experiences (Bellonci et al., 2019; Kerig, 2018; Logan-Greene et al., 2016). These maltreatment experiences are strongly associated with trauma-related developmental and educational challenges that require specialized support (Dierkhising et al., 2020; Kerig, 2018; Modrowski et al., 2019).

Residential treatment centers are often used to provide services and support for adolescents who can be challenging to engage. They are generally more restrictive and provide increased supervision and structure compared to community-based group homes (Bellonci et al., 2019). However, there is broad consensus in the United States that the restrictive nature of institutional placements often impedes developmental well-being and does not adequately provide adolescents with educational experiences that prepare them for academic success and healthy transitions into adulthood (Dierkhising et al., 2020; Dozier et al., 2014; Font & Gershoff, 2020). This consensus has led to a concerted effort to reduce the use of institutional placements for court-involved youth and to ensure that, if institutions are used, youth living in these placements are provided quality educational experiences (Palmer et al., 2020).

Importance of School Stability Among Court-Involved Students

Court-involved students comprise a diverse and vulnerable group of learners with complex cognitive, emotional, and behavioral needs (Brown et al., 2013; Garwood & Moore, 2019). Court involvement is associated with school instability (Frerer et al., 2013). Court-involved students experience educational disruptions at higher rates than their community peers (Frerer et al., 2013). Disruptions hinder learning continuity and academic achievement (Obradovic et al., 2009; Reynolds et al., 2009) and can lead to delays in vital academic service delivery (Zetlin et al., 2012). Educational gaps reduce court-involved students' ability to cultivate positive relationships with teachers and peers. Court-involved students experience exclusionary school discipline more frequently than their peers (Somers et al., 2020) and have higher rates of school disengagement (Kothari et al., 2018). Fewer placement changes among students living apart from their families significantly increase academic success and their likelihood of graduating from high school (Pecora et al., 2006).

Normalcy and School Engagement

School stability is critical for educational normalcy and strong school engagement. "Normalcy" refers to the ability to participate in developmentally- and age-appropriate activities (Pokempner et al., 2015; Simmons-Horton, 2017). For adolescents, these "normal" activities include activities considered typical for teens, such as participating in sports, socializing with friends, or pursuing a hobby. These activities are especially important for adolescent development because they provide opportunities to assert agency, try out new interests, learn about themselves, and generally foster healthy adolescent identity development (Simmons-Horton, 2017). Normalcy during adolescence is also closely linked to students' school experiences. School settings are often the main context for social interactions. Participation in extracurricular activities, for instance, helps adolescents build relationships with their peers and school community and is associated with increased school engagement and academic success (Rutman, & Hubberstey, 2018). Extracurricular activities are associated with increased school connectedness, higher grades, and lower school dropout rates (White et al., 2018). Many court-involved students living in institutional settings have experienced high levels of academic disruptions and instability that present barriers to educational normalcy (Crosby et al., 2017; Day et al., 2017). Many court-involved students living in institutional placements do not participate in common school-related activities such as sports, clubs, field trips, dances, internships, and volunteering opportunities (Pokempner et al., 2015).

Lack of educational normalcy impedes the development of strong school engagement. School engagement refers to students' relationships with peers and staff members and how students understand the importance of school, their school behavior, and their level of investment and participation in school activities. School engagement is generally understood as a

multifaceted construct (Appleton et al., 2008; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). It comprises both behavioral and psychological dimensions that are reciprocally connected (Fredricks et al., 2004; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012; Wang et al., 2018). School engagement is associated with multiple factors operating in students' social ecologies and school climates (Wang & Eccles, 2013).

Strong school engagement is understood to represent a crucial aspect of school success among adolescents that increases school completion (Fall & Roberts, 2012) and reduces delinquency (Li & Lerner, 2011). School engagement is often articulated as comprising three dimensions: emotional, cognitive, and behavioral (Fredricks et al., 2004; Wang & Eccles, 2013). Emotional school engagement describes how students feel about school, such as their relationships with peers and staff and if they feel as though they benefit. Cognitive engagement refers to the investment students make in their education, such as their effort in school and their grades. Behavioral engagement describes how students engage in school activities, and if they follow school rules (Fredricks et al., 2004). Strong school engagement is a requisite for building school communities that cultivate trusting student-teacher relationships and foster learning skills that support social, emotional, and intellectual development, and facilitate vital therapeutic support.

Trauma-Informed Frameworks in Education Among Court-Involved Students

Most court-involved students have histories of significant trauma experiences (Bethell et al., 2014; Bishop, 2018). Involvement in the child welfare system or the juvenile justice system frequently derives from experiences of child maltreatment and familial and community instabilities that intersect with social marginalities that have exposed court-involved students to substantial trauma and instability (Dierkhising et al., 2013; Greeson et al., 2011). Trauma is significantly related to lower academic achievement (Crosby, 2015; Paiva, 2019) and increased

social challenges (Bethell et al., 2014; Cole et al., 2005; West et al., 2014). Trauma alters neurodevelopment and neuroprocessing in ways that undermine healthy behavioral, cognitive, and emotional development and impede self-regulation and academic learning (Pravia, 2019). Court-involved adolescents often struggle in school and have poorer academic outcomes than their community peers (Clemens et al., 2017; Leone & Fink, 2017; Somers et al., 2020; Stone & Zibulsky, 2015). Promoting normalcy and strong school engagement among court-involved students requires consideration of students' past traumatic experiences and an understanding of how trauma impacts their behavior.

The 2018 Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) mandated that Qualified Residential Treatment Programs (QRTPs) such as RTCs must use trauma-informed treatment models (Dierkhising et al., 2020; Kelly, 2018; Stoltzfus, 2018; NCSL, 2020). Trauma-informed treatment models use an evidence-based understanding of the mechanisms through which trauma impacts development and behavior and promotes the development of therapeutic environments where all interventions and services are designed to recognize and respond to trauma and its behavioral manifestations (Carello & Butler, 2015; Harris & Fallot, 2001). These models focus on building safety, connections, managing emotions, and supportive programming that emphasizes strengths and promotes resilience.

While RTCs are required to use trauma-informed treatment models, federal legislation does not specifically outline how facilities should use trauma-informed approaches in their educational curricula. There is little federal guidance on how institutions such as RTCs should provide educational programming to court-involved students (Development Services Group, 2019). The use of trauma-informed educational frameworks may be particularly advantageous for promoting strong school engagement among this population, and some schools educating

students living in institutional settings have incorporated trauma-informed treatment frameworks into educational curricula (Baroni et al., 2020; Bryson et al., 2017; Marvin et al., 2017; Phifer & Hull, 2016).

Trauma-informed educational frameworks focus on how traumatic experiences shape school engagement and aim to train educators to view students' behaviors through a trauma lens. The goal of trauma-informed educational frameworks is the creation of school climates that increase school engagement and in which students and staff feel comfortable developing relationships, and all members of the school community feel physically and emotionally safe (Cohen et al., 2009). This is achieved through educating staff and making predictable routines that create a sense of security and stability which supports academic development (Pawlo et al., 2019; Transforming Education, 2020; Woolf, 2021).

Some trauma-informed educational approaches have also incorporated social and emotional learning (SEL) strategies to support the development of learning skills (Baroni et al., 2020) such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship acuity, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). Trauma-informed social and emotional learning (TI-SEL) differs from traditional SEL in its focus on providing increased support for students with significant trauma histories (Kim et al., 2021). TI-SEL aims to anticipate that students who have experienced substantial traumatic events may respond inappropriately to some stimuli in school and exhibit behaviors that in traditional school contexts would likely lead to punitive responses. TI-SEL curricula are structured to provide opportunities for staff to recognize disruptive behaviors within a trauma framework and offer appropriate supportive interventions for students. A key aspect of TI-SEL curricula is that they replace exclusionary school discipline

practices (suspension and expulsion) with alternatives aimed at redirecting students (Baroni et al., 2020; Crosby, 2018).

Curricula that integrate social and emotional learning competencies and trauma-informed frameworks offer a pedagogical approach that is particularly well-suited to support the educational success of court-involved adolescents living apart from their families in institutional placements. The implementation of TI-SEL curricula in schools educating court-involved students presents an opportunity to focus on promoting learning competencies while also emphasizing students' need for safety and positive connections within their educational environments.

Literature suggests that school engagement is linked to students' sense of school connectedness (Garwood & Moore, 2021; Green, 2020) and how they view their educational environments (LaBelle, 2019). Safe campuses and nurturing student-teacher relationships promote school engagement (Wang et al., 1997). Trauma-informed educational frameworks emphasize cultivating these school characteristics (Covell, 2010; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016; Transforming Education, 2020).

Trauma-informed curricula in institutional settings ought to provide a safe, stabilizing environment in which strong school engagement can flourish. But there is little known about how students perceive the benefits to their school engagement resulting from schools utilizing trauma-informed educational frameworks. The perspectives of court-involved students living in institutional settings are frequently not considered when examining educational curricula (Garcia-Molsosa et al., 2019; West et al., 2014). Examining this hard-to-reach student population's perspectives regarding their experiences is vital to better understand their complex and challenging educational needs.

Current Study

This qualitative study analyzed secondary data gathered through six focus groups conducted with court-involved students to examine how students attending a specialized charter school while living in an RTC viewed their school engagement. The study explored the research question: what aspects of the charter school's curriculum promote or hinder school engagement among students. The qualitative examination used thematic analysis to explore how court-involved students viewed school engagement while living in a confined institutional setting and how different aspects of their educational context and curriculum influenced their participation and feelings.

Methods

The secondary data used in this study was derived from focus groups collected as part of a school-led community-based participatory research (CBPR) evaluation study at a specialized public charter school for court-involved students. The school site was a public charter school co-located with an RTC in a Midwestern metropolitan area. This type of specialized charter school is defined under state law as a "strict discipline academy" (Michigan Department of Education, 2017). A strict discipline academy is a special public charter school that enrolls students under the supervision of the department of health and human services or a county juvenile court (Michigan Legislature, 2020; Section 380.1311g of the Michigan Revised School Code Act 451 of 1979). The school enrolls 5th to 12th grade students who were identified as female at birth, most of whom live in the co-located RTC. All the students attending the school were placed under the child welfare system's jurisdiction or adjudicated by the juvenile justice court system.

The RTC is a private, Catholic institution that receives public funds. It is a secure facility, and students cannot leave without prior authorization or supervision.

CBPR Evaluation Study

The school administration, teachers, and specialists collaborated to develop a TI-SEL curriculum tailored for the student population. Throughout the six-year curriculum development process (for more detail on the TI-SEL curriculum development see Baroni et al., 2020), the charter school's administration developed partnerships with academic researchers using CBPR methods to continually evaluate the curriculum. CBPR is a co-learning process that builds capacity within communities through power-sharing and reciprocity between researchers and community partners (Israel et al., 2008; Maiter et al., 2008; Wallerstein et al., 2017). CBPR is guided by principles that emphasize community impact, building on community strengths and resources, and equitable decision-making at each phase of the research process (Israel et al., 2008). Throughout the CBPR evaluation study, multiple academic researchers were invited to partner with the school in its development, implementation, and evaluation. The students at the school represent a population whose voice is not often heard in academic literature, and the CBPR study provided a research framework to gather and examine this hard-to-access cross-sectional data. The focus group protocol used to collect this data was collaboratively produced by the charter school's administration and academic researchers through the CBPR process and was structured to examine how students understood their school engagement. The focus groups were facilitated by a team of four academic researchers. Two of the academic researchers facilitating the focus groups had long-term involvement with the school's CBPR project and were familiar with the charter school staff and students.

Sampling and Administration

The current study used secondary data derived from six focus groups conducted with 37 students. All students in the school (N=109) were eligible to participate in the focus groups. Inclusion in the focus groups was based on a convenience sample of students who volunteered to participate. The focus groups were initially planned to be conducted in person on the school campus, however, at the time of the study, the planned in-person focus groups were canceled due to health concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the study was modified, and the focus groups were conducted via Zoom. Due to privacy considerations, students were asked before the beginning of the focus group session whether they consented to record the Zoom session. Three focus groups provided verbal consent to having the focus groups' video and audio recorded, while three focus groups declined to be recorded. In addition to video and audio conferencing via Zoom, the focus groups used the Zoom chat feature. This allowed students who felt more comfortable writing their responses rather than speaking an opportunity to contribute. The current study analyzed students' contributions to the focus groups through data derived from a combination of formats including the focus group Zoom transcripts, chat logs, and facilitator notes.

Sample

Thirty-seven students participated in the six focus groups. The school administration provided limited demographic data for each student who participated in the focus groups including race and grade level. All demographic information was provided by the school administration and was not self-reported by students. The participants ranged from 6th to 12th grade. Most participants (91.8%) were high school students (9th Graders 35.1%) (10th Graders 27%) (11th Graders 16.2%) (12th Graders 13.5%), and the racial/ethnic background of the

students included 19 (51.4%) White or European Americans students, 17 (45.9%) Black or African American students, and 1 (2.7%) Latina or Hispanic student (Table 4.1). Five of the student focus groups included six participants, and one included seven participants. Each focus group lasted approximately forty-five minutes.

Researcher Positionality

Researchers' perspectives and backgrounds are influential in the research process and frame how data is understood and disseminated (Parson, 2019). The first author identifies as a White-Hispanic man and doctoral student with a background in both education and public child welfare, and life experience living in a congregate care setting. He was the primary analyst of the data, and his aim in conducting this research was the development of educational support for court-involved young people.

Analytic Approach

The focus group transcripts, facilitator notes, and chat logs from the six focus groups were uploaded into Atlas.ti (ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH) and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify themes central to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The thematic analysis was conducted according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic coding. The goal of thematic analysis is to distinguish themes that are salient across the data and help inform understanding of the topic and research questions (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). The first author conducted the initial coding, and a second coder was then used to ensure reliability and consistency. The initial coding process included organizing the data into segments related to the study's research questions. From these segments, inductive coding was used to examine students' perspectives regarding aspects of the school's curriculum that promoted or challenged their school engagement. Open coding was used to

develop the first round of initial codes. These codes were then reviewed, modified, and refined. After the initial coding process, the codes were examined for emerging concepts across the data. These concepts were arranged as subthemes and then grouped into a larger overarching theme. Four central themes were identified. After the researchers completed the coding process, school leadership was invited to review the results and partner in the analysis process.

Findings

Two themes emerged from the focus groups related to the impact of the charter school's curriculum on strengthening school engagement. The themes that emerged related to (1) personalized instruction and smaller class sizes, and (2) the stabilizing educational environment students experienced attending the specialized charter school (Table 4.2).

What Aspects of the Charter School Promoted School Engagement?

Personalized Education

The importance of personalized education was mentioned twenty-one times across five of the six focus groups. In the focus groups, students noted how the school's smaller class sizes and flexible teachers helped create a more personalized educational experience that promoted their school engagement and strengthened their relationship with their school community. For example, a 10th grade student said*, "I came from a public school. A really big high school. So, it's easier here at [school name]. There are smaller classes. There are not really big crowds of people. My grades have improved. I went from C's and D's to A's and B's."* Another 10th grader added, "*the smaller classrooms, before I was worried about other girls and stuff, but now I can just do my work."* Several students noted their experiences of anxiety and social problems in larger school settings. The smaller classroom sizes at the charter school helped them feel more

comfortable: *"Here there are less people which is helpful because I have high anxiety"; "I just don't like having a lot of people in the classroom, but here there aren't many."* Several students also emphasized that the smaller class sizes and helpful teachers made them feel encouraged and engaged. One 11th grade student said, *"The teachers and staff are very helpful, and the classes are smaller."* A 12th grade student described how the teachers were more flexible and encouraging than those in her previous schools. "*They'll try and say like you can do it. But if you need a break, take a break, but you can do this, and give you something to fidget with."* This perception of the teachers and school staff members as more flexible and more understanding than teachers and school staff at their previous schools was echoed by several other students. One 9th grade student said, "*for me, I do my work on time, so I get more freedom. They let me draw or do my own thing while everyone else is doing work.* "Another student commented about the increased support and lack of exclusionary discipline, *The teachers are really supportive. They don't suspend me because they know I need that support."* One 11th grade student discussed why the teachers at the public charter school are more flexible and understanding than at other schools she had attended. "*The teachers know not to expect so much from us because we are going to be learning. And some kids may get distracted easily or have mental issues and that can affect their schoolwork."*

Other students discussed how their learning had changed due to the increased support they experienced. A 9th grade student noted, *"in this school compared to my other school my learning changed because we have an opportunity to grow and have less hard work and more time to do it and more effort put in by the teachers . . . The teachers are more understanding."* Another 9th grade student added, *"my grades have improved a lot, the teachers are nothing but nice to us."* Several other students provided similar feedback: *"I actually ask for help. I used to*

be shy. I kind of still am, but now I ask for help."; "I pay more attention now. I really don't have good grades, but they are better than before . . . The teachers try to make it easier to understand, but sometimes it's hard."

Stabilizing Environment

The other key theme that emerged from the focus group data regarding augmented school engagement was the stabilizing environment students experienced attending the charter school while living in the RTC. Eighteen students across five focus groups discussed their lack of school stability before their placement in the RTC and enrollment at the charter school. One 9th grade student, who reported getting good grades in her previous schools, reported that before coming to the residential school she had experienced multiple placement changes that forced her to change schools and disrupted her educational continuity. *"I didn't do anything; I switched placements."* An 8th grade student noted that she had previously been placed in a psychiatric facility, causing an educational gap, and was then moved to the RTC placement. *"I got put in a mental hospital and then I was put here."* A 10th grade student reported experiencing anxiety and being overwhelmed by caregiving responsibilities while attending her previous school, which limited her attendance and led to a lack of school engagement. "*I actually wouldn't go to school because I had a lot of social anxiety. I only went about six times in a month. I have a son and I was always so tired I wouldn't ever want to go. And when I did, I was miserable and stuck to myself."* Students noted that attending the residential school had stabilized their school experiences which had previously been unstable due to behavioral and situational factors. One 10th grade student said, "*before I was skipping school and running away and I'm at [RTC name] for that reason and more."* A 9th grade student noted that she had previously attended multiple schools and been expelled due to behavioral problems: *"I went to six different schools because I*

was bad." Numerous students mentioned multiple placement changes, getting into fights at school, getting expelled, experiencing bullying, skipping school, and broadly not having positive relationships at their previous schools. The stability and lack of exclusionary school discipline for these students were instrumental in promoting their sense of school engagement.

What Aspects of the Charter School Made Strong School Engagement Difficult?

Two themes emerged from the focus group data related to how aspects of the charter school curriculum could challenge students' school engagement. The strongest theme related to students' sense of a lack of normalcy. This theme described students' view that attending the charter school while living in an RTC did not provide them with many aspects of the traditional school experiences they valued, such as having multiple opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities and greater autonomy. The second strongest theme described some students' feelings that the curricular content was not a good fit for their learning levels and that the course content did not provide them with practical skills they valued relating to post-secondary, vocational, and life-skills attainment (Table 4.2).

Lack of Educational Normalcy

In the focus groups, students discussed their feelings regarding the lack of normalcy they experienced at the charter school and while living in the RTC. Students in several focus groups noted that they did not view the charter school as a "normal" or "real" school experience. One 10th grade *s*tudent referenced the charter school in comparison to a traditional community school. "*I'd rather go to a normal school because I don't feel like we get the full learning experience."* A 12th grade student reinforced this sentiment: "*I would rather go to a real high school because our diplomas are fake."* Twenty-four students across five focus groups discussed aspects of the charter school they felt lacked educational normalcy or provided fewer opportunities to

participate in normal school activities. Multiple students referenced a lack of extracurricular activities. Many students reflected on extracurricular activities they participated in at their previous schools. Students mentioned various sports (e.g., basketball, cheerleading, football, volleyball), music (e.g., band, choir, orchestra), and clubs (e.g., drama), and noted that the public charter school does not have many extracurricular opportunities. One 10th grade student said, *"I feel [school name] should have more school clubs."* Another 10th grade student said: *"There are no sports, no clubs, nothing."* Other focus groups also discussed their desire for more extracurricular activities. One 12th grade student said, *"I feel like we need field trips and activities like dance classes and stuff. And sports."* Another student in the focus group agreed, *"I agree. Basketball or soccer or something. Give us something to do."* A third student chimed in, *"More hands-on classes, field trips."* In another group, a 10th grade student expressed her desire to participate in sports. *"When I was in the 8th grade I did track, I never got to compete in it because my grades were terrible. It's always been a dream for me to do basketball though."* In addition to a lack of extracurricular activities, students expressed their dislike for the regimented structure and lack of freedom at the charter school. One student said, in the *"schools I went to, we were allowed, if we didn't want to eat the school food, we could order pizza."* Another added, *"We were able to go wherever we wanted. We didn't have to tell anyone where we went."* This prompted another student to say, *"We have to ask for permission to go to the bathroom. That seems very unnecessary. We have to like check-in. I don't like how we have to buddy. Cause I don't like touching people, I don't like to be touched."* These sentiments reflected the idea of a lack of educational normalcy experienced by students at the charter school.

Mismatched Learning Levels & Course Content

Fourteen students across five focus groups discussed that the course content at the charter school felt like it was not a good fit for their interests or learning levels. Students expressed that they wanted more content with more real-life applications. One 9th grade student noted, "*The experience with [school name] feels like a setback because a lot of it is things I know and are below my level . . . We only do worksheets. We don't put it to the test. So, it's like saying stuff we already know. . . We need more housing, job-related things."* Another 11th grade student in the focus group added, *"In this school, they don't teach business-like things."* Two other students in the group agreed. One said*, "I want to learn how to pay bills do taxes, real-life stuff."* Another student added, *"More about jobs in school."*

Other focus groups discussed the need for instruction closer to students' grades and ability levels. One 9th grade student said, *"I feel like my grades are not good. I'm struggling in some of my classes, but like they give me the work and I don't understand it. Some of the work was easy but I didn't understand it. I had more help in my other school."* In another group, a student expressed that she felt the content was a mismatch for her learning level. *"I feel like [school name] teachers either go too fast or too slow."* Other focus groups also reiterated variants of this sentiment. A 9th grader said, *"I feel like [school name] could teach us more about what is in our grade level. They really don't help because there are so many kids so they can't just stop and help one kid at a time there is not enough time."* Another added, *"I don't like the fact that they combine the grades. They are teaching me things I already know."* A third student stated that *"It's hard to learn. And we don't have real teachers here so we can't ask for help."*

Discussion

Most studies evaluating school engagement among the court-involved have relied on students' academic outcomes (Green, 2020). This study focused on how youth understand their school's structure and curriculum and how this influences school engagement. The study's findings highlight some of the challenges that schools serving court-involved young people living in institutional placements may face in balancing students' desires and needs for normalcy while concurrently providing safety and stability. This study's findings suggest that it is hard to create curricula that successfully balance vulnerable students' needs for normalcy without compromising safety and stability. These findings support expanding emphasis on promoting normalcy and developing innovative strategies to help court-involved students have meaningful opportunities to build the skills and relationships that will set them up for post-secondary success.

The Role of TI-SEL in Fostering Personalized Education Opportunities

A central finding in this study was the importance students placed on the charter school providing personalized educational opportunities in small classrooms. In the focus groups, students discussed how smaller class sizes and flexible teachers helped create a more personalized experience that increased their school engagement. Smaller class sizes and flexible teaching practices helped to manage students' anxiety and made them feel comfortable and included. Another important finding is related to the curriculum's alternative approach to exclusionary school discipline practices. The school's TI-SEL curriculum replaced suspensions or expulsions with an alternative intervention called the Monarch Room. The Monarch Room is a special place for students who are struggling or feeling overwhelmed to take a break in a supportive environment rather than worrying that they would be suspended or expelled (Baroni

et al., 2020). Exclusionary school discipline has harmful effects on school engagement. The TI-SEL curriculum provided an alternative to suspension or expulsion. The students referred to this alternative to exclusionary school discipline as an important element of positive school engagement and made them feel as though the teachers and school staff members were invested in taking into consideration their unique needs. The TI-SEL curriculum trained faculty to be able to recognize when students needed a break or were feeling overwhelmed. It emphasized the importance of flexibility to adapt to students' diverse learning needs.

The study's findings highlighted the importance of trauma training for educators. Teachers who are not trained in understanding and recognizing trauma responses in students' behavior may not be prepared to appropriately respond to students' silence, nonparticipation, or dysregulation. This study highlighted using trauma-informed frameworks in schools educating court-involved young people living in congregate settings (Brown et al., 2013; Garwood & Moore, 2019).

This study's findings suggested that a personalized educational opportunity was deeply valued for its positive impact on connectedness and school engagement. The literature suggests that court-involved youth living in institutional placements have higher rates of special education needs than their community peers (Crosby et al., 2017). Students with special education needs have higher rates of conduct problems in school and experience exclusionary discipline at higher rates (King et al., 2018). They experience less academic success (Brown et al., 2008) and are more likely to disengage from school (Sullivan et al., 2014). This study's findings highlight the value of TI-SEL curricula in providing individualized educational opportunities to court-involved with specific academic and learning needs, helping them to access educational normalcy.

Importance of School Stability

The study's findings highlighted the impact of students' school experiences. This study suggests that increased school stability is an important factor in promoting school engagement. Literature has consistently emphasized the importance of school stability for court-involved youth (Clemens et al., 2018), as well as its impact on students' sense of safety and willingness to engage (Mihalec-Adkins & Cooley, 2020). Court-involved students' education is too often impeded by placement changes. When court-involved students view their placements as stable and supportive, students have higher self-esteem (Mihalec-Adkins & Cooley, 2020), hold more positive views regarding their future, and do better academically (Kelly et al., 2021). This study's findings emphasized the importance of stabilizing educational environments in building positive relationships that reframe students' perceptions of school. Most court-involved students living in RTCs have been progressively moved up to more restrictive placements before being placed in institutional care (Bellonci, Holmes, & Whittaker, 2019). This process is associated with multiple school and placement changes. Increased stability afforded by attending school while living in an institutional setting was an important factor in promoting their school engagement. This finding should motivate educators in community schools serving court-involved students to increase protections that help maintain school stability. Despite the stabilizing educational environment many students reported, the duration of young people's placements in residential treatment should be as brief as possible. Most students do not spend a complete academic year in residential treatment, and a key emphasis should be to help students transition to less restrictive living situations that will provide them with legal and relational permanency, lasting school stability, and the treatment supports they need.

The impacts of court involvement often continue into adulthood, as those involved with the foster care and juvenile justice systems are more likely to experience economic hardship throughout their lives (Gilman et al., 2015). Court-involved young people are much less likely to graduate from high school than their community peers (McCurley et al., 2017). School engagement can interrupt this trend and play a role in reducing recidivism (Kubek et al., 2020) and increasing school completion (Fall & Roberts, 2012). Completing a high school degree is an important social milestone for young people. Increasing school engagement is imperative for promoting positive outcomes in adulthood and redirecting students toward healthy transitions such as vocational or other post-secondary educational opportunities. Increased stability provides a strong foundation to build trusting student-teacher relationships in a safe and stable environment. Institutional care can provide high-quality educational opportunities that simultaneously meet needs for stability, safety, and therapeutic and behavioral interventions. To meet this goal collaborative, supportive trauma-informed curricula that help build learning skills and develop relationships are needed. This study's findings can help residential schools to prioritize strategies in which administrators and staff build healthy school climates that promote student-centered curricula.

Developing the Right Curricular Fit in Diverse Classrooms

One of the key facets of the charter school that students found challenging was the issue of appropriate curricular fit. Literature suggests that educational mismatches can undermine school engagement (Talbert et al., 2019). This study's findings suggest that, because of the variety of previous educational experiences, educational mismatches were a problem, with problems arising from placing students in similar learning level groups. Students viewed the charter school's classes as including too many diverse learning levels. Some students felt the

pace was too slow and the content not sufficiently rigorous. Negative views regarding whether their academic courses were a good fit for their learning levels may be due in part to negative perceptions of individualized learning, in which students work at their own pace rather than receiving instruction as part of a class: students at diverse academic levels are grouped in the same classroom. This system may cause teachers to balance accommodating multiple learning needs simultaneously, and students with more advanced learning may feel as though they are not being challenged.

Some students felt as though the school did not focus sufficiently on providing employment skills development and what students termed "real-life" content, such as paying taxes or how to rent a house. The students put a high value on life skills development and job training opportunities. They felt these were underrepresented in the charter school's courses. Studies surveying former court-involved youth note life skills training to be a vital need that is lacking in their educational experience (Armstrong-Heimsoth et al., 2021). Vocational training and job skills should be more prominently featured. Schools serving court-involved students should develop more programs and community partnerships that provide students with opportunities for greater exposure to work training, such as internships and mentoring programs. Some model examples of the types of life skills development programs that might be developed have been instituted in California through the iFoster program. The iFoster jobs program in California provides court-involved young people preparing to transition out of the child welfare system with internships and job placements and training in employable skills. iFoster has helped over seven hundred transitional-age foster youth get permanent employment in living-wage jobs (iFoster, 2022). These types of job training partnerships are vital for court-involved students and help young people develop the skills and relationships needed to procure and maintain

employment in adulthood. These and other types of vocational and technical programs offer students, who may not be interested in attending a traditional four-year university, educational pathways toward certificates or associate degrees aimed at well-paying careers (Think of Us, 2022). Providing these types of programs in addition to TI-SEL skill-building can help court-involved students experience educational normalcy and provide academic, vocational, and post-secondary opportunities that match students' goals.

Challenges of Educational Normalcy for Court-Involved Students

The ability to access normalcy for court-involved young people is fraught with challenges. As a consequence of court involvement, young people's ability to participate in typical age-appropriate activities is limited. Attending school and being connected to a school community are vital parts of building normalcy and school protectiveness for court-involved students.

The findings suggested that the students in this study viewed participation in extracurricular activities as an important component of educational normalcy. Participation in extracurricular activities cultivates strong relationships with peers and the school community; and it increases school engagement and academic success (Rutman, & Hubberstey, 2018). Schools should increase their options for extracurricular activities and try to collaborate with students about new activities that students want: structured field trips, intermural sports, clubs associated with students' hobbies or interests, and opportunities for applied learning, such as science lab work.

This study's findings suggest that residential schools' curricula can be improved by being more student-centered and focusing on creating student-led opportunities to connect with interests and community resources in safe and prosocial ways. The child welfare advocacy

literature regarding court-involved young people (and formerly court-involved young people) emphasized the importance of normalcy (Pokempner et al., 2015). Normalcy is vital for healthy adolescent development (Simmons-Horton, 2017). The loud calls stressing the importance of normalcy from child welfare and juvenile justice system alumni and researchers were echoed in this study's findings.

Strengths and Limitations

This study is among the first to explore how court-involved students attending school while living in a residential treatment center view promotive factors and challenges for school engagement. This study provides in-depth descriptions of how students perceived the value and benefits of attending school in an institutional setting, and it draws conclusions about their school engagement. This study includes several limitations that constrain its generalizability to other settings serving court-involved young people. This study's sample included only students identified as female at birth, and no self-reported race or ethnicity data were gathered. The study's recommendation may not be generalizable to facilities serving students identified as male at birth, and the facility's specific dynamics and population may differ from other facilities serving court-involved students. The school's student population may also not be representative of schools in other geographic regions with different student racial or ethnic compositions. Many other factors may impact school engagement that were not discussed in the student focus groups due to sensitivity to students' trauma histories. While these limitations should be taken into consideration, this study's findings do offer an important snapshot of how court-involved students living in an institutional placement view the pros and cons of their residential education experiences. Findings from this study should help inform the development and implementation of curricula in residential settings to advance strong school engagement and illuminate the

delicate balance between normalcy and safety. Additional research is needed to better understand the supportive factors for school engagement among court-involved youth and how trauma-informed residential school curricula can generate safety, stability, normalcy, social and emotional skill-building, and academic success.

Conclusion

This study draws attention to students' perspectives and uses their contributions to attempt to improve educational experiences for students attending school while living in restrictive congregate care settings. Their perspectives assist in understanding how to augment school engagement, educational normalcy, and school completion. Institutional placements are part of the continuum of care for some subpopulations among court-involved youth. This study found that the students in the study identified positive and negative aspects of their schooling while living in the institutional placement and attending the co-located charter school. School engagement seemed to be supported by the increased stability and personalized educational opportunities afforded by the TI-SEL curriculum. But the lack of extracurricular activities reduced autonomy, and fewer opportunities for post-secondary and vocational development reported by students diminished students' sense of educational normalcy. This study's findings contribute to understanding how trauma-informed educational frameworks can be used to redirect school disengagement among court-involved students. It highlighted some of the challenges of attending school while living in institutional settings. Including student perspectives in curricular development makes an important contribution to effective instruction in an institutional placement. Nurturing the most vulnerable subpopulations of court-involved

youth and building positive educational trajectories is vital for their long-term health and well-being.

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Tables

Table 4.1

Grade level and race/ethnicity of student focus group participants.

Grade Level	
Middle School (6th - 8th Grade)	8.2%
High School (9th - 12th Grade)	91.8%
Race/Ethnicity	
Black or African American / Latina or Hispanic	48.6%
White or European American	51.4%

N=37

Table 4.2

Themes and illustrative quotes by the number of students discussing each theme across the six focus groups.

Themes	Frequency	Illustrative Quotes
Personalized Education	21 (5)	*"I came from a public school, a really big high school, so it's easier here . . .there are smaller classes, there is not a really big crowd of people. My grades have improved."* *"My experience in schools was I felt left out a lot but when I came to [school name] I became more opened up*
Stabilizing Environment	17 (6)	*"I didn't do anything. I switched placements."* *"Before I was skipping school and running away."* *"I went to six different schools because I was "bad."*
Lack of Educational Normalcy	24 (5)	*"I feel like we need field trips and activities like dance classes and stuff. And sports."* *"I'd rather go to a normal school, because I don't feel like we get the full learning experience."*
Mismatch Learning Levels & Course Content	14 (5)	*"I feel like my grades are not good. I'm struggling in some of my classes, but like they give me the work and I don't understand it. Some of the work was easy but I didn't understand it. I had more help in my other school."* "*The experience with [school name] feels like a setback because a lot of it is things I know and are below my level . . . We only do worksheets. We don't put it to the test. So, it's like saying stuff we already know. . . We need more housing, job-related things."*

Note: Frequency refers to the number of times each theme was discussed (The number of focus groups each theme was discussed in. | Students, N=37 (Focus Groups, N=6).

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

This three-article dissertation examined the importance of a trauma-informed social and emotional learning curriculum on school engagement among court-involved adolescents living in a residential treatment center and attending a specialized public charter school. The findings in this dissertation highlighted the efficacy of using trauma-informed SEL among students with significant trauma histories attending alternative schools outside their communities. In Chapter Two, the perspectives of teachers and school staff members regarding the importance of trauma-informed SEL were explored. The paper's findings highlighted the value school staff members placed on developing tailored TI-SEL interventions that meet the specific learning needs of vulnerable students. Chapter Three examined the relationship between students' SEL competencies and school engagement. Students completed a survey questionnaire related to their perspectives surrounding school engagement and their development of social and emotional learning competencies. The findings from the paper suggested that stronger SEL competencies are significantly associated with stronger school engagement. In Chapter Four, students' views regarding their school engagement were explored to learn how components of the trauma-informed SEL curriculum promoted strong school engagement. The paper's findings highlighted the negotiation between educational normalcy and safety and stability embedded within the experience of attending school while living in an institutional setting. The paper's findings emphasized the importance of incorporating trauma-informed SEL curricula among court-involved students and highlighted students' perspectives regarding the benefits and challenges of attending school while living in residential care.

Together, these studies reinforced the necessity of cultivating court-involved students' social and emotional learning skills and providing a trauma-informed educational context in which students feel safe, connected, and supported in their educational development. The findings from this dissertation supported the use of TI-SEL curricula and provided insight into the strengths and challenges of using TI-SEL curricula among court-involved adolescents living in confined congregate settings.

Study Implications and Opportunities for Future Research

Several areas for future research were also highlighted through the dissertations' findings. For instance, this study focused specifically on the development and use of a TI-SEL curriculum among court-involved students identified as female at birth. More research is needed to explore strategies for implementing TI-SEL curricula across diverse congregate care settings serving students with different gender identities and service needs.

Another issue that emerged from this dissertation's findings that should be explored in future research is the issue of aftercare and educational and vocational support for court-involved young people as they transition out of state care. Young people who participated in the study emphasized the importance of their school providing them with normalcy as well as concrete vocational and life skills training that would directly benefit them as they moved toward more independence. Future research should explore innovative strategies for engaging court-involved young people through emerging adulthood. Lastly, this study's findings suggest that future research is needed to better understand the use of congregate care settings for youth, and in what contexts congregate care should be used. Future research should explore the development of federal policies regulating services in congregate care settings, and how both licensed and unlicensed congregate care settings can be better regulated to protect vulnerable young people

and ensure that all have access to appropriate educational and life-skills developmental opportunities.

Aftercare Supports

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a critical developmental stage that has far-reaching impacts on social, educational, and economic outcomes later in life. For most teens, adolescence is a developmental stage in which they begin to develop independent relationships, explore different identities, and build life skills that gradually prepare them for early adulthood responsibilities. Likewise, in early adulthood, most young people continue this gradual process of developing and asserting greater independence while continuing to receive familial support. However, for many court-involved young people living in out-of-home care, the transition from adolescence to adulthood is often characterized by fewer familial and social supports.

The idea of "emerging adulthood" (Arnett, 2000) offers a framework for understanding the economic and social contexts young people in the United States inhabit throughout their transitions from adolescence to adulthood and highlights the resource gaps that many court-involved youth experience in early adulthood. Emerging adulthood describes a developmental stage associated with prolonged entrance into adulthood resulting from changes in economic and social relations within modern industrialized economies (Arnett, 2000). As adulthood has become increasingly delayed and young people postpone many of the traditional milestones associated with the transition from adolescence to adulthood (e.g., financial independence, parenting, careers, etc.), emerging adulthood has become a popular term for representing an 'in-between' period that many young people experience. In its normative conception, emerging adulthood is experienced as a volitional period when young people focus on exploring and cultivating educational and personal development that will better prepare them for stability and

security as adults (Arnett, 2000; Berzin et al., 2014; Jones, 2014). According to Arnett (2000), normative socio-developmental goals in emerging adulthood include the development of gradual autonomy while being financially dependent on support systems, self-focus, and identity exploration, and cultivating educational and professional skills while not yet formally connected to the labor market. The ability to meet these normative developmental goals has far-reaching impacts on people's lives.

To fully experience emerging adulthood, young people must have some form of social and financial support. This typically takes the form of familial support (Jones, 2014). Young people lacking strong familial support systems are often immediately thrust into the formal or informal labor markets: low-wage and precarious forms of employment that channel young people away from educational and vocational opportunities with greater potential for advancement. Many young people with court involvement have little support that reduces access to higher education and the inability to fully access potential professional opportunities (Furstenberg, 2010). This results in a heightened risk of experiencing financial struggles (Curry & Abrams, 2015; MacDonald, 2014; Courtney, 2009).

The expansion of extended foster care services over the last two decades has provided vital resources to support court-involved young people as they transition from adolescence to adulthood. However, many court-involved young people choose not to participate in extended care despite their limited resources and support (Jones, 2019). Future research should explore how court-involved young people understand successful transitions to adulthood and evaluate multiple pathways to success that go beyond going to college or getting a job. The use of vocational training programs, community college programs, supportive housing, mentorships, and internships among young people transitioning out of care should be expanded to better

understand how the child welfare system and juvenile justice system can encourage ongoing participation in services vital to young people in this life-stage who have limited familial supports. One example of an exemplary aftercare program that has had success in supporting court-involved young people as they transition from foster care is the First Star program (First Star, 2022). First Star is a nationwide program that connects child welfare agencies and schools serving court-involved students with colleges and career training programs that support youth in developing postsecondary and vocational skills through mentorships and immersive summer residential programs (Brown et al., 2021; First Start, 2022). The program has been shown to be successful in engaging young people as they move into early adulthood and providing needed support and resources (Brown et al., 2021; Chapman & Samuels, 2020).

Research suggests that multiple factors influence court-involved young people's decisions to access services in early adulthood. Most American youth people do not have the financial means to independently support themselves. Concerns regarding the ability to meet basic needs are central to many court-involved young people's motivation to access aftercare services (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012; Gomez et al., 2015; Berzin et al., 2015). Beyond basic needs, research suggests that many young people are motivated to participate in aftercare services because they offer them a greater opportunity to continue to cultivate their relationships in nurturing placements, go to college, and experience continued support as they transition from adolescence to adulthood (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012; Gomez et al., 2015; Berzin et al., 2015).

Few studies have explored the reasons young people decline aftercare services after turning eighteen. Among the few studies that have examined these questions, findings suggest that some court-involved young people may misunderstand or not be aware of the opportunities

available to them due to a lack of sufficient guidance despite the often complex court proceedings they have been subjected to (MacDonald, 2014; Goodkind et al., 2011). Other youth may desire greater autonomy and view continued participation in public support systems as undermining their conceptions of independence and adulthood (Pryce et al., 2017; Berzin et al., 2014; Goodkind et al., 2011; Samuels & Pryce, 2008). Ensuring that young people are engaged early in their transition planning processes and can meaningfully participate is vital. Studies have suggested that some of the reasons young people do not participate in available services are due to confusion regarding their options (Havileck & Peters, 2014; Wylie, 2014; MacDonald, 2014). These findings suggest that the programs and practices of juvenile courts can play a large role in determining whether a young person decides to participate in aftercare services. Courtney and colleagues' California Youth Transitions to Adulthood (CalYOUTH) study found that one of the primary reasons young people reported deciding to forgo extended foster care was feeling as though they had not been sufficiently included or engaged in their planning process before turning eighteen. CalYOUTH participants who opted not to participate in extended foster care reported having fewer contacts with social workers and court representatives regarding their aftercare plans and having had less input into their youth transition plans (Courtney et al., 2016). One encouraging program is the Achieve My Plan (AMP) intervention (Walker et al., 2012). AMP provides young people individualized coaching that supports them through team decision-making meetings and helps them develop and express their goals and aspirations throughout their transition planning processes. Young people are more likely to engage with services when they are active participants in their planning processes. Walker and collogues (2017) found that young people were more likely to actively participate in their aftercare planning process when they were engaged in AMP services (Walker et al., 2017; Walker et al., 2012). Further research is

needed to understand how to better support and include young people in their aftercare planning processes to ensure that they feel positive about the process and increase their likelihood of accessing and utilizing the support.

Another encouraging practice in promoting engagement in aftercare planning is participatory court processes for court-involved young people. Problem-solving courts were initially developed to produce more collaborative and less traumatic court processes for vulnerable populations. The goal of these specialized courts is to reduce recidivism through the provision of services aimed directly at addressing the underlying psychosocial and material issues influencing offense-related behaviors (Campbell, 2010; Miller, Block, & DeVault, 2020; Pope & Jones, 2021). Problem-solving courts, such as drug courts and homelessness courts, are effective in supporting people navigating complex legal processes to meet important needs that reduce their risk for recidivism (Fordyce, 2017; Buss, 2016; Campbell, 2010). These types of problem-solving courts have also been adapted for use with young people to provide increased opportunities to engage youth involved in juvenile court systems (Pope & Jones, 2020). Developing problem-solving courts for youth focuses on creating collaborative, youth-centered legal processes that include young people in vital decision-making processes that impact their futures. For court-involved young people living in out-of-home placements, participation in their legal affairs is often difficult (MacDonald, 2014; Goodkind et al., 2011). Successful planning for court-involved young people preparing to leave out-of-home care should include extensive involvement on the part of the young people themselves. Youth participation not only ensures that the aftercare plans that are developed authentically reflect the goals and needs of the youth, but it also serves as an important developmental process that helps foster social and emotional learning skills through the process of participation itself (Buss et al., 2008). Using collaborative

court practices offers court-involved youth an opportunity to cultivate skills in self-determination, goal construction, and leadership that are integral to strong social and emotional development. Future studies should investigate how the development of collaborative courts for youth leaving congregate care settings can help support young people in developing strong aftercare plans and fostering social and emotional skill-building.

Licensed and Unlicensed Residential Youth Facilities

Other than the new accreditation standards required by the federal Family First legislation, there is little consistency in the way that states regulate residential settings for young people. Some states mandate strict oversight of youth residential programs whereas others provide few regulations, particularly in unlicensed youth facilities. In addition to licensed congregate-care facilities, there are a significant number of unlicensed facilities, including residential treatment centers, wilderness programs, boy's ranches, addiction rehabilitation centers, and therapeutic boarding schools that operate without clear regulations and safeguards in place to protect the youth in their care (American Bar Association, 2021; Golightley, 2020). There is growing momentum across the United States to better regulate residential facilities to protect young people living away from their families. For instance, lawmakers in Missouri recently passed the "Residential Care Facility Notification Act" (HB 557/560) that requires all youth residential facilities to conduct background checks on staff at unlicensed congregate care facilities. While this dissertation focused specifically on a licensed RTC that receives public funds and specifically serves youth involved in the foster care system and or the juvenile justice systems, further research should explore the educational and developmental well-being of youth living in unlicensed congregate facilities.

Future Research Questions

As I move forward in my academic work, I intend to focus my research agenda on the examination for the following research questions:

- What are the best ways to integrate and adapt TI-SEL curricula for congregate care settings serving male-identified students?
- What role can a residential setting play in promoting educational normalcy for court-involved students without compromising their safety and stability?
- How can systems better engage court-involved young people in planning their transitions into adulthood?
- What types of community partnerships can support court-involved students living in congregate care placement? How can internship and mentoring opportunities in students' communities be better supported?
- What strategies can be used to increase school engagement?
- What are some ways systems can better prioritize young people's understandings of successful transitions to adulthood and cater to multiple pathways of success?
- What types of vocational training opportunities can be provided to young people who may not want to go straight to college and would otherwise be pushed directly into low-wage labor with little upward mobility?
- How can federal policy regarding the educational needs of young people living in congregate care settings be more clearly defined?
- What types of policies are needed to ensure that young people living in licensed and unlicensed congregate-care facilities across the United State are ensured safety and appropriate support for their healthy development?

Social Justice Statement

The three articles in this dissertation study focused on the educational experiences of court-involved youth involved in the foster care system and the juvenile justice system. This research aimed to expand understanding of the unique educational needs of this vulnerable population and examine curricular supports that will enhance their educational well-being and school success. This research supports the social justice aims of the social work profession and is intended to be used to improve services and support for young people navigating challenging educational systems, substantial life challenges, and systemic injustices.

A central tension throughout this dissertation is the use of congregate care to support the educational well-being of court-involved young people. There is a broad consensus among experts that the use of congregate care and other forms of restrictive institutional placements are detrimental to young people's healthy psychosocial and educational development (Barth, 2002; Casey Family Programs 2018; Dozier et al., 2014). Many congregate settings have inadequate oversight and are unsafe for young people (Behar et al., 2007). A Children's Bureau study (2015) found that many young people placed in congregate care settings could be better served in community-based placements and did not have clinical needs that warranted institutional placement.

The recent *Think of Us* report (Fathallah & Sullivan, 2021) detailed former court-involved youth's perspectives of life in congregate care. The foster care alumni resoundingly reported that their experiences in congregate care were unsafe, unhealthy, and unwarranted; and many experienced instances of abuse while living in congregate settings. Ensuring that court-involved young people can receive the treatment and care they need in the least restrictive family-like placements is a vital social justice issue (Casey Family Programs 2018; Dozier et al.,

2014; Barth et al., 2007; Gutterswijk et al., 2020; LeBel et al., 2018; Whittaker et al., 2016). Recent legislation, such as the 2018 Family First Prevention Services Act, has been enacted to help reduce the use of congregate care (Kelly, 2018; NCSL, 2021; Pokempner, 2019). Yet, despite significant reductions, congregate care continues to be an enduring component of the child welfare and juvenile justice systems' continuum of care (Lanctôt et al., 2010; Zhou et al., 2021). It is crucial that social workers, educators, policymakers, and others involved in the placement of court-involved young people hear what they have reported regarding their experiences in congregate care and further reduce the use of congregate care. When congregate care is used, it should be time-limited and provided in ways that ensure young people are getting high-quality treatment in safe and supportive environments. The use of trauma-informed approaches can help congregate settings ensure positive environments for young people to develop their skills and receive support.

Implication for Social Work Practice

This three-article dissertation provided key implications for social work practice that relate to multiple aspects of the Social Work Grand Challenges (Uehara et al., 2013).

Promoting Individual and Family Well-being

A focal point of this dissertation was to examine how trauma-informed social and emotional learning curricula can support healthy development for court-involved youth. Teaching SEL skills through trauma-informed approaches has critical implications for helping young people achieve healthy psychosocial and educational well-being, supporting the construction of healthy relationships, and promoting productive lives. Promoting school success for vulnerable young people is a core part of addressing the Social Work Grand Challenges and advancing individual and family well-being.

Promoting a Stronger Social Fabric

Court-involved young experience homelessness in early adulthood at much higher rates than their peers in the general public (Berzin et al., 2011; Dworsky et al., 2013; Kushel et al., 2007). Ending homelessness is a key focus of the Social Work Grand Challenges. This dissertation's advancement of aftercare supports and the provision of trauma-informed education for court-involved young people—who are one of the most vulnerable populations in the United States for experiencing homelessness—has key implications for strengthening the profession's commitment to supporting system-involved young people as they transition from care into early adulthood.

Promoting a More Just Society

This dissertation examined the need for improved support for young people living in confined congregate settings. Promoting decarceration is a core challenge for social work practice and ensuring that young people involved in the court systems are placed in the least restrictive, home-like settings is integral to the larger aims of decarceration. This dissertation also brought attention to the disproportionate representation of youth of color placed in congregate settings. There is marked disproportionality in both the child welfare system and the juvenile justice system. To promote the Social Work Grand Challenge of building a more just society, systemic racism in our public systems must be addressed. Providing support and resources to young people and their families is a vital part of achieving equal opportunities and justice.

Conclusion

This dissertation provided evidence that trauma-informed social and emotional learning curricula offer an approach to providing educational support to court-involved students that meet their holistic educational needs. Using curricular approaches informed by a TI-SEL framework provides institutions serving young people living apart from their families an opportunity to support multifaceted educational needs. The evidence suggested that TI-SEL curricula are effective in improving students' school engagement and have the potential to redirect the academic and social trajectory of vulnerable students toward school success and positive transitions in emerging adulthood.

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GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS): AFCARS is a national data collection system that collects information on children involved in the foster care system.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs): Traumatic events that occur during crucial development periods in childhood and adolescence. ACEs include childhood traumatic experiences of maltreatment, such as physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, neglect, parental incarceration, parental substance abuse, or mental health problems.

Complex Trauma: Multiple and or continuing traumatic events that impede healthy psychosocial development.

Congregate Care: Congregate care refers to a licensed or approved setting that provides 24-hour care for children in a group home (facilities with 7-12 children) or institutions (facilities with 12 or more children).

Court Involvement: The term “court-involved” used throughout this dissertation refers to foster care system jurisdiction or adjudicated by the juvenile justice system.

Educational Resilience: Educational resilience refers to the increased prospect of school success in the face of adverse experiences.

Every Child Succeeds Act (ESSA): The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act provided public schools an opportunity to expand student success measures. ESSA allowed more schools to incorporate student well-being and socioemotional development measures into their evaluation processes and offered a significant opportunity for schools to embed social and emotional learning competencies into educational curricula. Its passage is credited for a significant uptake in the incorporation of SEL programs in schools.

Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA): Established as part of the Bipartisan Budget Act of 2018 (Pub. L. No. 115-123), the 2018 FFPSA emphasized preventing children from entering foster care and providing improved services for families that would enable more children to remain in their homes. The FFPSA also provided the first federal guidelines for residential treatment facilities, which the FFPSA defined as "Qualified Residential Treatment Programs" (QRTPs).

Normalcy: The tern normalcy refers to the ability to participate in developmentally and age-appropriate activities.

Qualified Residential Treatment Programs (QRTPs): The 2018 FFPSA aimed to improve youth services by limiting federal Title IV-E funding (Social Security Act, 42 U.S.C. § 670) for the use of congregate care to facilities that meet the criteria to be considered a "qualified residential treatment program" (QRTP). QRTP is a designation that stipulates how residential

treatment facilities provide services, such as mandating licensure and accreditation and using trauma-informed treatment models.

Racial Disproportionality: Racial disproportionality refers to a discrepancy between the percentage of children of a certain racial or ethnic group in the U.S. population and the percentage of children of the same group in the child welfare system or juvenile justice system.

School Engagement: School engagement refers to a multifaced relationship between a student and school, comprising psychological and behavioral components that are reciprocally linked. This dissertation conceptualizes school engagement as comprised of three components: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral.

Social and Emotional Learning: Social and emotional learning (SEL) is understood as a multi-layered, comprehensive conception of learning that was developed originally through the Collaborative for the Advancement of Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL).

The Trauma Informed Care for Children and Families Act: The Trauma Informed Care for Children and Families Act of 2017 (H.R. 1757) was enacted in the 2018 Substance Use-Disorder Prevention that Promotes Opioid Recovery and Treatment for Patients and Communities (SUPPORT Act) (Pub L. No. 115-271). It included a provision that established the Interagency Task Force on Trauma-Informed Care aimed at developing best practices for training professionals and setting public policy for working with young people who experienced trauma.

Trauma: Experiences that cause intense physical and psychological stress reactions that have lasting adverse effects on physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.

Trauma-informed Care: Trauma-informed care (TIC) emphasize the importance of understanding how trauma impacts people's behaviors and designing therapeutic interventions and service delivery models that are explicitly structured to address the needs of trauma survivors.

Trauma-Informed Curricula: Schoolwide strategy for addressing trauma in which all aspects of the education environment are grounded in an understanding of trauma and its effects and are designed to
promote resilience for all.

Trauma-Informed Social and Emotional Learning (TI-SEL): Curricula focused specifically on teaching and learning as a holistic process that is premised upon the ability of educators and students to feel safe and supported while emphasizing SEL skill-building opportunities.

Youth Well-being: Youth well-being refers to when the educational, emotional, physical, and mental health needs of young people are being met.

APPENDIX

Table A.1
Background Information for Student SEL Survey Items.

Survey Item	Original Item	Citation
I work well in groups with people who are different from me	Work positively in groups with people who are different from me	(Coryn et al., 2009)
I have learned ways to make and keep friends in my school	Know different ways to make and keep friends	(Coryn et al., 2009)
I understand what causes problems among my friends and classmates	Understand the feelings expressed by others	(Coryn et al., 2009)
I try to help when I see someone having a problem	I try to help when I see someone having a problem	(Youth Development Executives of King County, 2019) YDEKC Youth Skills and Beliefs Survey
I can disagree with others without starting an argument	Can express my emotions without getting mad, excited, or yelling	(Coryn et al., 2009)
I know what makes me feel happy, sad, angry, or frustrated at school	Understand situations that cause me to feel happy, sad, angry, or frustrated	(Coryn et al., 2009)
My ability to succeed is something that I can change with effort	My ability to succeed is something that I can change with effort	(Youth Development Executives of King County, 2019) YDEKC Youth Skills and Beliefs Survey
I feel responsible for working to improve my life and future	I have a responsibility to improve my community	(Syvertsen, Wray-Lake, & Metzger, 2015) Youth Civic and Character Measures Toolkit (YCCMT)
	Understand that I am responsible for my actions	(Coryn et al., 2009)
I work towards my goals even if I experience problems	When I set goals, I take action to reach them.	(Youth Development Executives of King County, 2019) YDEKC Youth Skills and Beliefs Survey
	Finishing tasks even if they are hard for me.	WCSD-SEC
When I make a decision, I think about how it will affect my future	When I make a decision, I think about how it will affect my future	(Syvertsen, Wray-Lake, & Metzger, 2015) Youth Civic and Character Measures Toolkit
I think about how my behavior will affect other people	I think about how my behavior will affect other people	(Youth Development Executives of King County, 2019) YDEKC Youth Skills and Beliefs Survey (Syvertsen, Wray-Lake, & Metzger, 2015) Youth Civic and Character Measures Toolkit (YCCMT)

If I do something wrong, I take responsibility for my actions	If I do something wrong, I take responsibility for my actions	(Youth Development Executives of King County, 2019) YDEKC Youth Skills and Beliefs Survey
I can stand up for myself without putting other people down	I speak up for myself when I need something I treat others with respect	The Social-Emotional and Character Development Scale (SECDS) (Ji, DuBois, & Flay, 2013)
I can stand up for myself without putting other people down	I can say no to people or situations that may get me into trouble	The Social-Emotional and Character Development Scale (SECDS) (Ji, DuBois, & Flay, 2013)
I can think of ways to calm myself down when I am upset at school	I keep my temper when I have an argument with other kids. Knowing ways I calm myself down	The Social-Emotional and Character Development Scale (SECDS) (Ji, DuBois, & Flay, 2013) WCSD Social and Emotional Competency Long-Form Assessment
I know I can be successful when I try my best	I make myself a better person.	The Social-Emotional and Character Development Scale (SECDS) (Ji, DuBois, & Flay, 2013)
I am good at thinking about what might happen before I decide what to do	Can figure out ahead of time how certain situations may get me into trouble	The Social-Emotional and Character Development Scale (SECDS) (Ji, DuBois, & Flay, 2013)

References:

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Dearborn Heights, MI 48127
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Cbfacademy.com

April 2, 2020

Memo of Understanding: Clara B Ford Academy and Angelique Day Ph.D.

To Whom It May Concern:

This memo serves as an agreement between me, Beverly A. Baroni PhD., LMSW, school leader of Clara B Ford Academy and Angelique Day, PhD. We support the surveying and conducting focus groups in person, or virtual with staff and students at Clara B Ford Academy. All protections will be implement to provide confidentiality of the participants.

If you have any further questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at 313-806-7264.

Sincerely,

Beverly A. Baroni PhD LMSW

Beverly A. Baroni PhD., LMSW
Superintendent-Principal, Clara B Ford Academy.

Faculty Focus Group Protocol

INTRODUCTION

Hello and thanks so much for being a part of this Zoom conversation today! You have been asked to participate in this online group conversation because we are trying to learn more about the experiences of teachers working with young people who have been involved with foster care and the juvenile court. Your participation is important because your responses offer valuable information about teaching and supporting students who have experienced significant traumas and instabilities. To do this, we are going to ask you to share your thoughts and ideas about a few questions about your teaching experiences. However, before we get into the details of what we are going to discuss today, we want to introduce ourselves, meet you all, and as a group set some ground rules for the conversation.

[INTRODUCTIONS OF RESEARCH STAFF AND TEACHERS]

FOCUS GROUP STRUCTURE

We will begin by asking some questions and taking notes to record your ideas and what you share. We will also record our online conversation today to make sure we do not miss anything that you tell us. We think it is very important that we record your ideas accurately.

Is everyone okay with us recording this Zoom session?

We appreciate your willingness to share your ideas and want to remind you that what you say today will not be linked to your real name in any way. So, feel free to be honest in your responses. We also want to let you know that your participation is completely voluntary. Thank you for your time today.

Before we begin, does anyone have any questions for me?

Now I will begin recording the Zoom session.

Is everyone okay with us recording this Zoom session?

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. **BACKGROUND**
    - Can you start by telling me a little about yourself and how you came to teach at Clara B Ford?
        - Educational background/professional experiences
        - Length of time at school

2. **ORGANIZATION/PROGRAM OVERVIEW**
    - What does success (outcomes) look like for your program?

- What does success look like for your students?
- Can you tell me a little about the development of the Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum at Clara B Ford?
    - How was the SLE curriculum developed?
    - How were you training on the SEL curriculum?
    - How has it changed the school culture/climate?

3. **SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT CONSTRUCTS**
    - How do you define **school engagement**? Why?
    - What would *cognitive engagement* look like to you in this school?
    - What would *emotional engagement* look like to you in this school?
    - What would *behavioral engagement* look like to you in this school?
    - How is this school structured to facilitate positive school engagement?

4. **SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL)**
    - How do you define **Social-Emotional Learning**?
    - How does this school facilitate social-emotional learning?
        - Service model/approach (e.g., Monarch Room programs, activities, etc.)
        - Staff training & implementation

- **School Climate & Characteristics**
    - How would you describe Clara B Ford Academy?
    - How would you describe the students in your classrooms?
    - Could you describe the coursework, if any, that you took that addressed SEL content?
    - What kind of opportunities do you have to use SEL strategies?

- **Social-Emotional Learning Constructs:** *Respect, Teamwork, Motivation, Helping Others, Accountability, and Organization & Planning*

- What does "respect" look like for your students?
    - How was this SEL competency developed and implemented?
    - How has the focus on this SEL competency changed the way you teach?
    - How has the focus on this SEL competency impacted the students in your classes?

- What does "teamwork" look like for your students?
    - How was this SEL competency developed and implemented?
    - How has the focus on this SEL competency changed the way you teach?
    - How has the focus on this SEL competency impacted the students in your classes?

- What does “motivation” look like for your students?
    - How was this SEL competency developed and implemented?
    - How has the focus on this SEL competency changed the way you teach?
    - How has the focus on this SEL competency impacted the students in your classes?

- What does “helping others” look like for your students?
    - How was this SEL competency developed and implemented?
    - How has the focus on this SEL competency changed the way you teach?
    - How has the focus on this SEL competency impacted the students in your classes?

- What does “organization and planning” look like for your students?
    - How was this SEL competency developed and implemented?
    - How has the focus on this SEL competency changed the way you teach?
    - How has the focus on this SEL competency impacted the students in your classes?

- Could you share examples of successes you’ve had using SEL in your classroom?

- What are some of the challenges you’ve experienced using SEL in your classroom?

- Is there anything else you would like to share regarding SEL in your classroom?

5. **CLOSING**

    - Do you have additional ideas to share about anything we did and didn’t discuss today?

    - Do you have any questions for us?

Thank You!

Student Focus Group Protocol

INTRODUCTION

Hello and thanks so much for being a part of this conversation today! You have been asked to participate in this Zoom group conversation because we are trying to learn more about the school experiences of young people who have been involved with foster care and the juvenile court. Your participation is important because your responses let schools and education leaders know how they are doing, especially about whether you feel like schools have given you the support you need to be successful academically, and what they can do better.

To do this, we are going to ask you to share your thoughts and ideas about a few questions about your school experiences. However, before we get into the details of what we are going to discuss today, we want to introduce ourselves, meet you all, and as a group set some ground rules for the conversation.

[INTRODUCTIONS OF RESEARCH STAFF AND STUDENTS]

FOCUS GROUP STRUCTURE

We have a short amount of time, so we want you to know that we might have to cut off the conversation to leave time for all the things we hope to cover. We will begin by asking some questions to record your ideas and what you share. We will record our online conversation today to make sure we do not miss anything that you tell us. We think it is very important that we record your ideas accurately. Is everyone okay with us recording this video call?

We appreciate your willingness to share your ideas and want to remind you that what you say today will not be linked to your real name in any way. So, feel free to be honest in your responses. We also want to let you know that your participation is completely voluntary. That means you can log out at any time if you do not want to continue the conversation.

Thank you for your time today.

Now I will begin recording the Zoom session.

Is everyone okay with us recording this Zoom session?

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. INTRODUCTION

- Can everyone say the name they would like to be called during our conversation today?

2. SCHOOL OF ORIGIN

First, we want to better understand what your school experiences were like before you came to this school.

- What was the last school you attended before you came to this school?
  - What type of school was it? (e.g. Comprehensive High School, Alternative School, etc.)
  - In the past, what were the reasons you changed schools?
- Before coming to this school, what did you like best about school?

Cognitive Engagement

- Before you came to this school, what were your grades like?
  - What was the reason you received those grades?

Emotional Engagement

- How do you identify the term "*positive relationships*" with a teacher or school staff member?
- Before you came to this school, what were your relationships with teachers like?
- In your old schools, what did teachers do to create positive relationships with you?

Behavioral Engagement

- Before you came to this school, did you participate in school activities (e.g. sports, clubs, etc.)?
- In your old school(s), how did teachers help you address challenges?
  - What happened if you got in trouble at your old school?
  - What could have the schools you went to before this school done differently to better help with challenges?

3. EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE IN CURRENT SCHOOL

Next, we will ask a few questions about your experience in this school.

- What does this school do that your other school(s) did not do that you like?
- What does this school do that your other school(s) did not do that you <u>DO NOT</u> like?

Cognitive Engagement

- How has your learning changed in this school compared to other schools you went to in the past?
  - Are your grades better in this school than they were before? Why?

Emotional Engagement

- What do this school's staff do to create positive relationships with you?
- What expectations do school staff have of you?

- How do they show you these expectations?

Behavioral Engagement

- What is your biggest challenge in this school?
  - What has this school done to help you with this challenge?

- What opportunities do you have to participate in nonacademic school activities here at this residential school?

Social & Emotional Learning

- What does the term "respect" mean to you in school?
  - What has this school done to help you feel respected in school?
- What does the term "teamwork" mean to you in school?
  - What has this school done to help you develop teamwork in school?
- What does the term "motivation" mean to you in school?
  - What has this school done to help you feel motivated in school?
- What does it mean to "help others" in school?
  - How have you been able to help others in this school?
- What does the term "accountability" mean to you in school?
  - What has this school done to keep you accountable in school?
- What is the importance of organization and planning in school?
  - What has this school done to help develop organization and planning skills in school?

ACADEMIC GOALS & EXPECTATIONS

Next, we will ask a few questions about your educational goals.

- When you leave this school, do you want to continue your education?
  - *IF YES*: What type of school do you want to go to in the future?
  - *IF NO*: What do you want to do after you leave this school?
- When you leave this school, do you think you will be able to continue going to school?
- What will you need to be successful in school after you leave this school?
- What can your new schools do to make you feel welcome after you leave this school?
- What would you tell teachers and principals at your new schools to do to make you feel welcome and to be successful when attending?

College Expectations

- Do you want to go to college in the future?
  - Why?
- Do you expect to go to college in the future?
  - Why?

4. CLOSING

- Does anyone have any additional ideas to share about anything we did and didn't discuss today? Does anyone have any questions for us?

Thank You!

Student Survey Instrument

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING
Please fill in the circle that best represents your response to the statements about your current school.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I know what makes me feel happy, sad, angry, or frustrated at school.	O	O	O	O	O
I know I can be successful when I try my best.	O	O	O	O	O
I am good at thinking about what might happen before I decide what to do.	O	O	O	O	O
I try to help when I see someone having a problem.	O	O	O	O	O
I think about how my behavior will affect other people.	O	O	O	O	O
I work well in groups with people who are different from me.	O	O	O	O	O
I have learned ways to make and keep friends in my school.	O	O	O	O	O
This school has helped me to respect others.	O	O	O	O	O
I understand what causes problems among my friends and classmates.	O	O	O	O	O
I can stand up for myself without putting other people down.	O	O	O	O	O
I can disagree with others without starting an argument.	O	O	O	O	O
I can think of ways to calm myself down when I am upset at school.	O	O	O	O	O
This school helped me develop organization and planning skills.	O	O	O	O	O
This school has taught me how to make the right decision when I have choices.	O	O	O	O	O
When I make a decision, I think about how it will affect my future.	O	O	O	O	O
work towards my goals even if I experience problems.	O	O	O	O	O
My ability to succeed is something that I can change with effort.	O	O	O	O	O
If I do something wrong, I take responsibility for my actions.	O	O	O	O	O
I feel responsible for working to improve my life and future.	O	O	O	O	O

PAST SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

Please think back to the school or schools you attended in the last three years before coming to this residential treatment facility. Fill in the circle that best represents your response to the following statements.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I had positive relationships with teachers or school staff members.	O	O	O	O	O
I often got in trouble with teachers or staff.	O	O	O	O	O
I participated in school activities like sports or clubs.	O	O	O	O	O
I often had a hard time with schoolwork, like math, reading, or writing.	O	O	O	O	O
I tried my best to do all my schoolwork.	O	O	O	O	O
I felt like teachers and school staff were trying to help me succeed.	O	O	O	O	O
When I had a problem in school, teachers or school staff members would help me.	O	O	O	O	O

SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

These questions are about your current school experiences in this residential treatment facility. Fill in the circle that best represents your response to the following statements.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I have positive relationships with teachers and school staff members.	O	O	O	O	O
I often get in trouble with teachers or staff.	O	O	O	O	O
I participate in student leadership activities.	O	O	O	O	O
I often have a hard time with schoolwork, like math, reading, or writing.	O	O	O	O	O
I try my best to do all my schoolwork.	O	O	O	O	O
I feel like teachers and school staff were trying to help me succeed.	O	O	O	O	O
When I have a problem in school, teachers or school staff members will help me.	O	O	O	O	O

NOT RESEARCH

April 13, 2020

Dear Henry Joel Crume:

On 4/13/2020, the University of Washington Human Subjects Division reviewed the following application:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	Residential School Students' Social-Emotional Learning Feedback Survey
Investigator:	Henry Joel Crume
IRB ID:	STUDY00009965
Funding:	None
IND, IDE, or HDE:	None

The Human Subjects Division determined that the proposed activity is not research, as defined by federal and state regulations. Therefore, review and approval by the University of Washington IRB is not required.

This determination applies only to the activities described in this application. **Depending on the nature of your study, you may need to obtain other approvals or permissions to conduct your activity. For example, you might need to apply for access to data or specimens (e.g., to obtain UW student data). Or, you might need to obtain permission from facilities managers to conduct activities in the facilities (e.g., Seattle School District; the Harborview Emergency Department)**.

If you need to make changes in the future that may affect this determination or are not sure, contact us or submit a new request for a determination. You can create a modification by clicking Create Modification within the study.

We wish you great success.

Sincerely,

ELIZABETH FALSBERG, PhD
Team Operations Lead, IRB Committee J
(phone) 206-543-0639
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NOT RESEARCH

April 21, 2020

Dear Henry Joel Crume:

On 4/21/2020, the University of Washington Human Subjects Division reviewed the following application:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING & SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL EXPERIENCES
Investigator:	Henry Joel Crume
IRB ID:	STUDY00010126
Funding:	None
IND, IDE, or HDE:	None

The Human Subjects Division determined that the proposed activity is not research, as defined by federal and state regulations. Therefore, review and approval by the University of Washington IRB is not required.

This determination applies only to the activities described in this application. **Depending on the nature of your study, you may need to obtain other approvals or permissions to conduct your activity. For example, you might need to apply for access to data or specimens (e.g., to obtain UW student data). Or, you might need to obtain permission from facilities managers to conduct activities in the facilities (e.g., Seattle School District; the Harborview Emergency Department)**.

If you need to make changes in the future that may affect this determination or are not sure, contact us or submit a new request for a determination. You can create a modification by clicking Create Modification within the study.

We wish you great success.

Sincerely,

Jeff Love, IRB Administrator
206-543-2921, lovej2@uw.edu

EDUCATION

PhD	University of Washington	2022
MSW	California State University, Fullerton	2014
BA	University of Oregon	2009

RESEARCH INTERESTS & EXPERIENCE

Interests

Educational policy among young people experiencing foster care, juvenile justice, and congregate care; positive youth development; mixed methods; survey development and validation; community-based educational research.

Experience

Dissertation Research **2020-2022**
The Benefits of Trauma-Informed Social and Emotional Learning Curricula Among Court-Involved Students Living in Congregate Settings
University of Washington

Northwest Education Access Program Evaluation **2020-2022**
Research Analyst
Northwest Education Access

Best Starts for Kids (BSK) 5-24 Youth Measurement Validation Project **2018-2021**
Research Analyst
King County Department of Community and Human Services, Grant Office

Kinship Care Research **2021**
Research Assistant
Partners for Our Children (P4C)

Open Doors Initiative **2018-2020**
Research Assistant
Community Center for Education Results, Road Map Project

TEACHING INTERESTS & EXPERIENCE

Interests

Research methods, child welfare policy and practice, applied research methods, poverty and inequality, organization practice, and positive youth development.

Experience

Pre-Doctoral Instructor — **Spring 2022**
University of Washington, School of Social Work
Social Work 506: Social Welfare Research & Evaluation

Pre-Doctoral Instructor — **Winter 2022**
University of Washington, School of Social Work
Social Work 501: Poverty & Inequality

Pre-Doctoral Instructor — **Fall 2021**
University of Washington, School of Social Work
Social Work 505: Foundations of Social Welfare Research

Pre-Doctoral Instructor — **Spring 2020**
University of Washington, School of Social Work
Social Work 513: Macro Practice IV: Organizations and Community Practice

Pre-Doctoral Instructor — **Winter 2020**
University of Washington, School of Social Work
Social Work 501: Poverty & Inequality

Pre-Doctoral Instructor — **Fall 2019**
University of Washington, School of Social Work
Social Work 501: Poverty & Inequality

Pre-Doctoral Teaching Assistant — **Spring 2018**
University of Washington, School of Social Work
Social Work 506: Social Welfare Research & Evaluation

Pre-Doctoral Teaching Assistant — **Fall 2017**
University of Washington, School of Social Work
Social Work 521: Child Welfare Policy

Pre-Doctoral Teaching Assistant — **Fall 2017**
University of Washington, School of Social Work
Social Work 200: Introduction to Social Work Practice

PUBLICATIONS & PRESENTATIONS

Publications

Jones, T. M., Lea, C. H., Malorni, A., Brown, M., Bruick, S. **Crumé, H. J.**, Spencer, M. (2021). Best Starts for Kids Measurement Tool For Youth Ages 11-24. Seattle, WA: King County, Department of Community and Human Services, Best Start for Kids.

Crumé, H. J., Nurius, P. S., Kim, B. K. E., & Logan-Greene, P. (2020). School engagement among youth entering probation. Manuscript submitted for publication. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*.

Lea, C. H., **Crumé, H. J.**, & Hill, D. (2020). Traditions are not for me. Manuscript submitted for publication. *Social Sciences*.

Crumé , H. J., Martinez, D., Yohalem, N., Yoshizumi, A. (2020). Creating Paths for Change: Understanding Student Disengagement and Reengagement. Seattle, WA: Community Center for Education Results.

Jones, T., Lea, C. Malorni, A. **Crumé, H. J.**, & McCowan, K. (2020). *BSK Youth Development Measurement Project: 2018-2019 Report*. Seattle, WA: King County, Department of Community and Human Services, Best Start for Kids.

Crumé, H. J., Nurius, P. S., & Fleming, C. M. (2019). Cumulative adversity profiles among youth experiencing housing and parental care instability. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *100*, 129-135.

Day, A., Haggerty, K., Willis, T., **Crumé, H. J.**, & Wilson, M. (2018). Literature review: Intercountry adoption and private domestic adoption. National training & development curriculum for foster and adoptive parents. *Social Development Research Group*. Retrieved from http://www.sdrg.org/816.pdf

Day, A. & **Crumé, H. J.** (2018, June) New federal law restructures the federal financing of child welfare, increases focus on prevention efforts: An update on federal bills related to child welfare. *Society for Child and Family Policy and Practice: Division 37 of the American Psychological Association*.

Crumé, H. J. & Pecora, P.J. (2017).*Transition and independent living services for youth in foster care: A Resource Paper.* New York City: Taylor and Francis.

Conference Presentations

Crumé, H. J. (2022, Jan). *Impact of COVID-19 on Educational Engagement Among Nontraditional Students*. Oral Presentation. Society for Social Work and Research, Washington, D.C.

Crumé, H. J. (2021, Jan). *Student Perspectives of School Disengagement and Reengagement*. Oral Presentation. Society for Social Work and Research, Online Presentation.

Crumé, H. J., Nurius, P. S., Kim, E., & Logan-Greene, P. (2020, Jan). *School Success Among Youth Serving Probation*. Poster Presentation. Society for Social Work and Research, Washington D.C.

Jones, T.M., Malorni, A., Lea, C.H., & **Crumé, H. J.**, (2020, Jan). *Evaluating Community-Based Positive Youth Development Programs: A Scoping Review of Measures of Positive Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Identity, Social-Emotional Development, and Program Social Environments*. Oral Presentation. Society for Social Work and Research, Washington D.C.

Lea, C. H., Jones, T. M., Malorni, A., & **Crumé, H. J.**, (2020, Jan). *Program Leader and Youth Perspectives on the Role of Positive Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Identity, Social-Emotional Development, and Program Social Environments for the Development of Community-Based Survey.* Oral Presentation. Society for Social Work and Research, Washington D.C.

Malorni, A., Lea, C. H., **Crumé, H. J.**, & Jones, T. M. (2020, Jan). *Youth of Color Perspectives on the Development of Community-Based Survey: Using Cognitive Interviews to Evaluate Items for Measuring Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Identity, Social-Emotional Development, and Program Social Environments*. Oral Presentation. Society for Social Work and Research, Washington D.C.

Crumé, H. J., Nurius, P. S., & Fleming, C. M. (2019, Jan). Cumulative adversity profiles among youth experiencing housing and parental care instability. Oral Presentation. Society for Social Work and Research, San Francisco.

Jones, T. M., Malorni, A., Lea, C. H., & **Crumé, H. J.**, (2019, May). *A Systematic Review of Racial and Ethnic Identity Development, Social-Emotional Development, and Enabling Environments Measures for County-Wide Program Evaluation.* Oral Presentation. Society for Prevention Research, San Francisco.

Lea., C. H., Jones, T. M., Malorni, A., & **Crumé, H. J.**, (2019, May). *Youth Perspectives on Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Identity Development and Their Experience in Prevention and Health Promotion Programming.* Oral Presentation. Society for Prevention Research, San Francisco.

AWARDS, HONORS, GRANTS, & FELLOWSHIPS

Presidential Graduate Dissertation Fellowship 2020-2021
Graduate Opportunities & Minority Achievement Program (Go-MAP)
University of Washington

Presidential Graduate Fellowship 2016-2017
Graduate Opportunities & Minority Achievement Program (Go-MAP)
University of Washington

ADDITIONAL PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Social Casework Specialist 2014-2015
Contra Costa County, Children & Family Services
Richmond, California

Child Welfare Social Work Intern 2013-2014
Orange County, Social Services Agency
Orange, California

Case Manager MSW Intern 2012-2013
Illumination Foundation
Stanton, California

PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

Society for Social Work Research (SSWR)
Society for Research on Child Development (SRCD)