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Avoiding school suspension: Assessment of a trauma-informed intervention with court-involved, female students

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ABSTRACT
Court-involved, female students often experience trauma and disproportionate school discipline, complicating their academic success. This mixed-method study examines students' use of and experiences with the Monarch Room (MR), a trauma-informed disciplinary alternative. The study examines service utilization, using a repeated measures analysis of variance to explore whether students ($N = 71$) demonstrated statistically significant changes in time spent in the MR during the year. The study also qualitatively explores the lived experiences of students ($N = 23$) and perceived impact of the MR. There was a statistically significant increase in student MR use over the observation period (alpha = 0.05, $F(2, 140) = 11.44$, $p < 0.01$, eta-squared = 0.035). Students also report positive perceptions of the MR intervention. Implications for school practice are addressed.

KEYWORDS
Childhood trauma; court-involved youth; school discipline; school-to-prison pipeline; trauma-informed teaching

Introduction

Court-involved youth—those in the foster care and juvenile justice systems—experience high proportions of school suspension and expulsion, especially in comparison to their non–court-involved peers (Burley, 2010). This has a tremendous negative impact on their academic achievement and overall success as students (Coleman, 2009; Griffin, 2011). Research has shown that court-involved youth experience lower academic achievement and more school failure (Pecora et al., 2005). They also have lower rates of graduation (Grogger, 1997) in comparison to peers.

Female youth often have gender-specific experiences that impact their school discipline history. Although male students receive more school suspensions in general, female students from racial/ethnic backgrounds experience tremendous disproportionality in school suspensions (U.S. Dept. of Ed. Office for Civil Rights, 2014). For example, African American female students are suspended six times more than white female students and also experience suspension at a rate 12% higher than female students from all other racial/ethnic backgrounds (U.S. Dept. of Ed. Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Yet, the African American female student population remains understudied (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015). This study aims to address this gap, examining a group of court-involved, female, and primarily African American students in relation to their use of and experiences with a trauma-informed alternative to suspension. We examine students' intervention utilization and also leverage the narratives of their lived experiences to assess the intervention's strengths and limitations.

Literature review

Trauma-informed educational practices

Currently, there are several existing frameworks for trauma-informed practices in school settings (Crosby, 2015). These frameworks address various aspects of school culture, teacher–student rapport, and student discipline. Still, there is a dearth of empirical data to support the use of trauma-informed educational practices to reduce student suspension and expulsion, particularly among court-involved, female students from racial/ethnic minority backgrounds. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the National Center for Trauma-Informed Care describe an approach to trauma-informed care as including four essential parts: (a)

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acknowledgement of the prevalence of trauma; (b) recognition of trauma's impact on systems; (c) promotion of trauma-sensitive responses; and (d) avoidance of retraumatizing practices and policies (SAMHSA NCTIC, 2015). One pilot study by Baroni et al., (2016) evaluated a trauma-informed school discipline intervention, the Monarch Room (MR), which incorporated the aforementioned, four-part approach. This study found significant reductions in school suspensions and expulsions over a three-year period. These promising findings justify further exploration of this intervention as an alternative approach to school discipline, in order to circumvent the negative impact of traditional suspension and expulsion practices in schools.

Impact of student suspension and expulsion

School suspension can negatively impact several aspects of youth development, including student school performance. First, there is no evidence that it effectively reduces negative student behavior (Fenning & Bohanan, 2006; Losen & Skiba, 2011), yet it has been shown to interfere with student learning (Borman et al. 2003; Greenwood, Horton, & Utley, 2002). During suspensions, students miss out on valuable instruction time and assignments. Multiple suspensions equate to more school absence, leaving students with feelings of hopelessness as they grow further behind their peers (Casella, 2003).

Second, exclusionary discipline can negatively impact other aspects of student psychosocial functioning. It has been linked to poor student self-image (Cameron & Sheppard, 2006), as well as feelings of alienation and shame (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Also, it has been associated with the development of various psychological disorders. These include depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and anxiety (Cameron & Sheppard, 2006).

Third, student attachment to school may be disrupted by suspension and expulsion practices. Not only do students become academically disconnected, but also socially detached from the school environment (Christle et al., 2004; Gordon et al., 2000). Schools can assume a strong role in providing students with a sense of belonging (Cameron & Sheppard, 2006), and relationships with positive and supportive adult figures, especially for court-involved youth who are separated from their family of origin in out-of-home care. However, these relationships are compromised by suspension and expulsion practices, perhaps contributing to higher rates of school drop-out (Christle et al., 2004).

Finally, the execution of zero tolerance policies in many schools has negative implications for students from racial/ethnic minority backgrounds (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Zero tolerance in schools was originally defined as the systematic enforcement of predetermined exclusionary practices (i.e., suspension and expulsion) in order to promote school safety (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). However, these practices have become commonplace in dispensing strict exclusionary punishments for minor school infractions, including behaviors that in no way infringe on the safety of others (Cameron, 2006) (e.g., tardiness, inappropriate attire, class disruption). Furthermore, these tougher discipline philosophies may actually villainize minority students through racial stereotyping (Gavazzi, Russell, & Khurana, 2009), widening the achievement gap between these students and their white counterparts.

School-to-prison pipeline

Racial biases and the villainizing of minority students may account for the disproportionate amount of school suspensions that minority youth receive (Rausch & Skiba, 2004). Misconceptions about student behavior are not uncommon when dealing with court-involved youth (Cole et al., 2005; Griffin et al., 2011) and youth of color (Gavazzi et al., 2009). Kayama, Haight, Gibson, and Wilson (2015) illustrate how language used by school staff reinforce the criminalization of these youth. Furthermore, the experience of suspension and expulsion makes students more likely to become involved in the juvenile justice system (U.S. Dept. of Ed., 2014). This phenomenon, the *school-to-prison pipeline*, results in youth with the most academic and behavioral challenges being funneled out of schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems (Michigan Council on Crime and Delinquency, 2013). However, these practices do not address the real issues impacting students, and only widen the educational gap for students who are already facing significant academic disadvantage (Heitzeg, 2014).

Theoretical framework

This study examines the impact of trauma-informed school disciplinary practice using both attachment

(Bowlby, 1969, 1979, 1980, 1988) and sensory integration theory (Ayres, 2005; Dorman et al., 2009). Attachment theory views individual human development as the result of early childhood relationships with an individual's caregiver and encourages strong, positive interactions for optimal development (Bowlby, 1969, 1979, 1980, 1988). The abuse and neglect commonly experienced by court-involved youth can directly lead to poor attachments (Manning, 2008), and subsequently removing youth from their family home can further impede the formation of healthy attachments (Rushton, Mayes, Dance, & Quinton, 2003). Trauma-informed school discipline that encourages strong and supportive student–staff relationships may provide emotionally corrective experiences, helping to improve students' attachment styles and functioning.

Sensory integration refers to a neurological process, whereby an individual organizes sensations (i.e., sight, sound, touch) from both their own body and their surroundings in order to respond to the demands of the environment (Ayres, 2005). For youth who experience an inability to regulate their own moods and behaviors, perhaps as a result of psychological trauma, this theory suggests that using tools and activities that stimulate and activate particular senses can help youth to learn to self-soothe and manage maladaptive behaviors (Dorman et al., 2009). A trauma-sensitive school disciplinary intervention that utilizes such sensory integration techniques may assist court-involved students in increasing self-regulation, thus improving their school behavior and ability to deal with stressful events and triggers in the classroom.

Present study

This mixed-method study builds on the pilot study by Baroni et al., (2016), examining court-involved, female students' use and experiences with the Monarch Room (MR), a trauma-informed alternative to traditional suspension and expulsion disciplinary practices. Although the pilot study demonstrated promise for reductions in student suspension and expulsion, specific trends and experiences with MR utilization have not been examined. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to answer the following quantitative research question: Have students demonstrated statistically significant changes in time spent in the MR over the school year-long observation period? The primary qualitative research aim further explored the perceived impact of MR use on student functioning by asking students for their thoughts on the MR, how it impacts their mood and focus in school, and their suggestions for improvement.

Methods

Sample

For the quantitative portion of the study, student participants consisted of all MR users who were consistently enrolled between September 2014 and June 2015 at a public, charter high school, located on the campus of a large Midwestern child welfare placement agency and residential unit. This school exclusively serves court-involved, female students, with histories of abuse, neglect, and home removal. Approximately half of the agency's youth are involved through the foster care system, while the other half are involved due to juvenile delinquency. There were 141 students (35% of the total school population) who made at least one visit to the MR during the school year. However, the majority of students were residents in the residential unit, which has an average length of stay of 4–6 months, typical of the rate of turnover in residential placement units across the United States (Sickmund, Sladky, Kang, & Puzzanchera, 2011). Therefore, only 71 students attended the school for the entire duration of the observation period and were included in the analysis. See Table 1 for further participant demographics.

For the qualitative portion of the study, participants consisted of 23 students, recruited through random sampling among the entire school population. Approximately 70% of these participants utilized the MR at least once during the observation period. Participant demographics are included in Table 1 and were generally consistent with the racial makeup of youth in the surrounding urban communities (Baroni et al., 2016).

Description of intervention

The MR intervention incorporates SAMHSA's four-part approach (SAMHSA, NCTIC, 2015) by recognizing the impact of trauma and triggers on students' behavior, and responding with attachment-driven disciplinary alternatives, rather than traditional exclusionary school discipline, which can be further traumatizing. Named after the school's mascot, the

Table 1. Participant demographics.

	N	%		*N*	%
Quantitative Sample	71	100	Qualitative Sample	23	100
Race			Race		
African American	57	80	African American	16	70
White	10	15	White	7	30
Hispanic	4	5			
Grade			Grade		
9th	6	8	9th	5	22
10th	33	46	10th	5	22
11th	16	23	11th	6	26
12th	16	23	12th	7	30

Note. Racial comparison between samples.
(Excludes Hispanic students): $\chi^2(2) = 3.45, p = .18$.

monarch butterfly, the MR is a designated classroom, available throughout the school day, and managed by trauma-trained staff to provide positive support to help students de-escalate when needed. In addition to staff, the room is equipped with sensory integration tools, such as sensory puzzles, weighted blankets, fidget toys, a stationary bicycle, and other exercise equipment, to assist in the management of mood and emotions, and to also teach students how to use large and small motor skills to de-escalate and self-soothe. Sensory tools were selected through consultation with occupational therapy (OT) professionals, who also trained school staff on how to properly use them.

When students' emotional states or behavior begin to interfere with learning in the classroom, they may be referred by school staff or may self-refer themselves to the MR. Teachers and school staff are intentional about emphasizing the supportive nature of the MR, encouraging students to view it as a resource rather than a punitive action. Once in the MR, brief intervention strategies, including problem-solving and sensory-motor activities, are utilized to assist students in regulating their emotions in order to return to the classroom in 10 minutes or less. All student visits to the MR are documented by school staff in tracking logs, including the reason for the visit, time student arrived, time student returned to class, and the strategies used to assist the student. This data is regularly reviewed by school administration to improve policy and practice around MR implementation, and efforts are made to maintain intervention consistency.

Data collection

This study utilized a secondary analysis of school administrative data and qualitative data gathered using a convergent parallel mixed-method study design (Creswell, 2014). Information from MR logs was linked to the school's administrative data system, and then examined to assess changes in MR use over the one-year observation period. The major independent variable of interest was time (over the course of the school year). This was measured in three levels of time points, as the first third of the school year (September 2014 to December 2014), second third of the school year (January 2015 to March 2015), and final third of the school-year-long observation period (April 2015 to June 2015). Each time point was approximately 12 weeks long. The main dependent variable for this study was time spent in the MR, which was measured as the average amount of minutes spent in the MR during each time point.

The phenomenological approach was also used to inform the development of a semistructured interview protocol, asking students to respond to open-ended questions regarding their experiences with the MR and perspectives on how it has influenced their mood and behavior. Three focus groups were held for approximately one hour, convening at the school building in June of 2015. Approval was received from the Institutional Review Board and school administrators obtained informed consent/assent from students during the school registration process.

Data analysis

Administrative data were entered into SPSS 22 statistical software, and descriptives, normality, and sphericity were examined. Data met the assumptions of normality and sphericity, and a one-way repeated measures analysis of variance was used to explore changes in the dependent variable, average minutes spent in the MR, over the three time points (the independent variable). The effect size was calculated using

eta-squared in order to devise the strength of the change in MR use over time.

Focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Then, transcripts were coded by the first author, using reflexive bracketing for confirmability (Padgett, 2008). Next, transcripts were uploaded into NVIVO 10 and analyzed for themes using the direct language of the participants to look for commonalities, differences, and main ideas. The results were reviewed by a subsample of the focus group participants, providing a member-check on the validity and interpretation of the data. Quantitative and qualitative data were interpreted together to assess the overall association between the implementation of the MR intervention and student functioning.

Findings

Quantitative results

Administrative data show that a total of nine students were suspended from school during the observation period. Of this small number of suspensions, only two students were MR users. This demonstrates that the majority of students suspended were non-MR users, and also indicates that the majority of MR users returned to class—instead of escalating to the point of suspension—after their MR visit.

The repeated measures analysis of variance was found to be statistically significant at an alpha level of 0.05, $F(2, 140) = 11.44$, $p < 0.01$. A Bonferonni post hoc test indicated that the mean time spent in the MR from September to December ($M = 24.79$, $SD = 32.76$) was statistically significantly lower than the mean time spent from January to March ($M = 53.00$, $SD = 54.78$), $p < 0.01$ (see Table 2). The post hoc test also indicated that the mean time spent from January to March was higher than the mean time spent from April to June ($M = 39.20$, $SD = 35.30$), but was not statistically significant. Further observation would be useful to see if time spent in the MR might continue to decrease if given a longer observation period. The mean time in December was also statistically significantly lower than the mean time in June at $p < 0.05$ (see Table 3). Therefore, there was a statistically significant increase in student MR use over the observation period, albeit a small one, as the eta-squared value for change over time was 0.035, demonstrating a small to medium effect size.

Table 2. MR use by minutes ($N = 71$).

	Mean minutes	*SD*
December 2014	24.79	32.76
March 2015	53.00	54.78
June 2015	39.20	35.30

$F(2, 140) = 11.44$, $p < 0.01$

Table 3. Changes in MR use ($N = 71$).

From	To	Mean difference in minutes
December 2014	March 2015**	−28.21
	June 2015*	−14.41
March 2015	December 2014**	28.21
	June 2015	13.80
June 2015	December 2014*	14.41
	March 2015	−13.80

*$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$.

Qualitative findings

Students selected to participate in focus groups described their perception of how the MR impacts student functioning, mood, and classroom focus, and also provided suggestions for improvement. Findings from the qualitative data demonstrate a distinct paradox, where participants view the MR as a strong resource, but also a potential crutch for some students. Analysis of the data yielded the most commonly reported themes, as reported below.

Theme 1: "It helps you stay still." The majority of focus group participants reported that the MR was helpful or assisted them in improving their behavior, mood, or focus upon returning to the classroom. Participants reported that the methods of engagement used by MR support staff, as well as the intervention activities, and sensory tools (e.g., sensory puzzles, weighted blankets, exercise equipment) in the MR help students to manage difficult emotions and maladaptive behavior. The following quote illustrates how this intervention assists in improving student functioning:

> In the Monarch Room, she [MR staff person] kinda gives you space to yourself, and then she asks you, "Are you ready to talk? Do you want to talk?" Other than that, she just gives you space … there's puzzles in there to help get your mind off of different things … and then she allows you to take that stuff into other classrooms

too. So you got people, like me, who always gotta move … you can concentrate on that [puzzles] and it helps you stay still.

Theme 2: "It's a good thing to have the Monarch Room here." Participants also expressed that the MR helps to mediate conflict and distraction in the classroom. When students become escalated, demonstrating disruptive classroom behavior, the MR provides an outlet for the affected student, while also stabilizing the classroom environment so that other students can continue to learn. One participant provided the following quote to express this effect:

I feel like, in some cases, it's a good thing to have the Monarch Room here in this specific environment … the girls that are disruptive and got attitudes and just set a negative mood in the room can get away from everybody … don't nobody want to be around that… . So sometimes it's just like you need to just give them a limited time to be in there [the MR], and tell them to get their self together. Do whatever they need to do for fifteen, twenty minutes, and go back to class.

Theme 3: "You gotta learn to work your problems out." However, participants also discussed the potential for negative student behavior to persist after experiencing the intervention. Although students identify the MR as being helpful for addressing their present mood and behavior, they are unclear about how the social and emotional skills that they learn in the MR relate to future settings, when the MR will no longer be available to them. One student expressed this by stating:

Eventually you gotta learn to work your problems out cause when you turn into an adult you ain't gonna have that place or that counselor between you and that other person to help y'all work your problems out. Y'all adults and you are going to have to learn how to do that on your own.

Theme 4: "It's up to the girls." Participants also provided suggestions on how to improve the MR to better serve students' needs. These improvements included allowing students to remain in the MR for longer than the prescribed duration, adding media devices to listen to music, and providing a wider selection of exercise equipment to release negative energy. However, participants most prominently reported student buy-in as a factor to improve the utilization of MR services. This is illustrated in the following quote:

It's up to the girls [the students]. The Monarch Room, it's there for you to use it, but once you go in there and you not trying to make your mood good or whatever—you just trying to keep that attitude—it's not going to be helpful to you.

Discussion

This study assessed how court-involved, female students utilized and experienced a trauma-informed school disciplinary approach, examining the experiences of a sample of primarily African American students. Overall, quantitative data show that students consistently used the MR over the 2014–2015 school year, as use increased over the observation period and suspensions remained low. Qualitative findings also indicate that students generally found it to be an effective tool in helping them to improve their mood and behavior in school. In particular, the intervention's attachment-driven methods and sensory integration tools and activities were perceived by students as being helpful in improving students' moods, and assisting with de-escalation and self-soothing.

However, data also leave some lingering questions regarding the general trend of MR utilization, as use increased drastically by the middle of the school year, then slightly decreased by the end of the year. On one hand, the increase may be attributed to a genuinely greater need for the MR over the course of the school year, as academic demands increase. On the other hand, students might have spent less time in the MR during the first time point due to their lack of initial trust and connection to MR staff, as positive attachments had not yet formed. Youth who have experienced trauma often demonstrate difficulty with trust and interpersonal relationships (Cole et al., 2005), which may have impacted initial MR utilization. By the second time point, students might have built relationships with MR staff and begun to recognize the intervention as a resource, therefore utilizing the intervention more often. Then, as students learned new skills for de-escalation and became better equipped to apply these skills, their use of the MR—albeit not statistically significant—began to decrease during the final time point.

Additionally, the availability of the MR intervention throughout the school day provided a trauma-sensitive option for managing classroom conflict, briefly removing escalated students and allowing others to resume learning. Although these students significantly increased their MR use from time point 1 to time point 2, it is still highly likely that they experienced

more in-class time than they would have under the traditional suspension and expulsion protocol. This is an important distinction, as suspensions in this school setting have generally ranged from 1 to 10 school days, while MR use is only, on average, 10 to 20 minutes of class time, per visit. Students using the MR were able to return to class, remaining on the school grounds and receiving positive support from school personnel, rather than being sent back to their home, neighborhood, or residential unit for the duration of the school day or week. Therefore, the MR may be a more education-friendly option than school suspension and expulsion, upending the school-to-prison pipeline, as a school disciplinary strategy for negative student behavior.

Nevertheless, steps must be taken to help students make connections between the MR intervention and their future behavior. Theme 3 highlights how some students are struggling to relate skills learned in the MR to settings outside of school. For example, MR staff can initiate conversations with students about how sensory activities used in the MR (e.g., riding the stationary bicycle when triggered) can be translated into other academic or professional settings later in life (e.g., taking a walk on a lunch break when upset). MR staff can also assist students in developing buy-in and gaining ownership of the MR intervention. Students need to understand its purpose and the potential benefits of such a cultural shift toward trauma-sensitive discipline. The challenge may lie in helping students to develop such ownership, given that student buy-in requires a level of trust and relationship-building that might be initially difficult for this population due to their issues with complex trauma and attachment.

Strengths & limitations

This is one of the first studies to explore trauma-informed school discipline and to also utilize the perspectives and lived experiences of the students themselves to inform the intervention. However, there are limitations that should also be noted. These include the inability of the researchers to assess intervention fidelity over time, the influence of extraneous school changes, and the limitations of the MR's student capacity.

Implications for policy and practice

Findings from this study are preliminary in nature. Still, given the consistent efforts across the United States to reform the school-to-prison pipeline, schools that serve court-involved students should reevaluate the use of traditional forms of school discipline and zero-tolerance policies, which exacerbate academic and socioemotional outcomes among youth in this population (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; U.S. Dept. of Ed. Office for Civil Rights, 2014). Trauma-sensitive disciplinary practices and policies may assist in shifting school cultures and assisting educators in closing the existing achievement gaps. School administrators should explore their school's readiness to implement and sustain trauma-informed strategies for addressing negative student behavior, including attachment-driven solutions to encourage strong student–staff relationships and sensory integration tools to support student self-regulation. As indicated in this study, both teachers and students will utilize such suspension alternatives when they are available.

School discipline reform is also relevant to the emerging discourse on culturally responsive school practice and pedagogy, which encourages educational environments to embrace students' cultures as an embedded part of their learning (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Similar to the participants in this study, racial/ethnic minority youth are generally overrepresented in court-involved student populations (Sickmund, Sladky, Kang, & Puzzanchera, 2013; U.S.D.H.H.S., 2013), and schools should consider culturally sensitive, trauma-informed discipline as a method of engaging such youth. Behavioral interventions that are sensitive to students' adverse life experiences, rather than based in racial stereotyping and biased perceptions, may build a school climate where minority students feel more valued and understood by school staff. Also, acknowledging the unique experiences of female students of color, and their gender-related needs, may also help to improve outcomes. Ultimately, moving away from punitive and exclusionary practices may allow for greater flexibility to integrate cultural elements that might be more effective while also keeping students in school.

Conclusion

School disciplinary practices can greatly impact youth development. In particular, court-involved students face persistent challenges that interfere with both their academic growth and socioemotional functioning. As schools endeavor to educate and care for their students,

trauma-informed disciplinary alternatives may meet the urgent need that exists in our educational system today. Using trauma-sensitivity, schools can create environments where court-involved students can become engaged, remain connected, and even dare to succeed.

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